

Book Review

The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative

Christopher J. H. Wright

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The Mission of God by Christopher J. H. Wright is a landmark contribution to hermeneutics, biblical theology, and missiology. Wright contends that the Bible is the grand narrative of God's redemptive mission to humanity and creation, and therefore, that the biblical story is best understood when read through the lens of God's mission.

His interpretive approach is a grammatico-historical, literary-canonical hermeneutic, within a redemptive-historical Christotelic biblical theology. His approach sees Christ as the goal of biblical revelation, the one in whom that revelation coheres and, therefore, the hermeneutical center from which all of Scripture is now read. As Jesus taught His disciples in Luke 24, believers are to read all texts "in light of the story that leads *up to* Christ (messianic reading) and the story that leads *on from* Christ (missional reading). That is the story that flows from the mind and purpose of God in all the Scriptures for all the nations. That is a missional hermeneutic of the whole Bible" (41).

Wright proceeds by analyzing several unifying themes as they progressively unfold through the Old Testament: monotheism, creation, humanity, election, redemption, covenant, ethics, and future hope (17). He shows these themes to be key to understanding the Bible's meta-narrative,

and follows them into their New Testament fulfillment. Wright reveals the organic connections among the themes, repeatedly cycling through Scripture from beginning to end. His evidence and arguments move forward smoothly—his style winsome, articulate, and irenic. The depth of his exegesis and theologizing, and the breadth of his synthesizing are presented in language easy to follow and explanations easy to comprehend. In proving his theses, Wright interacts broadly with the best literature pertinent to his subjects and uses all New Testament and most Old Testament literary genres. His approach both maintains the theological integrity of each biblical author and illuminates the unity of Scripture.

Wright arranged *The Mission of God* in four parts. In Part 1, *The Bible and Mission*, he demonstrates the inadequacies of proof-texting and narrowly based hermeneutics, and the supremacy of a biblically holistic missional hermeneutic. In Part 2, *The God of Mission*, Wright discusses God's self-revelation to Israel through grace and judgment in Egypt, exodus, and exile. This led to God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ who shares the identity, performs the functions, and fulfills the mission of Yahweh. In Part 3, *The People of Mission*, Wright explores the continuous pattern of election, redemption, and restoration in both Testaments. He traces the progress of

redemption through God's covenants with Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and the climactic New Covenant in Christ. Part 4, The Arena of Mission, deals with God's mission to creation, and follows God's vision for the nations from creation, through Israel's history, to the nations' inclusion in Israel through Messiah.

Wright successfully makes the case that God's primary mission has always been for all nations to know and worship Him as Creator, Redeemer, and King. In the Old Testament, Israel was to be an extension of Yahweh's identity and mission to the nations. This is now fulfilled in the New Covenant, as all nations, Jew and Gentile alike, are included in God's one new humanity in Messiah by faith. Here they are redeemed by the blood of Messiah's perfect Passover, restored by His resurrection, recreated by the Holy Spirit, and grafted into the one olive tree on the basis of faith (529). They continually bear the image of their Creator into the nations, planting self-replicating missional communities living in worship, peace, and justice, calling the nations to repentance and faith in the coming King.

Some comments are in order regarding the use of *The Mission of God*. All of Wright's work flows from his interpretive framework described above. It is this theological, hermeneutical framework that yielded the insights in this book. Harvesting those insights with which we agree, while either refusing to deeply engage the theology and hermeneutic which alone can produce those insights, or pejoratively rejecting out-of-hand both that theology and hermeneutic and the those insights we dislike, is neither a legitimate use of this work nor a viable way forward for Pentecostal missiology (or for one's eschatology, ecclesiology, or theology as a whole).

Wright is certainly correct in describing Christ's teaching to His disciples as "... setting their hermeneutical orientation and agenda. The proper way for disciples of the crucified and risen Jesus to read their Scriptures, is *messianically* and *missionally*" (30). Certain aspects of Pentecostal ecclesiology and eschatology predispose us to enthusiastically embrace the *missional* lens of Wright's work, but reflexively reject the *messianic* lens. In other words, we want to arbitrarily disengage Wright's missional insights from his Christotelic reading of all Scripture. This would be disintegrative at best, and if done without proper disclosure, could be disingenuous at worst.

Wright's work should provoke Pentecostals to serious self-examination. After a century of intensive missions theorizing and practice, why have Pentecostals never produced anything close to *The Mission of God*? What aspects of our theological or doctrinal structures have shackled our ability to discern what Wright's approach produced? Do we have dogmatic, political, or emotional commitments that shut down legitimate discussions and interpretive methods before they are fruitfully engaged? Pentecostals should humbly receive not just that fruit of Wright's labor with which they agree, but open their minds to the tools of his labor as well. The theological and hermeneutical approach he uses demonstrates its unrivaled ability to penetrate the deep structure of biblical revelation. It proves that the core Pentecostal passion for world mission is indeed the pervasive passion of God and His Word.

The biblical theology from which Wright works is extremely coherent, biblically-rooted, thoroughly orthodox, historically tested, exegetically fruitful, and eminently defensible. It is in no way inimical, and in every way beneficial, to Pentecostal life and

theology. This historic approach should have a permanent and respected place in Pentecostal theological dialogue. It would anchor Pentecostals to evangelical and orthodox Christian theology, provide secure and spacious parameters for the theological contributions of majority world Fellowships, and prevent eccentric or sectarian concepts from hijacking Pentecostal theology.

It was Wright's consistent, coherent application of his redemptive-historical biblical theology and Christotelic hermeneutic that produced *The Mission of God*. I recommend his method and his book enthusiastically and without reservation.