

Mission – a discussion paper
Study leave report
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This paper arose out of a period of study leave which I took in August 2008; it is meant as a discussion starter on the topic of mission; it is not the last word on anything! The booklist at the end shows the material that I read during that study period and is not meant as an exhaustive list on books on mission; there are other, equally important, works that have given me much food for thought at other times.

I grew up with the notion that ‘mission is something the Church does’. I was involved in summer mission; I took part in a city-wide mission; the Christian Union organised a mission to the university; my church has a mission statement to outline what we see as our strategy. I participated in a discussion on mission lately in a Scripture Union group of which I am a member and we very quickly began to talk about missions and holidays as something we do to try to evangelise children and young people. For a long time, the Church has seen mission as something we do, either by sending people to other parts of the world as missionaries, or as evangelising the non-Christians of Scotland. We have mission nights in our Churches; we plan events to be evangelistic. The success of our mission depends on the number of people converted as a result of these.

Then we discover certain strange things happening. First of all, we develop a certain neurosis because other people are having more ‘success’ than we are, there are more converts at their meetings than ours; we must be doing something wrong; if only we have the right mission strategy things will be better. Secondly, people are converted at ordinary events, not ‘mission’ ones; people come to faith at other times and places, at events we have organised for other reasons. What’s going on?

Mission is something God does

“*Mission is not ours; mission is God’s...* It is not so much the case that God has a mission for his Church in the world, but God has a church for his mission in the world. Mission was not made for the church; the Church is made for mission – God’s mission.”¹ This is Christopher Wright’s version of a now-classic idea and quote. Mission is not something that we do or that depends on our success or technique. Mission is something that God does. Wright’s book *The Mission of God* is based around this whole premise, that mission is something that God does and that mission is something in which we simply participate. He also says that “God’s will to be known is the mainspring of our mission to make him known... (and this) precedes and undergirds all of the efforts of God’s people in their mission of making him known”.²

Wright’s contention is that this thread runs all the way through the grand narrative of the Bible, rather than coming out of proof texts. However, it is articulated most clearly perhaps in *John 20:21*. On the evening of the resurrection, Jesus is with the

¹ Christopher Wright; *The Mission of God*; IVP 2006; p.62

² Wright; op cit p.129

disciples in the upper room and says “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” God is a God who sends: Jesus has been sent by the Father into the world for a reason; the Father and Jesus send the Spirit into the world to continue the work Jesus began; then finally Jesus speaks of sending His disciples into the world for a reason. God is a sending God who is working out His mission in the world. We are invited to participate in the mission of God for the world.

Here is *The Story*, the grand universal narrative that stretches from creation to new creation, and accounts for everything in between. This is The Story that tells us where we have come from, how we got to be here, who we are, why the world is in the mess it is, how it can be (and has been) changed, and where we are ultimately going. And the whole story is predicated on the reality of this God and the mission of this God. He is the originator of the story, the teller of the story, the prime actor in the story, the planner and guide of the story’s plot, the meaning of the story and its ultimate completion. He is its beginning, end and centre. It is the story of the mission of God, of this God and of no other.³

Seeing mission as something God does, changes the way in which we think; we come away with a very different view of the world as a result of seeing mission as originating with and being completed by God. Here’s Wright’s very practical conclusion:

This is both humbling and reassuring. It is humbling inasmuch as it reminds us that all our efforts would be in vain but for God’s determination to be known. We are neither the initiators of the mission of making God known to the nations nor does it lie in our power to decide how the task will be fully accomplished or when it may be deemed to be complete. But it is also reassuring. For we know that behind all our fumbling efforts and inadequate communication stands the supreme will of the living God, reaching out in loving self-revelation, incredibly willing to open blind eyes and reveal his glory through the treasures of the gospel delivered in the clay pots of his witnesses.⁴

Universality – the gospel for everyone

There is a big picture here. “Mission is what the Bible is all about”⁵. *Genesis 12:1-3* is the place where this big picture is first spelled out. God called Abram and in that calling, expresses some of the big plans that He has for the world. The bottom line of that plan is that “*all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.*” (*Genesis 12:3*) This is not just for Abram, not just for his immediate family, not just for his genetic descendants. The thread continues all the way through the Old Testament, that grace is not just for Israel, but God has a plan that includes all of the nations of the world. At that stage, we are not told how He will do this, only that He will do it.

In *Luke 24:45-47* Jesus teaches the disciples what the Scriptures say about Himself. The focus is on Jesus the Messiah, but the outcome of that sermon is mission; the

³ Wright; op cit. p. 533

⁴ Wright; op cit. p.129

⁵ Wright ; op cit. p.29

disciples have a new responsibility to preach the gospel so that “*repentance and the forgiveness of sins will be preached in His name to all nations*” (Luke 24:47) Jesus saw His mission as primarily to Israel, though some Gentiles did find grace through His ministry. The next stage in God’s mission is to take the gospel to the whole world; the Church in Acts wrestled with the terms and conditions by which the Gentiles would be accepted, but there was no argument about the central thrust of the Church’s mission – the gospel is for everyone.

God’s mission touches the whole world, indeed the whole of creation – ultimately, it is cosmic in scale. He wants to make Himself known to all the nations; He wants the nations to know the rich blessing which He has first of all promised in the Old Testament and then fulfilled and completed in the coming of Jesus. Everyone must hear the story and then must respond to the story with the obedience of faith.

This raises a fundamental question for the Church. How do we make sure that the gospel is for everyone? We are happy to declare the principle, but how true is it in practice? Many Churches are quite successful in attracting people like us, the people who live around us and have a similar style of life. How do we get beyond that to the other parts of our community? Is there a particular kind of person that is attracted to our Church? If that is true, how then do we move beyond that to make sure that the work we do to participate in the mission of God is genuinely open to everyone?

Particularity – God involves us

The big, universal picture is worked out in very particular ways. First of all, God calls Abram. Against the background of Genesis 1-11 and all the problems and sin we see there “What can God do next? Something that only God could have thought of. He sees an elderly, childless couple in the land of Babel and decides to make them the fountainhead, the launch pad of his whole mission of cosmic redemption.”⁶ Then, through the particular people of Israel, His light is meant to shine. Next, through the particular person of Jesus, born in Nazareth, crucified and raised in Jerusalem, the mission is completed. Now, after Jesus, with work still to be done to tell the nations the good news, His Church is the particular way God has chosen by which he will make His name known. Leslie Newbiggin asks the question “How is it possible that the gospel should be credible, that people should come to believe that the power which has the last word in human affairs is represented by a man hanging on a cross?” He goes on to answer his own question: “I am suggesting that the only answer, the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it.”⁷ The grand story is told in very particular ways by this very particular people.

I find this fascinating. The key to God’s mission is particular people. God works through the particularity of the preacher opening up the message of the gospel for people to hear and some come to faith through these faltering attempts to capture something glorious. God works through the particularity of a conversation with someone who is struggling to understand what faith is all about. God works through innumerable, often hidden ways to take His mission to the next stage and we are the

⁶ Wright; op cit p.199

⁷ Leslie Newbiggin; *The Gospel in a pluralist society*; SPCK 1989; p 227

people through whom He works. This is the privilege we have. “The mission is God’s. The marvel is that God invites us to join in.”⁸

Our participation

The particular people, called by God to participate in His mission, are to carry this mission out in 3 ways:

- **Light to the world** – Israel had no great sense of being called to go to the nations, but did have a huge sense of calling to be special. The quality of their life, usually described as ‘be holy’ meant that they would be seen to be different and distinctive from the nations around. To be a light to the nations was the calling of the servant in Isaiah 42:6, a calling taken up by Jesus, both for Himself and for His disciples. (John 8:12; Matthew 5:14) This has always been interpreted, at least in part, as a challenge to a distinctive Christian worldview and lifestyle.
- **Make disciples** – Christians are to teach the world the truth about Jesus and the consequent implications for the way people live and behave. Preaching the gospel of the grace of God in Jesus Christ has been, and continues to be a crucially important part of the Church’s participation in the mission of God. We can be distinctive and different, but at some stage we need to tell people what makes us distinctive.
- **Love one another** – Jesus Himself said that this was one of the key-notes in being His disciples: “*by this will all men know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.*” (John 13:35) Our love for one another does somehow show to the world the One to whom we belong.

Using the words of Genesis 12:3, Wright sums up our part in this story with these words: “There could be worse ways of summing up what mission is supposed to be all about than “Go... and be a blessing””⁹

The whole story is mission?

I want to take the notion that the whole Bible is mission and change it slightly in order to explore something of the way in which we participate in the mission of God. If the whole Bible is mission, then the challenge we face as Church is to make our whole story mission. I spoke at the beginning about ‘mission events’, but is it possible to think in a different way about the relationship between mission and Church? Is it possible to see that every event we plan, every part of Church life has a mission focus?

One of the three aims of my study leave was to draw up a mission-strategy for the congregation. When I was part-way through the time, I decided not to go that way because of the impact on me of the reading. It seems to me now, that the better way to go and the way that fits more naturally with the way in which God works already, is to see the whole church story as mission and for us to have a mission-way-of-thinking about everything that we do in the life of the Church.

This would change the whole way Churches think! We neatly pigeon-hole events so that we know what they are for. We have social events to entertain people and develop our relationships with one another; we have events run by our Nurture

⁸ Wright; op cit p.67

⁹ Wright; op cit p. 214

groups that are meant to help Christians grow in their faith; we have guest services at which we hope that our non-Christian guests will be converted. How would it be if we began to think about every event from a mission point of view? What difference would that make to our attitudes if we simply arranged events knowing that God will be at work in them in His way? Would that take away the neurosis of success or failure? Would that build a sense of expectation over everything we do?

A way of mission

“The fact that God was in the Nazarene neighbourhood for thirty years and no-one noticed should be profoundly disturbing to our normal ways of engaging mission...there is a time to simply become part of the very fabric of a community and to engage in the humanity of it all.”¹⁰ Theologically, we describe this as ‘incarnation’ that God “*became flesh and made His dwelling among us*” (John 1:14) How well is the gospel embedded in our community? How well do we know our communities? Where do non-Christians socialise in our community? What bothers the young people who go to our school? What makes non-Christians tick, what bothers them, what excites them, where do their hopes and dreams lie, what are their social rhythms? First of all we need to understand our communities and be a part of them so that the gospel may be embedded in our society.

This might mean, for example, that a group of young people in school might wish there was a sports club because there is none in the community; another group might yearn to do some kind of drama in their community. Other parts of the Church are better at articulating this than the evangelical Church; indeed we have viewed with suspicion theological developments such as liberation theology because of their desire to become involved in the political and social life of their communities. Often evangelical churches have worked hard to keep themselves distinct from their communities, only venturing out on an evangelistic raid to do a door-to-door visitation or leaflet drop. We need to know our communities and be involved in them; we need to gather information and form relationships with the people we meet and live and work beside; we are challenged by these other theological views to be concerned for the whole person, their day-to-day needs as well as their spiritual ones. The gospel needs to be embedded in our communities through the presence and influence of Christians.

However, on its own ‘presence’ is not enough. Because it seems to go no further than being present in the community, evangelicals have been rightly critical of those who have only sought to be a presence. We are what Alan Hirsch has called a “message tribe.”¹¹ Or Christopher Wright again: “Almost any *starting* point can be appropriate, depending possibly on what is the most pressing or obvious need. Mission may not always *begin* with evangelism. But mission that does not ultimately *include* declaring the Word and the name of Christ, the call to repentance and faith and obedience has not completed its task.”¹² There will always be (and must always be) a place for proclaiming the truth of the gospel. Proclamation gives presence its edge. The mission of God is encapsulated in a story and it is in telling that story that people come to know God and know His blessing.

¹⁰ Alan Hirsch; *The Forgotten Ways*; Brazos Press 2006 p.133

¹¹ Hirsch; op cit p.134

¹² Wright; op cit p.319

And finally...

“All mission or missions which we initiate, or into which we invest our vocation, gifts and energies, flow from the prior and larger reality of the mission of God. *God* is on a mission and we, in that wonderful phrase of Paul, are “co-workers with God” (I Cor 3:9)”¹³ To say that ‘mission is something that God does’ is no reason for us to sit back and do nothing, leaving it all to God. It is true that mission belongs to God and that He has a universal, cosmic plan of redemption to which He is working. However, it is also true that He has entrusted the working out of that plan to us, to His particular people.

For me, this paper has set out some of the big picture of God’s Mission that, in particular, Christopher Wright has opened up in his book. I have not been able to list all of the questions that are in my mind as a result of this big picture. There are some fundamental principles of Church life that are challenged by what I have read. I will sum up with only two of these questions that in themselves are big-picture questions at the heart of who we are as Christians and as part of the Christian Church:

What kind of Church does God expect for His mission in the world?

What kind of me does God want for His mission?

Bibliography

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