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. - Christopher J.H. Wright, Whose world? Whose mission?

What is the ‘missional’ conversation all about? The missional conversation is connected to a new situational and theological awareness that Christians in Western society are experiencing. The situational awareness is tied to the ever declining presence and influence of the Church. That decline is causing Christians in the West to rethink their missiological location. They are no longer simply a sending church, they are now the church sent to their post-Christian setting — they are the missional church. Darrell L. Guder, the editor of the leading work on this subject, sets up the problem facing the Church in Western society,

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

The theological awareness that is spreading across the Church is that God is missional in his intents and purposes for creation. He is actively filling the earth with his glory. As Guder 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). - Darrell L. Guder, The Missional Church: A vision for the sending of the church in North America

As mentioned above the West is increasingly becoming Post-Christian. Counter-intuitive as this may seem this is actually good news for the Church. The Church as a missionary community is perfectly suited to be a fruitful witness for Christ.

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, this includes: how they speak corporately in preaching and teaching and how they speak in smaller community settings like small group discussions. Missional churches are also well versed in their surrounding culture’s stories. They know how to retell those stories in a way that makes the power and promise of the gospel clear. They are able to do this because missional churches readings of Scripture are marked by cultural sensitivity. As churches they are able to see how Scripture is a word for them and for their community. Again and again their reading of Scripture centers upon the ways Christ brings God’s Kingdom agendas to bear on the brokenness of their world. However, missional churches don’t stop here in their reading of Scripture, they are not only self-reflective about their faith and respecting of their unbelieving neighbors, they also actively seek to equip each other for service in the public arena (more on this later).

**Why read the Bible ‘missionally’?** Without a missional hermeneutic (a way of reading, understanding, and applying Scripture) it is impossible to be a missional church. There is however an even more important reason why the Church should read the Bible missionally. That reason was 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 itself. God has intended it to be read as a word from Him to empower His people for witness.

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 has chosen to reveal his eternal Word in an ever changing world, each portion of Scripture is a witness to how that choice has been realized through the different cultural forms and settings His people were facing at different points in the biblical story. The biblical story while spanning more than 1,500 years is a story which is Christo-telic; that is it has Christ as its goal (the Greek word telos means goal). Therefore the origin and goal of that story should shape how we read it. Michael Goheen connects the missional origin of the Bible with how it out to shape our practice of reading and applying it to our lives,
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. - Michael Goheen, *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. He has chosen to do this through His people, empowering them by His Spirit. Reading Scripture in light of its missional origin means acknowledging that the Bible is, as Lesslie Newbigin says, “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. - Lesslie Newbigin, *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 originally received? What role can it play now?
- Did this passage or book help them critique as well as value their surrounding culture (particularly their cultures stories and symbols)? Can this passage help us do something similar in our culture?

**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*
Is there a single overarching narrative (aka story) in Scripture or is it a medley of conflicting stories? This 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 overarching narrative is to capture it in four parts or four acts: Act 1) Creation; Act 2) the Fall; Act 3) Redemption; and Act 4) the Consummation. Others shorten this narrative outline to two parts: Creation and New Creation. Most scholars side with the third option and say that there is an overarching narrative that spans Genesis to Revelation but that within that narrative different biblical writers share unique perspectives. What is that overarching narrative? George Hunsberger says, “The mission of God provides the framework, the clue, the hermeneutical key for biblical interpretation.” George Hunsberger, 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 overarching narrative of the biblical story: 1) the mission of God while spanning the biblical story from Genesis to Revelation has a Christo-telic 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 Christo-telic coherence to it, that is it has Christ as its goal (telos in Latin means goal). Christ holds the biblical story together, the OT writers look forward toward him, the NT writers look back on him. The mission of God finds its goal in Christ (Col. 1.15-20; Ephesians 1-3), therefore reading Scripture missionally in light of its overarching 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. - Peter Enns, 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 is gathering according to his Father’s will, and is creating through the Spirit. Our reading of the Bible ought to connect each passage to Christ as its goal, and should help us see how he is making all things new through the Spirit’s use of his people. This means that secondly, we have only truly read and applied Scripture when we have been apart of the mission its story is recounting for us. The Bible records and operates as God’s tool in forming us a missional people. Again Peter Enns’s reflections from the same article above are 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”].” - Peter Enns, 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?
⊙ 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?
⊙ How does this text relate to the larger Scriptural witness in both testaments regarding the missio Dei and the role of God’s people play in it?
⊙ In what concrete ways might we deliberately read this text as God’s call to us as his people who are to participate in the missio Dei in our local community?

(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.


Wright, Christopher J. The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative
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.” - Grant LeMarquand, 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. There is a circularity at work here. Reading Scripture missionally also deepens and informs missional living.

Often in discussions about the interpretation of the Bible you will hear people say things like, “once you discover the authors intent you then have the meaning of the text.” Discovering what the author intended is a foundational concern in all interpretation, but there are problems in limiting our reading of Scripture to merely a quest for the authors intent. There are two problems with limiting ourselves to this goal: 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. There 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... - Richard Bauckham, 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 cultural location. 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. - George Hunsberger, *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 needs to ask 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:**

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

Barram, Michael. ‘Located’ Questions for a Missional Hermeneutic.


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, however, our goal is to have the Bible form us into a new missional community then our reading of Scripture will be more practically focused. Our reading will challenge us as a community to experience a continual conversion as we ask our surrounding neighbors to convert as well.

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 offers us valuable insight on this point,

. . . 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
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 so we can perform (literally live out in word and deed) the particular message of the gospel to our culture. Someone who is committed to reading Scripture in this way shares the conviction the first great 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 kind of community does a faithful reading of Scripture foster in our particular setting?

- 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 does this text call us to unlearn and learn 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.*

