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Notes Toward a Framework for a Missional Hermeneutic

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Introduction

Perhaps some brief comments on my own story may help you to see what I am doing today. Four things have pushed me to consider the issue of a missional hermeneutic.

1) The dialogue and cross-fertilization between mission and biblical theology in my teaching. For the last 15 years I have been teaching a number of courses in missiology along with an introductory course in biblical theology. Further for about two years I was engaged in co-authoring an introductory book for my biblical theology course. The dialogue between missiology and biblical studies pushed me more and more toward a missional hermeneutic.

2) Regular preaching: From 1999-2005 I spent six years in a downtown church as a minister of preaching. Our explicit goal as a pastoral team was to increasingly shape a missional congregation. So every week I was asking how the text might form them for their mission in the world.

3) My supervision of a Ph.D. dissertation, in which one section is on a missional reading of Scripture. When I received his first draft of the chapter, I was forced to ask what are the elements of a missional hermeneutic that I am looking for?

4) This corresponded with two invitations to conferences (Scripture and Hermeneutics Seminary, Oxford University; Bingham Colloquium, McMaster University) to engage biblical scholars on this topic. It forced me to ask, what exactly do I mean by a missional hermeneutic? The following is an attempt to articulate in a provisional and general way some conclusions I have come to. It is a macro-framework for a missional hermeneutic.

There are different ways of understanding the term missional hermeneutic. To orient you as to where I am coming from: Chris Wright's *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (IVP, 2006) has developed the direction in which I have been moving. One might consider what I am doing here as offering elements of missional hermeneutic or foundational assumptions that have shaped my missional reading of Scripture.

Perhaps the following analogy is helpful. Joel Green speaks of a missional 'reframing':

‘ . . . where we stand helps to direct our gaze and influences what we see in Scripture. With the image of “reframing” I want to call to our attention the way picture frames draw out different emphases in the pictures they hold. Similarly, even if the essential nature of the church has not changed, new frames bring to the forefront of our thinking and practices fresh emphases. If we take seriously the missional orientation of the work of Jesus and his followers as these are narrated in the Gospel of Luke and Acts of the Apostles, what do we see?’¹

What I am offering is a missional reframing or missional orientation that directs my reading of Scripture.

My conviction is that ‘mission’ is the ‘place’ or ‘social location’ we must occupy if we are to rightly understand the text. Nicholas Lash says that ‘if the questions to which the ancient authors sought to respond in terms available to them within their cultural horizon are to be ‘heard’ today with something like their original force and urgency, they have first to be ‘heard’ as questions that challenge us with comparable seriousness.’² I believe that it is missional questions, issues, and problems to which the ancient authors sought to respond. So if we are to ‘hear’ the text aright today our own involvement in God’s mission will be a necessary prerequisite. Only then will our anticipatory forestructures be opened to rightly interpret the biblical text. Only then will we ask the proper missional questions of the text.

I want to use the language of the Christian Reformed Church’s confession *Our World Belongs to God: A Contemporary Testimony* to frame this brief paper: “The Bible is the Word of God, *record* and *tool* of his redeeming work” (par. 35). I will break my brief talk into two sections: First, the Bible is a *record* of God’s mission through his people for the sake of the world. Second, the Bible is a *tool* in God’s mission for shaping his people for their mission in the world.

Scripture as a Record of God’s Mission

Here I make 7 brief points with a few remarks.

1. The Bible is the true story of the world in which we find our place and role.

It is not controversial to claim that the Bible tells a story. It is more contestable to say that this story is the true story of the world, a metanarrative about the meaning and destiny of universal history. But that is the claim made here. Scripture, as N. T. Wright puts it, ‘offers a story which is the story of the whole world. It is public truth.’³

2. God’s mission to redeem world is the main story-line of the narrative that the Bible tells.

The *missio Dei* is central to this grand narrative. Chris Wright offers a hermeneutic that ‘sees the mission of God (and the participation in it of God’s people) as a framework in which we can

¹ Joel Green, *Recovering Mission-Church: Reframing Ecclesiology in Luke-Acts*. Unpublished lecture given at the Epworth Institute, 2003. Accessed at <http://www.confessingumc.org/cmnewss03.html>

² Nicholas Lash, *What Might Martyrdom Mean?*, *Ex Auditu*, 1, 1985, 17-18.

³ N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK, 1992), 41-42.

read the whole Bible. Mission' he says 'is a major key that unlocks the whole grand narrative of the canon of Scripture.'⁴ While a traditional interpretation of the *missio Dei* revolves around 'sending'—the Father sends the Son, who both send the Spirit and the church—Chris would rather speak of God's mission in terms of his long-term purpose or goal to restore people from all nations and the whole creation.⁵ Thus, the '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.'⁶

The mission of God's people, then, is our participation in God's mission, playing our role in God's redemptive purposes: '*Fundamentally, our mission (if it is biblically informed and validated) means 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.*'⁷

We note here that the horizon of God's mission as the ends of the earth is central to the biblical story from the beginning. God's purpose and intention is to restore all nations, all peoples, all cultures, indeed all of the creation from the sinful rebellion of humanity and its effects. So God's redemptive purpose is comprehensive, and involves a battle against sin, rebellion and idolatry.

3. In Old Testament God chooses and forms Israel as a people with a view to bringing salvation to the whole world.

God's way of proceeding, so to speak, is to choose a particular people and gather all humanity into that community. Various books have fruitfully explored the development of God's mission in terms of a movement from particular to universal or from the one to the many.

The particular community that God chooses is both the place and the instrument, the locus and the channel of God's mission. God works out his redemptive purposes first *in* the community and then *through* that community for the sake of the whole world.

Against the backdrop of creation and human rebellion, God chooses Israel for the sake of the nations. In the second chapter of his little book *Bible and Mission* Richard Bauckham focuses on Abraham (Gen. 12.1-3), Israel (Exodus 19.3-6), and David in Zion. He chooses Abraham to bring redemptive blessings to all the families of the earth. He chooses Israel to reveal Himself to all nations. He chooses David in Zion to bring God's rule to ends of the earth. I have found helpful the way Dumbrell focuses on Gen. 12.1-3 and Exodus 19.3-6. When God chooses Abraham, God does not reject the nations but chooses Abraham precisely for the sake of the nations (Gen. 12.1-3). The ultimate purpose of Abraham's call in Genesis 12.1-3 is 'that all nations on earth may be blessed.'⁸ "What is being offered in these few verses is a theological blueprint for the redemptive history of the world . . .'⁹ When God meets Israel at Sinai (Ex. 19.3-6) he summons them, in the words of John Durham, to be 'a display-people, a showcase to the

⁴ Christopher Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006), 17.

⁵ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 22.

⁶ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 23.

⁷ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 22-23.

⁸ See William Dumbrell, *Creation and Covenant* (Nashville: Nelson Publishers, 1984), 55-72; Richard Bauckham, Richard, *Bible and Mission*, 28-36; Jo Bailey Wells, *God's Holy People: A Theme in Biblical Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 185-207.

⁹ Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation*, 66.

world of how being in covenant with Yahweh changes a people.¹⁰ Faithfulness to the call in Exodus 19 to be a holy nation and a priestly kingdom is, according to Dumbrell, the ‘way in which Israel will continue to exercise her Abrahamic role, and thus to provide a commentary on the way in which the promises of Genesis 12:1-3 will find their fulfillment.’¹¹ Dumbrell goes on to capture the significance of this call for the rest of Old Testament history: ‘The history of Israel from this point on is in reality merely a commentary upon the degree of fidelity with which Israel adhered to this Sinai-given vocation.’¹² The remainder of the Old Testament narrates how faithful Israel is to this call. Much of the Old Testament is concerned with God’s work to form and shape Israel for this task. This focus on the OT is a specific contribution of Chris Wright’s book.

4. In Jesus God’s purpose to restore the creation comes to a climax.

In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God reveals and accomplishes God’s final purpose of the creation’s restoration. Jesus fulfils the OT story: He fulfils Israel’s calling to bring redemptive blessing to all nations. He embodies Israel’s mission in his life, and accomplishes salvation of world in death and resurrection. He gathers and renews Israel to continue that mission.

5. Church taken up into God’s mission to continue the mission of Israel and Jesus.

The words of Jesus in John 20.21 define the identity and role of the church in God’s mission: ‘As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.’ As the church is incorporated into Christ they take up his mission, but also the mission of Israel. One way to make the missional connection between Israel, Jesus, and the New Testament church is to look at the use that Luke makes of the servant songs of Isaiah. T. S. Moore argues that Luke depicts Jesus as the one who comes to fulfill the calling of the servant in Isaiah whose task it is to bring salvation to the nations.¹³ He argues further that Luke also formulates his version of the concluding commission with the servant of Isaiah in mind.¹⁴ In this way the mission of Jesus is connected to the mission of the church: both discharge the ministry of the Isaianic servant. Thus Luke ‘used the Servant concept not only for his Christology, but also for his missiology.’ Consequently as ‘followers of Christ, believers today are privileged to be commissioned by Him to take up the mission of the Servant.’¹⁵

But the connection can be made not only forward from Jesus’ mission to the church’s mission, but also back from Jesus’ mission to Israel’s mission. Not only does the church continue Jesus’ mission, Jesus fulfills Israel’s mission. The servant songs of Isaiah must be put in the broader Old Testament story of a people called to incarnate as a community the redemptive purposes of God in the midst of the world for the sake of the nations. Isaiah’s promise comes in

¹⁰ John I. Durham, *Exodus* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 263. See further Dumbrell, *Creation and Covenant*, 80-90; Bauckham, *Bible and Mission*, 36-41; Wells, *God’s Holy People*, 27-57, 208-240.

¹¹ Dumbrell, *Creation and Covenant*, 90.

¹² Dumbrell, *Creation and Covenant*, 80.

¹³ Thomas S. Moore, The Lucan Great Commission and the Isaianic Servant, *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154 (January-March 1997), 47-51.

¹⁴ Moore, *The Lucan Great Commission*, 51-58.

¹⁵ Moore, *The Lucan Great Commission*, 60.

the midst of Israel's failure to be the faithful servant and looks forward to one who will arise out of Israel to fulfill her mission to be a light to the nations. Jesus comes as 'one who fulfills Israel's destiny.' When 'Israel's role of world mission . . . was forfeited through disobedience' that role pictured in the servant is 'transferred in the Gospels to Jesus.'¹⁶ The Servant will also gather a renewed Israel who will continue the Servant's mission. Thus we see a missional connection between the roles of Israel, Jesus, and the church as each participates in the missional purpose of God.

We see continuity between Israel and the church in terms of mission but also discontinuity. This mission takes a new form as the form of God's people changes. This gathered and renewed community is transformed by the work of Jesus and the Spirit into a multi-ethnic and non-geographically based community. They are sent to take up their homes and their mission, as it were, in all the nations of the earth.

6. The already-not yet period of the kingdom is an eschatological era of the missional ingathering of the nations.

It was here that several decades ago I began to understand the centrality of mission in the New Testament especially when I read the words of J.H. Bavinck and Oscar Cullman.¹⁷ The prophets promised salvation and judgment. Israel expected that to fall with the coming of the Messiah. However, the final judgment was delayed, and only a foretaste of salvation was given. The kingdom was already here but not yet here. Why? Newbigin answers:

'The meaning of this "overlap of the ages" in which we live, the time between the coming of Christ and His coming again, is that it is the time given for the witness of the apostolic Church to the ends of the earth. The end of all things, which has been revealed in Christ, is—so to say—held back until witness has been borne to the whole world concerning the judgment and salvation revealed in Christ. The

¹⁶ Andreas Köstenberger and Peter T. O'Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2001), 49-50. The role is not only transferred in the gospels but already in Isaiah. Commenting on Isaiah 49:1-6 Brevard Childs speaks of a servant that arises within Israel 'as a faithful embodiment of the nation Israel who has not performed its chosen role (48:1-2)' (*Isaiah*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001, 385).

¹⁷ 'The missionary proclamation of the Church, its preaching of the gospel, gives to the period between Christ's resurrection and the Parousia its meaning for redemptive history. . . .' (Oscar Cullman, *Christ and Time*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, English Translation 1949, 157). It is the eschatological mission of the church which 'takes place precisely in the intermediate period' that 'gives to this period its meaning' (162-163, italics his). J. H. Bavinck makes the following comments based on the analysis of a number of parables: 'According to the above parables such work consists particularly in going out into the highways and byways to invite all to the marriage feast of the king. One may say thus that the interim is preoccupied with the command of missions, and it is the command of missions that gives the interim meaning.' (32). 'Missions and the interim are inseparable.' (*An Introduction to the Science of Missions* Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1960, 34). 'Missions thus developed from the great messianic salvation foretold by the prophets, as the element which will mark the delay. The delay is necessary since the kingdom must now be given to another people. And when that has come about, when this gospel of the kingdom shall have been preached in the whole world, then shall the end come. Missions thus occupies an increasingly important place in the teaching of the gospels. The full realization of the great salvation waits as it were upon that moment when the task of missions shall be brought to completion.' (Ibid., 36).

implication of a true eschatological perspective will be missionary obedience, and the eschatology which does not issue in such obedience is a false eschatology.¹⁸

This already-not yet time period is taken up first with Jesus' mission to Israel, and then with the church's mission to the nations. This is what gives this era its meaning.

7. The mission of God's people involves a missional encounter with culture which both embraces the treasures and opposes the idolatry of all cultures.

I borrow the term 'missional encounter' from Lesslie Newbigin. At the heart of a missional encounter is a clash of stories with an invitation to see the world in a new way; the people of God indwell God's story, and by their lives offer an alternative and an invitation to come live in that story. It involves both affirmation and critique of other cultural stories.

This missional encounter takes place already in the Old Testament between Israel and the surrounding nations. There is an encounter with idolatry which is destructive of human life. This is evident in the encounter with the divine claims of the Pharaoh, with the idolatrous myths that shape Ancient Near Eastern cultures, with the idolatry of Canaan, with Israel's encounter with world empires in the post-exilic period. But there is also already an embrace of the cultural insights of the nations as seen for example in the wisdom literature. Dan Beeby speaks of 'transformed borrowing.'¹⁹ Chris Wright speaks of the interaction with ANE wisdom with a 'staunch monotheistic disinfectant.'²⁰

In the New Testament a missional encounter becomes more problematic. God's people are now non-geographically based and multi-ethnic; they are sent to and live in all cultures of the world. In my judgement missiology's struggle and consequent vast literature on the issue of contextualization has been quite helpful here. Newbigin's model which he develops from his missionary experience in India, and a reading of John (who he believes offers an effective model of missionary communication), is helpful.²¹ It recognises that the gospel is translatable by its very nature.²² It will take on many cultural forms. In the translation into various cultures it both affirms the creational structure and judges the idolatrous twisting of all cultural forms. George E. Ladd's little book *The Pattern of New Testament Truth* is helpful.²³ He speaks of the movement from Old Testament and Jewish form of gospel in synoptic gospels to a translation into classical, pagan culture in John and Paul.

So a missional hermeneutic is sensitive to the issue of gospel and culture, but it is also sensitive to the issue of gospel and cultures. The gospel takes many cultural forms which can

¹⁸ Lesslie Newbigin, *Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church* (American edition. New York: Friendship Press, 1954), 153.

¹⁹ Harry Daniel Beeby, A Missional Approach to Renewed Interpretation, in *Renewing Biblical Interpretation*, eds. Craig Bartholomew, Colin Greene, Karl Möller (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 280.

²⁰ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 50.

²¹ Cf. my Scholarship at the Crossroads: Exploring Lesslie Newbigin's Missionary Model of Contextualization, *European Journal of Theology* 10, 2, (2001), 131-142. Perhaps Newbigin's clearest elaboration of his own view of contextualization is his Christ and Cultures, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 31, 1978, 1-22.

²² Cf. Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989).

²³ George E. Ladd, *The Pattern of New Testament Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968).

offer a mutually enriching and mutually critiquing dialogue. Jim Brownson's fine work has developed this thread.²⁴

Scripture as a Tool of God's Mission

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* . . .'²⁵ Both record and tool are essential to a missional hermeneutic.

Understanding the Bible as a tool of God's mission can be elaborated in the following way.

1. The Old Testament Scriptures were written to 'equip' God's people for their missional purposes.²⁶

The Scriptures are an instrument of God's loving and powerful presence in the world to shape a missional people. Wright suggests that 'a full account of the role of scripture within the life of Israel would appear as a function of Israel's election by God for the sake of the world. Through scripture, God was equipping his people to serve his purposes.' Equipping, Wright continues, is 'inadequate shorthand for the multiple tasks scripture accomplished.'²⁷

It is precisely in order that Israel might fulfill her missional calling and be a light to the nations, the law ordered its national, liturgical, and moral life; wisdom helped to shape daily conduct in conformity to God's creational order; the prophets threatened and warned Israel in her disobedience and promised blessing in obedience; the psalms brought all of Israel's life into God's presence; the historical books continued to tell the story of Israel at different points reminding Israel of and calling Israel to its missional place in the story.

2. The New Testament Scriptures tell the story of God's mission through Israel as it climaxes in Jesus, and bring that story to bear in various ways on the early church to form and equip them for their missional calling in the world.
 - a. Jesus accomplishes what the Old Testament Scriptures had been trying to do—bring salvation to God's people and through them to the world.

²⁴ Jim Brownson, *Speaking the Truth in Love: Elements of a Missional Hermeneutic*, in *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, eds. George Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 228-259; *Speaking the Truth in Love: New Testament Resources for a Missional Hermeneutic* (Harrisburg: PA: Trinity Press International, 1998).

²⁵ N.T. Wright, *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2005), 51.

²⁶ The structure of this section is indebted to N. T. Wright's book *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2005).

²⁷ Wright, *The Last Word*, 37.

The Old Testament arose as a tool to shape God's people into a faithful people prepared to carry out their missional calling. Israel failed because of the sin of their hearts (Rom 8.3-4). Jesus accomplishes what the Torah, and the rest of the Old Testament, could not. Wright says that the 'work which God had done through scripture in the Old Testament is done by Jesus in his public career, his death and resurrection, and his sending of the Spirit. . . . Jesus thus does, climactically and decisively, what scripture had in a sense been trying to do: bring God's fresh Kingdom order to God's people and thence to the world.'²⁸

- b. The apostles' teaching, the gospel, the word of God (all roughly synonymous) was the proclamation of the fulfillment of Israel's story in Jesus.

If Jesus fulfills what the Old Testament had been attempting to accomplish, then it will now be the preaching of Jesus that will shape God's people for their mission in the world. The New Testament refers to this proclamation as the apostles' teaching, as the gospel, as the word of God. Wright summarizes what the word of God was for the apostles: 'It was the story of Jesus (particularly his death and resurrection), told as the climax of the story of God and Israel and thus offering itself as both the true story of the world and the foundation and energizing force for the church's mission.'²⁹

- c. This word or gospel was brought to bear on the church's life in various ways and carried life-changing power in and through the church.

As this word is proclaimed it carried God's life-changing power to form God's people into a faithful people (Rom 1.16; 1 Cor 1.18; 2.4-5). But a brief look at the summaries in the book of Acts show that it had power working through God's people in the world (e.g., Acts 6.7). So we can summarize in this way: God's powerful word called into existence a missional community, shaped that community as a faithful people, and worked through them to draw others to faith.

The gospel is brought to bear on the church's life in various ways. I have found helpful Herman Ridderbos work on the authority of the NT as he opens up that authority with the redemptive-historical categories of *kerygma*, *marturia*, and *didache*.³⁰ These categories translate into various literary genres in the New Testament. It is these various kinds of literature in the NT whose purpose is form God's people into a missional community.

- d. The New Testament is the literary expression of this word of God written to form, equip, and renew the church for their mission in the world.

The New Testament authors, conscious of their authority and inspired by the Spirit, wrote books that would shape the church for its mission. These message of these books called the church into existence, sustained them as God's faithful people, and equipped them for their missional calling. The New Testament authors believed themselves to authorized teachers, who,

²⁸ Wright, *The Last Word*, 43.

²⁹ Wright, *The Last Word*, 48.

³⁰ Herman N. Ridderbos, *Redemptive History and the New Testament Scriptures* (Formerly *The Authority of the New Testament Scriptures*; Translated by H. De Jongste; Revised by Richard B. Gaffin, Jr.; Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company), 49-76.

by the guidance and power of the Spirit, wrote books and letters to sustain, energize, shape, judge, and renew the church.³¹ As such these books ‘carried the same power, the same *authority in action*, that had characterized the initial preaching of the word.’³²

As an example, Michael Barram’s work in showing that Paul’s letters are part of his missional calling is helpful here.³³ Paul was a missionary who established witnessing communities in places where there was none. But as a church planter he was concerned that those congregation bear faithful witness to the gospel in their lives, deeds, and words. His return visits *and his letters* seek to accomplish that end. This missional intent and purpose must be recognised.

Conclusion

This is a provisional attempt to establish the missional frame with which I approach, read, and listen to Scripture in a missional way. No doubt this needs critique and refinement. But what I am convinced of is that the church must be engaged in God’s mission to read the Bible aright because that is what engaged the original authors.

³¹ Wright, *The Last Word*, 51.

³² Ibid

³³ Michael Barram, *The Bible, Mission, and Social Location: Toward a Missional Hermeneutic*, forthcoming in *Interpretation*; cf. also Barram’s *Mission and Moral Reflection in Paul* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005).