

Breaking open the text

A reflection on Chris Wright's missional reading of Jeremiah



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In my own faith journey as a biblical scholar, Chris Wright's scholarship has nourished me. Under his influence, I have moved to embrace a missional hermeneutic as the means to hearing more clearly the Word of God. It is a privilege to offer a response to his lecture, *'Prophet to the Nations': Missional Reflections on the Book of Jeremiah*.

Chris Wright demonstrates aptly the richness of a hermeneutic centered in mission. In conversation with George Hunsberger's paper, *Proposals for a Missional Hermeneutic: Mapping the Conversation*, Wright applies three of Hunsberger's summary points (1. Missional Framework of the biblical narrative, 2. The missional purpose of the texts, and 3. The missional locatedness of the readers) to the text of Jeremiah and proposes a fourth angle - the missional cost to the messenger. Wright's lecture contributes to our theological and ethical understanding of the message of Jeremiah.

The ultimate test of any hermeneutic is its ability to make sense of the text that it purports to be interpreting. Wright's missional reading breaks open Jeremiah in fresh ways that allow us to encounter the prophet's words within the contexts of Israel's role in God's mission, Jeremiah's audiences' situation, and Jeremiah's own life as a person called to serve in the prophetic office. The power of Wright's engagement with Jeremiah is enhanced by the amount of text that he deploys in the course of the lecture. This demonstrates that a missional reading of Jeremiah is not a matter of "proof-texting" but a map to the entirety of the text. [1]

As a professor of Biblical Studies, I have come to the conclusion that the goal of biblical interpretation is the conversion of the reader/hearer to the world of the text. I am drawn to a missional approach to the Scripture precisely because the questions that a missional hermeneutic asks are crucial ones that help to unleash the Word of God in all of its richness.

I particularly like the new question about missional cost with which Wright concludes his lecture. It draws us closer to the world of application for when we speak of missional cost it is profoundly difficult to avoid reflecting on the cost of the Gospel's demands on our lives.

I would like to suggest that we can expand the reach of a missional hermeneutic within our local communities of faith by venturing further into the world of contemporary application and appropriation. The fruits of a missional reading must begin to be heard in our churches and world. Here are some questions that I have found helpful for transitioning from study to teaching and proclamation:

How does this text shape my/our understanding of God's mission?

What sort of community does this text presuppose?

How do I/we need to change in order to embrace the vision of this text?

I also find it helpful to imagine two different audiences for the text: insiders and outsiders. When we read the Bible, we are hearing an insider conversation. The text of Scripture was written to address particular communities of God's people. Yet in our day, we must be mindful of how an outsider to the Gospel hears its message. If the goal of interpretation is conversion, it is vital that insiders hear the text as a call to (re)align themselves with God's mission in the world and that outsiders hear the text as an invitation to align themselves with it.

I hope that the Encounters Mission Ezine will continue to be a means of disseminating this important conversation about a missional approach to Scripture to the wider church. A missional hermeneutic is needed as we seek to proclaim the Gospel to all peoples and nations in our day. I see it as vital in my own context in the United States as a means for (re)awakening churches to the centrality of the mission of God and for inviting non-Christ followers to find their identity and calling in the narrative-world of the Old and New Testaments.

Let me conclude by expressing my gratitude again to Chris Wright for his stimulating lecture and to Tim Davy for the opportunity to participate in this important conversation.

Notes

[1] Wright uses the metaphor of a map in his earlier writings: Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (IVP, 2006), 69. See also, "Mission as a Matrix for Hermeneutics and Biblical Theology" In *Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation* (eds. Craig Bartholomew *et al*; Scripture and Hermeneutics Series, 5; Zondervan, 2004), 137-140.

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