

## A Missional Hermeneutic

### What is missional?

What is a missional church? *Treasure in Clay Jars* puts it well when it says, “Missional churches see themselves not so much sending as being sent” (Barrett 2004, x). Churches used to have a part of their overall life they called “missions.” It was the *part* of the church’s life where they sent people out to try to see souls “saved.” And, indeed, it was not about sending people across the street or even to the next town. Missions was about sending people overseas, to evangelize those in far away lands.

The missional shift that has taken place this last decade is not just the realization that the person *next door* might not believe in Christ.<sup>1</sup> It is a huge step back to see the big picture—God’s big picture. It does not ask, “What mission do I/we need to send *others* on?” It is much bigger than that. It is not even just, “What is *my/our* mission?” It is much bigger than that. It is not even as big as “What is *the Church’s* mission?”

Missional thinking is thinking that steps way back for the biggest picture of all—at least the biggest picture we finite humans can grasp. Missional thinking asks, “What sort of mission is God on in the world?” What is God’s plan not just for me, not just for us, not just for the Church, but for the entirety of the universe? Why did God create the world and where is it all headed? The “mission of God” is about the story of God’s walk with the creation from beginning to end, and not just about the salvation of us humans, but God’s redemption of the world as well.

### The Inevitability of a Hermeneutic

A key reading on this shift to missional thinking is Christopher J. H. Wright’s *The Mission of God* (2006). One of Wright’s main purposes is to show that “the mission of God provides a fruitful hermeneutical framework within which to read the whole Bible” (p. 26). A “hermeneutic” is a way of interpreting something. Everyone has one whether they realize it or not. Some of the most dangerous Bible readers are those who do not know they have one, the ones who assume they just read the Bible and do what it says.

The person who starts to read the books of the Bible on their original terms soon runs into some interesting issues he or she may not have anticipated. For example, most of us who are Christians read and value the Bible because we believe it to be God’s word, God’s word to us today. We eagerly read the Bible to hear God’s living voice, giving us the answers to our life’s questions. This expectation is entirely appropriate for us as Christians. At the same time, this drive to listen to the Bible and to hear what it has to say may lead us directly into a conundrum. Say we are reading Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. We notice that someone named Paul is writing it. Perhaps we think for a moment. Now who was this Paul and when did he live? The answer to the question is not particularly controversial. He lived some two thousand years ago. So God is speaking to me through the words of a man who has been dead for some time now.

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<sup>1</sup> None of this talk of shifts is to say that these things were unknown in previous generations. Indeed, these “momentous” shifts are often where the quiet, holy folk in the pew have been all along as over a lifetime they watch a string of “new things” flow through their churches.

But wait. This letter does not say it was written to me. Indeed, it quite plainly says it was written to a group of people who lived in a place called Corinth. And I have assumed it is a letter. This would seem a fairly good suggestion, since this Paul seems to be responding to a letter himself (1 Cor. 7:1). Again, where was this Corinth place? The answer to the question is not particularly controversial. It was a fairly large ancient city in Greece, situated in the Mediterranean Sea.

The more I pursue the original location of this letter in time and space, the more I may begin to feel some distance between myself and this ancient letter. I will discover that the meaning of actions in one culture may very easily differ from the meaning of actions in another. When Paul wrote the ancient Corinthians, Romans, and Thessalonians with behavioral instructions, the meaning of those actions surely had everything to do with those contexts. The result is that if I were to mimic the actions Paul was commanding, the *meaning* of what I was doing might very well not be the same as the meaning those very same actions had back then.

An amusing example of this phenomenon is the old Levitical instruction not to boil the kid in the milk of the mother goat (Exod. 34:26; Deut. 14:21). Even to this day in Israel, you cannot eat milk and meat in the same meal or serve it under the same roof because of the longstanding Jewish application of this verse. The reason for the original prohibition is not entirely clear, although it is often suggested that it had something to do with the religion of the Canaanites who surrounded Israel. What it was *not* likely about was some arbitrary and inexplicable desire on God's part to keep a person from drinking milk with eggs at breakfast.

Whenever we have this sort of puzzled reaction to the Bible, we are very likely reading stories or instruction whose most direct meaning largely connected strongly to its ancient context. What? A woman should have authority on her head because of the angels (1 Cor. 11:10)? What does *that* mean? What? Jacob put speckled rods in front of sheep having sex so they would have spotted offspring (Gen. 30:37-43)? What does *that* mean? What? Women will be saved from the transgression of Eve through childbearing if they live in continued faith, love, and holiness (1 Tim. 2:15)? What does *that* mean?

Many Christian readers do not pursue a contextual reading of the Bible far enough to feel the kind of distance we are talking about. We have a way of reading the Bible as a single story with a single plot, a "hermeneutic" that goes back to Bible times. God created the world good, but the first human Adam disobeyed God and set the world at odds with God in sin. But God set to work at reconciling the world, first by calling Abraham, who became a model of faith. Then he called Israel, Abraham's descendants, with the goal of ultimately bringing salvation to the whole world through them.

Then God came to earth in person as Jesus, a child of Israel. He died on the cross to make cosmic reconciliation possible. God raised him from the dead and, in time, he will return to earth to redeem the creation fully and to raise the dead to life, some to eternal joy and others to eternal condemnation. And thus we read the Bible as a single story with an overall plot that binds all the individual pieces together.

Something like the above two paragraphs is indeed the Christian way to read the Bible, although no doubt different Christian groups and individuals would write the two paragraphs slightly differently. The myriad variety of Christian churches each have their own spins and emphases, even though the cast of characters and basic storyline remains the same. One of the things that

distinguishes one Protestant group from another is the specific “glue” used to connect the story pieces together.

But for some, the deeper exploration of reading the books of the Bible on their own terms begins to pull against this unified story. Indeed, in the past some seminarians have found their study of the Bible in context cause it to lose some of its living quality for them—a living quality that ironically was one of the reasons they went to seminary in the first place. For example, Adam plays a very important part in the Christian story. But when a person reads the Old Testament on its own terms, Adam plays almost no role at all. He is mentioned in the second and third chapters of Genesis, and thereafter is not mentioned again. The role of Adam in the Christian story does not come from his role *on the Old Testament's own intrinsic terms*.

The virgin birth is similar in the Christian reading of the New Testament. It appears in Matthew 1 and Luke 2, but then plays no role at all in the rest of the New Testament, nor even in the rest of Matthew and Luke. The significance of the virgin birth in the Christian story thus does not come from its role *on the New Testament's own terms* but from the way we as Christians “glue” the parts of the Bible together.

Learning to read the books of the Bible in context is not something to try to avoid, but there is a good chance that it is a somewhat different way of reading the Bible than how you have been reading it. We have a tendency to bring the words of the Bible into our world without realizing it (the world “in front of” the text), rather than us getting into its world (the worlds within and behind the text). The books of the Bible did not have a single historical, social, and situational context. They were written to address countless times and places in three languages over about a thousand year period. The books of the Old Testament addressed varied contexts the Ancient Near East in the millennium before Christ. The books of the New Testament addressed varied contexts in the Mediterranean world in the century after Christ.

It is sometimes surprising to realize how differently these varied people thought than we do, indeed how differently they thought than each other. Reading in context is often like an intercultural experience, like the person who has been immersed for a year in a quite different culture. The more we read these books in context, the more “particular” their meaning can seem to become and, thus, the less uniform and directly applicable.

Yet the Bible is God’s word *for* us too and He frequently speaks directly *to* us through these words as well. How can we find a way both to hear God’s word to us in the words while recognizing the meanings they had when they were first God’s word to a multitude of ancients?

The way forward is neither to deny the insights of reading in context nor to consider the unity of Scripture no longer viable. A way forward is potentially two-fold. A first way has long been recognized by those who managed to keep their faith without running away from the genuine insights of a historical approach to the Bible. For example, Oscar Cullmann (1962) and others read the Bible in terms of “salvation history,” where the story of salvation is not only a story within the Bible, a *literary* story, but also the story of God in history outside the Bible—the *historical* story which includes the actual writing of the books of the Bible. We are prone to confuse these two ways of reading the biblical texts when we are first learning how to read the Bible in context.

Thus God’s story is not merely Adam to Abraham to Moses, *in* Genesis and Exodus. But God inspired *the writing* of Genesis and Exodus as moments in the history of salvation. It is the

paradigm shift that takes place when one begins to see how to read the books of the Bible in context. You see the books of the Bible themselves as key events in the story even more so than the characters and statements *in* those books. The books of the Bible thus become the story of God moving humanity forward toward a better understanding of Him in history, progressively, making the message take on flesh.

The reader who cannot yet read the Bible in context goes through the books of the New Testament in their literary order—Matthew, Mark, Luke, John. This person has a tendency to think the gospels were written first because they are about Jesus. Paul’s books are taken in the order they appear in the New Testament.

The contextual reader sees God walking with the early church through a series of revelatory events. Paul’s writings were written first. 1 Thessalonians and 1 Corinthians are early. But we see God walking with Paul into Philippians and Romans, whose teaching seems somehow to reflect a minister nearing the end of a decades-long ministry. The gospels were some of the latest writings of the New Testament, especially John. And they reflect a whole generation or two’s reflection on Jesus, his teaching, his ministry. They are inspired interpretations of Jesus, not videotapes of exactly what you would have seen if you had followed Jesus around with a video camera.

The writing of each of these books was a moment in a flow of revelation that has surely been underway since the creation. The same is true of the Old Testament. Abraham probably understood so little of what we understand that we would scarcely recognize him if we were to meet him. Moses understood a little more, and Isaiah still more. But we may, with 2000 years of God walking with the Church, understand things about the Trinity that the apostle Paul would not have clearly seen. Here is the contextual way to see the unity of the books of the Bible as inspired—inspired within the story of salvation’s history.

More recently, we have become more and more aware of how flexible the meaning of words can be. This flexibility or “polyvalence,” as it is often termed, not only explains why we find so many different interpretations of the Bible, but also how the Holy Spirit can and does speak directly to so many different people in so many different times and places.

It also opens possibilities for us to read the Bible as a single book once again, just as Christians did before the rise of historical-cultural interpretation. Before the modern era forced us to read the Bible in context—or pushed many to run away from it—Christians read the Bible as a single story from creation to final restoration. They read the text of the Bible as a single piece of inspired literature with a single meaning. They placed themselves within that single story they saw in the Bible. Ironically, it was in part the Protestant Reformation’s rejection of non-literal interpretation that most set the Western world on a trajectory away from such a unified reading. A unified reading of this sort requires us to de-emphasize the original contexts of each book in deference to a unified perspective *we* inevitably have to provide as readers.

Paul does not tell us how his “justification by faith” fits with James’ “justification by works,” nor does James tell us. *We* are forced to glue them together as believers and readers. Most of the biblical writings were originally separate documents that did not mention or engage each other. So the “gluing” of them together is a function of us as readers looking on. A process of unifying is required to fit the teaching of the books together because they do not tell us how to do it. For good or ill, it is inevitably something we *have* to do. Because most of us do this sort of integration without thinking about it, it can be hard to see that we are gluing these texts together.

It is the person who reads each text on its own terms that can distinguish between what these texts actually said and the legitimate Christian glue he or she uses to connect them together.

And that is okay. Indeed, it is more than okay. It is the way Christians since before the New Testament have, by the Holy Spirit, been able to see the Bible as a unified story. It is the way the Church, the body of Christ universal, has always read the books of the Bible. It does not matter that it is a slightly different way of reading the books than reading them in context. It is the *Christian* way of reading the texts.

### **A Missional Hermeneutic**

This discussion may seem tangential to reading the Bible as the mission of God, but it is essential if a person is to appreciate the depth and profundity of what we mean by a “missional hermeneutic.” Our understanding of polyvalence has legitimized what Christians have always done through the ages, namely, to loosen the words of the Bible from their original contexts just enough to read these texts as a single story of God creating and redeeming the world. We are currently witnessing the thriving of what is called a “theological hermeneutic” that legitimizes reading the Bible as a single book with a single story, even while recognizing that the Bible was originally a collection of books, plural, written in multiple languages to address multiple contexts.

Unfortunately, some Bible readers have also taken this climate as an excuse to continue reading the Bible in ignorance, never to confront the question of what these texts actually meant in the first moment of inspiration. True, it is most important that we read the Bible as Christians and thus that we hear in the words of the Bible the unified voice of God to us today. But surely we also want to know what these texts *actually* meant as well, what God was doing with the first moment of inspiration so long ago.

Christopher Wright puts it this way, “a missional hermeneutic must include at least this recognition—the multiplicity of perspectives and contexts from which and within which people read the biblical texts” (p. 39). A deep missional hermeneutic will not just read the whole Bible as the single story of God working out His mission for the world, although certainly this will be the centerpiece of a missional hermeneutic. But a missional hermeneutic with depth will recognize, as Wright puts it, that the “writings that now comprise our Bible are themselves the product of and witness to the ultimate mission of God” (p. 48). “[T]he Bible itself is in so many ways a *missional phenomenon* in itself” (p. 50).

Here is how Wright summarizes a missional hermeneutic: “A missional hermeneutic, then, is not content simply to call for obedience to the Great *Commission* (though it will assuredly include that as a matter of nonnegotiable importance), nor even to reflect on the missional implications of the Great *Commandment*. For behind both it will find the Great *Communication*—the revelation of the identity of God, of God’s action in the world and God’s saving purpose for all creation. And for the fullness of this communication we need the whole Bible in all its parts and genres, for God has given us no less” (p. 60-61).

Wright closes his introductory chapters with the following elements of the story of God on his mission. These headings provide us with a fruitful way to integrate the biblical material into a single, Christian, coherent storyline of salvation’s history:

#### 1. God with a mission

God created the universe for a purpose. He is the center of the story, not us. We are small players in a story that is, from beginning to end, about God, not us. The driving force of the plot is the mission *of God*.

## 2. Humanity with a mission

Christians understand God to have created a good world that Adam's sin put into crisis, however we conceptualize that sin. One key feature of a missional emphasis is the recognition that God's business is bigger than us. God may have put us above all things in the creation, but He didn't expect us to be "rulers" who couldn't care less about those over whom He placed us. A missional hermeneutic will take concern for the creation as something over which God placed us as stewards.

## 3. Israel with a mission

The Old Testament is the first part of the story. If we are to take Christianity seriously, then we have to see Act 1 as a true part of the story, where God used one nation out of all the earth to begin the slow process of bringing the whole universe back to Him.

## 4. Jesus with a mission

Jesus' mission spans Act 1 and Act 2. He comes to earth and ministered to the smallest part of humanity, the back hills of Galilee, truly insignificant by any human reckoning. But by the time he is done, he has died to bring the cosmos back into order and has risen from the dead as the first installment of a victory over the power of death that will be universal.

## 5. The Church with a mission

This is the part of the story that we are currently in, and the New Testament inaugurates this phase with the Day of Pentecost, placing us in the age of the Spirit. When this phase comes to a close, Christ will come again and bring about the decisive denouement of the plot.

## **Conclusion**

These are the elements of a missional hermeneutic. A missional hermeneutic will not only read the whole Bible as the single *story* of God's mission to create and restore a world *in a book*. It will see the books of the Bible themselves as moments in God's mission to restore a fallen world *in history*. In both cases, the mission of God provides an appropriate unifying principle by which to see the Bible as a whole.

A story, by its very nature, has a beginning, a middle, and an end. In the beginning of a story, a goal is unfulfilled. Sometimes we do not know how the situation comes about. In the story of *Cinderella*, for example, we never learn how Cinderella came to be living with her step-mother without her father. But every story has in its origins a problem situation of some kind. It is this problem that the middle part of the story works to overcome. And if the story has a happy ending, the end will see that goal—or some related goal—accomplished.

When we read the Bible through the lens of the mission of God, the goal of the story was for God to create a good world, a world over which humanity would serve as God's steward and representative. The problem at the beginning of the story is that humanity's sin has separated it from God and spoiled the creation. The rest of the story, particularly as found in the Bible, is the working toward a solution, a solution that finds its double climax in the death/resurrection and then second coming of Christ. This plotline of the mission of God to redeem humanity and

creation, provides the most appropriate Christian hermeneutic through which to read the texts of the Bible.

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