

A Missional hermeneutic and Scripture engagement

A response on behalf of Wycliffe Bible Translators UK



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In his lecture, Chris Wright helpfully laid out the essentials of a missional hermeneutic and then used this as a lens through which to view the book of Jeremiah. There was a lot to stimulate any student of the Bible, especially those who read the Old Testament. However, there is a fundamental assumption in the lecture that people are able to read what Jeremiah wrote. Sadly, for a variety of reasons, many people quite simply do not have access to Jeremiah. Very briefly, I'd like to consider what Chris' missional hermeneutic has to say to those who translate and disseminate the Scriptures.

In a language with the economic capacity of English we have numerous translations of the whole Bible available. For many minority languages, it is often the case that only a selection from the Bible is printed or published. Perhaps a Gospel, or a whole New Testament, maybe with the Psalms or a selection of Old Testament stories. In truth, Jeremiah is likely to be way down the list of things that are published. Does the missional hermeneutic stress on the overarching narrative of the Bible give us any insight into how we should go about making the Scriptures available? Should we perhaps consider concentrating resources so as to translate the whole Bible for one group rather than making selections available to a number of groups? Or could a missional hermeneutic guide us in making more principled decisions about which passages should be seen as essential? On the pages of a mission magazine this might seem a sterile question, but in a world where 200 million people do not have the Scriptures in their own language, some hard choices need to be made and we need a good hermeneutical and theological basis upon which to make them.

Another concept which raises interesting questions for the translator is the missional locatedness of the reader. Chris writes,

“missional hermeneutic arises from the community doing the reading – in their context and location. They are rooted in a particular time and place, and need to engage their own context in line with God’s missional agenda. Thus they read Scripture in a way that is not only faithful to the original context (the world of and behind the text), but also faithful to its significance for their own present context (the world in front of the text)”.

Traditionally the role of the translator has been seen as making a bridge between the original context of the text and the present context of the reader. The question is then raised as to how the translator can help or indeed hinder the community who are reading the text in their own context? If we view the text through a missional grid, will this impact the way in which we translate the Scriptures and make them available to people?

As Chris Wright has shown, a missional hermeneutic brings new questions and insights to the text of Scripture. Equally, it is a tool which could be used to help us rethink how we should be making the text available to those who don't yet have access to it.

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