

Missional hermeneutics: some opportunities and questions



Author: Dr Milton Acosta is Professor of Old Testament at Seminario Bíblico de Colombia.

This is a very interesting, stimulating, and well argued presentation. The Christian church, and perhaps especially evangelicals, need to be reminded that the mission of God in the world is not limited to evangelism. Also, Chris has presented convincing arguments to persuade his audience that mission is not just something the Bible talks about, but a hermeneutical key to understand the Bible. The idea of mission itself as a grid or lens through which we read the whole Bible is quite fascinating.

With his mission lens Wright takes us to the book of Jeremiah and shows us a few things. The summary of the argument is that God did indeed choose Israel but God did so as a means by which the nations would know and glorify God. Since Israel failed in that role, they were judged by God and taken into exile. The failure is more than just “believing in God”; it has to do with the ethical implications of that belief in society. And finally, God’s mercy and judgment apply to any nation on earth, as other Old Testament books also clearly demonstrate. Therefore, mission in the Bible is more than a topic, something the church does, a strategy, or a personal calling. It is a sort of interpretive paradigm by which we can understand the Bible as a whole.

Methodologically then, I think this approach could open new avenues not only for the study of missions, but for the construction a more encompassing biblical theology. Perhaps it would help evangelicals read their Bibles all over again and wean us off proof-texting practices when trying to persuade churches to do mission during the mission week.

Now the questions. I have used the word mission because that is what Chris has used in his paper and I do not have a better one. I do wonder, however, how this “new” hermeneutical key relates to other “old” and “big” hermeneutical keys such as the kingdom of God, for example. There are many cases in the Bible where this language is used; many times in the Old Testament God is called (among other titles) “king.” Kingdom of God is also very prominent in the preaching of Jesus, as it is evident in the New Testament, and as many twentieth century scholars have shown. But God is never called “a missionary” anywhere in the Bible.

In his book *The Mission of God* (pp. 33ff.), Wright argues that a missional hermeneutic is not just another way of reading the text. His aim is to find the coherence of the whole Bible. That is fine, but what does it mean to use mission as a hermeneutical key for reading the Bible in relation to other keys such as the kingdom of God that attempt to do the same thing? What does the mission key do to the kingdom key? Do we throw out the other key and use the new one only? I’m not against the idea of mission. It is just that I do not see how it works when older and bigger keys are brought to bear.

What limitations are there from reading a book such as Jeremiah’s with mission as a hermeneutical key? Are we reading it at the expense of other keys, for example Moltmann’s “eschatology of mission”? Could we equally use human displacement as an equally coherence-seeking hermeneutical key for reading the Bible since there is so much of it (Eden, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, the exodus, Judges, Ruth, David, the northern kingdom, the Exile (Jeremiah included) and Return, Jesus, Early Church, Paul, John)?

Please Note: The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of Redcliffe College.

If you would like to respond to this article, please use the 'Voice your comments' form on the [Encounters](http://www.redcliffe.org/encounters) website (www.redcliffe.org/encounters). You may prefer to email your response to mission@redcliffe.org, in which case please remember to include your full name, your organisation/role and whether you would like your comments posted on the [Encounters](http://www.redcliffe.org/encounters) discussion board.