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Encountering Mission

Faithfulness and Fruitfulness in Mission: American Churches' Mission among Ethnic Communities

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Abstract: This article examines mission efforts of American churches among various ethnic groups. It closely looks at the parable of the three tenants from Matthew 25:14–30 through a missiological lens to determine faithfulness and fruitfulness in mission. It underscores the significance of the Gospel's "investment" among others, particularly *ethnes* (ethnic groups). The study included biblical reflections followed by a brief historical overview of mission work by American church bodies. Recommendations are given to maximize missional engagement and partnership with the global *ethnes* who reside in America.

Introduction

I sometimes hear people in Ethiopia associating ineffective religious teaching with a roasted wheat that is eatable, but not good for sowing or harvesting. God desires that His people do not just settle for tiresome belief traditions but experience the energy of the new life in His name (Jn 20:30–31).



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The purpose of this study is to present a missiological reflection on Matthew 25:14–30 and assess the mission work of American churches to global nations in their backyards. By looking at the historical trend, this article discusses the contribution American churches made to mission and also critically evaluates the current decline of church membership arguably due to obsession with self-preservation. The study encourages spiritual alertness among the followers of Jesus that they preach the Gospel and spread it in the world beyond conventional ministry and mission fields.

Biblical Perspectives

The Gospel of Matthew describes the continuity of God’s saving work among the Jewish people as it also keeps the larger Gentile’s mission in closer view. Matthew uses the word *ethne*/ethnicity in different ways. One of the dominant usages is to see it as a larger category of people groups beyond the Jewish nation. In this instance, kinship and places are stretched and redefined to serve the larger evangelistic purpose. Dennis Dulling states: “The Matthean group thus stands on the boundary ‘between’ Israel and non-Israel, which is just where the marginal Matthean writer himself stands. The group is therefore in the process of (re-)constructing its ethnic boundaries.”¹

The genealogy in the first chapter of Matthew discloses that the Messianic mission involves Gentiles beyond the Jewish lineage. The four Gentile women mentioned—Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bethsheba—are prominent biblical figures and mothers who carried the non-Jewish branch of the Messianic genealogy (1:3, 5, 6). The Gentiles in Galilee, together with the Jewish communities, are also referred to as recipients of Jesus’ message of the good news (Mt 4:14–15).

Furthermore, Matthew mentions nations not only as recipients of Christ’s good news but also partners and messengers of the Gospel. He stated: “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few” (Mt 9:37). The harvest signifies people groups. Matthew sees a larger mission harvest in need of a larger number of harvest workers. Matthew’s use of comparisons at times highlights the missionary call given to the nations: “Therefore I say unto you, the kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation (*ethne*) bringing forth the fruits thereof” (Mt 21:43). As Gentile nations are entrusted with the Gospel, they will also be held accountable on how they receive and welcome Jesus’ messengers (Mt 25:31–45). More clearly, the Great Commission emphasizes that Christ’s saving work involves nations (*panta ta ethne*) as recipients and

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partakers of His Messianic mission. His disciples are commanded “to baptize and make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:16–20).

Jesus in His apocalyptic parables on burning lamps (Mt 25:1–13) and the parable of the steward (24:45–51) addresses His followers so that they faithfully shine His light and serve others. Schuyler Brown specifically describes it as “the community’s responsibility for the ethne (28:19).”² According to Matthew, sin has a universal impact that requires the universal people of God to work against it, sustained by God’s empowering grace. Dennis Dulling noted: “evil is so pervasive that an ethnos [“nation”] based on descent, ancestral customs, or land always falls short. There is both continuity and discontinuity with historical Israel; ethnic boundaries grow to include outsiders. In short, ‘Matthew metaphoricises ethnicity’ (318–19).”³

Evangelist Matthew in chapter 25 emphasizes the need for preparedness for the Second Coming of Jesus and His followers’ role in His Messianic mission among all nations. The three tenants were entrusted with talents. The talents do not signify some sort of skills or skill sets, as we usually think. They are precious and expensive items, such as gold or silver units. For a regular worker, a talent is worth of twenty years of labor. This indicates that the master entrusted his servants with a significant amount of treasures. According to the response and actions of the first two tenants, they seem to have a good attitude towards their master. There was no specific command given by the master that they invest the talents with bankers. They seem to engage in a profitable investment out of sheer sense of responsibility and trustworthiness that stems from the goodness of the master and their good attitudes towards him. In light of this, it appears that the two tenants were so excited about the generous treasure that they went out and hit the streets on behalf of the master and made investments with the bankers and doubled the profits. The master’s extended delay in a distant country didn’t deter them from working for him. It rather propelled their efforts to multiply the return.

This parable reminds the readers of the Gospel about the gracious riches of God as He entrusts His people with the precious message of the Gospel so that it will be shared with others outside of the immediate household. The tenants’ favorable attitude towards their master and their seemingly close relationship with him compelled them to engage in his mission faithfully and fruitfully. Their passion for the master’s investment intersects with the greater joy he offered to them as a reward. He told them “Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your

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master's happiness!" (v. 21). In other words, they have already tasted the joy in mission before fully realizing it.

The third tenant did not seem to understand nor embrace the loving heart of his master. He confirmed that he acted in fear. By doing so, he disclosed his allegiance more to self-preservation than to the master's mission. Furthermore, he did not put any effort to make profit out of the treasure at his disposal. He was lazy. The only thing he thought to do was to bury the talent and give it back to the master as it was. It is obvious that the servant was neither task oriented nor relational. It is not a surprise that his investment went flat. Nonetheless, his motive was more problematic than his actions. He portrayed the master as "a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed" (25:24). His wrong perception and characterization of the master contributed to a negative outcome and ultimately put his safety at a greater peril. Bernard of Clairvaux stated that "people who do not progress in the spiritual life, regress."⁴

This parable serves as a stern warning to the Jewish religious leaders that their failure to have a vibrant relationship with God and their lack of concern for others will have a dire consequence. This story also sends a strong message to the followers of Jesus and Matthew's community that, while getting ready for the Second Coming of Jesus, they need to wait for Him through active service and evangelistic works among people groups beyond their immediate community members.

American Churches' Context

Modern American mission can be described in various ways. Mark Noll characterizes it with the following notions: "regional predisposition, ethnic flavors, division of church and state, and secularization."⁵ I challenge the notion that historical Christianity in America has had ethnic flavors. Sunday morning still is "the most racially segregated time" in the country. Both older and newer immigrant churches tend to organize themselves around clearly demarcated racial categories. Strong socio-ethnic ideologies and narratives played a huge role in shaping communal identity in the United States. The churches in general reflect the social make-up and ethno-political discourse in the society.

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The advent of secularism, in addition to promoting individualism and consumerism, brought religious leniency, boredom, and deeper divisions. With it the *Christianization of America* seemed to give way to the *Americanization of Christianity*. Ethnocentric worldview and self-preservation became the norm for

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worship and ministry among many churches. In the process, not only did the church become a recipient of divisive racial rhetoric, it also became a major proponent of it. Donald Moorman stated that historically political discourse tends to influence the church's role as had been seen in the 1830s anti-Catholic movements by Protestant opposition groups.⁶ The exclusion act of Chinese immigrants in 1882 and racial discrimination against Southern Europeans also unmask the existing ethnocentric sentiments over the years.⁷ Like the third tenant, many churches in America seem to be preoccupied with self-referenced theological excuses that are devoid of faithfulness and fruitfulness to the mission of God. Many people call themselves Christians without having the passion and joy of Christ in their life. As a result, today's church suffers from acute spiritual fatigue, as evidenced by shrinking membership, diminishing volunteers, and impoverished mission outcome.

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It is evident that churches with strong ethnic background—be it Irish, German or Norwegian—have been challenged and stretched to embrace people from different ethnic backgrounds. As a result, former Northern European ethnic lines continued to grow blurry. However, larger racial unity and integration among Anglo, African American, Hispanic Christians, etc., still seem to be complex and difficult to achieve.

Furthermore, the influx of non-European immigrants to the country and the unreadiness of churches to welcome them created a deep puzzlement in the already struggling mission context. The immigration reform act in 1965 introduced the inclusion of non-European immigrants into the American social fabric. As a result, a large number of immigrants from the Southern Hemisphere began to arrive. Many of them came from a vibrant Christian background. However, on their arrival they observe that a good proportion of American churches are strictly divided across denominational and racial lines. Thus, due to existing divisions and the need for social bonding, immigrant Christians appeared to maintain tight ethnic, social, and religious ties of their homelands. As a result, they continue to congregate in narrow religious enclaves that often impede mission growth, particularly among the second generation. On the other hand, a postmodern worldview, supported by rapid technological means and global connections, reconfigures cultural values and fosters relativistic morality, theological fallacies, religious marketing, and divisions. As a

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result, churches either lose their foundational ground or become very defensive and inward focused. In either case they tend to lose on mission. America's emerging generation, particularly, seems to be caught up between the changing cultural shift and the churches' uncritical or antagonistic response to it.

Nonetheless, as we can see from the parable of the three tenants God's gracious call, His strength and advent cause us to be grateful and hopeful. It appears that the master's gracious acts compelled the first two tenants to be faithful and fruitful in their vocation. God is always at work among His people. He has faithful and fruitful remnants in America who enjoy the favorable heart of God and hit the road with the saving message of the Gospel and bring many more into His kingdom. Mark Noll noted: "The major 20th-century shift in denominational strength was reflected in the size of missionary contingents. The high point of missions among the older Protestant denominations came in the 1920s, when about half of the world 29,000 missionaries were Americans or Canadians. In 1925 there were more than 3,300 American missionaries in China alone. By the 1950s, the proportion of Christian missionaries from North America had reached two-thirds of the world total."⁸

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Right after World War II, as Europe experienced economic crisis and depleted moral and religious vibrancy, spiritual awakening had been restored in the United States. The placing of the slogan "In God we trust" on stamps in 1954, anti-communism revivals, women's growing role in mission and the Pentecostal movement were some of the characteristics of the changing religious environment in the United States.⁹

Moreover, the growth of Christianity in the Southern Hemisphere and the migration of many Christians to the West has a positive and promising impact for the church of God. Christian migrants' vibrant Christian witness play a significant role in strengthening faith in the host society and churches. In the greater Washington, DC, area where I currently serve, there are approximately 350,000 to 400,000 Ethiopian immigrants. There are over 100 Ethiopian Christian immigrant churches that mainly come from Ethiopian Orthodox Church, Ethiopian Evangelical Churches such as Mekane Yesus, Mulu-Wongel, and other churches' background. About 65 of these churches are Evangelical churches. Christians in these places seem to be very busy planting churches.

Our Southeastern District chartered nine congregation in its last district convention in 2018, and six of them were immigrant Lutheran churches. In the early 1990s, there were probably a few African immigrant Lutheran churches in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Over the last few years, these churches have grown in hundreds and are planted in almost every major city in the country. Particularly, there is a harvest that the Lord has provided through immigrants' second generation that we need to prayerfully and proactively engage in.

Passion

The main problem of western Christianity is not the declining membership. It is rather the loss of passion and joy for Christ and His mission. The first two tenants in the gospel story took seriously the abundant trustworthiness placed on their shoulders. They were not deterred by the delay of their master nor outside pressure. They focused on one thing and only one thing: multiplying the precious treasure! However, the third tenant had a distorted and wrong perception of his master. He served from a fear and scarcity mindset. He became the victim of his own ill-fated views and impoverished mission outcomes. The Lord has given His people the gift of joy and freedom abundantly. Anything that detaches His people from His gracious gifts will inevitably bring them down. According to the parable, burying a talent is equal to losing it all together. The church needs to align with the generous work of God's Spirit and act kindly and freely. Remember, whenever the people of God are at peace with God, they become compassionate, generous, and kind toward others.

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Invest in "Gentiles" too

The Great Commission is preceded by the great missionary parables, including the story of the two sons (Mt 21:28–32), the burning lamps (25:1–13), the parable of the steward (24:45–51) and the three tenants (25:14–30). The common thread in these parables is the focus on dedicated service for others beyond oneself. For Jewish Christians, the otherness of Gentiles might be seen as a liability due to an antagonistic historical past. What makes the Gospel unique is that it provides a new foundation of love that compels to love the unlovable and love them into the Father's

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kingdom. Thus, the otherness of others is seen as a potential mission opportunity, not a mission threat. Sharing the Gospel of Jesus is the main purpose of Christianity. We cannot afford sacrificing it because of fear, indifference, or other strategies.

The good news is that the Lord uses “others” to bless us. As Israel failed to carry out her mission, the Lord brought Gentiles to continue the mission. As the Lord of His Church and nations, Jesus uses anyone to bless His mission on earth. The three tenants had one master, one household, and one mission. Yet, the third tenant seemed to disassociate himself from the larger family and acted independently and wrongly. It cost him terribly. Christian unity is a necessity, not a luxury. We might be given gifts in various shapes and forms. Our level of effectiveness also may vary. Nonetheless, we have one Lord who loves us all and rewards us accordingly. We are unified in Him and in His mission. The Gospel is dynamic. Its nature moves it as well as others. The church has no option but to gratefully join the flow and move. Faithfulness to Christ is faithfulness to His mission. Right alignment with the will and passion of Jesus leads to courageous sharing of His love with others.

The third tenant used excuses and kept himself away from responsible and profitable investments. However, the master said that the tenant’s unprofitable dealing was due to his laziness and untrustworthiness. He buried the talents, which was obviously the easiest thing to do. It did not require hard work, complicated dealings nor negotiations. The tenant might have interpreted his action of burying the talent as a sign of faithfulness. So, faithfulness without fruitfulness? Reaching out to people who are different from us is not an easy thing to do. It can be a hard work. The easy way out will be just to let the status quo continue without requiring much from us and continue to hide behind our own self-referenced traditions and theological excuses. However, no excuse is worth the dedication to Christ’s mission, His unfailing glory, and the satisfaction that it brings to our heart. Christ is risen, and the tomb is empty. Our hope and labor for His name and sake cannot remain in the grave. Jesus has given life to our dead bodies and deeds. We are risen with Him and have joined His victorious mission.

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Urgency

The parable of the talents as part of the end times discourses emphasizes the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. It begs for diligent alertness. The first two tenants knew that the precious treasure was given for a limited time. They knew that the master who left for an extended time would inevitably come back. His delay did not deter them from working for him. It rather caused them to keep multiplying the talents for him. They chose to act promptly and diligently, trusting the favorable return of their master. And they entered into the master's eternally blessed joy. However, the third tenant seemed to waste his time in idleness and deceiving himself with unproductive and inappropriate excuses. And he seemed to misunderstand the delay of his master and used it to bolster his ill-informed perception of the master and the work he was supposed to do. At the end, the coming of the master was not good news for him.

Matthew describes that the end times are unsettling for nations (Mt 24:7–14). He stated that “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom” (24:7). And nations will rise against Jesus’ followers too (24:9). However, the Evangelist affirmed that in spite of all these difficulties “this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come” (24:14). The power of the Gospel overcomes hostilities among nations. It will be preached to all nations before the closure of time. How does the church act in mission in a timely manner? How does the Second Coming of Jesus inspire the church for more engagements with His mission among all nations?

The resurrection of Jesus provides new life in abundance to our mortal body and forgiveness for our sinful deeds. Those who have “buried” their talents still have hope through the risen Lord and can take part in His mission in a renewed mind and spirit.

Nonetheless, Jesus shared these parables in the context of His imminent death and resurrection for His people. Those who repent of their deceptions, laziness, and unfruitfulness will be forgiven through His Calvary blood. The resurrection of Jesus provides new life in abundance to our mortal body and forgiveness for our sinful deeds. Those who have “buried” their talents still have hope through the risen Lord and can take part in His mission in a renewed mind and spirit.

Endnotes

- ¹ Dennis Duling, "Ethnicity, Ethnocentrism, and the Matthean Ethnos," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 35, no. 4 (Nov. 2005): 125–143.
- ² Schuyler Brown, "The Matthean Apocalypse," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 2, no. 4 (July 1979): 2–27.
- ³ Duling, "Ethnicity, Ethnocentrism, and the Matthean Ethnos," 125–143.
- ⁴ Richard Carlson, "Between Text and Sermon: Matthew 25:13–46," *Interpretation*: 69, no. 3 (2015): 344–346.
- ⁵ Mark Noll, *Protestants in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 133–141.
- ⁶ Donald Moorman, *Harvest Waiting* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1993), 22.
- ⁷ Moorman, *Harvest Waiting*, 92–93.
- ⁸ Noll, *Protestants in America*, 133–141.
- ⁹ Noll, *Protestants in America*, 242.