

Missional Narrative and Missional Hermeneutic for the 21st Century

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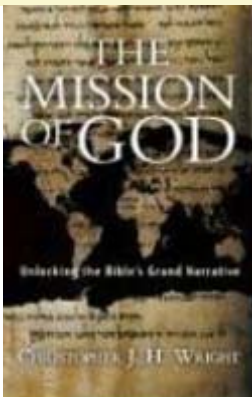
Published in “Featured Article” of www.GlobalMissiology.org January 2009

Here is a list of theological and missiological insights from reading J. H. Wright’s 535 pages work entitled: [The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative](#) (Baker) for this book is a key publication for missional narrative and missional hermeneutic for the 21st Century:

- We ask, “Where does God fit into the story of my life?” when the real question is where does my little life fit into the great story of God’s mission.
- We want to be driven by a purpose that has been tailored just right for our own individual lives (which is of course infinitely preferable to living aimlessly), when we should be seeing the purpose of all life, including our own, wrapped up in the great mission of God for the whole of creation.
- We talk about the problems of “applying the Bible to our life,” which often means modifying the Bible somewhat adjectivally to fit into the assumed “reality” of the life we live “in the real world.” What would it mean to apply our lives to the Bible instead, assuming *the Bible* to be the reality – the real story – to which *we* are called to conform ourselves?
- We wrestle with the question of how we can “make the gospel relevant to the world” (again at least that is clearly preferable to treating it as irrelevant). But in *this* Story, God is about the business of transforming the world to fit the shape of the gospel.
- We wonder whether and how the care of creation, for example, might fit into *our* concept and practice of mission, when *this* Story challenges us to ask whether our lives, lived on God’s earth and under God’s gaze, are aligned with, or horrendously

misaligned with, God's mission that stretches from creation to cosmic transformation and the arrival of a new heaven and new earth.

- We argue about what can legitimately be included in the mission God expects from the church, when we should ask what kind of church God expects for his mission in all its comprehensive fullness.
- I may wonder what kind of mission God has for *me*, when I should ask what kind of me God wants for *his* mission. (533-534)



Wright is the director of international ministries for the Langham Partnership International. He formerly taught Old Testament, and served as principal of All Nations College in Ware, England. His expertise in Old Testament studies is part of what makes this such a unique and transforming study of missions.

Wright begins the book with an answer to a simple question:

What is our mission in the World?

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 creation. (22-23)

After briefly reviewing the relationship between hermeneutics and mission in the past , Wright follows the above question with a more profound question:

What is God's mission in the world?

Wright endeavors to answer this second question by declaring his project for his book:

“What we have to offer, I contend, is a missional hermeneutic of the Bible. The Bible got there before postmodernity was dreamed of – the Bible which glories in *diversity* and celebrates multiple human *cultures*, the Bible which builds its most elevated theological claims on utterly *particular* and sometimes very *local* events, the Bible which sees everything in *relational*, not abstract, terms, and the Bible which does the bulk of its work through the medium of *stories*.” (47)

Most studies of missions begin with New Testament passages like the Great Commission and investigate what it means to take the gospel to all nations. The Old Testament is barely a footnote in these studies. What Wright masterfully does is show us how the Bible unfolds God's mission to us from Chapter 1 of Genesis. He helps recover the importance of the biblical narrative in the first eleven chapters of Genesis. For instance, Chapter 11 of Genesis tells us the story of the Tower of Babel:

Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth." Genesis 11:4 (NRSV)

The people sought renown. In defiance of God, they refused to fill the earth and united against Him as one. God confused and scattered the people, the tower project ended and people were scattered across the earth.

But then at the beginning of Genesis 12 calls out for Himself a people with these words:

1 Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.

2 I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.

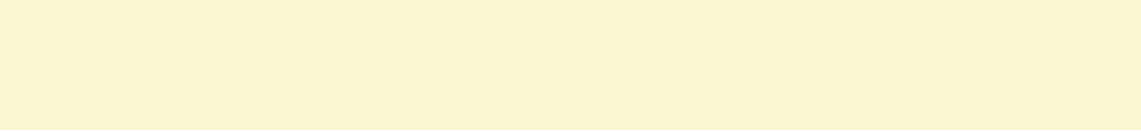
3 I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." Genesis 12:1-3 (NRSV)

It is a reversal of Babel. God will establish a great nation and all the people of the earth will be blessed; they will be "gathered" to God, not scattered.

Wright goes on through the course of the book to show how God had called out for himself a particular people in a particular place. He called them out to be his instrument for gathering all people to himself. If the land was the stage and the people were the actors, then the nations of the world were the audience to witness God's relationship with his people. While the Israelites tended to pervert their selection into haughty pride they soon learned that being God's people meant experiencing his blessing when they loved and worshiped and Him, and the withdrawal of that blessing when they refused. That was part of the witness God gave to the nations.

The New Testament expands how "the people of God" are understood and they are no longer confined to a place and a temple. They are the living temple. Apostles are sent out to gather the nations in and reveal God for who He is.

It is Wright's detailed investigation of passage after passage that truly makes the missional narrative come alive. Wright concludes the book by describing the transformative impact a missional hermeneutic has on those who adopt it. The book really is a wonder travelogue through the narrative God has given us in the Bible. It accomplishes its "mission" to give a missional hermeneutic.



(Editor's note: Paul's personal notes on [The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative](#) by Christopher J. H. Wright are informative to the theme of GM January 2009 as edited by Enoch Wan)