

*THE MISSION OF GOD: UNLOCKING THE BIBLE'S GRAND  
NARRATIVE*

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A Book Review

Presented to

Dr. John Klaassen

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by

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\*I affirm the honor code

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

What is the relationship between the Bible and mission? Which comes first? Should we seek to understand mission in the light of the Bible, or should we endeavor to understand the Bible in the light of God's mission? These are the key questions *The Mission of God* seeks to address.

Many books have been written on a biblical theology of mission. Author Christopher J. H. Wright's book is unique in that it explores a missional theology of the Bible. Dr. Wright is a well-respected scholar, teacher, and missiologist who draws from a wealth of ministry experience to write this invaluable book on the relationship between the Bible and mission. Currently, Dr. Wright serves as the International Ministries Director of Langham Partnership International. He also served for eight years as the principal of All Nations Christian College, a missions college in Ware, England.

### **Summary**

Wright's burden in writing *The Mission of God* is "to develop an approach to biblical hermeneutics that sees the mission of God (and the participation in it of God's people) as a framework within which we can read the whole Bible. Mission is... a major key that unlocks the grand narrative of the canon of Scripture" (17).

In Part 1, Wright provides the Biblical basis for a missional hermeneutic. Pointing to Christ's words in Luke 24, he argues that Christ "seems to be saying that the whole of the Scriptures... finds its focus and fulfillment *both* in the life and death and resurrection of Israel's Messiah, *and* in the mission to all nations, which flows out from that event" (30). A missiological approach to the Bible demands that we carefully consider "the purpose for which the Bible exists, the God the Bible renders to us, the people whose identity and mission the Bible

invites us to share, and the story the Bible tells about this God and this people and indeed about the whole world and its future” (31).

In Part II, Wright roots a missional approach to hermeneutics in the unique character of the God of mission. “Making God known is part of the mission of those who are called to participate in the mission of the God who wills to be made known” (74). The one true God, who has revealed Himself in Israel’s history and through the person of Jesus, wills to be worshipped and praised by all peoples. He stands in transcendent uniqueness to the gods of the nations. These gods, though existing in the lives, cultures, and history of those the nations that worship them, do not share in God’s divine existence and therefore must be confronted, exposed, and unmasked (163). “God’s mission is the blessing of the nations. And the blessing of the nations must ultimately include ridding them of the gods that masquerade as protectors and saviors, but are actually devouring, destroying, disappointing deceptions” (178).

In Part III, Wright unpacks the nature of God’s people as those who are created by and commissioned for the mission of God. “Having been chosen, redeemed, and called into covenant relationship, the people of God have a life to live—a distinctive, holy, ethical life that is to be lived before God and in the sight of the nations” (190). Wright carefully explains that the mission of God’s people does not begin with the birth of the New Testament church, but with the covenant God made with Abraham. “The dynamic narrative of God’s saving purpose for all nations through Abraham... is the heart of the gospel as announced by the Scriptures” (193). According to Wright, the Abrahamic Covenant is “the key that unlocks the Bible’s grand narrative” (213). In this monumental covenant, “God chooses not only to make Abraham and his offspring the object of his blessing, but also to make them the instruments of his blessing to the world” (253). Through the people of God, beginning with Abraham and now through the church, God’s missional purposes come to the nations.

In Part IV, Wright focuses on the arena of God’s mission. Wright states that the whole earth is the field of God’s mission (403). This arena, Wright argues, encompasses both humanity and creation. In fulfilling God’s mission, the author argues that Christians must prioritize not

only the evangelization of the nations, but “creation care” and “environmental justice” for the physical earth as well (418).

### **Critical Evaluation**

Mission is not merely something that we do; rather, it is at the heart and soul of who God is, and He has been doing throughout redemptive history. Wright powerfully demonstrates that mission is “not just one of a list of things that the Bible happens to talk about, only a bit more urgently than some. Mission is... what it’s all about” (22). To prove his point, Wright unleashes a torrent of Biblical truth that is impressive in its scope, depth, and poignancy. Wright taps into his background as an Old Testament scholar to demonstrate that mission is not merely a New Testament initiative (ex. Matthew 28:18-20) but is the central thrust of God’s purposes in the Old Testament as well.

His argument for mission arising out of the very nature of Scriptures was particularly insightful. “The whole Bible renders to us the story of God’s mission through God’s people in their engagement with God’s world for the sake of the whole of God’s creation,” Wright notes. (51). A missional approach to the Bible is not primarily rooted in the Great Commission imperative (Matthew 28:18-20), but in the very nature of Biblical authority. This Biblical authority is revealed in the three fundamental realities: the reality of God, His story, and His people (54-57). Wright states, “Our mission certainly flows from the authority of the Bible. But that authority is far richer and deeper than one biblical command we must obey. Rather, our obedience to the Great Commission, and even the Great Command itself, is set within the context of these realities... A missional hermeneutic, then, is not content simply to call for obedience to the Great Commission, 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 actions in the world, and God’s saving purposes for all creation” (58, 60).

Wright helpfully explains that a missional hermeneutic is not a way of forcing every text of God's Word into an evangelistic paradigm. Rather, this hermeneutic functions as a map to help us gain an understanding of how the individual parts of Scripture relate to the overarching missional character and purposes of God. It provides us "a way of seeing the whole terrain, a way of navigating through it, a way of observing what is most significant, a way of approach the task of actually encountering the reality itself" (69). Wright also addresses how the rise of various global hermeneutics, postmodernism, liberation theology, and other diverse perspectives can alter our perspective of what should (or shouldn't) be included in mission. Wright notes that a missional hermeneutic must insist that God's Word is the absolute standard of truth. Only as we uphold the Bible's authority can we evaluate diversity, culture, and Christian mission from an objective perspective.

While there is much invaluable wisdom and insight to glean from this book, there are also some significant causes for concern. For example, Wright defines mission as "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" (23). At first glance, this definition sounds good, but what exactly constitutes "the redemption of God's creation?" According to Wright, this redemption would include "environmental justice," social and economic equality, and "creation care." For Wright, "justice towards the earth" is an essential part of the mission of the church (412-413). Does the Bible, however, exalt social matters to the level of mission? Should God's people be equally as concerned about social, political, and environmental action as we are about preaching the gospel and making disciples? Wright presents an overly broad definition of the church's mission that fails to properly emphasize the particular task that the church has been sent out by God to accomplish. Yes, it is true that the church's mission "flows from and participates in the mission of God" (23). But in the fulfillment of God's mission, the church has been entrusted with a specific mission: to make, mature, and multiply Christ-like disciples who will fill the earth with His glory.

Wright also seems to place far more emphasis on the “impending catastrophe” of pollution, the depletion of the ozone layer, and global warming (413) than he does on the plight of the unconverted. Surprisingly, in an over five-hundred-page book on missions, the reality of hell is only mentioned once (306). Wright would have done well to consider the weight of Jesus’ evangelistic statements, as well as His warnings about the reality of eternal damnation, in comparison to secondary matters.

### **Conclusion**

The church must carefully reflect on how she is using or abusing Scripture in her understanding and practice of mission. Far too many churches build their theology and philosophy of mission on a few proof texts without considering the overarching theme and message of the Scripture. Wright’s book helps God’s people see how mission flows out of who God is, who we are, and what He has revealed about Himself and His unstoppable redemptive plan in His Word. Wright successfully demonstrates that mission is the key that unlocks the Bible’s grand redemptive narrative, expertly tracing the mission of God and man’s involvement in His mission beginning with Abraham, continuing through Israel, and finally through the New Testament church. Only as we read and understand the Bible missiologically can we truly appreciate the privilege we have as God’s people to engage in God’s mission.

\*Honor Code: I have written this paper exclusively for [course number]. If I received any editing or proofreading advice, I have made all such corrections myself. I have also documented each paraphrase, direct quotation, and borrowed idea in compliance with the Turabian and SBTS style manuals