

TRINITY EVANGELICAL DIVINITY SCHOOL

MISSION IN THE OLD & NEW TESTAMENT:  
A COMPARISON AND CONTRAST

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There is great continuity between God's mission in the Old and New Testaments. It is a mistake to divide God's mission into two separate programs, as if God were somehow unsure, unprepared, or even worse, schizophrenic. To avoid this false depiction of God, it is important to recognize what is continuous in God's mission: its development through human history, its climax in the person of Jesus Christ, and its movement with the people of God. Even in light of the differences between earlier and later stages of God's mission, by the end of this essay, it will be evident that even these differences are developments within one, continuous plan of salvation.

Paralleling His revelation to mankind, God's mission in the world should be considered *progressive*. Significantly, any differences between the Old and New Testaments do not necessitate discontinuity. To illustrate this, a flower that is planted goes through several stages of growth, and often looks different at different points, but would never be thought of as "discontinuous." Both the original seed and the resulting petals are part of the same flower. In a similar way, God's mission looks different at points, but it is all part of the same, continuous mission. God's plan is progressive in the sense that, according to Ephesians 1:4-5, what God planned "before the foundations of the world" is now in the process of being completed.

Starting in Genesis, Scripture reveals that God's mission has remained consistent throughout history. From the very beginning, the One who initiates mission is God Himself: He speaks, He acts, and He sends. The Mission of God, or *Missio Dei*, not only includes the creation of the universe, but a redemptive mission to save the world. In fact, thousands of years before Jesus' incarnation, the *protoevangelion* in Genesis 3:15 promised a Savior and offered much needed hope for Adam, Eve, and their descendents. Rooted in God's faithfulness, this promise for a Savior has remained consistent and unwavering throughout all of human history.

Both the Old Testament and the New Testament should be interpreted through the framework of God's initial promise to humanity in Genesis 3:15.

Furthermore, throughout human history, the "battlefield" of missions has remained the same: the human soul. The people of God have been made righteous on the basis of *faith* – not adherence to laws, sacrificial systems, or external signs. According to the words of Amos and Romans 9, the Israelites displaced the importance of faith, and Galatians 3:6 further clarifies that Abraham was saved on the basis of his faith in God – not through confidence in his own works. For this reason, mission in the Old Testament was based on the anticipation of God's salvation (as vague as that understanding was prior to Christ) rather than strict adherence to a legal system. Everything in the Old Testament, even the Torah, pointed towards the coming of the Savior. This is significant because Christ was not a back-up plan, but the original plan to reach the souls of sinners.

In addition, God's acceptance of Gentiles has also remained continuous. This is not to say that Gentiles were the "focus" of missions because clearly, Israel was chosen as God's people. But in choosing Israel – a nation that was visibly distinct from all other nations – God was *necessarily* affecting all of the people of the world. Israel was the impetus of God's plan, and as a result, surrounding nations were drawn in through Israel. Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth are just a few examples of how Gentiles were included in God's invitation. At the time, this was not evident to all of the Jewish people, nor was it accepted; but after large-scale events like the repentance of Nineveh, it was obvious that God's plan involved not only rebellious Israel, but other nations as well. That is to say, Israel's opinion of the Gentiles may have changed over time, but God was consistently willing to accept repentant pagans.

Within God's unified plan to save humanity, Jesus' life on earth inaugurates a new era of mission. Even this, however, is not a "contrast" in the strict sense. This inauguration is not a "new program" of replacing what was defective, but rather a perfect fulfillment of what God had already done. Whereas mission in the Old Covenant was centered around Israel as the visible display of God's character, the New Covenant became centered around the person of Jesus Christ, the fulfillment of Israel. In other words, as history progressed, missions was not revised or upgraded, but fulfilled in the person of Jesus.

Again, this is not discontinuous, but a new stage in God's plan. In the Old Testament, the historical books tell the story of the inadequacy of Israel due to their grievous and cyclical sin. Similarly, the prophets target the failure of the Israelites to embody God's standard. In the New Testament, however, Jesus is portrayed as the fulfillment of Israel. This is especially the case in the Gospel of Luke – e.g., Jesus resisting temptation during the 40 days in the wilderness – because Jesus embodied the nation of Israel could not. Jesus embodies the climax of God's mission to save humanity. Although the illustration falls short at this point, He causes the flower to bloom.

Because Jesus embodies God's mission, He has the authority to commission the disciples in Matthew 28:18-20. The Great Commission is not a change of plans, therefore, but a fulfillment of what has always been planned. The uniqueness of Jesus' commission is based on the fact that Jesus Himself is the reason that the disciples can proclaim the kingdom of God. The Old Testament prophets would not tell other nations to be like Israel, but at this point in human history, the disciples can "make disciples" because they now have a perfect example in Jesus Christ. Jonah demonstrates the Israelites' dread of proclaiming the Kingdom of God, but the New Testament disciples were devoted to the mission because of Jesus' authority in heaven and

on earth. Rather than the nation of Israel, missions is now founded upon the person of Jesus Christ.

Because of Jesus Christ, there is now motivation and a more sufficient reason to go and tell the nations the good news. At the conclusion of Jesus' life, He promised to send of the Holy Spirit, so that God's mission would continue through the Church today. The basis for evangelism is Jesus Christ, and God's activity in history is what drives the Church forward in mission. The Holy Spirit empowers us to be witnesses (Acts 1:8), but this is not a mystical or esoteric experience per se. As the Spirit guides, teaches, and reminds us of God's mission – most clearly demonstrated in Jesus Christ – so are we enabled to testify. Our power resides in who God is and what God has done. In this way, the Holy Spirit empowers and sends forth the Church in her missionary task.

Even the early church did not immediately recognize the breadth of God's mission. According to Acts 10-15, Gentiles were included in the believing community, but an outspoken sect of Jewish believers in Jerusalem struggled to accept that this was possible without circumcision. Although it took a heated debate to sort out the details, the apostles eventually came to a conclusion: the outpouring of the Holy Spirit served as *experiential* evidence of God's mission to the Gentiles, and the words of the Old Testament served as *revelatory* evidence to verify that God had indeed intended to include the Gentiles. In other words, even though the people of God have been at times shortsighted, God had always intended that Gentiles would be called by His name.

This was very different from the previous way that Gentiles were integrated into the people of God. Before the coming of Christ, in order to transition from a "God-fearer" to a proselyte, a Gentile male had to be circumcised. When this changed in the days of the early

church, the external, visible sign changed in *form* – e.g., from circumcision to baptism, from Passover to the Eucharist – but the *content* of “God’s mercy towards His covenant people” remained the same. Because Jesus Christ clarified the meaning of the covenant, the early church decided that circumcision was no longer needed in order to signify the covenantal people of God. The promise of Jeremiah 31:33 was fulfilled in Christ, so the sign could be changed to reflect the reality that the covenant in Christ that is written on believers’ hearts.

In light of all of this, while there is progression between earlier and later stages, God’s mission should be seen as unified and continuous. God’s promise in Genesis 3:15 is a framework for all of human history. At the proper time, Jesus embodied and clarified the mission of God, and through this unfolding of revelation, the Church has been empowered to testify about the person of Christ. Good news has existed since the *protoevangelion*, but with clarity, completeness, and compassion, Christ has displayed God’s grace for all the nations to see. Indeed, God has never wavered from His original mission to save humanity through Christ. For this reason, even the progression from the Old and New Testaments should be seen in the context of God’s one, continuous mission to save humanity and to glorify His name.