



# Missional Journal

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## Where are the Missional Evangelicals?

The positive and enthusiastic involvement of Evangelicals in the cause of global missions over the last century makes their comparative non-participation in the missional church movement intriguing. I am not saying that the movement is devoid of evangelical voices--that is clearly not the case. But given Evangelicals' concern for gospel outreach, one might have expected that by now the word "missional" would be more clearly understood, that churches would be more engaged with the opportunities for incarnational ministries, that more Bible colleges and seminaries would be revamping programs in a missional direction, etc. So what's up?

No doubt there are multiple issues at work. The "mainline" denominational flavor of some of the missional discussion probably suggested to conservative evangelicals that this was a conversation that did not merit their attention. The various connections between the missional church and the "emerging church" also raised warning flags, especially as the latter term became radioactive following the publication in 2005 of D.A. Carson's *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*.

But perhaps a larger problem that has stood in the way of evangelical embrace is that the missional discussion has not seemed sufficiently "biblical." I don't think this is a fair or accurate evaluation, but I can see how some people have drawn the conclusion. Most of the early participants in the movement were not trained biblical scholars. Instead, they represented a broad range of primary expertise in theology, sociology, history, philosophy, and missiology. A good number also had extensive experience in pastoral ministry, including church planting.

This diversity was all to the good, but it did allow the perception that "missional" was not strongly based in a biblical understanding of church and gospel. And Evangelicals are Bible people . . . or at least they *want* to be!

Now, my purpose in raising this issue is to say that while the current ambivalence of Evangelicals toward the missional church is understandable, it is no longer justifiable (if indeed it ever was) in terms of insufficient biblical grounding. The game-changer is (or should be) the thoughtful and detailed work of Christopher Wright, an OT scholar and chair of the Theology Working Group of the Lausanne Movement. His massive study *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (IVP, 2006) argued powerfully for the theme of mission as integral to a faithful reading of scripture. He has recently published a very engaging follow-up entitled *The Mission of God's People: A Biblical Theology of the Church's Mission* (Zondervan, 2010).

What follows is not a summary or review of these books, but rather a highlighting of a few points that I found particularly helpful.

### ***Mapping the Bible***

Reading scripture from the perspective of mission is much more than assembling a list of texts that instruct the church to evangelize the world. Wright suggests that any interpretive framework functions like a map. No map can capture accurately or comprehensively all the features of the reality that it portrays--some features may be omitted and others may be distorted. Particular maps have value according to their effectiveness in helping us to "see" certain geographical features, to avoid particular obstacles, to get where we need to go, etc. And of course some maps are better than others because they give us a fuller, more accurate or more useful account of a geographical area.

Professor Wright argues that approaching Scripture with a missional hermeneutic is an exercise in map reading which is particularly faithful to the nature of the biblical narrative. "The more I have attempted to use (or stimulate others to use) a missional map of the Bible, orientated fundamentally to the mission of God, the more it seems that not only do the major features of the landscape stand out clearly but other less well-trodden paths and less scenic scholarly tourist attractions turn out to have surprising and fruitful connections with the main panorama." [1]

I find this analogy attractive, in part because it confirms my own experience. Evangelicals utilize a variety of maps (Lutheran, Reformed, Wesleyan, Anabaptist, etc.) to navigate the terrain of Scripture. I have profited from most of these maps, but the missional hermeneutic has been especially helpful in reframing issues in ways that seem more comprehensive and faithful to the entire biblical narrative.

### ***Election***

Take, for example, the Bible's frequently debated theme of election. Historically this has been understood primarily as a teaching about *salvation*, and that has led to endless debates about sovereignty, free will, and the justice of God. Instead, Wright frames election in terms of mission: God begins by choosing Abraham and his descendants ". . . not so that Abraham and his family alone get saved, but rather that by being blessed he should become *the agent of blessing to others*." [2]

Because the early Christians saw themselves as participants in the story of Abraham, the missionary expansion narrated in Acts represented the logical development of salvation history. "So the idea of 'missional church' is far from a new idea. . . . If we understand the church from our biblical theology as that community of people chosen and called since Abraham to be the vehicle of God's blessing to the nations, what else can the church be but missional? This is who we are and what we are here for." [3]

I particularly like Wright's exegesis of Genesis 18:19: "For I have chosen him [Abraham], so that he will direct his children to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just, so that the Lord will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him." In this verse, says Wright, ethics is the connecting link between election and mission. God's intention to bless all nations will be fulfilled as the descendants of Abraham live counter-culturally in a world marked by the oppression, violence, and immorality of Sodom. So holiness is never simply a private matter between the individual believer and God. "The moment we fail to walk in the way of the Lord, or fail to live lives of integrity, honesty and justice, we not only spoil our personal relationship with God, we

are actually hindering God in keeping his promise to Abraham. We are no longer the people of blessing to the nations." [4]

### ***Integral Mission***

Many Evangelicals now recognize that faithfulness to the Gospel includes the commitment to social justice. [5] Wright is certainly not the first to argue for integral or holistic mission. But once again, I like the way he marshals the biblical evidence.

God's people are those who have been redeemed. The exodus is the primary OT event described as an act of redemption, and this experience in turn became one of the principal lenses through which Jesus and the apostles interpreted the significance of his death and resurrection. This exodus-cross correlation drives in two major directions for Wright.

First, reflection on the Exodus narrative makes clear that God's redemption of Israel was multi-faceted. "The texts portray at least four dimensions of the bondage that Israel suffered in Egypt--political, economic, social and spiritual--and goes on to show how God redeemed them in every one of these dimensions." [6] So approaches that emphasize one of these dimensions to the exclusion of the others are not faithful to scripture or the character of God.

Second, if the cross initiates the new exodus experience of the people of God, then the cross must be understood as central to every element of holistic mission. Clearly, Wright has no sympathy for a liberal Social Gospel devoid of robust doctrines of atonement and resurrection. "So it is my passionate conviction that holistic mission must have a holistic theology of the cross. . . . There is no other power, no other resource, no other name, through which we can offer the whole Gospel to the whole person and the whole world, than Jesus Christ crucified and risen." [7]

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So if you are not yet convinced, I encourage you to try reading the Bible from the grand perspective of the mission of God. That's what we are training students to do at Biblical Seminary. As one of my board members likes to say, "Biblical is missional, because missional is biblical." Think about it!



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[1] Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God* (IVP, 2006), p. 69.

[2] Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God's People* (Zondervan, 2010), p. 72.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 73.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 95.

[5] For example, the recent work of Timothy Keller, *Generous Justice: How God's Grace Makes Us Just* (Dutton, 2010).

[6] Wright, *Mission of God's People*, p. 99.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 111.