

# A UK pastor's perspective

## A response on behalf of Keswick Ministries



Author: John Risbridger, Minister at Above Bar Church, Southampton, and Keswick Convention trustee.

Chris Wright's contribution to the articulation of a profoundly missional hermeneutic is widely known and deeply significant, particularly since the publication of his seminal work on *The Mission of God* (IVP Academic, 2006). This lecture broadly follows his approach in the book, to give a missional reading of Jeremiah, who was appointed (we are reminded) as a "prophet to the nations" (Jer. 1:5).

Writing as a pastor in a city-centre church in Southern England, I found much in the lecture that was helpful and that resonates with our situation.

- i. Highlighting the missional orientation of Israel's election (e.g., Jer. 13:11).* Particularly striking was the use of Jeremiah's 'sash' imagery in chapter 13 "to bring pleasure and praise to the wearer". This theme, though well rooted in the patriarchal promises (especially Gen. 12:1-3) was clearly much neglected in Israel. The concept clearly carries across into NT teaching on election (e.g., Eph. 1:11-12) but it remains a neglected strand in our teaching on this theme today. This is surely to our cost, since this missional strand in our view of election is the perfect antidote to the exclusive and inwardly-oriented attitudes that (all too often), accompany our reflections on it.
- ii. Highlighting the missional purpose of Jeremiah's call to repentance (4:1-2).* The call to reject idolatry and to live out the ethical demands of the covenant clearly stands at the centre of Jeremiah's ministry. However, the missional orientation of this call is all too easily overlooked - both in our reading of Jeremiah and in our thinking about the call to holiness today. Recent thinking about the call to mission *in our western context* has placed considerable emphasis on contextualisation, and this is largely to be welcomed. However, the boundary between cultural contextualisation and cultural assimilation sometimes seems alarmingly unclear to us. It seems to me therefore that in the western church this call to the *distinctiveness* of covenant loyalty needs to be clearly heard along side the call to appropriate contextualisation. To reflect the glory of God among the nations (and in our nation) the church does indeed need to be accessible, but we must also be radically different.
- iii. Highlighting the cost of being 'sent' in mission.* I think Dr Wright has done us all a service in adding to Hunsberger's proposals for a missional hermeneutic, a section on the messenger himself (Jeremiah). No faithful reading of Jeremiah can overlook his desperate struggles and his heart-rending honesty. That such accounts provide both a fore-shadowing of the suffering of Christ and an indication to the church of the sacrifices entailed in faithfulness to our missional call, is an important insight for us today. One of the effects of our cultural assimilation to western values is the expectation of a comfortable life with little in the way of suffering. As well as being simply out of step with the suffering and poverty of so much of the global church, such a view is clearly out of step with the scriptures themselves.

In reflecting on the lecture I also wanted to raise two areas for further discussion.

- i. The call for social justice.* It was in fact Dr Wright who first underlined for me the strength of the call for social justice in Jeremiah's prophetic ministry (see especially 22:15-17). It is clear that the lack of such justice in Israel, and the judgement which followed from it, was a cause of shame for Israel among the nations (22:8-9). That appears to cast this call in a missional framework. What then could Jeremiah

contribute to our understanding of the place of socio-political engagement in the context of mission today?

- ii. *The newness of the new covenant.* Clearly this is an area over which interpreters of Scripture have long been divided. However, Jeremiah's hope of restored covenant faithfulness (with all the missional implications which Dr Wright's paper has brought out so helpfully) seems inextricably linked to *New Covenant* promises (classically Jer. 21:31ff, cf. 33:9). What are the implications of this for how we read Jeremiah as *new covenant* believers? Should this not heighten our expectations both as to how distinctive we should be as the people of God today, and as to how significant that distinctiveness should be in its missional impact? And if our expectations are in fact *low*, should we not be all the more deeply challenged by texts such as these?

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