

# Mission: What the Bible is All About

## An interview with Chris Wright



Chris Wright is International Director of Langham Partnership International, and author of *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative*. Interviewer: Tim Davy, Editor, Encounters.

### **Firstly, tell us a bit about your background. Would you describe yourself as an Old Testament scholar or a missiologist?**

I was brought up in a Christian home; my parents had been missionaries in Brazil for 20 years before I was born (I am the youngest of four). So I was taught the Bible well within a missionary ethos - so perhaps it's not surprising that I have a passion for both. But I think if I had to choose, I would be considered as an OT Scholar, rather than a missiologist, since I have never done formal missiological degrees, and there are many other branches of missiology than just the biblical dimension that I focus on (e.g. historical study of mission, systematic theological issues, cultural and social anthropology, linguistics, mission strategy, ethical and pastoral dimensions of 'member-care', etc. etc.).

### **Your particular passion seems to be fusing the Old Testament, ethics and mission. Has this always been the case? How has your experience teaching in cross-cultural contexts affected your reading of the Bible?**

The interest in OT Ethics happened because, in 1970, the then Principal of Belfast Bible College (and later of Redcliffe College), Victor Reid, asked me to teach an evening course on 'Christian Ethics'. I thought I should start with the OT, but could find no books on the subject. I wrote to my undergraduate supervisor in Cambridge, John Sturdy, to ask if OT Ethics would be a good topic to do PhD research in (which I wanted to do), and he wrote back to say, 'Probably; nobody has written anything on it in English for 50 years'. So I did my doctorate in the field of the economic ethics of the OT, which led to *God's People in God's Land* (Paternoster), and then *Living as the People of God* (IVP - and eventually the revised form of that; *OT Ethics for the People of God*). So I got labelled a bit as one of those rare people who seem to know something about what the OT has to say on social ethics. In the wake of Lausanne 1 in 1974, this was flavour of the month for some years as British evangelicals recovered their social conscience and engagement.

I taught at All Nations Christian College for a year before going to India in 1983. This missiological context forced me to ask more questions of the OT text: 'What happens when you read these texts from the angle of their relevance to Christian mission?' And the answers began to amaze and fascinate me. Then teaching the Bible in a different cultural context was very enriching and challenging also.

So the two sides of my interest have grown together and reinforce one another.

### **It seems from your previous writings that you have been gearing up to this book for some time. How significant has this project been for you? Do you feel you've now said what you wanted to say on the subject or are there more areas you want to explore?**

Certainly, *The Mission of God* has been the fulfilment of a lot of my life, teaching and thinking for many years now. So in that sense it 'delivers my soul'. It has been a huge amount of work and very significant as something I felt I really had to say. I started out thinking I would just write a book on an OT theology of mission, to fill the gap left by Bosch's book, *Transforming Mission*. But the more I worked on it, the more stuff I discovered in my

research, and the more it seemed necessary to make it a 'whole Bible' approach - even if heavily weighted towards the OT.

I think I have said in the book all I want to (or indeed can!) say for the moment. But I have no doubt at all that there will be other areas to explore and new thoughts to think.

The exciting thing is to discover that other scholars are getting into this field also. There is a whole track each year now at the Society of Biblical Literature thinking about missiological hermeneutics of Scripture. That is bound to throw up new avenues of investigation and discovery. There will be plenty of room for intensive study of specific parts of the canon, and individual books, from a missional hermeneutical perspective, and that too will be very exciting to observe and take part in. I think there is a fresh realisation that the old phrase of John Stott, 'Our God is a missionary God' extends to the scriptures that we affirm come from him.

**In contrast to many scholarly works, your writing is very passionate as well as academically rigorous. Is this combination something you have sought to cultivate or is it just your natural style?**

I don't try to cultivate it. I find myself excited and moved by what I am reading, thinking, and trying to communicate, and I suppose that comes across. I write, as I lecture and preach, with a fairly high level of personal engagement and energy. I don't know any other way to do it!

**What kind of readership were you thinking of when you wrote *The Mission of God*?**

I had in mind the kind of people who tell me that they found Living as the People of God helpful - i.e. not just students and pastors, but ordinary Christian folk with a reasonable level of Christian maturity and ability to cope with a bit of a challenge - but without too much technical, theological or critical training. At the same time, I did also have in mind seminary students. I was aware that my work on OT ethics had been increasingly used as a textbook in college courses (especially in the USA), so I had in mind to produce a book that could be used in the same way. So I suppose the kind of person I had in mind was my mental picture of a first year student at All Nations Christian College - generations of whom I taught for many years!

I have to say also that I was very grateful to Dan Reid and the editorial team at IVP, USA, who helped me a lot in making sure the book was well structured and, even though rather large, easy to follow in terms of the flow of its overall argument. And they engaged some excellent readers for the initial manuscript, who came back with nearly 20 pages of dense critique, questions, suggestions and other comments, which I found very useful indeed, and helped the book enormously. At the same time, they let me write and say exactly what I wanted to, with very little actual change to my wording. Any author needs to be grateful for good editing help from a quality publisher.

**Most people who've trained for mission have probably taken a course called something like, 'The Biblical Basis of Mission'. The first thing you do in chapter 1 is raise an objection to this title. Why is this?**

I don't so much object to it, as suggest that it is not adequate. Of course we need to understand the biblical foundation for mission (as for anything else). But I wanted to get away from the perception of the Bible as merely adjectival to what we do in our human efforts, and see rather that the Bible is itself a witness to the mission of God, and that we must start from there.

**You suggest that mission is ‘what the Bible is all about’. How radical a thought is this in the field of Old Testament studies? Why?**

I expect it probably is radical. In the guild of OT Scholarship, as in most biblical studies, the tendency for a long time has been towards more and more fragmentation. Furthermore, if one approaches the text of the Bible from a non-confessional stance, then it is simply a collection of ancient books arising from one particular religious culture. There is no inherent unity. So the concept of the Bible being 'all about' anything is uncomfortable in that mindset.

My hope, however, is that for evangelicals with their higher view of the coherence and unity of the Scripture, that it is possible to help them see this missional perspective as a way of understanding the Bible in relation to 'the whole counsel of God' - i.e. God's mission and purpose in creation, redemption, sovereignty and judgment.

**The study of mission and the Old Testament has developed considerably in recent years. What do you attribute this trend to? Where do you hope the field will be in twenty years' time, and how do you hope *The Mission of God* will have contributed to this?**

It is growing for sure, and that is very encouraging. Perhaps it is because more people who are fine scholars are engaged in teaching - for shorter or longer periods - in cross-cultural contexts ('mission fields' in older language!), in Africa, Asia, etc. So they are having to wrestle with the text in mission contexts (as I did), and discovering new ways of handling it. Over the next few decades, I would hope to see more books devoted to a missional reading of specific biblical books, and many fresh insights gained from that process. I hope *Mission of God* will have helped to 'provide credible space' for such work, in providing some degree of hermeneutical validation for approaching the Bible in this way.

**So, what can OT scholars learn from missiologists, and vice versa?**

OT Scholars can learn to see that the issues we read of in the text (Israel's encounter with other nations and cultures) are common issues in contemporary mission, and so missiological perspectives can illumine the OT issues.

Missiologists need to learn that mission did not begin on the Mount of Ascension, and that the Great Commission has its roots deep in the OT Scriptures. That, above all, I hope, is what my book demonstrates.

**And what can OT scholars and missiologists learn from mission practitioners (agencies and individuals), and vice versa?**

That all theology must have a mission relevance, and that all mission practice must be theologically reflected and warranted.

**You mentioned David Bosch's *Transforming Mission* earlier. Your book has been compared in stature to Bosch's. What are the similarities and differences between the two?**

As I mentioned earlier, the lack of real engagement with the OT in *Transforming Mission* was the stimulus that originally led me to want to write the book I eventually did. I think Bosch's book includes some very fine chapters on the NT, and I learned a lot from it. It certainly gave us more than we had at that time. But his book is much more a history of mission thinking

and practice, with its different paradigms through the ages - whereas mine is a biblical theology. Both kinds of reflection are vital parts of missiology as a discipline.

**Some people might be surprised that you spend so much time reflecting on the Old Testament's role in a proper understanding of mission. Why do you do this?**

Partly because it is the larger part of the Bible! Also because the OT was the Bible of Jesus and the Apostle Paul, so their whole concept and practice of mission came from 'The Scriptures'. It is tragic, to me, that the modern church has so neglected the OT, or distorted it into rather weird modern systems of interpretation, that ordinary believers just ignore it, or treat it only as a quarry for 'End-Times' prophecies and the like. I really wanted to bring the OT to life in relation to the core foundations of our Christian world view, and show how every key element in its teaching is part of what we believe and how we live in relation to being the people of God in God's world for God's purposes.

**Do you think the increased awareness in the Church of such 'global' issues as wide-scale poverty and the environment lends itself to a renewed interest in the Old Testament?**

Yes, very much so. Part of the reason why Christians have been slow in responding adequately to these things is the widespread ignorance of the OT.

**How has working on *The Mission of God* helped you to reflect on current trends in global Christianity?**

The growth of the church outside the west is of course a major factor in all mission thinking. It is part of my 'awareness', but I don't think it materially affected my specific biblical reflections - other than to welcome that the fact that world Christianity, with its multi-national, poly-centric, multi-directional dimensions, seems far closer to NT Christianity than the Christendom we inherited.

**Why is it so important that those involved in cross-cultural ministry are steeped in the missional message of the Bible? Also, how have your reflections on the Old Testament shaped your own work?**

What else can prepare them for mission service, or give them adequate mental and spiritual resources for the challenges they face?

My OT studies have only enriched my general teaching around the world, and I suppose given me the motivation and resources to speak about various missional and ethical issues in ways that people often seem to find refreshing or somewhat unusual (because they have either ignored the OT, or handled it in purely allegorical ways).

**Finally, could you tell us a bit about your role with Langham Partnership?**

The Langham Partnership International serves the world wide church, specifically in those parts of the world known as the majority world, where Christians do not have access to resources. The programmes of LPI originated in the vision and ministries of John Stott, and are concerned that the staggering numerical growth of the church overseas should also be growth with depth - particularly through raising the standards of biblical preaching, evangelical theological education, and Christian literature. There are six national supporting movements and three international programmes (Langham Scholars, Langham Literature

and Langham Preaching), each of which has its own full time director and some support staff. My own role as International Director includes co-ordinating this team, doing some teaching and preaching around the world, networking with theological institutions in the majority world, and giving overall leadership and management to the growing movement. Further details are on the website, [www.langhampartnership.org](http://www.langhampartnership.org).

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