



Anglicans in
World Mission

A SHORT COURSE ON WORLD MISSION

Session 2. The Bible and Mission

Aim: to explore how the Bible can be used as an important tool for mission

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Worship

The session starts with a prayer. The following, which links closely to the theme of the session, may be suitable.

Beckoning Christ

You call us out of our comfortable ghettos of 'us' and 'them'
To risk discipleship without walls.

You call us into a worldwide fellowship
Where God is worshipped
Above all other.

You call us into a worldwide fellowship
Where prayer is offered
Day and night.

You call us into a worldwide fellowship
Where we can share what we are
With others who love you.

You call us into a worldwide fellowship
Where each person has something to give
To the whole.

You call us into a worldwide fellowship
Where compassion and respect
Shape missionary endeavour.

Keep on beckoning us
Out of our safe havens
Into your richer fellowship
Of challenge and reconciliation, faith and hope.

Kate Compston

Starting out

The Handmaid's Tale, a novel by Margaret Atwood, tells the story of a repressive future society which keeps the Bible locked away. The Bible is only accessible to the commander of the household (male) and, even so, is heavily censored. The handmaid, Offred, observes that the Bible is kept locked up 'to keep the servants from stealing it... the Bible is an incendiary device: who knows what we'd make of it, if we could get our hands on it'.

- Is the Bible 'an incendiary device' as far as we are concerned?
- What parts of the Bible do you think best fit this description?
- Do you feel there are parts of the Bible this description does not apply to?
- In this respect, would you distinguish between the Old and New Testaments?

Thinking it through

Each of the other three sessions of this course includes a bible study. What therefore are we particularly seeking to focus on when we call this session 'The Bible and Mission'?

The answer is that, as well as studying a particular passage or passages in the 'What about the Bible?' section, we are taking a look at the Bible's 'grand narrative' – its sweep from beginning to end, from Genesis to Revelation – and asking what it has to say to us about mission.

The work of two twentieth century writers on Christian mission have significantly influenced the writing of this section. They are the South African David Bosch, whose book *Transforming Mission* (Orbis, 1991) made an immense impact upon thinking about mission in the 1990s, and the Scot Andrew F Walls, who through both his teaching and writing (published largely in the form of collected articles) has inspired creative thinking about mission and culture in our increasingly globalised age. Bosch and Walls suggest in their writings that:

- Christianity is an intrinsically missionary religion
- The Bible is an intensely missionary book
- At the heart of mission is the crossing or breaking down of barriers and boundaries.

So let us explore the narrative of the Bible using the motif of boundary-crossing mission. Mission has its roots in the story of Creation. God chooses to bring into being a world 'other' than himself and, bridging the gap, to seek a relationship with it. There is a well known poem, *The Creation* by James Weldon Johnson, which presents God as follows:

And God stepped out on space,
And he looked round and said,
'I'm lonely –
I'll make me a world.'¹

The poem continues through the various stages of Creation – but God remains lonely still, until finally he proclaims: 'I'll make me a man.' And human beings are therefore created for relationship with God.

In fact one of the features of the Creation story of Genesis 1 is the interplay between unity and division, likeness and difference. It is a world in which clear boundaries are set – between light and darkness, day and night, land and sea, and these are 'good' because structure is important. And when it comes to living things, which are created 'each according to its kind', the boundaries between each species are important, for they facilitate the diversity and variety of Creation. Yet even as God creates according to this 'boundary-making' pattern, he seems – when it comes to humanity – to cross a boundary, for human beings – uniquely among Creation – are created in the image and likeness of God. It is also intriguing that it is only in relation to humans that God spells out 'male and female he created them'. The boundary between the sexes is spelt out in the making of humankind, but it is also a boundary that is essential to cross for the purpose of procreation – so that humanity can continue. It is to these human companions that God

¹ *The Book of American Negro Poetry*. ed. James Weldon Johnson, Harcourt, Brace and Co. (NY), 1922.

gives stewardship over the rest of Creation. So both boundaries and boundary-crossing are already present in the first chapter of the Bible.

But the negative side of boundaries becomes apparent only two chapters later when the distance between God and human beings resulting from human disobedience in Eden is physically reflected in a boundary of exclusion – the cherubim with fiery swords guarding the gates of the garden (Genesis 3:24).

From this point onwards, mission is about bridging this barrier – and restoring a new Creation.

The World Alliance of Reformed Churches, in defining mission, puts it like this: “Mission involves, on the other hand, assessing and addressing all that which separates people from God, each other and creation. Put in biblical terms, we are called to name and deal with ‘sin’ in all its dimensions, that is: personal as well as structural sin. At the same time mission involves living out, proclaiming and celebrating all that which reconciles people with God, each other and creation.”²

Fairly early on in the Book of Genesis humankind sets about trying to break down a barrier or boundary – but goes the wrong way about it. This is the essence of the story of the building of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11. Human beings overextend themselves by seeking to build ‘a tower with its top in the heavens’ (Genesis 11:4). And the story also suggests that the building of the tower is linked to the desire for a totalitarian kind of unity. Yet difference has dignity and diversity is God-given, and so it is enforced by God through the scattering of humanity and the gift – or challenge – of the diversity of languages. So how do we both honour our diversity yet also build a human community without walls? Such is the task the rest of the Bible seeks to wrestle with.

The quest begins in earnest with the call of Abraham, which is deliberately presented in contrasting terms to the efforts of the builders of Babel. They had wanted to ‘make a name’ (Genesis 11:4) for themselves – Abraham on the other hand is offered a ‘name’ (Genesis 12:2) by God. And while the builders had wanted to remain firmly in one place, Abraham was called to travel far from home, crossing geographical boundaries on the way. Whether fortuitously or not, the description ‘Hebrew’ which is given to him (Genesis 14.13) – and which will be owned by his descendants at key points in their history – seems to be linked to the verb *avar*, which means ‘to cross over’. Boundary-crossing is being written into their identity. The following reflection brilliantly captures the significance of the story of Abraham in relation to God’s vision for the world: “We like to exclude all who don’t suit our preferences. We become a sect. Sects are composed of men and women who reinforce their basic selfism by banding together with others who are pursuing similar brands of selfism, liking the same foods, believing in the same idols, playing the same games, despising the same outsiders. Early on selfism developed into sectarianism in order to build a tower to heaven without having to bother with the God of heaven. A sect is accomplished by community reduction, getting rid of what does not please us, getting rid of what offends us, whether of ideas or of people. We construct religious clubs instead of entering resurrection communities...[But] with the call of Abraham, the long, slow, complex, and still continuing movement to pull all these selves into a people of God community began. The birthing of Jesus’ community on the Day of Pentecost was an implicit but emphatic repudiation and then reversal of Babel sectarianism.”³

² Report of the Executive Secretary responsible for the Mission Project, Jet den Hollander, World Alliance of Reformed Churches; http://warc.jalb.de/warcajsp/news_file/8.pdf accessed 20.04.10

³ Eugene Peterson, *Christ plays in Ten Thousand Places*, Eerdmans, pp. 242, 244

So it is of vital importance that the call of Abraham is not for himself and his family alone. Written into its fabric is the clear pledge that the destinies of Abraham's family and the rest of humanity will be knit together 'In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed' (Genesis 12:3).

Moving on in the biblical story it is significant to note that what is often called 'the root experience' of the people of Israel, the Exodus, has at its heart an image which expresses the breaking of a barrier – namely the crossing of the Sea (Exodus 14-15). Yet only a few chapters further on in the narrative the encounter with God at Sinai reinforces barriers and boundaries – as it is made clear that the people cannot approach the holy mountain (Exodus 19). We could say that the interplay between these two strands – the one barrier-breaking and the other boundary-constructing runs through the entire Old Testament – and perhaps even into the New. At certain points one strand dominates – at other times it is the other. Perhaps the particular 'power' of the Bible is however especially demonstrated when the two strands are in a dynamic interaction with each other. This can be seen at a number of different points in scripture.

First there is the theme of 'election' and 'chosen-ness', whether of the people of Israel as a whole or specific individuals. On the one hand this might seem to set up barriers – yet 'election' is never for a person's (or nation's) own sake – but to enable God to engage with a wider group. So, for example, the 'servant' of Isaiah 40-55 seems to be chosen to bridge barriers and extend God's reign.

Another example is the way that the Old Testament adopts symbols and language that probably originated in the wider religious culture of the Ancient Near East – but transposes them into a new key. A striking illustration is the use within the Old Testament of the symbol of the 'sea', which appears in a wide range of Middle East religious texts as a mythological chaotic and hostile force. The Old Testament adopted the symbol (see, for example, Psalm 93), thus building contextual bridges into the surrounding culture. But it also sets down markers that distinguish the use of the symbol when compared with other Ancient Middle Eastern religious traditions, so that the Old Testament assertion of monotheism means that the 'sea' ceases to be in any way a separate divine force.

A third example is the striking way that language that was originally used to describe specific religious places and events is extended to include a wider group. A good illustration is the use of the word 'holy' in the Book of Isaiah. The word 'holy' – *qdsh* in Hebrew – literally refers to things that are 'separate' because they are linked to the divine in some way. So 'holiness' is par excellence a concept with boundaries and barriers at its heart. Thus a mark of the holiness of the Temple was its physical separation from the rest of Jerusalem by a series of boundaries which only some could pass through, after appropriate rituals. But dramatically Isaiah 4:2, for instance, talks about the whole city of Jerusalem being 'holy' – because the barrier between the Temple and the rest of Jerusalem has been broken and holiness has spilled over to 'flood' the entire city.

Thus the story of the Old Testament seems to be reflecting the creative tension between these two dynamics – establishing boundaries, yet also breaking barriers – pulling in different directions. And perhaps this links in some ways to the tension also reflected in Israel's relationship to the people of foreign nations, what is sometimes called Israel's 'mission to the nations'. You can find parts of the Old Testament which soar outwards from Jerusalem and where God's power over and care for the whole world is stressed, and other parts which stress the particular holiness and sanctity of Jerusalem, and encourage the nations to make a pilgrimage to the city, to discover the presence of God there in a special way. Sometimes this is described as the Old Testament vision of mission to the nations being both 'centrifugal' (ie moving out from Jerusalem) and

'centripetal' (moving towards the city). Of course both centripetal and centrifugal understandings of mission have an element of 'barrier-breaking' about them, for both seem to break through the barrier of ethnicity which is writ fairly large into some strands of Old Testament thinking.

So in the later parts of the Old Testament what is the picture that we are getting? There is considerable diversity, with different attitudes to the nature of society in Jerusalem, and attitudes to the wider world. How far should boundaries that 'holiness' demanded be respected, and how far should they be broken? Inevitably different sections of society had different views – and their varied attitudes are reflected in different sections of the Bible.

A vivid illustration of this comes in Zechariah 14:20-21 which states, 'On that day there shall be inscribed on the bells of the horses "Holy to the Lord". And the cooking pots in the house of the Lord shall be as holy as the bowls in front of the altar; and every cooking-pot in Jerusalem and Judah shall be sacred to the Lord of hosts.' To understand what is being implied here, we need to turn to Exodus 28.36 a passage which says that on the vestments of the High Priest, the most special and sacred person involved in Temple worship, the words 'Holy to the Lord' were inscribed. The prophet responsible for the writing of Zechariah 14 was well aware of this. But now these same words are not linked to a 'holy person' but to everyday animals. In other words the traditional boundary between the sacred and the secular is being done away with. And then that is reinforced with the comments about pots.

Effectively Zechariah 14 is suggesting that the High Priest, whose very *raison d'être* was to manage the boundary between the sacred and the secular, would be out of a job! It is a challenge from a prophetic group to the hierarchs who held the reins of power in Jerusalem. Zechariah 14 is a deliciously subversive piece of writing, and is a reminder that the Bible is actually perhaps the most subversive book in history. It is also worth noting that Zechariah 14 concludes by commenting that, 'And there shall no longer be traders in the house of the Lord on that day'. The very reason for the traders was also to ensure that only things that were properly 'holy' were used in the Temple and its worship. The demise of the traders was therefore yet a further signal that the world of the priestly caste – and its potential for exploiting the poor – was being declared redundant. The barriers were well and truly smashed. It is understandable that when Christians read these words from Zechariah their minds may turn to Christ's 'cleansing' of the Temple. Certainly as far as some of the Gospel writers are concerned (Mark and John in particular) this incident in the life of Jesus is not so much a 'cleansing' as a calling into question the rationale for the Temple's very existence. The distinction between the holy and the secular has, in Christ, been abrogated.

And so we move into the New Testament. The writer of this reflection does not see a sharp contradiction between Old Testament and New. It is not as though 'boundaries and barriers' only appear in the Old Testament and 'barrier-breaking' in the New. Both strands are there in both Testaments.

Yet there is of course a sense in which the New Testament takes a radical further barrier-breaking step – because through the incarnation God breaks the ultimate barrier of all, the boundary between humanity and divinity. It is as though God is taking us back to creation again, but this time being even more radical. This is vividly expressed in the account of Jesus' baptism as described in Mark 1.9-11 – the boundary that had been set between earth and sky in Genesis 1.7-8 is torn apart as heaven is 'scissored open', as a mark of the significance of Jesus' coming. Yet the divine-human link that Jesus makes in his person does not negate cultural specificities. He is a boundary-crosser in his very

being. For the paradox at the heart of the Christian confession is the holding together of universality and particularity, of the 'utter Jewishness of Jesus and the boundless universality of the Divine Son'.⁴

Throughout Jesus' ministry boundary-crossing is a consistent motif. He reaches out to tax-gatherers and sinners, while in 'touching' a person with the 'unclean' disease of leprosy even before healing them, he crosses traditional barriers. He shared water vessels with a Samaritan woman in contravention of the tradition that 'Jews do not share vessels in common with Samaritans.' (John 4.8-9) As we have already seen he also dramatically broke the boundaries that 'holiness' imposed in relation to the Temple. It could well be suggested that it was boundary-crossing which led to Jesus' own death. The 'system' of boundaries worked to the benefit of the political and religious leaders who felt very threatened by his actions. Indeed, the manner of his death, particularly as it is presented in the Gospel of John, was itself a symbolic boundary-crossing. For as John's language of 'lifting up' makes clear, the cross physically linked 'above' and 'below', 'heaven' and 'earth'. (Additionally, of course, the language of Hebrews 13.12 speaks of a different sort of boundary-crossing, in Jesus' dying 'outside the city gate'.)

Under the impact of the Holy Spirit, the early church in its mission lives out the logical extension of Jesus' boundary crossing. This is shown in the church's willingness to engage with Gentiles, and to question the validity of places (such as the Temple) or laws (such as food and purity laws) which build barriers between people. The Holy Spirit itself plays a key role in this boundary crossing. For the nature of Spirit is that it is uncontrollable - 'the Spirit blows where it wills' (John 3.8). Such is vividly demonstrated on the day of Pentecost itself, with its picture of unity in diversity conveyed both through the flames, and through the crossing of the barrier of human language. In turn the Pentecost events foreshadowed an ongoing process of 'translation' in the life of the church.

Andrew Walls regards 'translation' as an inevitable consequence of the incarnation. As he puts it, 'Incarnation is translation. When God in Christ became man, divinity was translated into humanity, as though humanity was a receptor language'. And this initial 'translation' is followed by others as 'Christ, God's translated speech is re-translated from the Palestinian Jewish original... The very universality of the Gospel, the fact that it is for everyone, leads to a variety of perceptions and applications of it.'⁵ According to Walls the Gospel is infinitely 'translatable', and as it crosses new boundaries of language or culture this increases and expands the Lordship of Christ. Quoting again from Walls, 'Only in Christ does completion, fullness, dwell. And Christ's completion... comes from all humanity, from the translation of the life of Jesus into the life-ways of all the world's cultures and subcultures through history.'⁶

In this classic article Walls is arguing that the Letter to the Ephesians marks a particular moment of importance in the life of the church, because it is a point when Jewish Christianity and Greek (Gentile) Christianity are meeting on approximately equal terms and both cultures are being honoured. As a result both can enrich the whole, and the profound understanding of the role of Christ, and the building up of the body the Church which is expressed in the Letter to the Ephesians, is the result.

Walls suggests that with the development of global Christianity and increasingly powerful Christian voices from Africa and Asia, we may be experiencing another 'Ephesian Moment' in the life of the Church and it is the challenge laid before us to

⁴ Andrew F Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* p26. Orbis 1996

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ Andrew F Walls, The Ephesian Moment in *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*, Orbis, p. 79

discover how the Church can be enriched as a result. One thing is certainly true, that with Walls' vision of the legitimacy of 'translation' before us, we can come to understand how contextualisation or inculturation of the Christian faith is not an aberration but actually a deep theological necessity. To explore the interface between the Christian faith and different cultures, and to ask how culture and faith can inform each other, is actually the life-blood, the DNA, of barrier-breaking and boundary-crossing biblical mission. It is linked to our understanding of the Bible itself, which is (unlike the Qur'an, for example, which formally exists in a perfect form only in Arabic) a book that is 'translatable' – and of course Bible translation has often been a significant feature of the missionary movement.

One important feature to note is that in the early church (and this is especially illustrated in the Book of Acts) the barrier-breaking missionary movement works in two directions. It involves both moving out, but also inviting in. This is often called 'embassy' and 'hospitality' respectively. So for example, mission involves Paul (and others) travelling on 'missionary journeys' as an ambassador of Christ, crossing geographical, political, cultural and religious boundaries. It also however includes invitations by a wide range of people, and it is through the acceptance of such acts of hospitality too that the Gospel is able to spread in a world that was often socially segregated.

Although we have obviously stressed the barrier-breaking strand of the New Testament – the boundary-creating motif is also apparent, perhaps particularly in some of the later letters, as the early church reflects on the kind of boundaries it needs to build in a world that it experienced as hostile. However it is certainly true that the 'last word' of the New Testament, found at the end of the Book of Revelation, is one of overcoming barriers. The ultimate goal of mission is seen in the new creation of Revelation 21; the boundary between the worlds of humanity and divinity is breached, as the eternal God now chooses to make his home with mortals (Revelation 21.3), and in the holy city of new Jerusalem, 'the gates will never be shut by day... and there will be no night there.' (Revelation 21:25)

What about the Bible?

Depending on the needs and interests of your group you might like to use one or more of the following three options.

1. Mission in Acts and today

Five practical responses from the book of Acts.

Look up the following verses in Acts and draw out the mission themes associated with them.

Acts 1:3	Evidence for mission
Acts 1:6-8	Commissioning for mission
Acts 2:37-39	Baptism for mission
Acts 1:43-47	A church for mission
Acts 16:9	Invitation for mission

Discuss: What part do the following play in your church's commitment to global mission?

- Evidence?
- Commissioning?
- Baptism?
- Church life?
- Invitation?

2. Mission and hospitality

Using the handout 'Come to the Party', explore creatively the links between mission and hospitality. Inviting people to work in pairs, ask each pair to take one or two of the invitations drawn from situations and incidents in the Book of Acts. They should read the biblical passage to which it refers, and write their RSVP to the invitation. Then invite people to share their RSVPs and have a discussion around the issue of 'hospitality and mission'.

- Why was hospitality such an important means of mission in the New Testament period?
- Is it also important today?

3. Barrier-breaking between Jews and Samaritans

Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well at Samaria in John 4.5-42 is an excellent example of the barrier-breaking nature of mission. This passage formed the basis for USPG's 2010 Lent course 'What is mission?' You might find the leaders notes written in relation to John 4 useful. They are available in the World is My Parish further resources section.

One interesting way of looking at the passages would be for the group to identify in turn with:

- the woman;
- the disciples;
- the Samaritans
- and perhaps Jesus himself.

In each case ask the question, 'What barriers are being broken down through this encounter – and what is the result?'

In practical terms

Empowering women with the Bible

The Ujamaa Centre of KwaZulu-Natal University is committed to using biblical and theological resources for the empowerment of the poor, the working-class and the marginalised. In 1996, one of the sub-themes of a conference on 'Women and the Bible in South Africa' was 'Women and Violence', and for a Bible study workshop they chose a seldom-read passage in 2 Samuel 13 that describes the rape of Tamar by her brother Amnon.

The impact of the Bible studies was explosive – culminating in the launch of a national campaign to tackle rape and the abuse of women in South African society. When the first Bible studies were held, in 1996, the co-ordinators reported: 'Women are amazed that such a text exists, are angry that they have never heard it read or preached, are relieved to discover that they are not alone, are empowered because the silence has been broken and their stories have been told.'

In a typical Bible study, the emphasis was placed on participant-led discussion, with the involvement of the co-ordinators and academic scholarship kept to a minimum. The primary aim was to create a safe environment in which participants felt able to share openly about their feelings and experiences.

Professor Gerald West, Director of the University's Institute for the Study of the Bible, and Co-ordinator of the Ujamaa Centre, explained: 'In safe places, women who have been touched by Tamar tell their stories, help and hold the pain of their sisters, and plan for the transformation of their churches and communities.' Professor West was USPG/SPCK Bray Lecturer in 2005.

The impact of the Bible studies was so powerful that participants urged the co-ordinators to tackle women's rights at a national level – and the Tamar Campaign was born in 2000. Pamphlets, posters and newspapers were produced, magazine articles were written, faith organisations, clinics and colleges were involved, and speakers appeared on the radio and at conferences.

The campaign has helped to raise awareness and give hope to many women – although the lessons have sometimes been painful. One woman recalled how she used to get annoyed when a friend, in tears, started to speak about the time she was raped. But after encountering the campaign, the woman said: 'I better understand what my friend was going through. Now I want to have counselling skills so as to address this kind of situation. I cannot change the past, but I can influence the future.'

But there is still much work to be done. Women in abusive relationships are still being told by some church leaders to simply 'pray' or 'persevere' - with their faith called into question if they haven't been able to do this. Unsurprisingly, some women feel there is little point in saying anything. Meanwhile, men can find themselves confused and challenged by the existence of the story of Tamar alongside other verses in the Bible that say women should be silent in church.

The Tamar Campaign continues, using the Bible and theological reflection to challenge attitudes and tackle the oppression of women.

Putting it together

Questions for discussion

1. How far does this exploration of mission as 'barrier-breaking' and 'boundary-crossing' reflect your own experience? What are the barriers and boundaries we need to cross today, as individuals and as churches?
2. The 'Thinking it through' section refers to the two dynamics of mission – sending out, and welcoming in. Are both necessary? Is either more important than the other? Which do we reflect most strongly in the life of our own church?
3. The 'Tamar campaign' is an example of using the Bible in a very practical way to transform lives and society. What barriers are broken down when the Bible is used in this way? Can you think of other examples of times when the Bible has changed the nature of society?
4. How can engagement with the world church through USPG help us to cross boundaries?
5. How does this focus on 'boundary-crossing' link to the recent interest in mission and reconciliation, which we touched upon in Session One?
6. What do you think we can learn from the modern 'Ephesian Moment' in the life of the Christian Church?
7. What is the irreducible core of the gospel that must be translated into a new culture? How can we discern what is called 'syncretism' (i.e. where a crucial part of the Christian gospel gets lost in the shift into a new culture)? How can we identify our own cultural expression of Christianity that should not be translated into a new culture?
8. Is it helpful to talk about Christ being incarnated afresh when the gospel enters a new culture? What does this mean in practical terms?
9. Are we as native English speakers in some way 'handicapped' because of the global dominance of English these days? Does it mean it is more difficult to understand the significance of 'translation' (both literally and metaphorically)?
10. Reflect on the opening prayer by Kate Compston. How does it speak to you?

Sending out

Sing a short Christian song which includes verses in a language other than English, eg Thuma Mina (which is excellent because it has a 'sending out' theme – and words and music are widely available; for example in Lambeth Praise.)

Closing prayer A

For all who study the Scriptures

That the fruits of their study may be evidenced in mission

For all who feel the Spirit's prompting

That their lives may be empowered for mission

For all who extend the hand of love

That those who take it may feel the touch of Jesus

For all who open their homes

**That those who enter may sense the welcome of Christ,
Amen**

Closing prayer B

Ever-wise God,
as you have granted us
to drink with delight
from the Word
that leads us to know you,
in your goodness grant us also
to come at length to you,
source of all wisdom,
and stand for ever before your face.

(After the Venerable Bede)