Proper Missiology Requires Sound Biblical Interpretation

Or . . . Proof texting—The best path to bad missiology

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After hearing an intriguing anecdote, preachers often joke with their friends by stating an old, but all-too-frequently applied line, “That would make a great sermon, I just have to find a Bible passage to match it.” Most preachers, of course, are speaking facetiously and would never let a good story, rather than sound exegesis, drive a sermon.

In the world of missions, the fervor to inspire the next generation of missionaries with fascinating stories and creative strategies often leads some speakers to utilize Bible passages as proof texts taken out of context. This assertion does not mean that these strategies will not be successful or the stories are not moving. However, the texts some missionaries use in these instances do not mean what they imply. Sound exegesis of Scripture should always take preeminence when one is speaking or leading in missions.

God has written the Bible in such a way that the simplest rice farmer in Vietnam or the most astute hedge fund trader in New York can understand basic truths from His Word. In fact, God has always spoken in ways common men could understand.

God spoke to Moses, the prince turned sheepherder, in a variety of ways—from the Burning Bush to “face to face.” Each time God revealed truth to Moses, he was able to understand clearly what God had to say. God spoke to Gideon, a man full of doubt in a troubled time, in a way that could assuage his fears as to whether God would really be with him.

With Paul, a man in a hardened condition due to his religiosity, Christ spoke quite boldly in Acts chapter 9. Paul needed a direct, unmistakable wake up call to come to faith in the risen Lord. In the end, God has consistently relayed His perfect truth through means understandable to the specific listener.

Scripture summarizes the ways that God has revealed truth to man in Hebrews 1:1–2: “God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spoke in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, Has in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds;”

God uses the Holy Spirit through the Word of God to help us hear His truth. Individuals can take what the Scripture has to say and have confidence that the God of the universe will reveal readily applicable truths to their daily lives.

The fact that God has written in such a simple manner does not mean that more in-depth exegetical studies are not necessary to glean deeper understanding from His Word. If one wants to teach the Word of God accurately, he must follow some basic, common-sense approaches to gleaning the meaning of the text.

One cannot simply choose a verse, highlight the simplicity of what it says, and ignore context, background or linguistic nuances to the passage. The danger of picking texts to prove a point is evident—even if the point is used to promote some positive missiological ideas. Taking verses out of context promotes poor strategy in
missions and heresy in general. The proclaimer of God’s Word is in danger of trumpeting his vision over what God intended in the original passage.

Missionaries and missiologists often highlight certain verses in the hopes of promoting their cause. Sometimes, the verses they choose do not mean what the speaker implies. This paper examines four passages that are misused from Scripture and attempts to show a proper exegetical interpretation of each Scripture.

**Habakkuk 1:5**

Habakkuk 1:5 has become a favorite passage for many missionary organizations. The verse inspires images of God working wonders on this earth beyond man’s imagination. “Behold you among the heathen, and regard, and wonder marvelously: for I will work a work in your days, which you will not believe, though it be told you.

One can see examples of this passage utilized throughout promotional webpages on the Internet. A simple Google search can find many churches that list Habakkuk 1:5 as a pivotal verse in their missions vision. One can even find this verse utilized to promote missions emphasis in textbooks such as *Perspectives of the World Christian Movement*.

Are these groups maliciously using this verse? No. Each group has a heartfelt desire to reach their target people for Christ. No one can begrudge these groups for their passion for the lost. However, they are misquoting a verse that has little to do with a missions’ impetus. The verse has far more to do with judgment than it has to do with missions.

Habakkuk prophesied as a contemporary of Jeremiah, Nahum and Zephaniah in the final days of the Assyrian Empire and the beginning of Babylon’s world domination. It was a dark time for Judah. Josiah had died and Judah was far from God. Habakkuk sought God to find out how long he would cry out for justice without a response from God. In verses 3 and 4, Habakkuk listed a litany of problems within Judah that were grotesque to a man of God—strife, contention, ineffective laws, wickedness and poor judgment.

In His grace, God replied to Habakkuk’s query. He tells him to “look” and “be utterly astounded.” He assured Habakkuk He would work in ways that Habakkuk “would not believe.” The commands in verse 5 are in the plural so it would be more than just Habakkuk who would be aware of God working.

However, do the ideas of “looking” and “being astounded” relate to global evangelism? Proper exegesis of this verse requires one to study the complete passage. God is not referring to a series of evangelistic harvests that will occur. Instead, He is revealing He will use the Babylonians to fulfill his purposes of judgment. God said in Habakkuk 1:6: “For, lo, I raise up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, which shall march through the breadth of the land, to possess the dwelling places that are not theirs.”

The following verses describe the Chaldeans as “terrible” and “dreadful” (vs. 7) and they “come for violence” (vs. 9). They “scoff at kings” (vs. 10), and in the end the Chaldeans would not even give God the glory for their actions (vs. 11). In truth, this passage describes God’s ability to utilize even the dastardliest people for His
justice. To ascribe this passage with a meaning pertaining to global evangelization overlooks what the verse is teaching—God receives glory through His justice.

One should not minimize one of God’s perfect attributes in order to elevate another. If mission groups misuse this verse, they are painting a false tale of what God is actually saying. One might ask, does not Paul cross-reference this passage in Acts 13:41? After, all we have no greater mission book than Acts! Paul refers to Habakkuk 1, but his sermon reminds the readers of impending judgment rather than giving a missions focus.

Mission organizations have used this passage to promote going to unreached people groups around the world with the hope of seeing God produce results beyond what man can imagine. This usage is a classic example of a proper motivation, but an improper hermeneutic. One can accurately say that Habakkuk 1:5 demonstrates God is at work in this world, but the context of the passage has little to do with modern application for missions’ strategy to the unreached.

Matthew 9:35-38

On the surface few verses promote God’s focus on the harvest fields like Matthew 9:35-38. This verse seems perfectly suited for reminding missionaries to focus on the current harvest: “And Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every sickness and every disease among the people. But when he saw the multitudes, he was moved with compassion on them, because they fainted, and were scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd. Then said he unto his disciples, The harvest truly is plenteous, but the laborers are few; Pray therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth laborers into his harvest.”

The verses begin with an overview of Christ’s itinerant ministry. He traveled to all of the cities and villages accomplishing three goals—teaching, preaching and healing. For the modern reader, many obvious truths can be gleaned from this passage. From verse 35, one can find an excellent outline of how to do ministry with a balance of preaching, teaching, and compassion ministries. In verse 36, the reader can see that, in the midst of Christ’s busyness, He is still compassionate toward the lost. Finally the reader can observe in verse 37 that Christ sees the disciples were surrounded by a potential harvest of souls. The disciples’ key job was to pray that the Lord will send out further laborers into His harvest.

Harvest missiologists lean toward Donald McGavran’s strategies of placing mission resources in evident harvest fields in order to reap the often short-lived evangelistic harvest. They risk the temptation to promote the idea that since Christ used the word “harvest” in this instance, missionaries should focus on proven “harvest” fields.

However, Christ was not giving future missionaries a strategy of targeting harvest over sowing fields. Instead, the passage is about Christ’s compassion among the lost of Galilee to whom He is ministering. Those people in Galilee could vacillate from being incredibly open to the Gospel (Mark 6:30–44) to being extremely hardened to what Christ had to say (Matthew 13:54–58). In Matthew 9, Christ had compassion on His people, the Jews, because they were “sheep without a shepherd.”
That type of designation could be applied to both open and hardened people. These were individuals who were harassed and helpless and in need of a leader—particularly the Messiah.

An argument actually can be made from the Gospels that Christ was targeting a more open people without reading preconceived notions into this text. After all, the Jews were seeking a Messiah and had the Scriptures available to them. In a sense, they were a more ready harvest than the Gentiles. However, the focus of this particular passage is simply to find workers ready to go to work. What happened immediately after Jesus’ call for workers? Matthew 10:1 details the sending of the disciples to minister to a spiritually dark world.

A proper understanding of context allows the reader to glean profound spiritual truths from Matthew 9—compassion for the hurting in the midst of busy ministry, a focus on finding more workers to reach a hurting world, and a recognition that Christ views the world as a harvest—without having to formalize a missions strategy based on a faulty hermeneutic.

Matthew 28:19–20

How can anyone critique Matthew 28:19–20 as if the passage is misused for missions endeavors? After all, if there is any Scripture passage that so evidently commands past and future generations to be involved in reaching the world, it is these verses: “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.”

This passage teaches missiologists some obvious truths. Followers of Christ are commanded to go, make disciples, teach, and baptize in His name. From this text missionaries can apply the principle to reproduce what they have learned to the next generation just as the disciples were to teach what they had learned from Christ. (See 2 Timothy 2:2)

One can also learn that even in the physical absence of the Son, Christ will be with him until the end of the age as He works in the missions endeavor. All the above truths are evident from the passage. However, application of the passage can be taken too far as well. A modern missions’ strategy taken from an application of the term peoples should give missiologists pause as they examine Matthew 28.

Ralph Winter introduced a concept in 1974 at the Lausanne Congress. He sent a wake up call to mission organizations that the task of global evangelism is far from complete. Whereas mission work might have been completed in a geographic sense, it was certainly not finished in the sense of peoples. Organizations were reminded that billions of people are born in ethno-linguistic groups without the opportunity to hear the Gospel adequately.

These groups, known as unreached peoples, became a central focus of the strategy to reach the world for Christ. A standard definition for people groups was enacted in 1982 at Lausanne which stated, “An unreached people is a people group among which there is no indigenous community of believing Christians with adequate numbers and resources to evangelize this people group without outside
(cross cultural) assistance.”5 Today the number of unreached people groups stands at 6,895, although that number changes frequently depending on parameters of research.6

Mission organizations have a renewed sense of focus and urgency as they attempt to reach these last groups for Christ. Groups ranging from Joshua Project to the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention emphasize the importance of reaching unreached peoples as a core pillar in their strategies. In a sense, this era is an exciting time to be involved in world missions. Strategies to share with unreached people groups are basically accepted as the next great phase of mission work.

Winter’s clarion call reminds churches that the term nations does not mean modern day nation-states. This concept is integral in expanding the Church’s vision for outreach. After all, the boundaries drawn by Western colonial powers in South America, Africa and Asia would have been completely foreign to the disciples in Galilee two thousand years ago.

Winter’s exposition of the text prompts the reader to examine Scripture, and the word peoples specifically, from the perspective of the first century hearers as well as from today’s viewpoint. Christ spoke to those believers sitting before Him in a way that they could understand. Interpreters of Scripture must put themselves in the place of the hearers to understand adequately a passage’s context.

In light of the necessity to read the Bible from the perspective of first century listeners, have mission strategists now gone too far with its application of Matthew 28? Can modern scholars honestly say those listeners would have understood that a people group is defined by ethno-linguistic terms to the degree of specificity that missiologists have placed on the term today? The Joshua Project describes criteria for defining the term “people group:"

An argument can be made for defining "people group" according to the highest of the two barriers (understandability and acceptance), in some circumstances. If understandability is the most important barrier, then a linguistic, or an ethno-linguistic, approach is used. With this approach, one people group doesn’t speak more than one language (apart from occasional bi-lingual individuals), although more than one people group may speak a given language if cultural or dialect differences warrant.7

In a sense, strategists have placed twenty-first century details on a first century definition. The crowd Jesus was addressing would not have understood His command in this specific a light. Why does this discrepancy matter? Strategies are driven by nuances of this definition that would never have been on the minds of the early Church.

Are the parameters missiologists have placed on the definition of people group necessarily untrue? No. In a sense, simple observation shows that people are more likely to commune with others like themselves ethnically and linguistically. If one goes to most churches around the United States, he can see the majority of people in worship are part of one ethnicity (Thankfully that trend is changing).8
However, a twenty-first century sociological definition placed upon a first century observation poses certain problems. Have mission organizations become too specific in groups being targeted? Consequently, are missionaries being sent to geographic regions with the belief that the sheer numbers of local unreached groups merits prioritizing those areas? Have churches focused on people groups to such a degree that other valid strategies of mission work such as seminary education, social efforts, or deploying missionaries to proven harvest fields are not being addressed? Have mission organizations targeted people groups with an antiquated perspective on the changing face of society? In other words, are there areas where the definition of people groups simply does not apply? Does trying to force strategies focused on people groups actually hinder the work of the Kingdom?

Paul Hiebert posed this question concerning changing methods in missions:

In mission, we too often use the methods used in the past, which are based on small-scale, tightly knit, resident communities. Then we wonder why we are not effective. In the modern world, people no longer belong to people groups. They participate in many different intersecting communities and do so in different ways. The assumption that we can foster “people movements” in complex urban settings needs to be reexamined. We need to develop an ecclesiology and missiology that enables us to bear bold witness in a global world with its global powers, regional loyalties, and local identities.  

The problem with modern day interpretations of Matthew 28 is not that missiologists are spouting heresy when they interpret nations in this way. Instead, some leaders are applying a twenty-first century definition that is appropriate for certain areas of the world and not for others. They are ignoring the changing face of the times where “peoples” are so intertwined in daily living that we do not need to view them as self-contained units to the degree we once did. Mission organization limit missionaries in their vision and practice by placing parameters in a definition not found in the Bible.

Matthew 24:14

“And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come.”

In Matthew 24, modern readers can review the Olivet Discourse. Any time preachers come to passages that deal with eschatology, debate occurs over interpretation. Sound believers in Christ can have divergent opinions on Matthew 24 and still hold to orthodox doctrine.

The context of the verse is fairly clear. Jesus was ministering in the days prior to the Cross. He refuted the Pharisees and exclaimed that Jerusalem would be left desolate (Matthew 23:19). The disciples, of course, were curious as to what Jesus was saying and, consequently, pointed out the majesty of the buildings of Jerusalem. The disciples obviously could not fathom that the buildings would be imperiled
(Matthew 24:1). Logically, the disciples wanted to know when all of these things would occur.

Jesus, then, did not give a specific date. Why not? Jesus wanted His disciples to understand no one knows the hour, and neither should they. Christ said of His return “But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only.” (Matthew 24:36) Instead, prior to verse 36, He gave visible indicators that will occur before His return. Christ revealed signs from battles (vs. 6), nature (vs. 7), from persecution (vs. 9), and from heretical movements (vs. 11). Many of His followers would grow cold in their love for the Kingdom (vs. 12). Christ painted a very bleak picture indeed for the disciples.

To this point, this article’s description of the background of the passage would probably draw the ire of very few readers. However, certain interpretations of terms are debatable in Matthew 24. For example, what does “all the world” mean? Some scholars hold “all the world” indicates only the Roman Empire (since that was the world the disciples would have understood). Others say the verse is discussing all the “peoples” indicated by similar passages in Mark 13, as well as in Matthew 24:14. Another debate can center on what the word “end” means and when will that time occur? Depending on one’s millennial view, Matthew 24:14 can bring hearty debate on the idea of the “end”. However, this article will not critique all the millennial views. Sincere Bible students can have vastly divergent views on His return. Instead, the problem with modern missions’ usage of this passage is its application.

Mission organizations have been using this verse as a key proof text to show the need to target all of the nations. Often this verse is meant to be motivational, but, in the end, the hearer takes the verse as a foundation for strategy. How does one view the verse as strategic? Simple logic could lead one to believe that if missionaries reach all peoples, then Christ will return. In a sense, one cannot gauge the exact day of Christ’s return but one can make an educated guess that He will return after the 7,000 unreached people groups are all reached. After all, in this view, the verse tells us that the Gospel will be preached to all peoples and then the end will come. The end of the world seems quite obvious from that missiological understanding of the passage.

The problem with this type of application is that in the context of the passage, Christ was speaking generally to His disciples. He discussed wars, famines, persecution and cold-hearted believers. Each of these statements could apply to any century since the time of Christ. He was purposely vague with his disciples earlier in Matthew 24. This verse is purposely vague as well. He did not define what “preached” means. The question arises whether He meant by the word “preached” that the Gospel is shared once or that a majority of individuals in that nation will have come to Christ?

Jesus did not define what “nations” meant. Of course, the discussion of “nations” takes the reader back to this article’s review of the application of Matthew 28. Taking into account that He was not specific when discussing how to much of a nation the gospel must be “preached,” nor did He discuss the modern application of the world nations. Christ certainly did not lay out a command for a strategy from this verse.
Few missions organizational leaders would ever state they are basing a strategy on Matthew 24. However, in practice, two results come from misuse of this verse. First, whether or not statements are made officially concerning strategy and Matthew 24, in practice mission organizations are flocking to the strategy of going to smaller and smaller people groups in order to reach the last of the “unreached.” Eschatology is driving missions’ strategy.

Second, even if many mission organizations are not basing a strategy on Matthew 24:14, the misuse of this passage filters down to the average layperson as the verse gives modern churches a strategy. All too frequently one can see this verse used in local churches as the impetus to go to unreached people groups. In a sense, who can blame them for wanting to be a part of helping in ushering Christ’s return? However, is the verse actually saying that we can be a part of ushering in His return? No, instead, the verse is a reminder that Christ has a heart for the nations of the world, and He will not return until the full number of all the peoples have come to Him. The verse is not a man-centered strategy, but a God-driven plea to go to all the world.

**Conclusion**

Ultimately, a sound hermeneutic requires modern day readers to place themselves in the minds of the first century hearers. At the same time, they must understand God has written His word so readers can comprehend and apply it today. A majority of this paper has highlighted what missiologists have done wrong in teaching these verses; however, some summary thoughts are appropriate on what they have done right and how these verses can be applied in more sound ways.

In truth, missiologists attempt to bring a missions focus to a stagnant church. Highlighting verses such as Matthew 24 and 28 remind individuals that Christ did have “peoples” on His mind. Americans, like the Jews in the first century, can be very insular in their mindset. Utilizing these verses reminds believers that Christ was concerned for all the peoples.

A certain amount of strategy can be gleaned from these verses as well. Less strategy can be gleaned from Habakkuk 1:5, in this author’s opinion, because the verse is so egregiously misused. However, in Matthew 9 a missionary can certainly glean a strategy of how to work—preach, teach, and minister to the hurts of their people. From Matthew 28:19-20 missiologists are certainly on track as they move the focus from nation states to people groups. Christ gave us a plan to do more than just evangelize, but to teach and disciple these new believers. Matthew 24:14 adds some strategic elements, within limits, to it as well. Logically missionaries should keep expanding outward to new areas until all the peoples hear about Christ.

However, missiologists should reflect on the limitations of what these verses are saying. Dogmatic statements defining “people” and to what degree they must be “preached” (Matthew 24:14) need to be tempered. In truth, modern believers do not know exactly how to define a “people” and to what degree they must be “preached.” We can know God wants all men to hear and come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:4).
Each individual deserves a chance to hear regardless of their people group. Simply because an individual comes from a “reached” group does not mean he has a realistic chance of hearing the Gospel without a modern missions emphasis to his people as well. Modern day definitions based on these verses seem stringent at best and misleading at worst.

Missiologists do not have to oversell the idea of missions by misinterpreting verses. A speaker can be tempted to have an idea and then find a verse to match the idea. Missionaries should let Scripture speak for itself. The context of the passage and the power of the message will convict men of their need to be involved in missions. At the same time, as missions leaders rightly try to construct strategy based on Scripture, they should humbly accept the fact that, at times, they have read more into the passages than are actually present. This understanding will enable them to be open to divergent views about who should be targeted and how they should be reached.

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3 Bloomberg, Craig. *The New American Commentary: Matthew*. (Nashville, Broadman and Holman, 1992),166. “Jesus’ human emotions reflect a deep, gut-level ‘compassion’ (a reasonable, idiomatic English equivalent for a term [from Greek *splanchnos*] that could refer to bowels and kidneys) for this sea of humanity.”
7 [http://www.joshuaproject.net/assets/articles/what-is-a-people-group.pdf](http://www.joshuaproject.net/assets/articles/what-is-a-people-group.pdf) (accessed October 20, 2013).
8 [http://intervarsityurbanprojects.pbworks.com/f/can+megachurches+bridge+the+racial+divide++willow.pdf](http://intervarsityurbanprojects.pbworks.com/f/can+megachurches+bridge+the+racial+divide++willow.pdf). (Accessed October 20, 2013) According to Michael Emerson, a specialist on race and faith at Rice University, the proportion of American churches with 20% or more minority participation has languished at about 7.5% for the past nine years. But among Evangelical churches with attendance of 1,000 people or more, the slice has more than quadrupled, from 6% in 1998 to 25% in 2007.
10 [http://home.snu.edu/~hculbert/eschaton.htm](http://home.snu.edu/~hculbert/eschaton.htm) (accessed October 21, 2013)
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