



THE CHOICE OF TWELVE God's Strange Mission Strategy

Kory M. Capps

Jesus turned the world upside down in ways no one could have imagined. His methods for doing this were as surprising as the transformation he introduced. He died a criminal's death nailed to a wood beam and then walked out of a tomb three days later.

A tree outside Jerusalem reserved for those on death row seems the most unlikely place for the world to be changed. For most, the permanent disposal of any man who merited such punishment was the only good that could come from such a cursed place.

God's wisdom and plan is always intentionally garbed in foolishness. This was the case with the incarnation, the cross and, in my opinion, all other pieces of his saving plan. The twelve disciples were another critical component of God's plan for the world.

They were chosen to join and extend the ministry of Christ to the ends of the earth. I doubt anyone would have looked at this group and thought, "now they are going to change the world."

In one sense, that's the whole point. I believe there are some important things to be learned the choice of the twelve. In this vein, I want to explore the narratives where he chooses them and sends them forth for service.

We find the selection and appointment of the twelve disciples four different times in the synoptic gospels. Each of these accounts is distinct in the details emphasized and the context in which the narrative is placed.

“GOD’S WISDOM AND PLAN IS ALWAYS INTENTIONALLY GARBED IN FOOLISHNESS. THIS WAS TRUE OF THE INCARNATION AND THE CROSS. IT WAS ALSO TRUE OF HIS PLAN IN SELECTING AND SENDING THE TWELVE DISCIPLES.

By exploring each of these narratives in their context we will come to a greater appreciation of God's intention in choosing the twelve. We will walk through the narratives examining the context and the nuances of each author. I will seek to draw out relevant implications to conclude each of the three sections.

Matthew's Narrative

The Context

Jesus is in the fray of ministry. In the preceding context he has raised a little girl from the dead, healed a woman with severe menstrual bleeding, given sight to blind men, and restored a mute man's voice (Matt 9:18-34). From town to town he is bombarded with the needs of the sick, oppressed, possessed, and broken.

As he looks out upon the needy crowds he feels a deep sense of compassion (ἐσπλαγγίσθη) for them. He sees them as harassed and helpless sheep because they lacked a shepherd (Ez 34).

Moved by his compassion he instructs his disciples about the needs of the harvest and calls upon them to pray. "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out (ἐκβάλη) laborers into his harvest" (Matt 9:37-38).

After this piece of instruction, the narrative moves directly into the selection and appointment of the twelve disciples. This event is set squarely in the context of the great needs of the world, the untouched harvest field, the compassion of Christ, and prayer.

We must understand the appointment of these twelve men as an expression of Christ's compassion for the harassed and helpless. His selection of the twelve and their appointment is directly tied to the massive harvest field with its great lack of workers.

We must also recognize that the disciple's appointment is the result of prayer. Not the prayers of Christ or others, but their own! They are praying to the Lord of the harvest to send forth laborers. God's response is to send them.

The context following the event fleshes out how the disciples will fulfill their task. Jesus trains these new harvesters in God's field how to harvest. He teaches them what to expect as they work. The instruction is thorough and sobering.

His instructions are a missional field manual. The table of contents containing these topics: destination, housing, money, resources, preaching, healing, length of stay, discerning when to leave, persecution, conversions, and rewards (Matt 10:5-42). Jesus selects, appoints, and

equips those whom he sends forth to work in his harvest.

Jesus makes an abrupt shift as he trades out images of harvest for the metaphor of a slaughterhouse. The twelve are sheep, sent into the midst of wolves.

The outcome of sheep mingling with wolves goes without saying. The compassionate mission of Christ and his disciples is inherently costly. How could it be any other way---it's the mission of the Christ who is moving inexorably toward a cross.

The Text

"And he called to him his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every affliction. The names of the twelve apostles are these: first, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother; James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him" (Matt 10:1-4).

Matthew emphasizes the role of the disciples in expelling demons and healing the sick. This emphasis comes from the compassionate ministry seen in Jesus. Compelled by the needs of the sick and oppressed around him Jesus empowers his disciples to extend his work.

Though preaching and teaching are a key component of this work (Matt 10:7), they are not center stage in this narrative. The ministry of the disciples rests on the authority of Christ. What they are called to stands outside their power.

Matthew names the twelve men hand-picked by Jesus to be his disciples. We can glean a number of things from this simple list. It is interesting to note the selection appears to happen in pairs. The conjunction "and" runs through the entire passage as Matthew describes the disciples in couplets.

What is going on here? Other passages point to Jesus sending out teams of two (Lk 10:1, Mk 6:7). Could Matthew's list be missional partnerships among the disciples? Could this be the way he teamed up his disciples as he sent them out? If so, we can discern in this passage six different teams.

Simon called Peter and Andrew his brother	Thomas and Matthew the tax collector
James son of Zebedee and John his brother	James son of Alphaeus and Thaddaeus
Philip and Bartholomew	Simon the Cananaean and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him

We know that they were sent out multiple times during the ministry of Christ. One wonders what the dynamics of these teams were like. What was it like for two sets of brothers to be teamed up? What about Simon and his partnership with Judas? What did doubting Thomas think of Matthew the tax collector?

How did these teams work together? Who took the lead in the various teams? What gifts did they each bring to the table and how did they complement each other? What conflicts did each team face? What did they find annoying about each other? Did any of them ask Jesus for a trade? Did Jesus ever switch up the teams? What happened to the teams after the Great Commission?

I imagine that the teams were somewhat fluid. The fact that the other gospels pair up the disciples differently discounts my conjecture or confirms that the flexible nature of the teams. In any case, the alteration of these teams is very slight in the other gospels. Either way, it is certain that the twelve were sent out two by two (Mk 6:7). They all experienced the dynamics of a paired missionary team.

By asking speculative questions we are exercising imagination around actual events. An exploration of the gospels and Acts with these dynamics in mind would be intriguing.

The example of the sons of thunder (James and John) desiring to call down fire from heaven to consume an unwelcoming town (Lk 9:54) makes you wonder what these guys were like as a team!

What else do we learn from this list? We see the caliber of men that Jesus chose for his mission. We have two fishermen, one zealot, one tax collector, one thief and betrayer, one doubter, and two sons of thunder.

Credentials are clearly unimportant as we know nothing about three of these guys. We have men skilled with nets, swords, and money. We have simple working class men.

There are no Pharisees, Sadducees, or Essenes in the group. No religious teachers or masters of the Torah. Instead, we have a ragamuffin posse, a rather unlikely bunch to be called into missionary service.

The Implications

Compassion is a compelling force in the mission of Jesus. It is compassion that took him to the cross and it is compassion that gave the world the twelve.

Mission in the eyes of Jesus includes all that compassion would compel you to do. It includes the healing of the sick, the engagement of the dark forces that oppress people, and the proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom.

It is compassion to preach the gospel. It is compassion to meet the real physical needs. It is compassion to take the enemy head on under the authority of Christ. Each of these compassion-driven activities should be understood under the umbrella of mission.

Jesus intentionally selects common, weak people. The twelve disciples were nobodies. Their selection is 1 Corinthians 1:18-31 in action. God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise. God chose what is not, to bring to nothing the things that are.

The choice of these twelve men is by design. God only chooses and uses weak people. It is truly that simple.

How could it be any other way if his goal is to simultaneously manifest his strength and undercut all human boasting?

The cross reveals God's character and methods. His strength is seen only in weakness and his weakness is in fact his strength. He saves the world through weakness. His character and ways find expression in the mission of the twelve and the mission of the church.

Mark's Narrative

The Context

In Mark's gospel, Jesus is smothered by human need as the story moves toward the appointment of the twelve. Mark highlights that Jesus was in danger of being crushed by the crowds that sought his help (Mk 3:8-10)

Mark then records this interesting statement. *"And whenever the unclean spirits saw him, they fell down before him and cried out, 'You are the Son of God.' And he strictly ordered them not to make him known"* (Mk 3:11-12). Directly after this comes the selection and appointment of the twelve.

The boldest witnesses in the gospel of Mark are sidelined and the weak twelve are called into service. It is pure irony that the demons in the gospel of Mark are the ones that see Jesus most clearly, tremble at him most fiercely, and proclaim his true identity most consistently.

Jesus had an army of unwilling, yet helpless witnesses that he commanded to shut up. They could not make him known, that was for the twelve disciples he chose. It is not angels or fallen angels tasked with the proclamation of Christ's lordship. This unique task belongs to the twelve. God has chosen the weak things of the world once again.

Following the appointment, Jesus assures his followers of persecution (Mk 3:22-30) and assures them that they will find strength among the family of those who do God's will (Mk 3:31-34). He then instructs them about the nature of their mission through three parables (Mk 4:1-33).

The parables embody the call to be faithful and patient in sowing the gospel seed no matter the response, difficulty, or opposition.

The Text

"And he went up on the mountain and called to him those whom he desired, and they came to him. And he appointed twelve (whom he also named apostles) so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach and have authority to cast out demons. He appointed the twelve: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter); James the son of Zebedee and John the brother of James (to whom he gave the name Boanerges, that is, Sons of Thunder); Andrew, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus, and Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him" (Mk 3:13-19).

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Mark provides the reader with details we do not find in Matthew. Mark says the twelve were those whom he "desired" (ἤθελεν). Jesus called a large group to himself, but selected only twelve from among them. The authoritative call (προσκαλεῖται) of Christ was the way he created/made (ἐποίησεν) the twelve disciples.

Mark explains the reason for the choice of the twelve. First, they were chosen that they "might be with him" (ἵνα ὦσιν μετ' αὐτοῦ). Life on life, this is the heart of Christ's discipleship program. The twelve are formed into a missional community doing life with Jesus.

This is no stale classroom. This is on the job training. The reason the disciples were equipped for their task was a simple one: they were with Jesus (Acts 4:13).

Second, Jesus gathers the twelve that he 'might send them out to preach' (ἵνα ἀποστέλλῃ αὐτοὺς κηρύσσειν). The proclamation of the word is central to the appointment of the twelve. Their new title "apostles" (οὗς καὶ

ἀποστόλους ὀνόμασεν) confirms this. These are “sent ones.”

The third selection purpose is to ‘have authority to cast out demons’ (ἔχειν ἐξουσίαν ἐκβάλλειν τὰ δαιμόνια). The darkness must be penetrated. Christ grants authority to this platoon of preachers to assault the gates of hell.

Like Matthew, Mark provides a list of the twelve disciples. He points out that that Simon was given the name Peter, which means Rock.

Jesus also nicknamed the others in his inner circle. James and John are called ‘Boanerges,’ which means ‘sons of thunder.’ Both nicknames apparently speak to the strength and fierceness of these chosen men (Mk 9:38, Lk 9:54, Jn 18:10).

The Implications

Mark is clear on three purposes for the calling of the twelve. 1) Called to be with Jesus; 2) Called to go preach; And 3) Called to cast out demons. The relationship between these three purposes should be understood in two ways.

First, we should understand that being with Jesus is an end in itself. Just as the disciples are sent to preach and cast out demons, they are called to be with Jesus. Being with Jesus is not just a means to an end. It is the essence of being a disciple of Christ.

“FROM A CONTEMPORARY HUMAN PERSPECTIVE, THE TWELVE MAY HAVE BEEN THE LEAST EQUIPPED GROUP FOR MISSIONARY SERVICE.”

Second, we should understand that the first purpose is foundational to the rest. Being with Christ equips the disciples for ministry.

Being with Jesus is instruction on preaching. It is a classroom on spiritual war. Take away this foundation and the mission of the twelve crumbles. The Great Commission only made sense to the disciples because they had been with Jesus for the last three years. They

knew exactly what to do! Jesus had trained and equipped them for the task he left with them.

Life on life forms the core of Christian discipleship. It was the way of Jesus and the way of his followers. There is no program, curriculum, conference, book, or school that can take the place of doing life together.

The discipleship of the twelve happened in community. They interacted with Jesus together. They ate together. They slept together. They traveled together. They watched Jesus together. They talked to Jesus together. They were sent out together.

It is within community that the missional impulse is birthed, cultivated, and realized. From this we learn that community, discipleship, and mission are inseparable.

On another note, I find the naming of the inner circle intriguing and informative on two levels. First, the giving of a name or nickname communicates something. It can communicate intimacy, closeness, and companionship. On a biblical level when God names someone he often does so to communicate fresh purpose and new identity.

The naming of the three disciples reflects Jesus’ understanding of the personalities of these men. It points his close relationship with them and reveals his sense of humor. It also established the way Jesus intended to utilize them for his kingdom (Matt 16:18).

Second, the nicknames reveal the type of character needed for the missional task.. God chooses man who resembles a rock and two brothers who resemble a thunderstorm. This is an interesting choice for a trio of missionaries.

These are some hardy guys. Years of manual labor, fishing, and weathering the outdoors had shaped them into a rugged crew. These are guys who give strong calloused handshakes. These are men that know what it means to make a living. These are the type of guys that are handy with their fists.

They were not academics, missiologists, evangelists, or religious teachers. They were not the most versed in Scripture. From a contemporary human perspective they may have been the least equipped for missionary service. And yet they were among three of the most important

men God chose to join his mission. God never chooses like we do. He does not assess the same way we do. The choice of the twelve should caution us on what missionary material looks like.

The most fit and likely candidates for missionary service would certainly have been twelve men from among the religious teachers of the day. Certainly a smattering of Sadducees, Pharisees, Scribes and Essenes would have provided the most equipped men for the task at hand. God's wisdom looks very different.

Excursus: Mark's other appointment narrative

Mark records another story about the appointment and sending of the twelve. In Mark 6:7 we read that, "*he called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits.*" This narrative is likely parallel to the story we explored in Matthew.

Whereas the narrative we already looked at in Mark is probably parallel to the story in Luke. This narrative is important to bring into the discussion because it adds a few things missing in the other gospels. Here we see the strategy of Christ in sending out the disciples in teams of two. This would have been important for encouragement, accountability, and greater effectiveness.

The other thing that Mark emphasizes in the mission of the twelve is the war against the enemy. Mark has a strong emphasis on mission as war. Jesus is the Warrior-King set on crushing the head of his enemy. It makes sense that his disciples would be soldiers in his army waging war against his enemies.

As the text continues, Mark records some clear instruction to the disciples regarding their mission. Jesus instructs his disciples on what they need as they go (Mk 6:8-9), how long to stay and where to sleep (Mk 6:10-11). Mark also records that the disciples obeyed by preaching, healing, and casting out demons (Mk 6:12-13).

Luke's Narrative

The Context

In the preceding context of Luke, Jesus reads his marching orders in the synagogue and then proceeds to obey them (Lk 4:16-19). Jesus immerses himself in the

task given him by the Father and foretold by the prophets. His days are filled with preaching, teaching, and healing (Lk 4:31-44).

Luke records how the lepers, the crippled, and the demon possessed have all felt the impact of his ministry (Lk 5:12-26, 6:6-11). Jesus is fulfilling his ministry of justice and jubilee and it is to this that the twelve disciples are joined. The mission of Christ will become theirs.

The context that follows the selection of the twelve is unique and interesting. Once the disciples come off the mountain they are surrounded by a great crowd on what Luke calls a "level place" (Lk 6:17). Jesus then proceeds with the "sermon on the plain."

This narrative is parallel to the "sermon on the mount" in Matthew's gospel. The placement of this teaching unit serves impart the kingdom ethic that must characterize them as they join his mission.

As a missional community, they are to be set apart by Christ's upside down priorities (Lk 6:20-26), counter-intuitive love (Lk 6:27-36), lavish generosity (Lk 6:35-42), and wisdom from above (Lk 6:46-49).

The Text

"In these days he went out to the mountain to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God. And when day came, he called his disciples and chose from them twelve, whom he named apostles: Simon, whom he named Peter, and Andrew his brother, and James and John, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon who was called the Zealot, and Judas the son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor" (Lk 6:12-16).

Luke is very interested in drawing out the significance of prayer in the life and ministry of Jesus. Jesus was in prayer at his baptism when the voice from heaven instructed him on his mission (Lk 3:21-22). He often pulled away for times of prayer alone and with his disciples, (Lk 5:16, 9:18).

We also see Jesus in prayer at the transfiguration when he receives encouragement for the fulfillment of his mission (Lk 9:28-29). Jesus intercedes for his disciples and for himself (Lk 22:32, 39-46). Jesus is even found in prayer

as he is put to death at the cross (Lk 23:34-36). Prayer is a pervasive theme in Luke's gospel (Lk 10:21-24, 11:2-4, 5-13, 18:1-8, and 21:36).

With this larger context in mind, it is no surprise to find our Lord at prayer before his selection of the twelve. Luke tells us that Jesus was alone on the mountain praying all night. Jesus always prayed at important moments in his journey.

Prayer accompanied his baptism, transfiguration, and the cross. Here it precedes and covers the selection of the twelve. This was an important decision. When Jesus emerged from the night of prayer, he was clear on his choice of the twelve. He made no mistakes.

Jesus calls all of his followers to him and then selects twelve out of that group. These twelve are named apostles. Unlike Matthew and Mark, Luke does not record the purpose for their selection.

In the list of the twelve, Luke points out that one of the disciples was a zealot. Simon apparently came from the religious sect that believed the kingdom of God would come by force. Like the inner circle, he was probably no joke.

The Implications

Prayer is a significant part of Luke's selection story. In Matthew's gospel, the sending of the twelve is an answer to their own prayers. Here, the appointment of the twelve is a result of Christ at prayer. That their selection was tied directly to prayer communicates that the Father's will undergirds the selection of the twelve.

We saw in Luke's gospel the link between mission and jubilee. The "year of the Lord's favor" (Lk 4:19) is a clear reference to Jubilee (Lev 25:1-55). The mission of the disciples is about forgiveness, mercy, deliverance, justice and healing.

Conclusion

This brief overview of the selection and sending narratives in the gospels has yielded some helpful insights. First, the larger context of each gospel has helped us

understand the mission of the twelve disciples from three different angles. These angles reveal varying emphases in the gospels, each of which give us a broader perspective about the purpose and character of Jesus' mission.

In Matthew's gospel, the keynote is compassion. The twelve disciples are an expression of Christ's compassion and an extension of his compassionate ministry to the nations. They are driven to the nations as a result of the prayers they bring to God in obedience to Christ. The mission of compassion finds expression in preaching, teaching, healing, and casting out demons.

“THE APPOINTMENT OF THE TWELVE IS A DIRECT RESULT OF THE PRAYER OF JESUS. I DOUBT WE WOULD CONSIDER THEM AN ANSWER TO PRAYER, BUT IN FACT THAT’S EXACTLY WHAT THEY WERE.”

In Mark's gospel, the key theme is warfare. The disciples have been witnessing the Warrior-King wage war on the evil one and his forces. The selection of the twelve disciples is nothing short of a military draft.

They are brought into Christ's platoon to fight alongside him. Mark emphasizes the call of the disciples to be with Christ, to preach, and to cast out demons. As they stick close to their Commander they will learn that his weapon and theirs is the bleeding love of the cross.

In Luke's gospel, the thrust is joy. Jesus is on a mission to usher in an era of Jubilee for all the nations. Through preaching, healing, and taking on the enemy he is bringing about redemption, freedom, and joy. It is this mission that the twelve join. These disciples, viewed as an answer to Jesus' prayer, are instructed in the ways of the kingdom as they join him in his work.

From these three gospel accounts we must learn that the mission of God is broad and sweeping. We must also discern that the underlying motivation of this mission is polyvalent. Here we see that joy, compassion, and rescue are good biblical motivations for mission.

Some would like to believe that compassion is not a good enough reason to engage in missions. This is not the only reason but it is one good, solid, Christ-like reason. I am of the opinion that the missionary needs to draw from every single biblical motivation given them to engage their task with vigor, effectiveness, and perseverance.

The second thing we discerned was the choice of unlikely men for the missionary task. Each of the gospels identifies the twelve men chosen by God and gives some detail on them. We know that Jesus chose at least four fishermen (possibly more).

We know that his inner-circle earned nicknames that would be fitting for MMA fighters. We know that Jesus selected a tax collector, which was a despised vocation during that time. We know that Jesus selected a man from the zealot sect, which believed that force would usher in the kingdom. We also know that he selected a doubter and a phony that ultimately betrayed him.

I wonder if any of the twelve disciples would make the cut to become missionaries today. Would Peter's impetuosity and anger issues exclude him? Would Matthew's awful past be a hindrance to his appointment? What about the violent zealot, Simon? Is there any way he would make it past an initial questionnaire?

What chance would two brothers have who have been nicknamed the sons of thunder? What about the educational level of the four fishermen? How would the shaky faith of Thomas be viewed? What about the utter lack of accredited theological training among all twelve? What about their vocational training and lack of ministry experience? What about their gruff and unpolished character?

The selection of the twelve for missionary service should challenge our thinking today. His choice of these men is indicative of his ways. He chooses the weak things of this world. He chooses what is not and forgets what is. His ways and methods purposely destroy the wisdom of man. He is interested in jars of clay. That's why he chose the twelve.

This little missional community is made up of an unexpected and diverse group of individuals. They were probably the least likely candidates for missionary service.

This type of weakness is the perfect recipe for God's strength. This after all is his plan for every Christian.

All believers should find great encouragement from the twelve disciples. In them, we see that God loves to use weak people. In fact, that is the only type of person he is willing to use.

The story of frail disciples has been given to us for our encouragement. We see ourselves in them. We relate to them. We are to draw great strength from these men embedded in the narrative of God's grace. They remind us that Jesus is the hero, theirs and ours. They remind us that God loves to magnify himself in weakness. They assure us that he will work through our brokenness.

There are also lessons to be learned here regarding contemporary thinking and practice on the issue of missionary selection and appointment. Every mission organization or church has a theological and philosophical framework that informs their practical methodology for assessing, choosing, and sending missionaries.

Mission organizations and churches must always be sharpening and reforming their thinking about these issues. We must let the text of Scripture speak and we must be willing to shift and move with it. We must allow the wisdom of God to destroy the vestiges of human wisdom in our theology and practice.

The third and final thing I have drawn from this exploration came as a surprise. As I read and thought about the selection of the twelve they became more real to me than ever before. I found myself trying to get in their skin. I tried to put myself in their boats. I tried to imagine myself at the table where they ate together.

I tried to eavesdrop on conversations between them that were never recorded. I tried to imagine relational dynamics between a fisherman and a tax collector. I tried to envision what the twelve would have looked like strolling down the street and how they would have been perceived.

In short, this brief study sparked my imagination and pushed my mind beyond old boundaries and into new places.

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