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Mission Recalibrated – Chris Wright’s *The Mission of God*

Holistic hermeneutics and mission

I owe my old teacher, Dr Graeme Goldsworthy, author of *Gospel and Kingdom* and *According to Plan*,¹ for convincing me of the inestimable value of a holistic approach to reading the Bible. Goldsworthy’s starting point was that the Scriptures need to be treated as a coherent whole. Though they contain much in them that is diverse, unusual, difficult and even at times mystifying, there is in them a unity that corresponds to the unity of purpose of God himself. This is of course a wonderful antidote to hopeless proof-texting on the one hand, and to abstract systematising on the other, though both are sadly persistent evangelical vices. As Goldsworthy shows, here is a way to take the Old Testament seriously in its full particularity without resorting to moralising or spiritualising. Here is a way to read the Bible as a whole, allowing as far as possible the whole canon to speak and to show how its parts relate to one another.

The Scriptures hang together because, in all their complexity and diversity, they tell of the God who speaks his promises, and who acts. This is a hermeneutics driven by the conviction that the Bible invites itself to be read through the lens of the gospel it proclaims and serves, as a book which is itself designed to be a very part of the mission it describes. The abiding strength of reformed theology – the emphasis on the sovereignty of the loving God – is to be understood not in abstraction, but in terms of his actual history with his people in his creation as it is narrated in Scripture. All God’s promises are indeed affirmed in Christ Jesus.

These themes happily permeate Chris Wright’s epic work *The Mission of God – Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative*. Wright opens with the bold claim that ‘[M]ission is what the Bible is all about’ (29). He asks ‘can we take mission as a hermeneutical matrix for our understanding of the Bible as a whole?’ (32). So, ‘mission’ is not only the subject matter of the Bible, it is (and here Wright deploys an interesting set of metaphors – of which more later) the ‘key’ to ‘unlocking it’; or, it is the theme which provides the ‘overarching framework’ to the narrative of Scripture; or, it is a ‘hermeneutical matrix’; or it is the ‘grand narrative’; or it is the ‘map’ (69). In discovering what the Bible is about, it is discovered how the Bible ought to be read. And it is impossible to over-estimate the scope of the Bible’s concern: it is addressed to all people everywhere.

1 Goldsworthy 1981, 1991.

Missional hermeneutics

A 'missional hermeneutic', then, recognises the multiplicity of perspectives and contexts from which and within which people read, and have read, the biblical texts. A truly missional reading of the Bible will not fall prey to the cultural imperialism of previous generations but will in fact invite responses from a plurality of perspectives. Yet, lest we fear that Wright is permitting an interpretational free-for-all, he quickly adds that

where the missional hermeneutic will part company with radical postmodernity, is in its insistence that through all this variety, locality, particularity and diversity, the Bible is nevertheless actually THE story. This is the way it is. This is the grand narrative that constitutes truth for all. (47).

The story of the Bible is, according to Wright, a universal narrative around which smaller stories cohere: they have provided for them their 'place in the sun'. Special-interest readings and advocacy hermeneutics may then have their place, but not as the controlling matrices (as they have so often become in contemporary discourse about mission).

Wright is here telling a truth close to the heart of the gospel itself and his insight is confirmed by recent theological and philosophical accounts of the essence of Christianity. Colin Gunton put it in Trinitarian terms in *The One, the Three and the Many*: Christianity sides with neither monism nor chaos, but speaks of a God whose own being is a diverse unity and a unified plurality.² Further, in their recent readings of Paul, neo-Marxist European philosophers Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek have given lengthy descriptions of the subjective and particular universals which characterize the genius of Christianity – and which have been somewhat lost from view.³ What they have observed is the remarkable way in which Christianity eclipses and dissolves tribalism ('there is neither Greek, nor Jew...') and yet also is able to provide a non-abstract reading of history. Difference is transcended yet not obliterated. The God of the Bible is both the electing *and* the creating God: he chooses a people for the sake of the whole earth. As Wright puts it himself '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' (51). There is then a consonance in Wright's description between the biblical message of universal creation and particular election and the biblical hermeneutic which invites a plurality of perspectives to cohere around a central narrative spine.

The mission of God

Fundamental to Wright's understanding of mission is that mission is primarily God's mission. When he uses 'mission' he is not merely referring to the tasks of the church but to what God purposes in and for the entire cosmos. In Wright's words:

our mission (if it is biblically informed and validated) means our committed participation as God's people, at God's invitation and command, in God's own mission within the history of God's world for the redemption of God's creation (22-3).

² Gunton 1993.

³ See Badiou 2003 and Žižek 2000.

The specific activities and tasks to which Christians are called are then to be seen in relation to mission in this wider sense. The Bible itself is not just a record of God's mission but an instrument of it. The whole canon of Scripture is a missional phenomenon in the sense that it witnesses to the self-giving movement of this God toward his creation and us human beings, wayward but beloved.⁴

The significance of Wright's holistic and missional approach to Scripture is illustrated in the way in which, as he insists, the Bible's ethical imperatives ought to be set within the context of its great indicatives: 'a missional hermeneutic ... cannot read biblical indicatives without their implied imperatives. Nor can it isolate biblical imperatives from the totality of the biblical indicative' (61). The Bible is in essence a remarkable description of the nature of reality. It describes how things really are with God, humanity and the world as it expounds the great themes of creation, fall, and redemption. This is the context for the imperatives of mission that follow.

Holistic mission

Wright's work is, then, an impressive attempt to recalibrate evangelical thinking about mission by calling it to be more authentically and holistically scriptural. His vision for a 'holistic understanding of mission from a holistic reading of the biblical texts' (61) is breathtaking in its scope. By determining to listen to the whole counsel of God, Wright outflanks missiological uses of Scripture which are arbitrarily selective. He exposes as inadequate and reductionist those views of mission that would emphasise proclamation over social action and *vice versa*. In his own words,

How then can it be suggested that evangelistic proclamation is the only essential mission of the church? It seems impossible to me to justify such reductionism if we intend to sustain any claim to be taking the whole Bible seriously as our authority for mission and as that which defines the content and scope of our mission. Mission belongs to God – the biblical God. The message of mission is to be drawn from the whole of God's biblical revelation. (306)

Three challenges

This summary does less than justice to Wright's work but I trust it is true to its most salient features.⁵ Wright himself offers a point at which his own work might be assessed:

I would ask that the missional framework I propose in this volume be evaluated for its heuristic fruitfulness. Does it in fact do justice to the overall thrust of the biblical canon? Does it illuminate and clarify? Does it offer a way of articulating the coherence of the Bible's overarching message? (68)

I wish to take up Wright's challenge and ask: does the missional framework as Wright construes it – and proceeds to expound it – actually succeed in achieving what he claims for it? First of all, I wish to ask whether Wright has articulated the

4 Webster 2003: 17ff makes a similar point: Scripture is itself used by God as an instrument of salvation.

5 Already the impact of Wright's work is being felt: in Tim Chester's very recent book *Total Church* (Chester and Timms 2007), the lessons of *The Mission of God* are shaped into a set of practices for the local church.

concept of 'mission' with enough clarity that it is a persuasive candidate to be *the* theme to guide biblical interpretation. Secondly, I wish to explore whether Wright has given a convincing account of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments, and the difference between Israel and the Church. Thirdly, I will examine whether Wright has given an enlightening discription of the distinction between evangelism and social action. As will become evident, while in general I concur with Wright's proposal and with his proposed method, I have some reservations as to whether he has succeeded in demonstrating his case in each of these three areas.

I – Does the 'key' fit?

Wright's choice of 'mission' as the point of thematic coherence for the Scriptures certainly appears apposite. 'Mission' gleams with possibilities. Furthermore, 'mission' is a word that has been appropriated by all and sundry in the Christian world. Clearly, Christians would like to order their Christian activities to this concept. However, the chief drawback of using this term as the lodestar for scriptural interpretation is that it is too vague. Wright wants to use the word 'mission' to encompass all of God's purposes towards the world. The risk, however, is that the term doesn't say anything about those purposes other than that they are purposes.⁶ It isn't really saying anything remarkable to claim that the God of the Bible is purposive and that this is reflected in the pages of the Bible. In fact, it is hard to conceive of an alternative proposal.

Further, it is curious that Wright does not anywhere give consideration to the alternative 'keys' for understanding the Bible that have been offered in the course of Christian commentary on Scripture. For example, the notion of 'the Kingdom of God' – which, for example, provides Oliver O'Donovan's hermeneutical grid in his magisterial *The Desire of the Nations*⁷ (and Goldsworthy's in *Gospel and Kingdom*) has many obvious advantages over 'mission', not least in that it features prominently and explicitly in the teaching of Jesus. 'Covenant' is another obvious theme that has, in reformed theology, provided exactly the sort of key that Wright expects 'mission' to provide. Why is mission superior to these candidates which each have a long pedigree and seem to offer more clarity as conceptual tools than 'mission'?

That Wright is aware of these alternatives and their possibly competing claims is evident in the fact that there is some confusion as to what he is claiming for his preferred theme. Is 'mission' being presented as one way among many to view the Scriptures as coherent or it is really to be recognised as *the way*? Wright starts by offering his theme 'the mission of God' as one possible hermeneutical key with great potential (see, for example, his discussion of a 'messianic' reading on pp 30ff). By the end, however, it has become THE right and correct way to make sense of the Bible. So, ultimately, he is saying more than 'this theme is a neglected theme and look how much of the Bible is related to it'. By the end he is saying 'the whole Bible can (and I would argue, should), be read in the light of this overarching

⁶ Further, in order to recast the term for use in this context as God's 'mission', Wright has to remove its connection with 'sending' (23), thereby further reducing the distinctiveness

and clarity of his key word. As Wright acknowledges, 'mission' isn't strictly speaking a biblical word either.

⁷ O'Donovan 1996.

governing perspective' (532). That it *can* be read this way is granted but it hardly sounds as if he is convinced that he has established his own case that 'mission' is the guiding principle *par excellence*.

As we have seen, Wright deploys a number of guiding metaphors. These metaphors, however, prove quite troublesome. He offers his reading of the Bible as the 'key to unlock' the Bible's narrative. This is itself an awkward metaphor: is the Bible a safe that needs cracking? A door that needs opening? Is it somehow closed without the key? Wright also repeatedly speaks of the theme of God's mission as a 'framework', or an 'overarching framework'. Goldsworthy uses the same vocabulary, as do O'Brien and Köstenberger,⁸ though in the way Wright uses it, it isn't a framework really (which is a structural metaphor), but, an organising motif. But the deeper question is 'why do we need a 'framework'? Is the framework the answer to the question as to what the Bible is about, or is it the means to discover the answer to this question?'

The lack of conceptual precision at this point is evident when we consider the way Wright has asked that his own work be evaluated. A redundancy becomes apparent: in effect he is asking whether mission, the proposed 'overarching framework', does justice to the 'overall thrust of the biblical canon' or whether this 'overarching framework' succeeds in 'articulating the coherence of the Bible's overarching message'. It seems to me that, if it is decided that there is an overarching framework, then the question of the coherence of the Bible has already been settled. If it is an 'overarching framework', then it surely must do justice to the overall thrust of the canon, or it isn't an 'overarching framework' at all.⁹ A more serious engagement with philosophical hermeneutics is needed here.¹⁰

II – Old and New Testaments.

Wright has spent his writing career challenging the vapid practical Marcionitism of contemporary evangelicalism. It is therefore not a surprise to hear his very strong, almost polemical, advocacy of the significance of the Old Testament for a proper biblical theology and to read many pages of thorough exposition of Old Testament texts from the point of view of mission.¹¹ In fact, Wright's great portrayal

8 Köstenberger and O'Brien 2001.

9 On p 26 the conceptual confusion is heightened when 'frameworks' become 'maps'. Well, which are they?

10 Such philosophical engagement is indeed found in Goldsworthy 2006.

11 Wright is of course an Old Testament scholar and as such this emphasis is to be expected. However, it is a virtue that threatens at times to become a vice, with a heavy weighting in the direction of his expertise. An examination of the index and the bibliography reveals that hardly any of the authors cited are *theologians*. They are almost entirely contemporary biblical scholars of one kind or another. He

references precisely no patristic sources; no Augustine; no medieval writers; no Reformation greats (other than Calvin in passing); no evangelical revival era or Protestant scholastic thinkers; no Puritans; no Karl Barth (though he is mentioned once in the text, in fact); no Jürgen Moltmann, no Gustavo Gutiérrez, no Colin Gunton, no John Webster (to name a few authors that came to this writer's mind as having quite a bit to say about the subject matter of the book). It is precisely in the area of conceptual clarification in which I find myself querying Wright that these writers might have been of greatest assistance.

of the grandeur of God's mission springs out of an appreciation of the Old Testament's treatment of the theme. As he writes:

[T]he scope of our mission must reflect the scope of God's mission, which in turn will match the scale of God's redemptive work. Where do we turn in the Bible for our understanding of redemption? Already it will be clear enough that in my view it will simply not do to turn first to the New Testament (265).

I would concur – who wouldn't? – that the New Testament has its sense against the context and background of the Old. However, there is something not quite right about the language of 'turning first to the Old Testament'. It is the inescapable duty of Christians *qua* Christians to turn first to Christ; or, at least, to acknowledge the impossibility for them of reading the Old Testament without Christ. Our reading of the Old Testament is always after Christ, or it isn't Christian.

In his zeal to show the continuity between the testaments, Wright has not, to my mind, sufficiently accounted for the difference between them. Marcionitism was attractive precisely because it had a point: in Christ, something new comes to pass. Or at least, the themes and concerns of the Old Testament are presented in a surprising new way. This is true of Wright's particular emphasis on mission. It is precisely *because* of the revelation of Christ that it becomes possible to read the Old Testament in the light of mission. That this is an emphasis of the Old Testament becomes apparent on a re-reading of this text after the fact of the encounter with the New Testament. If reading the New Testament must be a canonical business, then so also must reading of the Old.¹² It simply will not do to read off a concept or theme found in the Old Testament, and apply it to the church without careful theological qualification. The church is not Israel.

Wright is of course well aware of the danger of this kind of application. He insists that '[w]e are not Old Testament Israelites living within a theocratic covenant bound by Old Testament law' (see pp 304-5). He rightly complains about the tendency of liberation theologians to do this with the exodus. But I am not convinced that he himself has completely evaded this trap. This especially comes into play in his discussion of the jubilee, one of his favourite biblical themes (290ff). Wright says

Mission belongs to God – the biblical God. The message of mission is to be drawn from the whole of God's biblical revelation. So we cannot simply relegate the powerful message of events such as the exodus or institutions like the jubilee to a bygone era. They are an integral part of the biblical definition of God's idea of redemption and of God's requirement on his redeemed people. (306)

Certainly, Wright is right: relegation is not an option for a full-orbed biblical theology. But how are we to handle the transition between the social legislation directed to Israel and the era of the Church? Wright's response to that question would be that the New Testament explicitly declares some Old Testament material to have been provisional – the food laws, for example, and the sacrificial system. There is an explicit rationale for our nonobservance of these 'matters' (305). In

¹² John Goldingay's recent Old Testament work does this quite magnificently – Goldingay 2003, 2006.

other words, for Wright, ritual requirements are made particular to Israel's own identity in time and space. In contrast, the ethical principles gleaned from the Old Testament are universalised.

But can this distinction be so easily sustained from reading the Old Testament itself? Wright seems to overlook the fact that the Jubilee itself was not merely an ethical *teaching* or *principle*. It was precisely a ritual practice, with an ethical and theological meaning, that Israel was to engage in on regular occasions. Which is to say: the line between ceremonial and ethical command is not so easily drawn as Wright suggests. The critique of the latter prophets was not against ritual practice *per se* but against ritual practice set against a context of injustice and idolatry. Isn't Wright's proposed application of the Old Testament ethical material arbitrarily drawn? Certainly, many theologians in the history of the church have made alternative proposals for criteria by which the Old Testament material ought to be received by Christians but we are not told why these are to be rejected in favour of Wright's proposal.

A further query I have along these lines is as to what Wright makes of the commands to holy war in the Old Testament. The relationship of Israel to the other nations surrounding her was frequently marked by armed struggle at the specific command of Yhwh. Even within her life she was commanded quite specifically to ensure the destruction of false images and idols. If there was an international perspective on view it was that the defeat of the nations and their submission to the Lord's anointed one was to be the way in which Israel would carry her mission to the nations (see Psalm 2, for example). There was then a definite negative side to Israel's mission. She was not merely the bearer of divine blessing to the nations, but also the bringer of divine curses. This too had been promised in the Abrahamic covenant of course. How would Wright account for this negative aspect of the mission as it is translated into the era of the church?¹³

III – Social action and proclamation

One of the great virtues of *The Mission of God* is the way in which Wright exposes as biblically inadequate those views of mission that do not include the pursuit of justice and righteousness. As he says in words we have noted above:

[H]ow then can it be suggested that evangelistic proclamation is the only essential mission of the church? It seems impossible to me to justify such reductionism if we intend to sustain any claim to be taking the whole Bible seriously as our authority for mission and as that which defines the content and scope of our mission. (306)

13 Curiously, given that Wright is persuaded that the Bible is a grand narrative that describes reality, the texts that he alights on and spends time with tend to be meditative, reflective, poetic or prophetic and not narrative. I suspect this is because he can quickly access the interpretational material in the text and build it into the bigger picture.

Wright refuses to allow verbal proclamation to become all that mission is about because this refusal is what the Bible demands.¹⁴

What is not in doubt is the importance of 'good works' or 'social action' within the missional activity of the church, if it is to be faithful to God's mission. Having asserted with considerable force that mission incorporates both proclamation and social action, it *is* a question worth exploring as to what the proper conceptual relationship is between proclamation of the gospel and the church's acts of obedience. Are they interchangeable (such that we can fulfill our part of the mission by doing one or the other of the alternatives) or parallel (in that both are of equal priority for the church by God)? Or does there pertain some conceptual relationship between them? Wright at this point takes up the Lausanne suggestion that evangelistic proclamation is *prior* (316) to social action. He is reluctant to demur from this description of the relationship, but he does so on account of the tendency for the 'priority' of evangelism to squeeze out social action entirely. Wright suggests rather that *ultimacy* (i.e., the 'ultimacy' of proclamation and the corresponding 'penultimacy' of social action) is the best paradigm. As he puts it: '[M]ission may not always *begin* with evangelism. But mission that does not ultimately *include* declaring the Word and the name of Christ, the call to repentance, and faith and obedience, has not completed its task.' (319). Similarly, Köstenberger and O'Brien write,

The mission of the exalted Jesus is accomplished through the witness of the apostles in the power of the Holy Spirit. The one who is himself sent by God sends his representatives to bear testimony to his salvation, to announce the forgiveness of sins and to make disciples of all nations. In other words, his witnesses continue the mission of Jesus by declaring to men and women everywhere the glorious gospel of the grace of God. As the Father has sent him, so Jesus sends them. Moreover, this testimony to Jesus and his saving work involves a wide-ranging series of activities that result in believers being built up in Christ and formed into Christian congregations. It is not limited to primary evangelism and its immediate results.¹⁵

In other words, without verbal proclamation of some nature at some point, mission loses its specifically Christian character

I think this is a crucial – and accurate – acknowledgement from Wright that, within the field of mission, social action and good works are ordered to proclamation of the gospel and not the other way around. It could have been made more strongly but Wright seems more keen to put paid to the suggestion that this construal of mission might result in an emaciated vision of social action. There is not a parallel arrangement between the two aspects at all. Rather, one springs from

14 Wright does not, however, give an indication as to whether there is any writer who does indeed suggest that evangelistic proclamation is the only essential mission of the church. He lists no specific opponent and gives no space to suggesting what the arguments for a proclamation-only (or proclamation-dominant) view of mission might be. Why does he invest such a polemical tone, then, in favour of an

expanded view of mission? If no evangelical writer is actually pushing this barrow, then why is the debate worth having? If indeed there is an opponent, then why do we not hear what his or her case is, and hear why it is deficient? Debate with a worthy opponent – if, indeed, there is one – might actually have sharpened Wright's thinking somewhat here.

15 Köstenberger and O'Brien 2001: 351.

the other and serves the other. As it is with faith *sans* works, so it is that evangelism without good works is dead. But the works of the gospel *derive* from the gospel, and not the other way around.

Is 'ultimacy' the best paradigm? I think perhaps Wright could have said more here to clarify his point in theological, and specifically eschatological, terms. Good works and the gospel are inseparable, but they are distinguishable: 'faith without works is dead', after all. But it is the gospel of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ that gives the great description of the context out of which these works flow. Ultimately (that word again) it is God's desire – his mission – to be known. When churches work to make God known, in all the diverse ways in which he has ordained, then his ultimate purpose is served. It is this communicative aspect that makes the mission what it is. It gives it its nature.

Conclusion

Wright has written a masterful book on mission. The discourse of mission in evangelical circles has been decisively changed for the better. I am less convinced however that he has written a book that is as fruitful as he claims it is as regards the Bible. I have doubts that 'mission' on its own is a heuristic tool with as much leverage as is hoped, not the least because of a need for conceptual clarification at a more sophisticated level. Though he is indeed a skilled expositor of the Old Testament, Wright's expositions are not so fresh and innovative that the benefits of his suggested hermeneutic are immediately obvious.

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Fundamental to Wright's understanding of mission is that mission is primarily God's mission. When he uses "mission" he is not merely referring to the tasks of the church but to what God purposes in and for the entire cosmos. In Wright's words "Wright's work is, then, an impressive attempt to recalibrate evangelical thinking about mission by calling it to be more authentically and holistically scriptural. His vision for a "holistic understanding of mission from a holistic reading of the biblical texts" (61) is breathtaking in its scope. By determining to listen to the whole counsel of God, Wright outflanks missiological uses of Scripture which are arbitrarily selective.