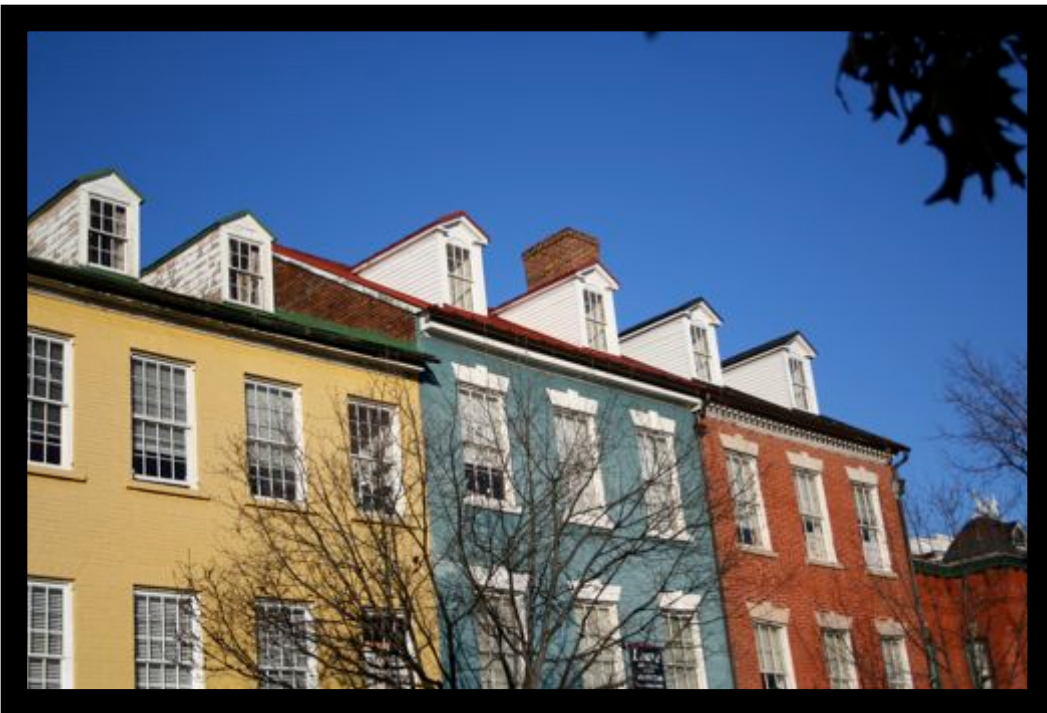




Reading the Bible Missionally



Introduction

“It is not enough, however, just to say that mission has a solid biblical foundation, we also need to see that the Bible has its roots in mission. That is, the Bible is the product of God’s engagement through God’s people in God’s world for God’s ultimate purposes for the nations and the world...So from beginning to end, the



Bible is 'missional', by its very existence and by its comprehensive message. Mission then has to be a prime hermeneutical key for our own Bible reading and teaching." - Whose world? Whose mission?, Christopher J Wright

What is the 'missional' conversation all about? The missional conversation is connected to a new *situational* and *theological awareness* that Christians in the West are coming to. The *situational awareness* is tied to the ever declining presence and influence that the Church in the Western world is having and how that is causing Christians in the West to rethink what it means to be the church sent - the missional church. Darrell L. Guder, editor of perhaps the most well known work on the topic called "The Missional Church: ," sets up the problem facing the Church in the Western world today;

"Rather than occupying a central and influential place, North American Christian churches are increasingly marginalized, so much so that in our urban areas they represent a minority movement. It is by now a truism to speak of North America as a mission field." The Missional Church: A vision for the sending of the Church in North America

The *theological awareness* that is spreading across the Church in the West is that God himself is missional. God is sent and we as his people must see our churches as sent. Again, Darrell L. Guder fills this out when he says;

"We have come to see that mission is not merely the activity of the church. Rather, mission is the result of God's initiative, rooted in God's purposes to restore and heal creation. "Mission" means "sending," and it is the central biblical theme describing the purpose of God's actions in human history..We have learned to speak of God as a "missionary God." Thus we have learned to understand the church as a "sent people." "As the Father has sent me, so I send you" (John 20.21)." The Missional Church: A vision for the sending of the church in North America

As mentioned above the West is growing more and more Post-Christian but this is good news. For a God who is missional and for a church who being made in His images is also missional, this shift to a Post-Christian setting carries with it huge opportunities to be what by nature she is called to be: A sent people, a missional church.

What is a 'missional' church? *"A missional church is characterized by a great deal of respect for people who don't believe. In other words a missional church understands what its like not to believe." (Tim Keller) What that means is that missional churches give great consideration to how they speak: How they speak corporately in preaching and teaching; and how they speak in smaller community dynamics like small group discussions because they view themselves as a "sent people" living in a Post-Christian culture. Missional churches are well versed in their surrounding culture's stories and they know how to retell them in a way that contextualizes the Gospel. What this means*



for missional churches reading of Scripture is that it is marked by cultural sensitivity. They are able to see how it is a word for them, for their community, centered upon how Christ has already and is yet to bring God's Kingdom agendas to bear on the brokenness of their world. Missional churches don't stop here though, they are not only self-reflective about their faith and mutually-respecting of their unbelieving neighbors, but they also actively seek to equip each other for service in the public arena.

Why read the Bible 'missionally'? Without a missional hermeneutic (a way of reading, understanding, and applying text) it is impossible to be a missional church. There is, however, an even more important reason why we should read the Bible missionally. A reason indicated in the opening quote by Christopher Wright, "*So from beginning to end, the Bible is 'missional', by its very existence and by its comprehensive message. Mission then has to be a prime hermeneutical key for our own Bible reading...*" We should read the Bible missionally because the Bible is a missional book that's not to be only studied, but to be read as a word from Him to empower His mission through us.

In the following pages we will explore what it means to read Scripture missionally by: 1) learning to read Scripture in light of its missional origin; 2) its missional narrative; 3) our missional context as readers; and 4) the missional engagement of Scripture with our culture.

Reading Scripture in Light of its Missional Origin



God freely chose to have Himself, His will, and His mission revealed to His people so that they would join him in the '*missio dei*' (mission of God). All of Scripture embodies the consequences of that choice: God revealing his eternal Word in an ever changing world. Each portion of Scripture is a witness to how God's revelation was given in the cultural forms and setting of His people at that point in the biblical story. (A story which is Christotelic - having Christ as the goal of the story - through and through). Does the origin of the story shape how it should be read? Yes. Michael Goheen connects the missional origin of the Bible with how it shapes our practice of reading Scripture;

"The Scriptures do not only record God's mission through his people to bring salvation to the world; they are also a tool to effectively bring it about. They don't only tell us the story of God's mission but take an active part in accomplishing God's mission. Out of this history of mission described in the Bible various kinds of books arose as products of God's mission and played a role in forming God's people for their mission in the world. As N.T. Wright puts it speaking only about the New Testament: 'The apostolic writings . . . were not simply about the coming of God's Kingdom into all the world; they were, and were designed to be, part of the means whereby that happened . . .' Both record



and tool are essential to a missional hermeneutic.” Notes Toward a Framework for a Missional Hermeneutic

The Bible is a record and a tool by which God completes His mission in our world through His people who are empowered by the Spirit because of Christ. Reading Scripture in light of its missional origin means acknowledging that the Bible is, as Lesslie Newbigin put the matter, “public truth.”

“We have a gospel to proclaim. We have to proclaim it not merely to individuals in their personal and domestic lives. We do certainly have to do that. But we have to proclaim it as part of the continuing conversation which shapes public doctrine. It must be heard in the conversation of economists, psychiatrists, educators, scientists, and politicians. We have to proclaim it not as a package of estimable values, but as the truth about which is the case, about what ever human being and every human society will have to reckon with.” Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth

What does it look like to read the Bible in light of its missional origin?

Questions intended to help you read Scripture in light of its missional origin:

- ☼ How did this particular passage or book come into being? How is your situation and the missional needs you have different, how are they similar to what gave rise to this passage or book?
- ☼ What equipping role did this passage play in the missional life of the covenant community when it was given? What role can it play now?
- ☼ How did this passage or book help them join in God’s mission causing them to treasure as well as confront their culture: its stories and its symbols? How should this passage function now in light of Christ?

Suggestions for further reading on the missional origin of the Bible:

Guder, Darrell L. Ed. *The Missional Church: A vision for the sending of the church in North America*

Hunsberger, George. [Proposals for a Missional Hermeneutic: Mapping the conversation.](#)

Keller, Tim. [The Missional Church.](#)

Newbigin, Lesslie. *Foolishness to the Greeks.*

Wright, Christopher J. [Whose world? Whose mission?](#)



Reading Scripture in Light of its Missional Narrative



Is there a single grand narrative for Scripture? That question has caused no little stir among biblical-theologians. Some say yes, others say no, and still others say yes and no. For those that say yes a common way of summarizing the grand narrative of the bible is to sum it up in four parts or four acts: Act 1) Creation; Act 2) Fall; Act 3) Redemption; and Act 4) Consummation. Others shorten this narrative outline to two parts: Creation and New Creation. Most scholars side with the third option and say yes and no. There are several major themes that get developed in Scripture and there are several ways to trace those themes. While there is not one grand narrative that excludes others, there are some narratives that are more dominant and the mission of God is certainly one of those. As George Hunsberger has said, *"The mission of God provides the framework, the clue, the hermeneutical key for biblical interpretation."*

George Proposals for a Missional Hermeneutic: Mapping the Conversation

There are two things we need to consider as we explore the mission of God as a dominant narrative in the biblical story: 1) the mission of God as a narrative that stretches the biblical story from Genesis to Revelation has a Christotelic coherence to it; and 2) it is a narrative that's relevance is missional-ecclesial in form. *First*, the mission of God in Scripture has a Christotelic coherence to it, that is it has Christ as its goal (*telos* in Latin means goal). Christ as the goal of the biblical narrative is what holds it together. The biblical narrative is not just Christocentric (centered on Christ) but it is Christotelic. He is what makes sense of the many dominant narratives in Scripture. The mission of God finds its goal in Christ (Col. 1.15-20; Ephesians 1-3), therefore reading Scripture missionally in light of its narrative means seeing how Christ functions as the goal of the story. Old Testament professor Peter Enns, fleshes this out when he says;

"Christ is the end (Greek, telos) of Israel's story and so gives the entire story its unifying, coherent structure—much as the climax of a well-crafted story puts the pieces of the novel together in wonderful and exciting ways." Some Thoughts on Theological Exegesis of the Old Testament: Toward a viable model of biblical coherence and unity

The climax of the missional narrative of the Bible is Christ and the new humanity he in accordance with his Father's missional desires is creating through the Spirit with the word. Our reading of the Bible ought to connect each passage to Christ as its goal who has and is making all things new through his sent people. Which means, *Secondly*, that the relevance of the Biblical narrative which is Christotelically coherent is found in the formation of this "sent people." The Bible both records and functions as God's tool in



forming a missional-ecclesial people. Again Peter Enns's reflections from the same article above is very helpful;

“And that Christotelic coherence is properly embodied only in the church, the body of Christ. The proper application of Israel's story—its true relevance—is in God's newly reconstituted people whose identities are found entirely in their union with Christ and his saving work [read: “his mission/saving work”].” [Some Thoughts on Theological Exegesis of the Old Testament: Toward a viable model of biblical coherence and unity](#)

What does it look like to read the Bible in light of its missional narrative?

Questions intended to help you read Scripture in light of its missional narrative:

- ☼ What does this text say, implicitly or explicitly, about the ‘*missio Dei*’ and the missional character of God?
- ☼ What does this text reveal about humanity and the world?
- ☼ What does this text say about the nature and mission of God's people in the world, that is, about the church understood as an agent of divine mission rather than as an institution, civic organization, or guardian of Christendom?
- ☼ How does this text relate to the larger scriptural witness, in both testaments, to the ‘*missio Dei*’ and the mission of God's people?
- ☼ In what concrete ways might we deliberately read this text as God's call to us as the people of God to participate in the ‘*missio Dei*’ to which it bears witness?

(All the questions above for this section were taken from Michael J Gorman, [Some Basics of a Missional Hermeneutic](#))

Suggestions for further reading on the missional narrative of the Bible:

Bauckham, Richard. *The Bible and Mission*.

Hays, Richard B. *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*.

LeMarquand, Grant. [From Creation to New Creation: The Mission of God in the Biblical Story](#).

Wright, Christopher J. *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative*
_____. *Knowing Jesus Through the Old Testament*.



Reading Scripture in Light of Our Missional Context as Readers



“One possible place to begin talking about the Bible and mission is with the intersection between the biblical text and the reader who encounters this text in new ways in the context of missionary activity. The German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer spoke of all interpretation as having two horizons—the horizon of the text and the horizon of the reader. Meaning and understanding, he said, takes place at the intersection of these two realities.” From Creation to New Creation: The Mission of God in the Biblical Story

The above quote by Grant LeMarquand hits on something that is often lost in discussions about how we should read Scripture: The necessity of having our lives wrapped up in mission. If you’re going to read the Bible missionally you must be living missionally otherwise the questions you bring as a reader to the text won’t be aimed at mission but something else. Nevertheless there is a circularity at work here. Reading Scripture missionally also deepens and informs missional living.

Typically in discussions about the interpretation of the Bible you’ll hear people say things like, “once you discover the authors intent then you have the meaning of the text.” Discovering what the author intended must be a foundational concern in all interpretation but there are problems in limiting our reading of Scripture to just a quest for the authors intent. There are in fact at least two problems with this method or goal in reading texts. *First*, the problem with this method is that it is ignorant of the underlying presuppositions every reader brings to the task of interpretation. We are creaturely and by nature finite which means we always interpret things from a finite, limited point of view. In seeking to discover the authors intent our own vantage point and agendas get added in. Even the original gospel writers weren’t free of bias. Their bias was in part due to the missional needs of their audiences as they composed their accounts of Christ. New Testament scholar, Richard Bauckham, notes the bias of the Gospel writers accounts in his book “Jesus and the Eyewitnesses”;

“They [the Gospels] embody the testimony of the eyewitnesses, not of course without editing and interpretation, but in a way that is substantially faithful to how the eyewitnesses themselves told it, since the Evangelists were in more or less direct contact with eyewitnesses...” Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as eyewitness testimony.

Secondly, in seeking only to discover the original authors intent in interpreting or reading the Bible the reader misses the reality that texts can have far more meaning and relevance than what the original authors may have had in mind. This ought to be assumed from the outset since every part of Scripture has a dual authorship: human



author(s) and Divine. Scripture is able to speak to situations (or ‘locations’) far beyond those the original authors and their communities were dealing with.

Reading the Bible missionally requires us as readers to be self-aware of our missiological needs and interests that we bring with us as we read. A missional reading of Scripture requires us to explore how the text before us does and doesn’t engage those needs and interests. To read Scripture missionally means raising “located questions” that are sensitive to our missional context and interested in engaging our culture. What are “located questions”?

“Located” questions, then, are those that arise out of that tangible place and time in which the sent community [missional church] lives in terms of which it seeks to discern its particular charism and vocation. And that implicates further the community’s location in its publicly present witness in that time and place. Its mission itself is the proper location from which the Bible is interpreted.” Proposals for a Missional Hermeneutic: Mapping the conversation

What does it look like to read the Bible in light of our missional context as readers?

Questions intended to help you read Scripture in light of your missional context:

- ✻ How does this text speak to our missional context, what are the “located” questions our context is asking from the text?
- ✻ What does this text call us to unlearn and learn afresh as we engage our missional context?
- ✻ Are there models of contextualization in this text that we can learn from as we seek to be in but not of this world?
- ✻ How does this text call us as God’s people to be both different from and involved in the world?
- ✻ What are the ways this text equips us for mission?
- ✻ Did this text play an integral part in the formation of the missional identity of its original audience? If so, how can it play that part in us?

(Some of the questions above for this section were taken and modified from Michael J Gorman, Some Basics of a Missional Hermeneutic)

Suggestions for further reading on reading the Bible in light of our missional context:

Allen, Roland. *Missionary Methods: St. Paul’s and Ours.*



_____. *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church: And the causes that hinder it.*

Barram, Michael. [‘Located’ Questions for a Missional Hermeneutic.](#)

Conn, Harvie M. *Eternal Word in a Changing World: Anthropology, Theology, and Mission.*

Holmes, Stephen R. *Listening to the Past: The place of tradition in theology.*

Reading Scripture in Light of its Missional Engagement with Our Culture



“While traditional biblical criticism asks, ‘which hermeneutic is most qualified to understand the Scripture?’ missional hermeneutics asks instead, ‘what kind of community does a faithful hermeneutic foster?’”
Colin Yuckman, [An Ulterior Gospel](#)

Yuckman’s quote above poses an intriguing question. Is our reading of scripture affected by the goals we have when we come to it. If we just want to ‘understand’ scripture then the quest to finding its meaning will be wrapped up in finding the very best technical interpretive strategy that leads to that understanding. If, on the other hand, our goal is to have the Bible form a new missional community then our goal in reading it will be more practical in focus than theoretical.

Communities who read the Bible missionally read it with the goal of having the Bible transform them into a new community which resembles the character of God as one who is sent to their particular culture. There is a ‘*performance*’ aspect to reading the Bible missionally: We read Scripture so that the gospel would be performed in a faithful manner in our lives and in our community. What does it mean for the Gospel to be performed faithfully? James V. Brownson explains this phrase well;

“ . . . the term draws inspiration from speech-act theory, which recognizes that our language not only communicates information, but actually brings states of affairs into existence. Hence the gospel is not merely concepts to be understood; it is not ideas to be applied, nor is it only a story to be heard and believed . . . [but also the gospel is] . . . a narrative to be performed, a narrative to be expressed by words and deeds that bring a new state of affairs into existence. This is in keeping with the long prophetic tradition of Scripture that sees the Word of God as living and active (Hebrews 4.12).” [Faithful and Compelling Performances of the Gospel](#)



Reading the Bible missionally means reading Scripture in such a way that you and I are left with a clear sense of how the text we are studying engages our cultures stories, symbols, and idols; and how the text with its particular message helps form us and our communities so that we become culture-makers who are performing the gospel in word and deed in our particular cultures. Someone who is committed to reading Scripture in this way shares the same conviction the first great urban missionary Paul the Apostle had, “*Paul reads Scripture under the conviction that its story prefigures the climactic realities of his own time.*” (Richard B. Hays, [Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul](#))

What does it look like to read the Bible in light of its missional engagement with our culture?

Questions intended to help you read Scripture in light of its missional engagement with your culture:

- ☼ What kind of community did this text help originate? How did the creation of that community missionally engage its culture?
- ☼ What particular forms of culture-making did this text call forth, and continues to call us to perform in the context of our present mission?
- ☼ What kind of community does a faithful reading of Scripture foster in our particular setting?
- ☼ What does this text call us to unlearn and then learn afresh as we seek to perform the gospel before our neighbors?
- ☼ How does this text call us as God’s people to be both different from and involved with the world?

(Some of the questions above for this section were taken and modified from Michael J Gorman, [Some Basics of a Missional Hermeneutic](#))

Suggestions for further reading on reading the Bible in light of its missional engagement with our culture:

Conn, Harvie M. *Evangelism: Preaching Grace & Doing Justice.*

Crouch, Andy. *Culture-Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling.*

Guder, Darrell L. [Ambassadors for Christ: 2 Corinthians 5:17-21.](#)

Hays, Richard B. *A Moral Vision of the New Testament.*

Wright, Christopher J. *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God.*

Yuckman, Colin. [An Ulterior Gospel.](#)