

Mission Strategy

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Since “Mission Strategy” is not a Biblical term, I would like to begin by giving a definition of the term as I intend to use it in this paper. Mission strategy is a plan of action intended to fulfill God’s purpose to have men live with him eternally. That purpose is expressed in such passages as: Ge 1:26 when our Creator said, “Let us make man in Our image,” or Jer 31:33 when our Lord said, “I will be their God and they will be my people,” or when our Savior said, “I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.” (Jn 14:3) Mission strategy is a plan of action intended to bring about this blessed purpose of our Lord.

God’s Strategy—Revealed

I believe that we need to begin by considering what our Lord tells us about his strategy in his word. This is going to sound terribly simplistic, but permit me to speak of two steps in God’s strategy for bringing men to himself so that they can live with Him for all eternity.

God’s Strategy, A: An Atonement for All Mankind

Soon after our first parents turned against him, the Lord began to reveal the first phase of his strategy for bringing fallen men back to himself to live with him eternally. The first revelation that we have of that strategy is found in Ge 3:15. He reveals his strategy that is to send a Savior who would crush Satan’s power and reunite fallen man with his Creator once again by putting enmity where it belongs, between man and Satan. He revealed His strategy when he called Abraham and told him that through him people of all nations on earth would be blessed. He revealed his strategy by means of the Old Testament Ceremonial Law. He showed that he would reconcile himself with his rebel creatures by means of a substitutionary blood sacrifice. He revealed his strategy in greatest detail when through the prophet Isaiah he spoke of the suffering Servant, who through his death would redeem many. In the Old Testament era from Genesis to Malachi our Lord, in many times and many places, continued to reveal this first phase of his strategy, the atonement for all mankind.

It is very important to note that God’s strategy of atonement became clear to men in its details only when it was actually carried out. In the Old Testament Era even “The prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come searched intently and with greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow.” (1 Pe 1:10,11) It is only after it all actually was done, that men could see, and after the events had been recorded in the New Testament that we now can see, God’s strategy of atonement clearly and in detail. Now, after Jesus of Nazareth has fulfilled it all, we can see clearly what strategy God had in mind when, for example, he said, “I will put enmity between thee and the woman...”

Let’s stop for a moment to note some of the surprising things about this first phase of God’s strategy. His love for us his rebellious creatures, his desire to have us live with him for all eternity, more than staggers the imagination. It numbs the mind. He loves

us that much that he sacrificed his Son so that we might be able to live with him eternally. We feel with Abraham as he leads his dearly loved son, Isaac, to Moriah, the mountain of sacrifice. But think of the heavenly Father leading his beloved Son to the cross on Calvary! What would it take for you or me to sacrifice one of our children? We are incapable of, we can't even imagine, that kind of love. This strategy of atonement is surprising also in another respect. The person who carried it out looked like anything but a rescuer or hero. He was a man who was born in a stable, who could say of himself that he had no place to lay his head, Who was condemned, spit upon, mocked, scourged, and finally hung on a cross to die. Who in his right mind would ever have thought that this Jew from Nazareth is the Savior of the world? But it was through him, through this Jesus, that God made an atonement for all mankind.

As we move on to the second phase of God's strategy, I think it is very important that we keep in mind these two characteristics of the first phase, the atonement phase of that strategy: 1.) It was not fully clear to men until it was carried out. 2.) It was surprising, surprising beyond our capacity to imagine.

God's Strategy, B: Gathering His People, His Israel

In his word our Lord has revealed to us many things about the second phase, the gathering phase, of his strategy. The Old Testament gives us the broad outlines of that strategy. It tells us that this gathering will begin with the Jews and then reach out finally to all nations. (Isa 54:2,3) It tells us that Gentiles shall also be bringing Jews back to the Lord. (Isa 49:22) Isaiah tells us that the suffering Servant shall live again, see the results of his suffering, and be satisfied. (Isa 53:10,11)

It is interesting, and I believe, important to note that the Apostles and early Christians interpreted what was happening in their day according to the strategy that God had revealed in the Old Testament. To the people gathered in Jerusalem on Pentecost, Peter said that God had through the prophet Joel said that he was going to do this sort of thing. This was part of his strategy. (Ac 2:16-21; Joel 2:28-32) At the council in Jerusalem, James, the Lord's brother, sees in Paul and Peter and Barnabas' success in Gentile missions, the carrying out of the strategy that God had revealed in the book of Amos. (Ac 15:14-18; Am 9:11,12) These people had God's Old Testament revelation of his strategy. They recognized what was happening in their time as a fulfillment, a carrying out of that strategy. I think that we need to consciously strive to interpret the events of our day in the same way.

In the New Testament our Lord tells us many more things about this second phase, the gathering phase, of his strategy. For example, he tells us that he shall gather men through the preaching of his word. He says that men shall preach his word similar to the way that a farmer sows seed. (Mt 13) He says that he shall gather ever more people by using those who already are his disciples as others. (Ac 1:8) He says that he, the risen Lord, shall be with his disciples as they go out to make disciples of others. (Mt 28:19,20) He promises that his Holy Spirit shall make all of these things possible. (Ac 1:4,8) "Wait for the gift My Father promised.... You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you.") He says that he shall provide the special gifts, the pastors, teachers, evangelists needed for this work of gathering his people. (Eph 4:11,12) By example he shows that he, the risen Lord, provides the opportunities for his people to witness. Think, for example, of how the Lord healed the lame man at the beautiful gate of the temple. (Ac 3,4) That miracle attracted a crowd of people. The Lord provided the opportunity. Then Peter and

John used the opportunity to witness to him, the crucified, risen Savior. He tells us too that this gathering shall continue until the moment that he returns in glory and brings this present world to an end. (Mt 24:14 “And this Gospel of the Kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.”)

As people who are interested in mission strategy, you and I need to study the Scriptures, to see these things, to learn to know what God has revealed to us about his strategy. As we do, as we grow in our understanding of his strategy, what will our response be?

Mission Strategy—Our Response

Our first response can only be awe and amazement, awe and amazement that our Creator desires to have us live with him that much, that he actually carried out the first phase of his strategy. Through the crucifixion of his Son, he actually made an atonement for all mankind. We can only respond to the second phase of his strategy with amazement as well, amazement that he should have chosen to use us, his sinful, shortsighted followers, followers who are so apt to err, followers who are so apt to become proud, —amazement that he actually chose to use us to carry out the second phase, the gathering phase, of his strategy. I believe that such awe and amazement at his love, his wisdom, his choices, is the only proper foundation for developing a mission strategy.

If we recognize and take to heart the facts that our Lord has revealed to us about his strategy, then a deep awareness of our extremely limited knowledge, shall also be a part of our response. We are, with regard to phase B, the gathering phase of God’s strategy, where the Old Testament prophets were with regard to the first phase, the atonement phase of that strategy. Like they, we shall not understand God’s strategy clearly and in detail until it has actually been carried out. We should not be surprised when the things he does according to his strategy simply baffle us, such things as establishing antichristian, or unchristian governments in so many countries on our planet. (Ro 13:1) Out of respect for his strategy and in awareness of our own limitations, we should not try to distort or overlook historical facts, so as to get God’s strategy to make more sense to us. In honest humility we need to bow before his divine strategy which so frequently is so incomprehensible to us. That strategy shall become clear even to us when we are with him in heaven. (1 Co 13:12)

Mission Strategy—Directives from our Lord

Our Lord has not only revealed a number of things about his strategy to us. He has also given us directives to follow. Since we and what we do are involved in his strategy, the description of that strategy and the directives for our mission strategy are intertwined. Some of the things mentioned above under “God’s Strategy, B.: Gathering His People, His Israel,” might be included here as directives for our mission strategy. I’ll mention a few more directives that he gives us. I have the feeling that this list will be far from complete.

In regard to means and method of gathering his people, the Holy Spirit tells us that his Gospel is the power of God unto salvation. (Ro 1:16,17) The proclamation of his Gospel is to take the form of witnessing. (Ac 1:8) This proclamation is to be centered, actually centered in the crucified Christ who physically rose again from the dead. (1 Co 2:2; Ac 1:22, Matthias was to “Become a witness with us of his resurrection.”)

In regard to the scope of this strategy, he tells us to gather people from “All nations,” and, “To the ends of the earth.” (Mt 28:19; Ac 1:8) He assures us that he is

gathering all things together in one in Christ. (Eph 1:10)

He tells us that our objective is to “Make disciples,” men who with their entire being answer his call, “Follow Me.” (Mt 28:19; 9:9, the call of Matthew.)

By example the New Testament letters teach us that our strategy is to include leading one another to greater maturity, to help one another fight the good fight and keep the faith until the end. (E.g. Eph 6:10-18)

The New Testament directives to obey government authority certainly apply to mission strategy. (Ro 13:1; 1 Pe 2:17; Tit 3:1) Those who wish to do mission work in countries whose governments forbid Christian missions certainly must come to terms with these passages. In our zeal to serve our Lord, we dare not ignore directives given to us by that same Lord. The examples of Asia and Bithynia in Acts, chapter 16, show that there may be times when our Lord does not want us to do mission work in a given area.

For the most part these God-given directives for mission strategy do not tell us exactly, concretely what to plan for the next day, the next month, or the next year. This brings us to the next section of this essay:

Mission Strategy—God-given Freedom and Responsibility

To my knowledge there are only a few instances in the New Testament when God closed off an individual’s freedom of choice in mission strategy and told him exactly what to do. For example the Lord told Peter to go to the home of Cornelius even though that was against Peter’s religious principles. The Lord told Philip to go to the road leading to Gaza even though that was desert country. The Lord told Paul not to go to Bithynia or Asia even though that was part of Paul’s strategy. By the way, I think that we do Paul a disservice if we assume that going to Bithynia or Asia at that time was not part of a well-planned strategy. The Lord told Paul to go to Macedonia, even though that was not part of Paul’s strategy at that time. When God gives such a concrete directive by revelation, we no longer have any choice in mission strategy. The fact is, however, that he very rarely does that. Apparently he very rarely did that even in New Testament times. We need to be well aware of the fact that if we have not received a vision or some other form of direct revelation, we do not really have a “Macedonian Call.”

The above means that our Lord gives us a surprising amount of freedom in determining mission strategy. He permits us to determine the places where we are going to do mission work. He permits us to make these decisions on the basis of such things as distance, accessibility, language, social and economic factors, government permission, etc. he permits us to determine the time when we do mission work in a given place. Think of Ecclesiastes, chapter 3. He permits us to call missionaries, to decide what methods to use.

This freedom to make such decisions with regard to mission strategy puts us under heavy responsibility. We are like the ten servants in the parable, (Lk 19) each of whom received a mina. We are to use all of the gifts, all of the means that our Lord has entrusted to us, to the best of our ability so as to accomplish his purpose until that time when he returns. I believe that this responsibility obligates us to seek to recognize as many alternatives as we possibly can and then develop a mission strategy by evaluating those alternatives.

Mission Strategy—Alternatives

The mission strategy alternatives that confront us keep changing from place to place and from time to time. Let me mention just a few that come to mind:

Should we put the emphasis on following so-called “Macedonian calls,” or rather emphasize “Teaching all nations?” The latter would mean striving to evaluate any and all potential mission fields regardless of whether we have an invitation or not.

Should we enter mission fields where other church bodies already are experiencing success, or should we concentrate on areas where the Gospel seems to be making little progress? Think of Paul and his “ambition to preach the Gospel where Christ was not known.” (Ro 15:20)

Should we put the emphasis on “Seed sowing,” which would be striving to bring the word to as many people as possible in any proper way possible, or should we put the emphasis on “Church planting,” which I believe would mean putting the emphasis on gathering congregations?

Should we sow the seed only where personal follow-up is possible, or should we sow the seed as far and wide as possible, regardless of follow-up limitations, e.g. radio broadcasts to areas outside our immediate field of work?

Should we limit our geographical area of work as determined by our strategy or should we be flexible?

Should we seek certain types of people or seek anyone?

Should we put strong emphasis on developing a financially indigenous church, or stress faithful stewardship of material wealth?

Should we use incentives such as teaching English or American cooking to get into contact with new people or not?

Should we strive to develop a national church that is a replica of the mother church in the U.S., or should we encourage the development of a national church that, aside from doctrine, has its own cultural and social characteristics?

Should we continue to increase the number of missionaries as long as there is plenty of work for them to do, or should we “cap off” the number of missionaries when the national church seems to be taking root?

No doubt other alternatives will surface in the course of your discussions. I hope that you shall be able to discuss them, evaluate them freely and openly in the fear of our Lord and in a spirit of love and respect for one another.

Mission Strategy—Some Absolutes

In bringing this paper to a close I would like to list a few things having to do with mission strategy, things that I personally believe are absolutes:

Developing mission strategy is simply a part of faithful stewardship. We are obligated to develop the best mission strategy that we possibly can.

In developing mission strategy we must strive to take into account *all* of the directives that our Lord has given us in his word.

In developing mission strategy we must seek to recognize and evaluate *as many* alternatives as possible.

In developing mission strategy we should limit ourselves to what appears to be feasible, so that we don’t become guilty of wasting time and effort that could better be spent on actually witnessing to others regarding our risen Savior.

In developing mission strategy we must strive to recognize where revelation ends and Christian common sense, good stewardship, begins.

In developing mission strategy we must recognize our human limitations such as inability to fully comprehend God’s strategy, inability to accomplish anything on our

own, inability to live without sin, our need to learn from one another and to receive help from one another.

Let us constantly ask our Lord for his blessing upon our stumbling efforts at mission strategy. His promises, such as, “Lo, I am with you always,” and the history of his church assure us and all Christendom of that blessing.