

THE MISSION OF GOD

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## THE MISSION OF GOD

*Missional.*

It is the buzzword of ministry right now.

*Are you on mission?*

Like most trends in Christian culture and ministry, there exists a great deal of hype and mania around mission right now.

*What is your mission statement?*

Could all this fanfare be an echo of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century business and organizational renewal? After all, it is not uncommon for the church to lag 20+ years behind contemporary events and cultural shifts. Or is there something deeper, more significant afoot?

With Christopher Wright's magisterial *The Mission of God* as the guide and tutor, this paper will seek to understand and evaluate the theological moorings for the missional movement. It will first establish a definition helpful for this odyssey. Then it will survey what Wright presents as the mission of God. Finally it will discuss the implications of the mission of God on biblical hermeneutics and Christian living today.

### **Defining Terms**

Rightfully, Wright begins by defining terms, starting with *missions*. In the popular sense, it is a term that has become narrow and lopsided. The word brings to mind the lone evangelist or couple travelling to far away lands in order to preach the gospel and win souls. Wright redefines it, saying, "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."<sup>1</sup> A thoroughly theocentric definition, Wright's point is that missions is more than what Western Christianity commonly envisions as the calling of a chosen few. Preeminently, God is at work, and missions is joining with Him, whether domestic or abroad, down the street or right next door.

### *Missio Dei*

If we are to participate in God's work, then the question becomes: what is God at work doing? What is the *missio Dei*? If there were a simple answer, it would be that God is on a mission to make Himself known as *the* God.<sup>2</sup> By choice or by force, when creation is confronted with that reality, then God is worshipped and glorified (cf. Isa 45:23, Gal 2:9-11).

Wright wrote, "It is something of a truism that in the Bible God is known through what God does and says. So the combination of the mighty acts of God and the words through which those acts were anticipated, explained and celebrated form the twin core of so much of the Old Testament literature."<sup>3</sup> Through Israel, God made known His status as "creator," "owner," "ruler," "judge," "reveler," "lover," "savior," "leader," and "reconciler."<sup>4</sup> While this revelation came primarily to Israel, it was not exclusively theirs. In fact, Israel would be an object lesson to the nations around her (cf. 1 Kings 9:3-9). The nations would also discover this revelation the hard way, the way of pain and suffering, the way of judgment (cf. Exod 7:1-5; Isa 19:22).

Through Jesus Christ, God again sought to make Himself know. "If you knew me, you would know my Father also," Jesus said (John 8:19b, ESV). Wright made the case that it was no accident for Jesus to take the title of God and take the actions of God. Only one person

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 22-3.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 104.

would be recognized as “the Lord” in first century Judaism, and that was YHWH.<sup>5</sup> Yet Paul, the Pharisaic Jew, assigned that title repeatedly to Jesus. Moreover, he applies to Jesus passages that originally described YHWH (cf. Isa 45:21-24; Phil 2:10-11). As for actions, Wright pointed to four roles unique to YHWH that are ascribed to Christ: creator (1 Cor 8:6), ruler (1 Cor 15:24-28; Eph 1:20-23), judge (Rom 14:9-12), and redeemer (Rev 7:10).<sup>6</sup>

Such a heavy emphasis on making Himself known as the God would explain the prevailing rhetoric and passion against idolatry in the scriptures. “You shall have no other gods before me” (Deut 5:7, ESV). “Whoever sacrifices to any god, other than the Lord alone, shall be devoted to destruction” (Exod 22:20, ESV). “Do not go after other gods to serve and worship them, or provoke me to anger with the work of your hands. Then I will do you no harm” (Jer 25:6, ESV). Idolatry is in direct conflict with the *missio Dei* because something or someone that is not *the* God is being ascribed *the* God’s divinity, supremacy, and glory. “When human beings attribute to other gods gifts, powers or functions that belong to the one living God, then God is deprived of the honor that is due his name alone,” said Wright.<sup>7</sup>

### **A Missional Hermeneutic**

If the *missio Dei* is to make Himself known as *the* God, then what impact does that have on how we read the scriptures? Wright makes the analogy of a hermeneutic to a map. The question he poses is: how helpful is the map? Does it make the most sense of the data or does it distort or misrepresent the terrain? Wright observed:

No framework can give account of every detail, just as no map can represent every tiny feature of a landscape. But like a map, a hermeneutical framework can provide a way of seeing the whole terrain, a way of navigating one’s way through it, a way of observing what is most significant, a way of approaching the task of actually encountering the

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 109-21.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 171-2.

reality itself (just as a map tells you what to expect when you are actually in the terrain it portrays).<sup>8</sup>

A missional hermeneutic then is a framework based on the notion that the purpose of the Bible, its historical events, its poetry and its prophecy, its law and its covenants, is to reveal God as *the* God. Moreover, it seeks to understand and evaluate passages in relation to how it reveals God. “It does not claim to explain every feature of the vast terrain of the Bible, nor to foreclose in advance the exegesis of any specific text,” expressed Wright in a caveat, but it enables the reader to contextualize the passage and assess its contribution and significance to the main purpose, God’s self-revelation.<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, Wright directed his readers’ attention to six areas that are paradigmatic for understanding God as *the* God: being chosen for blessing, the selection of Israel, the redemption of Israel, the Jubilee, the covenants, and the ethics of Israel’s law. Being chosen to bless is instrumental to the missional paradigm. Genesis 12:1-3 marked a decisive move in the course of redemptive history. God bound himself to Abraham for the purpose of blessing all nations.<sup>10</sup> In Genesis 1, blessing began with the good life, life as it should be in relation to God and creation, but after Genesis 3, nothing is as it was. To experience blessing now will require redemption and restoration. Genesis 12, then, demarcates how God intends to bring about that blessing, that redemption, that restoration.

For “God so loved the world that he chose Abraham and called Israel.”<sup>11</sup> Selecting Israel must be seen then in the light of a greater cause. Israel was not chosen for her beauty or might, nor for her righteous or moral superiority (Deut 7:7; Ezek 16:1-14). She was chosen because she was pathetic and helpless. God chose her so that there would be no confusion, no competition, as to who was the cause of her success. He chose her so that the impact of his

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 263.

presence and law would be all the more pronounced to the nations. Wright emphasized that this election was far from an ends in and of itself.<sup>12</sup> God chose Israel to serve a priest to the nations (Exod 19:5-6).

Next, the exodus is God's first act in making Himself known to the Israel and the nations. It depicts "the primary model of God's idea of redemption of Israel, not just of in the Old Testament but even in the New, where it is used as one of the keys to understanding the meaning of the cross of Christ."<sup>13</sup> The exodus brought about freedom from the sin of Egypt's oppression—economic exploitation, political discrimination, and social violence—as well as the freedom to know YHWH, to worship Him, to serve Him.<sup>14</sup>

Similar to the exodus, the year of Jubilee, then, becomes the picture for restoration. Wright noted that the jubilee primarily protected the family's economic resources.<sup>15</sup> In an economy largely driven by what one could produce on or from the land, returning the land to its rightful owner would reset the economic system and prevent generation after generation from the bonds of debt and poverty. Moreover, the reset would preserve the equitable distribution of income-generating land which was established when the land was first conquered.<sup>16</sup> The Jubilee also had theological implications. The land was supremely God's, and Israel merely enjoyed it as a gift. "For the Israelite, living with his family on his allotted share of YHWH's land, the land itself was the proof of his membership of God's people and the focus of his practical response to God's grace."<sup>17</sup> In other words, the Jubilee holistically restored families to full participation in the life and worship that God intended.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 263.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 265

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 268-9.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 291.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 292.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 292.

The covenants are the mile markers for the mission of God. The covenants revealed where God where was going—how He was going to make Himself known—and how He would get there—how he would make good on His promises. The Noahic covenant established that God was concerned for the earth and its preservation as a whole, even though it was cursed.<sup>18</sup> The Abrahamic covenant laid the foundation for how God intended to bless the nations, making Himself known to them.<sup>19</sup> The Mosaic covenant established God’s priesthood, the terms and conditions of His presence, and the future for Israel.<sup>20</sup> The Davidic covenant set the stage for the universal rule of YHWH over all the nations through a future king.<sup>21</sup> The New Covenant reaffirmed that God had not given up on making Himself known as the God because a day would come where the failures of man in the other covenants would be permanently overcome.<sup>22</sup> Wright remarked that it was “the trademark of YHWH” in that this covenant was yet another act “of grace beyond belief and certainly beyond deserving.”<sup>23</sup>

Lastly, the biblical ethics are an integral part to the *missio Dei*. How God’s people act is a living witness to YHWH. Their faithfulness and obedience speak to veracity of God’s claims and commitments. If God’s instructions are discarded as meaningless, then God must be toothless, inconsequential, irrelevant. Knowing God is to walk in His ways. Righteousness and justice, steadfast love, and faithfulness characterize his ways. An absence of righteousness, justice, steadfast love, or faithfulness is therefore a confession either of not knowing God or of rebellion against Him—neither is compatible with the *missio Dei*. “The people of God in both

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 326.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 327.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 329.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 345-6.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 350.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 350.

testaments are called to be a light to the nations. But there can be no light to the nations that is not shining already in transformed lives of a holy people.”<sup>24</sup>

### **Missions Today**

Being missional, being on mission, for today’s Christian should mean that he or she is participating in what God is actively doing, namely making Himself known as *the* God. That outworking transpires not merely with the proclamation of Jesus Christ crucified and resurrected—though that is the ultimate goal. Rather it is acting in light of what God has revealed that He is concerned with, such as the orphan, the widow, and the alien. It is the pursuit of redemption and restoration of humanity and creation. It is soft hearts that love God and love their neighbors.

Being missional is not about trying to usher in the Kingdom of God. Only Christ’s return will bring about the fullness of redemption and restoration. A Christ-less utopia is lie birthed from the mouth of the serpent, a lie that woos the corruption of our hearts. Rather being missional is speaking and acting prophetically, confronting the broken and fallen state of this world and then pointing to the better way and God who authored it. It is acting out the values of the God for the world to see and come to know the true God. Wright went further to say that evangelism only is void of impact “unless Christians are also taught the radical demands of discipleship to the Prince of peace, are seeking first the kingdom of God and his justice, and understand the wholeness of what the Bible so emphatically shows to be God’s mission for his people.”<sup>25</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Fundamentally, being missional is about being involved with God is doing and what God cares about. The mission of God is to make Himself known to the world as the supreme and

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 358.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 321.

only God. He has set out to accomplish this by speaking and acting in history, superlatively through Israel and Christ. Hence to read the Bible requires viewing it through the lens of the *missio Dei* and examining particularly Israel's election, the exodus, the jubilee, the covenants, and biblical ethics with that same filter. For Christians today, being missional cannot be just concern for humanitarian causes or just preaching Jesus. It needs to be the integration of involvement in the redemption and restoration of humanity and creation as a part of the proclamation of the Gospel.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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