

Christopher J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative*, Downer's Grove: IVP Academic, 2006. ISBN 0-8308-2571-1

Of missiologies, there is apparently no end. To be honest, it used to be the other way round. Missions, now treated as a specialised field, was once seen as just an extension of ecclesiology. The location of a church work was considered in large part to be incidental. In other words, the only difference between missions and domestic ministry was the fact that one work was conducted in your own tongue and the other was not. Likewise, because mission or missions (most Protestants use “missions” while Roman Catholics and Anglicans prefer “mission”) was seen as a simple extension of business as usual, all of the tools that informed domestic ministry were applied to missions as well. In practical terms, it meant that Indians or Chinese were all too often seen as Americans and Englishmen with strange accents. Western methodologies and theological formulas were applied without modification in new, more exotic settings.

Then came illumination. Just as Western powers were divesting themselves of their empires after the Second World War, and promoted a world of United Nations, Western churches also began to repent of paternalism that had fostered aberrant dependency among mission churches and non-Western Christian populations. It was the age of late modernism and all sorts of scientific tools emerged with which to revolutionise foreign missions. Chief among these disciplines were sociology, anthropology and linguistics. These fields allowed people to understand non-Western cultures on their own terms. New church planting movements emerged with Western help that began to develop real

indigenous spirituality and ecclesiology. Much of the new developments hinged on new paradigms. For example, nationals and missiologists embraced the incarnation as *the* crucial model with which to understand the gospel's work among the nations. According to its popular use, the incarnation meant that Jesus could come into any culture as a true member of that community. The gospel was infinitely translatable. Well, that's one side of the story.

The other side, is that theology, when it was not being ignored in favour of anthropologically-flavoured pragmatism (see emergent church movement), developed either as a way of justifying the unbiblical or sub-biblical practices of host cultures or as a means for expressing the liberal sentiments of left-leaning evangelical missiologists. There were two related casualties related to these changes. The first casualty was the “Grand Tradition”, the sense of biblical, theological, and doctrinal consistency owing to an understanding that there was one grand narrative, the Christian story, connecting all places and all times. This “historical Christianity” was sacrificed for the sake of maximizing contextualisation. Creeds, confessions etc., once serving perhaps as straightjackets, preventing indigenous believers from theologising for themselves, were then systematically ignored to such a degree that new believers had no access to the visible church, either globally or temporally (unless it involved the small army of anthropologically trained missionaries.) Where once believers undertook the task of theology and ministry in dialogue with ancestors or fellow believers around the world, they now had to face the task either alone or with specialists, many of which reflected the theological, doctrinal drift so prevalent among contemporary evangelicals.

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The second casualty was ecclesiology itself. There is no field within theology that has been more neglected in the late modern or postmodern world than that of ecclesiology. This is certainly no church age. On the home front, it is now the age of George Barna's *Revolution* calling for the burial of traditional churches as being irrelevant and their replacement by newer voluntary associations based on the meeting of personal needs. In the world of missions, the same thinking manifest itself in the proliferation of "Insider movements" or churchless Christianity. Emergent church spokesmen such as Brian McLaren and missiologists such as Ralph Winter proposed the preference of having "believing" Muslims or Hindus to that of having churches of former Muslims or former Hindus. This, I believe, is a reflection of both the artificial separation of missions from ecclesiology and the eclipse of ecclesiology in general terms. We do not care about the church any longer, at least not in the sense that it plays a meaningful role in the evangelisation of the world. Listening to the siren song of the anthropologists, we have concluded that the church is a disposable means to another end, the recreation of the world and evangelisation of humankind.

Enter Chris Wright. While this new work represents no panacea, it certainly is a strong step in the right direction. All too often, contemporary missiologies focus on a topical structure that underscores a pragmatic or theological approach, or they rely on locating the conceptual centre of their work in paradigms found almost entirely in the New Testament, neglecting the majority of the Bible. In the first case, these works tend to be vulnerable to proof-texting. One develops a pragmatic or sociological construct and then justifies it through the use of biblical texts. In the deepest sense, of

course, this approach is not biblical at all. In the second case, ideas such as the incarnation (in imitation of Roman Catholic practice following Vatican II) are stretched beyond their original meanings in order to provide a broad enough platform to support an entire missiology. Wright, thankfully, moves in the opposite direction. While highly influential missiologies such as that of David Bosch only spend four of 600 pages considering the Old Testament witness, and even Köstenberger and O'Brien's well received work only had 28 (compared to 177 for the New Testament), Wright commits the lion's share of his work to looking at the Old Testament. All I can say is that it is about time.

To be absolutely clear, Wright is not attempting to say that Israel had a fully formed understanding of international mission. In fact, he notes, "In my view, Israel was not mandated by God to send missionaries to the nations. I would argue that Israel had a missional reason for existence, without implying that they had a missionary mandate to go to the nations (pp. 24–25). "In other words, Wright does not think that all we have to do in order to understand missions is read the Old Testament. Rather, he thinks that an accurate understanding of mission is not possible until one understands mission from within the perspective offered by the Bible's metanarrative. If you wish to have a biblical understanding of mission, you must see mission as a biblical concept and you must begin at the beginning. Wright borrows a phrase "a hermeneutic of coherence" to describe the gospel as one redemptive story from Genesis to Revelation. Additionally, this is the world's story, not just Israel's. While he underscores this essential fact, he also manages to excoriate Western missiologists for their obsession with "contextual theology". Though this is intended to reflect the sort of incarnational

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expression noted earlier, Wright claims that it actually betrays the “arrogant ethnocentricity” of the West, because it still concedes the West as the benchmark. How interesting. The West races to “help” the nations by cutting their dependent ties to others, but manages to do so in the most paternalistic of ways. Did I say it was interesting?

Wright notes that the mission of Israel was to be a light to the nations. Doing so meant living out the covenant made with Abraham and his descendants. He spends a great deal of time articulating the terms of the covenant and in particular connecting it with the outbreak of missions in the New Testament. His work is convincing. Israel alone among the nations knew the one true God as both creator and redeemer of humanity. Salvation for the world came through the covenantal relationship established by God with a people, the Israelites, through Abraham and his seed. The promise of blessings progressed through those relations from one man, Abraham and his descendents, through David and pre-eminently Jesus to the nations. To some degree, this meant, “God’s people, even under judgment, remain God’s people for God’s mission (91).” There is no room for Wright for a parenthetical, dispensational church. There is no radical disjunction between the people of God. Wright underlines the point by reminding the reader of the covenantal image that integrated together both Jews and Gentiles, the live tree.

Before getting to the church and its connection to Israel, Wright connects Jesus to the covenant God of Israel. Relying on recent work conducted by Martin Hengel, Richard Bauckham and Larry Hurtado, the author compiled convincing evidence for the Bible’s early recognition that Jesus was considered divine, if not in the same sense as would later be expressed at Nicaea and Chalcedon. For example, the term *kyrios*

(Lord) was used repeatedly as a title for Jesus. This was a significant bit of evidence given the fact that *kyrios* was used over 1,000 times in the Septuagint as a title for the God of Israel. Over and over again, Jesus assumes the place reserved for YHWH. Christ, likewise, was identified with the glory of God, and powerfully as the great “I Am” of the Old Testament. Interestingly, the Bible does not attempt to redefine the understanding of God with the advent of Christ as resurrected saviour. Rather, Jesus is incorporated into that understanding. There was no disjunction between the God of Moses and the God of Paul. The difference was that the Lord Jesus introduced the believing community to what had always been true but not fully revealed, that God was triune.

In a bravura performance, Wright links the church to one feature of the Old Testament that has been almost repudiated in our own pluralistic age. He demonstrates how the understanding of covenantal truth is exclusive truth. There is only one creator. As Wright puts it, the Bible does not deny the existence of other gods. It simply shows how those gods are really either human creations with no power in themselves and therefore are incomparable to YHWH, or they represent a malevolent, demonic presence. In either case, they were not to be dismissed, as they often are by contemporary missionaries as simply human cultural expressions. They are to be exposed and countered. In doing so, the exclusivity of truth found in the covenantal revelation shines forth. Wright does not attempt to argue for the denying of every expression of truth found in other cultures, rather his aim seems to be that there is only one comprehensive redemptive truth. There is no room, for example, for supporting the triune God and the religion of Muhammad. Rather, “our mission, in participation with that

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divine mission, and in anticipation of its final accomplishment is to work with God in exposing the idols that continue to blur the distinction, and to liberate men and women from the destructive delusions they foster' (p.165).

Underlying this concern for exposing error and promoting the exclusivity of truth was a commitment that extended far beyond the limits of much modern-day missions. Wright illustrates this with an examination of Paul's approach to the faith. "The thoroughness of Paul's mission practice is that he was not content merely with evangelism and church planting but was concerned to build mature communities of believers who could think biblically through the ethical issues they faced in the ambient religious culture. His pastoral and ethical guidance to his churches was thus as much part of his missional task as his evangelistic zeal, and just as theologically grounded too" (p. 182). This is something well worth considering as we jettison most of our distinctives in order to make the faith less offensive.

This truth spans the Old and New Testaments. In other words, the gospel of grace bridges the entire Bible. It is not something that suddenly appears at the cross. One can see in Paul's attitude the same passion for seeing the covenantal faith penetrate and transform every part of creation. This was no truncated decisionism, no "centred" embrace of a few supracultural distinctives. Mission in this sense is nothing more or less than an entry into the world of the Bible. As Wright puts it, "To belong to the Messiah through faith was to belong to Israel. And to belong to Israel was to be a true child of Abraham no matter what a person's ethnicity" (p. 194). Genesis's instrumental use of "through you" (contra Goldingay) in chapter 17 connects Abraham and everything that came after. "Abraham

and his offspring will be the means through which God (the true agent and source) will extend his blessing to the universal scope of his promise" (p. 253). In that sense, Christ does not abolish the Old Testament; he completes and extends it.

Wright also spends considerable time explaining the real scope of God's redemption. There is no "easy-believism" in the biblical record. Nor are its effects limited to the experience of the new birth. The covenant encompasses both the physical and spiritual. It is about salvation and it is about justice. Wright shows the holistic concern of the Old Testament and New Testament in the understanding of Jubilee. Unlike other treatments lobbying for the political or economic dimensions of the concept, Wright embraces aspects of these while connecting them to the larger theme of God's covenant faithfulness, expressed through his protection of the families of Israel (p. 295). He then takes the theme one step further by connecting that same sensibility to Peter's proclamation in 2 Peter 3 concerning the restoration of creation through the Messiah.

Perhaps its greatest weakness would be the evangelical Anglican tendency to make less of the connected, visible, global church than it should, but that is most likely my own Presbyterian perspective coming through. More seriously, the work seems to evidence the contemporary affliction of seeing the church in instrumentalist terms, as the means through which God accomplishes other tasks, such as evangelising creation. "A missional hermeneutic proceeds from the assumption that the whole Bible renders to us the story of God's mission through God's people in their engagement with God's world for the sake of the whole of God's creation" (p. 51). In such a case, the church exists to do something else, rather than to be something else, the Body of Christ. Was the church created in order to facilitate

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something else, the church, or was the world created for a covenantal people whom God would love? I opt for number two. The church is an “is” not just a “does”. When we look at the end of the Bible, we will not see something beyond the church as the Bride of Christ. The church is not just a means, a method for doing something else. The problem with the thinking is that once you identify the church fundamentally as an instrument, it is all too easy to place it along all other such tools. It is ultimately this mistaken understanding that opened the door for arriving at an anthropological understanding of church and mission. When we begin to see the church as the Body of Christ united to him through the agency of the Holy Spirit, we will begin to develop missiology that integrates with and not works against the church itself.

Wright’s effort shows the limitations of his understanding, but it also makes a great contribution to the church and represents real progress. It is a great effort and easily the best work of its kind in some time. It may be true that missiology suffered under the theologians. I would say, however, that the situation has been far worse since it became a marginal discipline for missionaries and missiologists alike. Thankfully, Wright’s effort represents a balanced treatment that begins to pull together the separated strands of theology, biblical studies, and ministry specifics and to some degree sensitivity to the social sciences.

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