

A Dialogue with N. T. Wright
Jesus: A Public Figure Making a Public Announcement.
Mission, Worldview, and the People of God

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*The Mission of God's People and Biblical Interpretation:
Exploring N.T. Wright's Missional Hermeneutic*

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Introduction

The term 'the gospel as public truth' is a phrase that became quite characteristic of Lesslie Newbigin's work during the 1980s and 1990s. He coined the phrase to brand, as it were, his whole mission in Western culture programme. For Newbigin the gospel was public truth for all people in all times and places, and for the whole of their lives both public and private. The church was entrusted with this gospel and charged to make it known to all peoples in all of their lives both public and private. What Newbigin found in the Western church upon his return from India was a gospel that had been relegated to the private sphere. The gospel had been accommodated to the reigning doctrine of the public square which proclaimed science as public truth. Newbigin's programme was to call the church back to its mission, to encounter and confront the comprehensive religious vision of Western culture with the truth of the gospel. And so, the catchphrase 'the gospel as public truth' was a challenge to the Western church to announce the gospel and embody it across the entire spectrum of its life.

On more than one occasion Tom has referred to Newbigin's notion of the gospel as public truth as expressing something that defines his own work. Of course, Tom comes at this from a different angle—as biblical scholar rather than missiologist—but there is indeed, in my judgment, a remarkable similarity in their approach. My task is to explore the way that mission is a central element in the big picture that shapes Tom's work.

I come to this dialogue as one whose scholarly work has engaged Lesslie Newbigin's thought and especially his concern for the gospel as public truth. Moreover I have been working, along

with others, toward a missional hermeneutic. And in my study I have found wonderful resources in Tom's writings and so in my brief presentation I want to open up three areas of his work that are especially fruitful for the ongoing conversation around a missional hermeneutic.

The notion of a missional hermeneutic is variously used. The three elements that I will explore are offered by Richard Bauckham's definition of a missional or (as Richard himself calls it) a 'missionary hermeneutic'¹. A missional hermeneutic is a way of reading Scripture . . .

- in which mission is the hermeneutical key . . . not simply a study of the theme of mission in the biblical writings, but a way of reading the whole of Scripture with mission as its central interest and goal
- which seeks to understand what the church's mission really is in the world as Scripture depicts it
- which inspires and informs the church's missionary praxis

In the rest of this paper I will briefly touch on these three aspects as they appear in Tom's writings highlighting themes that are important for the ongoing conversation concerning a missional hermeneutic.

Reading the whole of Scripture with mission as its goal

The first element of a missional hermeneutic in Tom's work begins with the confession that Scripture tells the true story of the whole world, that it is public truth.² And more specifically it is a record of God's mission to restore the whole creation through the mission of his chosen people. Thus the whole story of Scripture must be read with mission as one of its central goals.

There are two essential components in Tom's work that are worth noting in this regard. The first is the importance of the Old Testament in a missional hermeneutic. Johannes Blauw rightly observes:

When we speak about the Church as 'the people of God in the world' and enquire into the real nature of this Church, we cannot avoid speaking about the *roots* of the Church which are to be found in the Old Testament idea of Israel as the people

¹ Richard Bauckham, 'Mission as Hermeneutic for Scriptural Interpretation', 1. Unpublished paper.

² *New Testament and the People of God*, 41-42.

of the covenant. So the question of the *missionary* nature of the Church, that is, the real relationship between the people of God and the world, cannot be solved until we have investigated the relation between Israel and the nations of the earth.³

Similarly Tom comments that for some of his critics ‘the long story of Israel seems to function merely as a backdrop, a source of prooftexts and types, rather than as itself the story of God’s saving purpose.’⁴ By the time we reach the mission of the new covenant people in Tom’s work it has been fully informed by several millennia of Israel’s history that have shaped the missional identity of God’s people as a light to the world in the full spectrum of their lives.

The second feature is the scope of the salvation that is central to the biblical story. A ‘soteriological self-centredness’⁵ (to use GC Berkouwer’s term) has marginalised the cosmic scope of the biblical story and has led in turn to an emaciated missional hermeneutic. Newbigin complains that we have abstracted the individual from God’s bigger story that gives the person’s story meaning. Many read the biblical story, he says, starting with the question of individual salvation and in so doing privatise God’s mighty work of grace and talk ‘as if the whole cosmic drama of salvation culminated in the words, “For me; for me.”’ This is a perversion of the gospel, he says.⁶

Similarly Tom says that in the last 200 years we have ‘overemphasised the individual at the expense of the larger picture of God’s creation.’⁷ The problem is that when ‘we start with the future hope of the individual, there is always the risk that we will at least by implication, understand that as the real center of everything and treat the hope of creation as mere embroidery around the edges.’ He thus structures his following argument in terms of the ‘large-scale hope of the whole cosmos, the great drama within which our little dramas are, as it were, the play within the play. What is God’s purpose for the world as a whole?’⁸

³ Johannes Blauw, “The Mission of the People of God”, in *The Missionary Church in East and West*, eds. Charles C. West and David M. Paton (London: SCM Press, 1959), 91.

⁴ *Justification*, 11.

⁵ G. C. Berkouwer, *The Return of Christ*, 211.

⁶ Lesslie Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 179.

⁷ Says one German Lutheran theologian: ‘This cosmic aspect of redemption was increasingly lost to Western Christendom since the Age of Enlightenment, and to this day we have been unable to restore it to its strength and clarity’ (Adolf Köberle, *Der Herr über alles : Beiträge zum Universalismus d. christl. Botschaft* [Hamburg : Furche-Verl., 1957], 103).

⁸ *Surprised by Hope*, 80

I suggest that the logic of the biblical story that will nourish a robust missional hermeneutic is cosmic-communal-individual. God's goal is a *cosmic*, creation-wide renewal; he chooses a *community* to embody that future; and *individuals* are called to join this community and play their role in the bigger story.

Scott has emphasised the centrality of the covenant with its 'dual emphasis on the election of a people and their intrinsic connection with God's purposes to recover his whole creation as his kingdom.'⁹ Indeed, for Tom both covenant and election are fundamentally missional. '*The purpose of the covenant was never simply that the creator wanted to have Israel as a special people, irrespective of the rest of the world.*'¹⁰ The covenant envisages a people 'who are to be his special people for the sake of the world.'¹¹ Likewise 'election was never about Israel being called for its own sake, but always about God's call of Israel to be a light of the world.'¹² To forget this missional aim of the covenant is to 'betray the purpose for which that covenant was made. It is as though [what a comical image!] the postman were to imagine that all the letters in his bag were intended for him.'¹³ Rooted in the Abrahamic and Sinaitic covenant Israel was to 'function as a people who would show the rest of humanity what being human was all about.'¹⁴ Yet the people failed treating the covenant as 'exclusive privilege.'¹⁵ Called to 'model genuinely human existence'¹⁶ they were unfaithful to that commission, served idols, and thus became part of the problem. Upon Israel's failure Jesus takes their vocation to be the light of the world upon himself. In his ministry he calls a community to be with him inviting and showing them how they are to be the light of the world.¹⁷ In his life, death and resurrection he deals with the sin of the world including the sin of Israel so that they might fulfil their original vocation. The new covenant people of God are 'humanity renewed in Christ' called now to fulfil the original vocation of Israel which they had failed to attain.¹⁸ Jesus sends them to continue his own mission, the original mission of Israel. They are to discharge their mission to the world as he has to Israel. With the outpouring of His Spirit, God calls 'into being the new covenant people, the

⁹ Scott Hahn, 'A Dialogue with Tom Wright', 2-3.

¹⁰ *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 118.

¹¹ *Simply Christian*, 69.

¹² *Paul*, 119.

¹³ *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 108.

¹⁴ *Bringing the Church to the World*, 59.

¹⁵ *Paul*, 36.

¹⁶ *Scripture and the Authority of God*, 39.

¹⁷ *Bringing the Church to the World*, 66; *Jesus and Victory of God*, 288-289.

¹⁸ *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 136.

restored Israel-for-the-world.’¹⁹ This renewed Israel transformed through Jesus and the Spirit is a now ‘multi-ethnic, non-geographically-based people charged with a mission to the world . . .’²⁰ And so, the ‘church exists . . . for what we sometimes call “mission”’: to announce to the world that Jesus is its Lord. . . . Mission, in its widest as well as its more focused senses, is what the church is there for.’²¹ The church is ‘designed—it isn’t too strong a word—to be a sign and foretaste of what God wants to do for the entire cosmos. What’s more, such people are not just to be a sign and foretaste of that ultimate salvation; they are to be *part of the means by which* God makes this happen in both the present and the future.’²²

This all too brief, and no doubt incomplete, summary of some of Tom’s high points of the story highlights the centrality of mission in the story the Bible tells. But I want to emphasise here that this is not simply tracing the theme of mission but a hermeneutical lens on whole of Scripture. For example, about the Old Testament Tom says:

The canonical Old Testament *frames the entire story* of God’s people as the divine answer to the problem of evil: somehow, through this people, God will deal with the problem that has infected his good creation in general and his image-bearing creatures in particular. Israel is to be God’s royal nation of holy priests, chosen out of the world but also for the sake of the world. Israel is to be the light of the world: the nations will see in Israel what it means to be truly human, and hence who the true God is.²³

To say that the mission of God’s people to be the light of the world ‘frames the entire story’ is to say more than it is simply a theme. The point is that mission is a hermeneutical lens to read the whole of Scripture. Similar statements could be made, I think, about the gospels, Acts, and Paul’s letters in Tom’s work. For example, of the gospels Tom tells us that ‘an entire hermeneutic world’ opened up to him as he read John 20.21: ‘As the father has sent me, so I send you.’ Jesus’ own mission is the source and template of our mission as we receive the Spirit. This demands ‘that the church again and again study the historical mission of Jesus . . . to realign

¹⁹ *Scripture and the Authority of God*, 49.

²⁰ *Scripture and the Authority of God*, 54.

²¹ *Simply Christian*, 204.

²² *Surprised by Hope*, 200.

²³ *Paul*, 109. My emphasis.

itself with the shape and content of that mission in order to carry out its own.’²⁴ This offers to us a missional lens for reading the gospels.

Mission is a central part of the big-picture narrative that shapes Tom’s work. He says that if he is ‘accused of having in [his] head a “large narrative” which [he] uses for interpreting the Gospels, [he] pleads guilty—and summons the Four Evangelists to [his] defense.’²⁵ I suggest that a central thread in that large narrative that Tom uses to interpret the Gospels, and the Old Testament and Paul as well, is a rich and comprehensive understanding of mission.

The Comprehensive Scope of the Church’s Mission

Second, a missional hermeneutic seeks to understand what the church’s mission really is in the world as Scripture depicts it. Indeed mission often remains a mere shadow of its biblical self in much writing on missional church, and so Tom rightly says at one point that ‘we must also reshape our ideas of mission itself.’²⁶ How does he understand mission in the biblical story?

Tom says much about the nature of mission that is in harmony with many other writers. But I want to highlight here a feature that simply does not get the attention it deserves—viz. the comprehensive scope of mission. The problem has been, and continues to be, that a mistaken understanding of the nature of salvation has impoverished mission. ‘As long as we see salvation in terms of going to heaven when we die,’ Tom says, ‘the main work of the church is bound to be seen in terms of saving souls for that future. But when we see salvation, as the New Testament sees it, in terms of God’s promised new heavens and new earth and of our promised resurrection to share in that new and gloriously embodied reality . . . then the main work of the church here and now demands to be rethought in consequence.’²⁷ It is precisely when we get our eschatology straight—a vision of the goal of cosmic restoration that has broken into the present—that ‘we will rediscover the historical basis for the full-orbed mission of the church.’²⁸

I have already referred to Israel’s mission as the call to ‘model genuinely human existence’ and to demonstrate ‘what it means to be truly human.’ This comprehensive mission is based on at least five things in Tom’s writing: 1) on a strong theology of creation; 2) on the resurrection

²⁴ *Jesus, Paul, and the People of God*, 151.

²⁵ *Jesus, Paul, and the People of God*, 131.

²⁶ *Surprised by Hope*, 193.

²⁷ *Surprised by Hope*, 197.

²⁸ *Surprised by Hope*, 200-201.

that inaugurates the new creation in which the church participates; 3) on the ascension where Christ is enthroned as Lord over all creation with mission as a call to make known his lordship; 4) on a gospel of the kingdom that is the good news of the restoration of God's rule over all creation; 5) and on a comprehensive salvation that is the restoration of the whole world.

In language reminiscent of Abraham Kuyper and C. S. Lewis Tom says that 'It is the Christian claim that every square inch of the world, every split second of time, belongs to Jesus, by right of the creation and by right of redeeming love.'²⁹ And so he can speak of moving from worship straight into tasks like humanizing and harmonizing beauty in architecture, work in office and shop, shaping public life, campaigning for decent libraries and sporting facilities, discussing town planning, running playgroups for children of single working moms, organising credit unions for the poor, and creative and healthy farming methods, among other things, and then repeat the refrain three times: 'This is not an extra to the church's mission. It is central.'³⁰ Tom's comment on farming and caring for soil reminds me of Newbigin's comment that 'a farmer who farms his land well but neglects to say his prayers will be certainly condemned by Christians as failing in his duty. But a farmer who says his prayers, and allows weeds, bad drainage, or soil erosion to spoil his land, is failing in his primary duty as a churchman. His primary ministry in the total life of the Body of Christ is to care rightly for the land entrusted to him. If he fails there, he fails in his primary Christian task.'

Thus essential to mission are the various callings believers have in all walks of life. 'The gospel of Jesus points us' Tom says, 'and indeed urges us, to be at the leading edge of the whole culture, articulating in story and music and art and philosophy and education and poetry and politics and theology and even, heaven help us, biblical studies a worldview which will mount the historically rooted Christian challenge to both modernity and postmodernity . . .'³¹ Mission in our vocations is not simply a matter of evangelism and personal ethics—although it is that—but to embody God's new creation in those areas in such a way as to raise questions, to set up signposts that say there is a different way to be human. When people are puzzled it leads to evangelism, the telling of the gospel as the explanation.³² In fact, the gospel—an announcement of God's victory over the powers of evil in Jesus—is laughable unless the church is

²⁹ *Bringing the Church to the World*, 150.

³⁰ *Surprised by Hope*, 265-266.

³¹ *Challenge of Jesus*, 151; cf. *Bringing the Church to the World*, 142, 150.

³² *Challenge of Jesus*, 143-144.

demonstrating his lordship in all these areas of life, and ‘in addition, its own internal life gives every sign that new creation is indeed happening, generating a new type of community—then suddenly the announcement makes a lot of sense.’³³

Living as new creation people under the Lordship of Christ in all these areas of human life will necessarily mean a confrontation with an equally comprehensive story shaping a communal way of life in service to other gods. It will mean a confrontation of the idols that dominate the culture and public square. And so in our mission we will insist he says, ‘on worshiping Jesus in the place where other forces, other gods, hold sway’ and ‘planting the flag in hostile soil’³⁴ Similar to Newbigin’s notion of a missionary encounter, confrontation does not simply mean a sterile polemical opposition: it means a loving involvement in the cultural task that appreciates the creational good while rejecting the idolatrous distortion.

It is worth at least briefly noting three important emphases that arise out of Tom’s comprehensive understanding of mission that encounters a different story: suffering will be essential to the church’s mission; the church will need to develop a robust worship and prayer life; and finally, there is a need for community to support and nourish the people of God in its new life in Christ.

Bible as a tool for mission

A third and final element of a missional hermeneutic is that we read and interpret Scripture so as to inspire and inform the church’s missionary praxis. In my judgment this is perhaps the most exciting and novel contribution Tom has made to a missional hermeneutic even though I will be much too brief in this section.³⁵

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 also take an active part in accomplishing his mission.³⁶ The authority of Scripture

³³ *Surprised by Hope*, 227.

³⁴ *Bringing the Church to the World*, 150.

³⁵ I have written on this elsewhere: “Continuing Steps Toward a Missional Hermeneutic,” *Fideles*, 3 (2008), 90-97.

³⁶ See *Scripture and the Authority of God*, 21-59; *Simply Christian*, 180-190;

must be understood, then, in terms of its place and role in this story, or as he puts it another way, provocatively perhaps, biblical authority is a “sub-branch . . . of the mission of the church.”³⁷

Over against many post-Enlightenment options, conservative and liberal, God’s “self-revelation is always to be understood within the category of God’s mission to the world, God’s saving sovereignty let loose through Jesus and the Spirit and aimed at the healing and renewal of the creation.”³⁸ To rightly understand the authority of Scripture, then, is to understand its formative role, how it powerfully works to shape a missional people and through them the healing of the world. To miss this role and purpose of Scripture is to misunderstand its nature and authority.

Implications for Biblical Scholarship

This is, after all, a seminar on biblical scholarship. So let me close with three things from what I have said important for biblical scholarship.

1. First, the more general point: If we are to interpret Scripture correctly ‘we must learn to read and understand it in the light of that overall story.’³⁹ Biblical scholarship needs to be shaped by the worldview or controlling story of Scripture itself. Yet the Enlightenment story and worldview have played an enormous role in shaping biblical interpretation often undermining many things I have emphasised in this paper. And so there needs to be the same missionary encounter or confrontation in biblical scholarship itself that takes place in the rest of cultural life. This will gratefully acknowledge, of course, that methods shaped by the Enlightenment have indeed brought new light to Scripture. However, it has also brought much distortion. There is a need for a confrontation with biblical scholarship that works out of a different story and worldview—a confrontation that embraces the insights and rejects the distortions.
2. Second, more specifically, mission is a central element of that overall story. And thus a missional hermeneutic is essential for a true interpretation of Scripture. And yet it

³⁷ *Scripture and the Authority of God*, 27-28.

³⁸ *Scripture and the Authority of God*, 29.

³⁹ *Surprised by Hope*, 281.

remains rare in mainstream biblical scholarship. The wonderful work of David Bosch, Chris Wright, Richard Bauckham, and other fine scholars, for example, in the GOCN missional hermeneutic forum in SBL and the BISAM group in the International Association for Mission Studies is a wonderful start. But it remains an exotic item on the fringes of biblical scholarship where, it seems, it can be safely ignored. This has to change for the sake of the church and the world.

3. Biblical scholarship must ultimately serve the church in its mission. It seems to me that this is an urgent need. As Bauckham points out too often ‘the academic guild of biblical scholars’ has a ‘largely self-generated agenda [that] increasingly excludes the church from its context and implied audience.’ Biblical scholarship, he insists, must ‘address the church in its mission to the world’ and even make the church in the West, that is now waking up to its mission, not simply its audience but its dialogue partner.⁴⁰ Here I suggest we need much more work on how the various genres of both the Old and New Testaments can equip God’s people for their mission.

Tom’s work has been widely influential but the widespread reception of his work seems not to have engaged the fundamental importance of worldview and big picture themes in biblical scholarship or the centrality of mission in the biblical story. Surely there is a major blindspot and a disabling prejudice (to use Gadamer’s terminology) at work here that needs to be explored and addressed.

⁴⁰ Bauckham, ‘Mission as Hermeneutic for Scriptural Interpretation’, 1-2.