



The mission of God by Christopher J.H. Wright

It can be confusing to keep theologians apart if they have the same family name, especially if they are from the same country and the same denomination. In the Reformed tradition, for example, we have two Bavincks and two Schilders. In the contemporary Anglican world we have the phenomenon of two Wrights. Many readers of *Clarion* will be familiar with the name N.T. Wright, the well-known Anglican bishop and New Testament scholar. In this article I want to introduce you to another Wright, an Anglican clergyman as well (though not a bishop), and an Old Testament scholar. His name is Christopher J.H. Wright.¹

Wright is International Director of the Langham Partnership International, a group of ministries founded by John Stott in 1974. Wright is also a leader within the Lausanne movement and delivered one of the main speeches at the Lausanne III conference in Cape Town (2010). He has written several books, including *The Mission of God* (2006) and *The Mission of God's People* (2010). His theological views have been influenced by John Stott but he seems to be cautiously moving away from some of Stott's positions (more about that later).

The book *The Mission of God*² is a massive book of more than five hundred pages. It has become a standard work in the field of biblical theology of mission. It is expected that the book will be a textbook at evangelical seminaries for the next few decades. Since the book is going to influence the thinking of the next generation of ministers and missionaries in the broader evangelical movement, it is important to take note of what Wright is saying. An additional reason to do so is that Wright's theology of mission suffers from important weaknesses. As I hope to demonstrate, it would not be good if Wright's approach was swallowed hook, line, and sinker.

I will attempt to summarize the book, I will mention some positives and discuss a number of key concerns. I need to mention that I have benefited from listening to a review of Wright's book by Dr. Gary Millar at the 2013 Gospel Coalition conference in Orlando, Florida.³ I also found helpful comments in Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert's *What is the Mission of the Church?*⁴

Mission as God's work

Summarizing a densely written book of more than 500 pages is a tall order. I apologize in advance to the reader if this summary is going to be a bit dense as well. I will attempt to highlight only the most important aspects of the book.

First, as the title of the book indicates, Wright emphasizes *that mission work is God's work*. Wright gives the following definition of mission:

"Fundamentally, our mission (if it is biblically informed and validated) means our committed participation as God's people, at God's invitation and command, in God's own mission within the history of God's world for the redemption of God's creation" (p. 22-23).

This definition represents a popular emphasis in current missiological thinking: We should not think of mission work in the first place as the work of the church. We should rather think of mission work as the work of God, and we should keep in mind God is already at work in the world. The church is called to participate in that work. (Of course, the important question will be: What is God believed to be doing in the world?)

One more comment regarding Wright's definition: You will have noted that he formulates a purpose of mission work. The definition says that the purpose of God's mission is "*the redemption of God's creation.*" That is a broad purpose which allows Wright to include socio-political action and environmental care as part and parcel of mission work. (I'm tempted to comment, but let's first complete the summary of Wright's book.)

Second, Wright says that *God's mission is holistic*, in the sense that both spiritual and physical needs are addressed. Per consequence, mission is everything that Christians do to address the world's spiritual and physical needs. This is an important move! Classic Reformed theology would agree that Christians have a task in this world, a task which includes social action and caring for the environment. However, this would not be called mission work. In classic Reformed theology, mission work is defined in terms of the spreading of the gospel for (1) the salvation of individuals and (2) the planting of the church. Wright, following John Stott, takes a broader approach. He thinks of mission work as the church "through the combined engagement of all its members ... applying the redemptive power of the cross of Christ to *all* the effects of sins and evil in the surrounding live, society and environment" (322, italics as in original). In other words, mission can be anything ranging from evangelism to social involvement and protection of the environment. In Wright's opinion, all these aspects are important and we should not say that any one is more important than the other (in this respect he differs from John Stott who would have said that the proclamation of the gospel is the most important part of mission work).

Being a blessing

Third, Wright believes that *mission work is more about being a blessing than about being sent*. He suggests that the Great Commission of Matthew 28 has played too important a role in thinking about mission. In this respect Wright is once again a follower of John Stott who said similar things in his book *Christian Mission in the Modern World*.⁵ Like Stott, Wright warns against overemphasizing the aspect of "sent-ness" in mission. He warns against becoming "obsessed" with the great mission imperatives, such as the Great Commission (61). Instead of understanding mission primarily as being sent into the world, Wright would like to see mission being understood as being a blessing to society. In this respect he considers the calling of Abram (Genesis 12:1-3) to be a key passage. Abram was sent to Canaan and the goal was that the nations would be blessed through his presence and his intercession for them. Wright makes the remarkable suggestion that the calling of Abram in Genesis 12 is more worthy to be called "the Great Commission" than Matthew 28:18-20.

Quote: "It would be entirely appropriate and no bad thing, if we took *this* text as 'the Great Commission.' Certainly it is the biblical foundation on which the text in Matthew is based that is usually elevated to that role" (214, italics as in original).

Fourth, Wright suggests *that some Old Testament events or motifs should play a more important role in our understanding of mission*. One such event is the Exodus, which Wright refers to as "*God's model of redemption.*" This has implications: Rather than seeing forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God as key aspects of redemption, Wright suggests that we should look at the Exodus in order to determine the character of redemption. He argues that the redemption which the Israelites received through the Exodus had political, economic, social, and spiritual dimensions. It was a holistic kind of salvation.

He concludes: "*So although the exodus stands as a unique and unrepeatable event in the history of Old Testament Israel, it also stands as a paradigmatic and highly repeatable model for the way God wishes to act in the world...*" (275).

In other words, God's mission is still the same: He wants to bless people politically, economically, socially, and spiritually. Thus, mission work should focus on all these aspects. Another Old Testament theme which Wright takes to be "*paradigmatic*" is the Year of Jubilee, which he calls "*God's model of restoration*" (300).

Fifth and finally, Wright's book is an effort to prove *that the Bible should be interpreted by using a mission-al hermeneutic*. There is more about mission in the Bible than just a few "mission texts."

The whole Bible should be understood from a missional perspective! After all, Wright argues, God is a missionary God, a God who is on a mission. Therefore, God's Book must be interpreted from a missionary perspective. Wright calls this approach a "*missiological hermeneutic of Scripture*" (26). This does not mean that each and every text in the Bible is saying something about mission. The idea is rather that a missional perspective can function as a kind of a map to help us find our way through the Bible, help us understand where God is going with the world.

Positives

In evaluation, let us begin by noting a number of positives. The best part of *The Mission of God*, in my opinion, is Part 2 which is entitled "The God of Mission." This part contains three good chapters. The first chapter is a defense of biblical monotheism. The second chapter is a defense of Jesus Christ as the unique Saviour of mankind. Wright points out that the Bible really comes with one message in this regard: "*The YHWH-centered monotheism of the Old Testament became the Jesus-centered monotheism of the New Testament*" (126). The third chapter explains how the Bible confronts idolatry in its many forms, whether ancient or modern.

Quote: "Although gods and idols are something in the world, they are *nothing* in comparison to the living God" (187, italics as in original).

Another strength of Wright's book is his explanation of important aspects and institutions of the old covenant, such as the calling of Israel among the nations and the Year of Jubilee. Even though I do not agree with the missiological implications which Wright draws from such passages, one can learn much from his exegetical work. The same applies to his discussion of passages from the psalms and the prophets which speak prophetically about the nations seeing the light, learning the law of God, assembling before his throne (230-243).

Use of Old Testament passages

Having mentioned that Wright's focus on the Old Testament passages is one of the strong aspects of the book, I also need to say that there are significant concerns with how he uses the Old Testament. The first concern is that his *exegesis of Old Testament passages seems to be influenced by his desire to read holistic mission into the text*. In order to illustrate this, let us take another look at what Wright does with Genesis 12:1-3. While everyone agrees that the call of Abram is a pivotal moment in God's plan of redemptive history, there are different interpretations regarding the question what is expected of Abram. To what extent is he expected to be involved in the life of the neighbouring tribes and towns? Is he expected to speak to his neighbours about God? Is he expected to promote justice and peace in Canaan? Or is he expected to live in relative isolation from his neighbours?

Wright argues that Abram is commissioned to mediate God's blessings to the nations. Much of his argument is based on the translation of the phrase "*...and you will be a blessing*." While most translations take this as indicating the result or purpose of Abram's journey to the promised land ("*so that you will be a blessing*"), Wright prefers to take it as a distinct command: "*Be a blessing*." He even suggests that it would be entirely appropriate to take Genesis 12:1-3 as "*the Great Commission*" in the Bible (p. 214).

Eckhard J. Schnabel, in his book *Early Christian Mission* (2004), rejects the suggestion that Abraham was called to actively mediate God's blessing to neighbouring nations.

He interprets Genesis 12:1-3 as follows: "*The blessing for the nations is a promise, not a command. Abraham does not receive an assignment to carry YHWH's blessing to the nations; rather, the nations are promised divine blessing if and when they see Abraham's faith in YHWH and if and when they establish contact with his descendants.*"⁶

This is confirmed in the ensuing chapters of the book of Genesis. Those who are well disposed toward Abraham and his descendants fare well (Melchizedek, Abimelech), while those who oppose him or his descendants are punished.

The promise that Abraham and his descendants will be a blessing to the nations is repeated several times in the book of Genesis (Genesis 18:18; 22:18, 26:4; 28:14). Obviously, it is an important aspect of God's plan of redemption for the world. At the same time, the emphasis is not on the people of Israel actively "spreading the blessings" to the other nations. Rather, the emphasis is that God's people are called to live in covenantal obedience and that this will bring blessing not just to God's own people but also to the entire world. Ultimately, it will be through the great descendant of Abraham, the Lord Jesus Christ, that the nations will be blessed.

A related question is: If Abram was called to "be a blessing" to the nations around him – as Wright suggests – what form was that calling supposed to take practically? Was Abram expected to evangelize his neighbours? Or was he expected to help the poor and fight against injustice? A key passage for Wright in this regard is Genesis 18, Abraham's plea for Sodom, and especially the Lord's words in verse 19: "*I have chosen him that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just, so that the Lord will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.*" Focusing especially on the phrase "*to do what is right and just*" (or, more literally, "to do righteousness and justice"), Wright claims that the Lord expected Abraham "*to do righteousness and justice for the oppressed and against the oppressor*" (367). In the case of Sodom and Gomorrah this meant that the Lord wanted Abraham to be concerned "*about the suffering of the oppressed in the region at the hands of these cities*" (367). The weakness in Wright's argument is that the text does not support what he is trying to prove. The text says that Abraham was expected to teach *his children and his household* to do righteousness and justice. No reference is made to teaching the *nations*.

Moreover, Wright's suggestion that Abraham was concerned about the suffering of the oppressed in the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah is not supported by the evidence in Genesis 18 and 19. The evil that is singled out in those chapters is not social injustice but rather moral decline and perversion, evidenced by the fact that the men of the city are addicted to sodomy. In the New Testament we read that Abram's nephew Lot, apparently the only righteous man in the city, was distressed because of "*the filthy lives of lawless men*" in Sodom (2 Peter 2:7).

In conclusion, Wright's explanation of Genesis 12:1-3 illustrates the problem that he is trying to find a holistic view of mission in the Old Testament.

New Testament evidence lacking

A second concern regarding Wright's use of the Old Testament is that *he does not sufficiently ask the question whether implications drawn from the Old Testament are supported by evidence from the New Testament*. For example, when Wright says that the Exodus and the Jubilee are paradigmatic and highly repeatable models for the way God wishes to act in the world (275, 300), he fails to entertain the question whether such claims are actually being backed up by the New Testament. Take the Jubilee: Does the New Testament really indicate that the Jubilee is a paradigmatic and repeatable model for mission work in the world today? Wright would have a hard time to convince his readers that this is the case. But he does not even raise the question.

Something similar could be said about the Exodus. Wright claims that "*the rest of the Bible clearly takes it as paradigmatic*" (275) but he does not offer any biblical proof for this statement. The same applies to the claim made in the next paragraph:

"The inevitable outcome surely is that *exodus-shaped redemption demands exodus-shaped mission*" (275, italics as in original).

In other words: Wright is saying that just like the Exodus had political, economic, social, and spiritual dimensions, so our redemption in Christ has political, economic, social, and spiritual dimensions. It sounds powerful. Wright says it is "*inevitable*." But does the New Testament actually support this conclusion? The question comes up what Wright does with passages such as Colossians 1:14 and Ephesians 1:7 where redemption in Christ is described in terms of forgiveness of sins.⁷ One would have expected Wright to discuss such passages and then attempt to prove that even though the apostle mentions forgiveness of sins, the New Testament actually

supports a broader understanding of redemption. Now that Wright fails to do so, it reinforces the impression that the "exodus-shaped" understanding of mission which Wright promotes does not flow from biblical passages but rather from his own desire to understand mission that way.

A key aspect of Wright's book is the fact that he gives the *Old Testament* a significant place in building a *biblical* theology of mission. This is praiseworthy as such. It is a welcome correction to the approach that many authors follow (which may be summarized as: Skim through the Old Testament and move on to the New Testament as quickly as possible). At the same time, the approach followed by Wright results in the book having the feel of an *Old Testament* theology of mission, rather than a *biblical* theology of mission. There are many references to the New Testament in the book but there is no significant discussion of mission in the gospels, in Acts, or in the letters of Paul.

This would perhaps be acceptable if nothing more was at stake than that the Old Testament gets more attention in Wright's book than in most other books on mission. But something more serious is happening: because Wright is so convinced of the abiding value of Old Testament motifs such as the Exodus and the Jubilee, he does not take into account that there is significant discontinuity between the old and the new covenant. Indeed, God delivered his people socially and economically by liberating them politically from slavery in Egypt and bringing them into their own land. But the situation of the new covenant, at least in its present form, is different. For Christian believers redemption means in the first place forgiveness of sins, reconciliation with God, and being gathered into the church as the body of Christ. And although the effects of this spill over into other aspects of the Christian life, it does not follow that Christians are always delivered from political bondage or economic hardship. One could even argue that the Christian life can, to some extent, be compared to the life of God's people in Egypt. Christians are "*aliens and strangers in the world*" (1 Peter 2:11-12).

Eschatology

It is not just the distinction between the old and the new covenant that is not recognized sufficiently. The same happens to the distinction between the present age and the future age when God will make all things new. Biblical promises regarding the last judgment (Revelation 20:11-15) and a new heaven and a new earth (Revelation 21) do not get the attention they deserve. There is not a strong sense in the book that in this era we have only a foretaste of the fullness of blessings which awaits us on the new earth. Sure, Wright will admit that we do not yet see the completion of that redemptive work in present history. But he will also make statements such as:

"The restoration of ecological harmony does lie within the possibilities of a redeemed human history" (410).

The suggestion is that we may have great expectations about the possibility of salvation and restoration in the present era. When Wright claims that mission should focus on social, political, and environmental aspects, one almost gets the impression that God is believed to be gradually building and establishing the fullness of his kingdom on earth, and that the church is called to participate in the building process. It is a popular notion today, especially in liberal-ecumenical theology, but it is not biblical.

Weak view of sin and judgment

In this connection I need to add that Wright's book suffers from a weak view of sin and judgment. The fact that God will bring terrible vengeance upon the wicked (Revelation 21:8) does not play a meaningful role in Wright's eschatology. That people need to be rescued from the coming wrath (1 Thessalonians 1:10) is not part of his rationale for mission work. That there is a place called Hell is not even mentioned in the book (unless I missed it; at any rate, there is no reference to hell in the book's Scripture Index).

The same weakness emerges when Wright describes the results of the Fall. He does not mention our guilt before God or our need to be reconciled with God. Instead, he focuses on "*the mess*" we see all around us:

"Through rebellion and disobedience against our Creator God, we have generated the mess that we now see around us at every level of our lives, relationship and environment" (55).

Similarly, when he describes salvation, he does not mention reconciliation with God. Instead, he says:

"The solution has been initiated by God through his choice and creation of a people, Israel, through whom God intends eventually to bring blessing to all nations of the earth and ultimately to renew the whole creation" (55).

I suspect that Wright, if we asked him, would agree that forgiveness of sin is an important aspect of salvation. But it does not receive emphasis in his book. This is unfortunate. Changes in theology usually occur incrementally. In the case of Wright, the emphasis has shifted away from an emphasis on reconciliation with God to an emphasis on the restoration of creation. This is not a good development.

Social action and evangelism

This brings us to another important aspect of Wright's book: his view of the relationship between social action and evangelism. His position can be summarized in two points. First, *everything* is part of mission, whether it is preaching the gospel or helping the poor, caring for AIDS patients or protecting the environment. Second, Wright contends that it is wrong to say that evangelism should have *priority* over social action in the church's mission agenda. He prefers to say that evangelism has *ultimacy*.

Quote: "We can enter the circle of missional response at any point on the circle of human need. But *ultimately* we must not rest content until we have included within our own missional response the wholeness of God's missional response to the human predicament" (319).

What is Wright saying here is that it does not matter where we start, whether it is with evangelism or with social action, as long as *ultimately* we get to the point that we tell people the good news of Christ.

It should be noted that this represents a shift in thinking within the Lausanne movement. For many years the dominant position was that evangelism and social action are both important but that evangelism is *primary* in the mission of the church.⁸ This was also the position defended by John Stott.⁹ Now Wright promotes what he calls "*a different way of thinking about mission*" (317): We should understand mission holistically, and all aspects are equally important, whether it is social action or evangelism or action for environment.

Reflecting on this, I'm reminded of John Stott's words: "*Christians should feel an acute pain of conscience and compassion when human beings are oppressed or neglected in any way ... But is anything so destructive of human dignity as alienation from God through ignorance or rejection of the gospel? And how can we seriously maintain that political and economic liberation is just as important as eternal salvation?*"¹⁰

The Apostle Paul's main concern about his own people, the Jews, was not that they were under political oppression but that they were cut off from Christ (Romans 9:1-3). His main desire for them was not that they would regain political independence but that they might be reconciled to God and be saved (Romans 10:1). Paul understood his own mandate as being a "*ministry of reconciliation, that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them*" (2 Corinthians 5:18-19).

It is a real weakness in Wright's book that he does not deal with these passages in Paul's letters, and that he also ignores other New Testament passages that describe the character of the missionary mandate, such as the Lord's words to the apostles (Acts 1:7-8) or Paul's words to Timothy (2 Timothy 4:1-5). Wright appears to be very concerned that people will be too narrow in their understanding of the church's missionary mandate (as in: focusing only on the salvation of the individual). Unfortunately, his own understanding of the missionary mandate is too broad and will inevitably lead to confusion regarding the priorities. Evangelism and church planting will be

replaced by activities such as digging water wells in Africa and helping refugees settle here in North America. Nothing wrong with such activities! But if they take the place of evangelism and church planting in the church's vision for mission work, something is seriously amiss.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Wright's *The Mission of God* is an interesting and thought-provoking book with good sections on biblical monotheism, the uniqueness of Christ, and other important issues. The outstanding feature of the book is the attempt to make the Old Testament relevant for developing a biblical theology of mission. Unfortunately, the book suffers from a strong tendency to use aspects from the Old Testament in order to promote a holistic view of mission in which social action and evangelism are seen as equally important. The book itself illustrates that core aspects of mission such as the preaching of the gospel for forgiveness of sins are pushed aside to make room for socio-political action, medical health care, and protection of the environment. The book also suffers from a weak eschatology: What the Bible presents as belonging to the future age (after the return of Christ) is drawn into the present age.

If this book is going to shape the understanding of mission work of the next generation of mission workers in the evangelical world, I'm afraid we are going to see a lot less preaching of the gospel. It may not be Wright's intention, but his book opens the door to socio-political activism receiving more attention than the preaching of the gospel and the planting of the church.

There is a well-known saying in mission circles that is attributed to Bishop Stephen Neill: "If everything is mission, nothing is mission." Wright hates that quip and refers to it as an "*old knock-down line*."¹¹ If only he had more seriously considered the danger it points to!

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¹ Incidentally, both Wrights will be speaking at a conference on "A Missional Reading of Scripture," organized by Calvin Theological Seminary (Grand Rapids) in November 2013. See <http://calvin.seminary.edu/academics/continuing-education/missional-reading/>

² Christopher J.H. Wright *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative*. IVP, 2006.

³ Workshop at The Gospel Coalition, Orlando, April 7, 2013 by Dr. Gary Millar, entitled: "A Biblical Theology of Mission: An Evaluation of Chris Wright"

⁴ Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church? Making sense of social justice, shalom, and the Great Commission*. Crossway, 2011.

⁵ John R. W. Stott, *Christian mission in the modern world*. (London: Falcon, 1975), 29.

⁶ Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, Volume 1 (IVP, 2004), 63.

⁷ For this point I am indebted to Bobby Jamieson's excellent review of Wright's subsequent book *The Mission of God's People* at www.9marks.org.

⁸ Lausanne Covenant, 1974, paragraph 6 *The Church and Evangelism*.

⁹ See John Stott, *Christian mission in the modern world* (Falcon, 1975), 35-36.

¹⁰ John Stott, *Christian mission*, 35

¹¹ Wright, *The Mission of God's People*. (Zondervan, 2010), 25-26.