

## Chris Wright's *The Mission of God* A Missiologist's Perspective



Author: Dr Kang San Tan, Head of Mission Studies, Redcliffe College.

This review seeks to highlight *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative's* contribution to missiology and our understanding of Christian mission. In 1999, at the WEA Iguassu Consultation, I first heard *Chris Wright* express his critique that *David Bosch*, in *Transforming Mission* (1991), devoted rather limited space to the study of Old Testament texts for mission theology. In his new book, Wright devotes about two-thirds of his discussion to Old Testament texts. The above observation points to the book's distinctive contribution in developing a Christian understanding of mission, not only from the New Testament, but beginning with the Old Testament. Wright is International Director of Langham Partnership International and former Principal of All Nations Christian College.

*The Mission of God* is organised along three major focal points of the worldview of Israel (God, people and earth). After discussing the concept of a missional hermeneutic, Wright develops, in part 2, the assertion that the living God wills to be known to the world through Israel and through the church. In part 3, he moves on to the study of "The People of Mission" by examining biblical themes such as election, redemption, covenant and ethics. Wright concludes with a discussion on "The Arena of Mission" by considering the themes of earth, and the nations in relation to mission.

Wright begins by asking the question of whether a missional reading of scripture can be applied to the whole of the scriptures. What happens when Christians read the Bible as a grand narrative of God's mission? Instead of proof-texting and basing the whole of Christian mission on a few selected New Testament passages, Wright offers a missional reading of the whole Bible. This particular (*missional*) way of reading the scriptures is based on 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). Rather than developing a biblical basis of mission, Wright offers a missional apologetic for the Bible; that behind the church's mission is a God with a mission as revealed in the whole of the biblical narrative. Wright's missional hermeneutic seeks to include global Christian voices, "the multiplicity of perspectives and contexts from which and within which people read the biblical texts" (p.39). Beyond contextual and postmodern readings of scripture, Wright argues that the Bible offers a particular story of God's action through Israel with a universal claim among the nations. Missionaries reading this book will benefit from a more coherent and biblical framework for mission. As a result, readers are invited to discover mission in almost every book in the bible. In my view, this modelling of reading the bible missiologically is the most important contribution of Wright's *The Mission of God*.

Secondly, Wright demonstrates an approach to mission reflection through a careful exegesis of scripture. Contextual theologies, cultural studies and sociological insights need to be developed through serious grappling with the scriptures, rather than distorting texts. Although it was not the expressed purpose of the book, *The Mission of God* contributes towards the closing of the existing gap between missiology and biblical studies. Instead of separating theology and biblical studies from *mission contexts*, Wright approaches the texts of scripture through a mission paradigm. In some circles, theological and biblical studies have been considered academic and scientific, while missiology still finds itself under suspect by scholars of other academic disciplines. Part of the distrust may come from missiologists using biblical proof-texts to justify their mission theories and strategies. To some extent, Wright demonstrates in action, more than words, that mission readings and careful exegesis of scripture are both needed for critical missiology.

Some Old Testament scholars question the existence of a mission impetus in the Old Testament, delineating the contrast between centripetal and centrifugal missions. Wright's approach on the particularity of Israel's calling as God's people, in the light of the New Testament understanding of Jesus as the promised Messiah, cuts across radical discontinuity in understanding mission between the two Testaments. Instead, Israel's self-understanding in the Old Testament provides a springboard for the church's mission in the New Testament. Therefore, while recognising the lack of active missionary outreach on the part of Israel in the Old Testament, Wright could argue that Israel "definitely had a sense of mission, not in the sense of *going* somewhere but of *being* something" (p.504).

A third contribution from Wright's studies is the re-definition of mission to include social and political dimensions. In relation to the Exodus story, Wright argues that it shows many dimensions of transformation in God's redemptive programme: political, social, economic, rather than just spiritual. Israel's election, redemption and covenant resulted in an ethical distinctiveness in Israel's witness among the nations. In addition, there is an ecological dimension to God's mission, for "holistic mission, then, is not truly holistic if it included only human beings..." (p.416). In the section dealing with humanity in rebellion, sin is comprehensive, affecting the physical, social, spiritual, and rational dimensions. Therefore, the gospel must be comprehensive in addressing the varied dimensions of sin. While these concepts of holistic mission are not new, Wright's approach in establishing a coherent biblical framework on mission is a major resource for future discussion on the scope and meaning of mission. Our understanding of mission can no longer be limited to evangelism, or social action, but must be an outflow of these theological convictions of a living God who has acted in redeeming the whole creation to himself.

Finally, a biblical-theology approach to interpreting the mission of God yields a strong emphasis on the ethical demands of being the people of God. The growth of Christianity must be accompanied by a worldview transformation that is rooted in Jesus, the seed of Abraham (pp.219-220). In countries where Christianity has grown at a rapid rate, this ethical dimension of mission, integrated in Christian identity, is vital. Far too often, church growth enthusiasts focus on evangelism and church membership rather than the worldview and social transformations of newly formed Christian communities. Possibly, this recovery of missional ethics (not just righteous living as a matter of being pleasing to God but as a matter of counter cultural witness) is what is sorely missing and needed in Christian communities in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

Wright's missional hermeneutic focused primarily on the Christian scriptures. An aspect that is beyond the scope of this book is what is the nature of culture for mission thinking? Coming from Asia, I would like to see missional readings of scripture which integrate these biblical insights into the realities of Asian cultures, particularly utilizing non-Western cultures as positive resources and 'scaffolding' (to use Wright's term) for constructing contextual missiology. Nevertheless, in Wright's defence, this volume is explicitly a biblical study and it may not be fair to expect a thorough going integration with other disciplines such as cultural and social studies. Therefore, Wright's model in focusing on biblical studies can be the very base for contextualising the biblical message to each local situation. However, missiology, by its very nature must go beyond a scriptural basis towards engagement and where appropriate, integration with culture and non-Christian systems of thoughts and philosophies.

Methods in missiology are still unfolding, with some arguing towards a more radical approach. The missional reading of scripture is not just a matter of applying to non-Western contexts what we think we have discovered from biblical traditions. Rather, mission reflections need to be more explicit in our methods of intentionally incorporating culture as a source for theology.

For example, Wright's extensive discussion on idolatry offers key biblical perspectives on the subject. The book, with its orientation to biblical studies, further offers some applications to

Western ideas of idols, but did not really deal with concepts of idol worship in Buddhism or Hinduism which are prevalent in Asia. Mission reflection arising from Asia needs to ask a different set of questions, possibly taking a different route by engaging with various understandings of idols in non-Christian belief systems (for example, the variety of Buddhist perspectives on idols). In such critical correlations and engagements, missiologists develop a distinct Christian perspective on such belief systems. However, critical engagements with non-Christian perspectives must return to works such as Christopher Wright's tome of biblical insights, lest new insights fail to stand the test of individual books of the Bible or fit within the grand narrative of scripture argued in this excellent book.

To conclude, this remarkable book, which covers a vast terrain of biblical materials, meticulously researched, written in an accessible yet comprehensive manner, will be a major text for both students of mission and mission practitioners on the field, as well as for pastors in multicultural settings. Beyond missional readings, the book invites readers towards a doxological participation in the mission of God as the very heartbeat and centre of all reality. In the author's concluding words, "This is the grand narrative that is unlocked when we turn the hermeneutical key of reading all the Scriptures in the light of the mission of God" (p.534).

Buy *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* from [St Andrew's Bookshop](#).

Author: Christopher J.H. Wright  
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