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# Making A Difference: A Conversation with Chris Wright's *The Mission of God*

It is a daunting task to be asked to review a book of this scope and magnitude (581pp). When you are a former student being asked to review one of your teachers, there is a certain reluctance to undertake such a task. Chris was one of our lecturers when we studied at All Nations Christian College (ANCC) in the late 1980's. We enjoyed his lectures, both content and style, and were grateful for his input then as now. Indeed, I can hear echoes of some of the content of his lectures as I read through the book. I really do not think we would have coped with some of the complexities of mission service had it not been for our years at ANCC where Chris' lectures were a vital part of our formation. For the strength of Chris' lectures, and to a certain extent, the strength of this book, is the application and the challenge to work out an understanding of the biblical text in our daily lives and in our discipleship.

## Why read the Bible?

It is exactly this point of relating the Bible to daily life and discipleship that challenges me more and more. Why exactly do we read the Bible? Why do we read lengthy books such as this? What is the purpose of our reading and reflection? A Korean scholar who teaches in the USA observes

Since coming to teach in the West I often ask my seminary students why they read and study the Bible. I find that for most the goal of their biblical studies is not clearly defined.<sup>1</sup>

Why do we read the Bible? Is it to amass more head knowledge or is it to become more like Jesus in thought, word and deed? Other scholars from the Majority World have lamented the dryness and barrenness of Western biblical scholarship – so much of it intended for academia which is not wrong in itself perhaps but is it scholarship that engages with real issues and is life-changing? Philip Jenkins notes, 'for the growing churches of the Global South, the Bible speaks to everyday, real-world issues of poverty and debt, famine and urban crisis, racial and gender oppression, state brutality and persecution'.<sup>2</sup> He concludes that the approach to the Bible in the South 'carries a freshness and authenticity that adds vastly to its credibility as an authoritative source and a guide for daily living'.<sup>3</sup> We in the West would do well to heed this approach so that our approach to Bible reading and exposition takes us from a stance of

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<sup>1</sup> Lee 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Jenkins 2006: 5.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

learned observation to applied engagement. Or, as David Bosch, the great South African missiologist, so aptly said, let us move from a theology of the balcony to a theology of the road.

### Mission as the key?

This book is really Chris' *magnum opus*, the culmination of years of reflection, teaching and writing on the mission of God. He recalls those early days at ANCC where he found teaching a course such as 'The Biblical Basis of Mission' an increasing frustration and misnomer. He argues that a course title such as this diminishes mission rather than enhances it. He wanted his students then, and wants us now, to see that 'the whole Bible itself is a "missional phenomenon"' (22). This immediately shows where Chris is coming from. For Chris, mission is the key to the whole biblical narrative. This is clearly stated in the book's title and subtitle, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's grand narrative*. Chris claims that 'mission is, in my view, a major key that unlocks the whole grand narrative of the canon of Scripture.' (17) So we are clear right from the beginning that mission is the thread, the *leitmotif*, the key that will unlock the Scriptures.

Mostly, I am comfortable with this – mostly, but not entirely. You may be surprised at this. After all, I have been a mission partner, I work for CMS – a mission society – and I teach mission studies. Surely mission is the key. Well, yes and no. I think I would prefer to see mission as a hermeneutical lens through which to view the Scriptures but Jesus as the key. I hope this does not sound horribly pedantic and pious but there is a world of difference between a concept (vital as mission is) and a person. Transformation is to be found in relationship with Jesus, not in the 'key' of mission. Nor am I terribly comfortable with the 'key' metaphor. Does the Bible need unlocking? Do we not all have access to the Scriptures, from the illiterate people of mainly oral cultures who can hear it read, and appreciate its rhythms and cadences, to the highly educated biblical scholar? Is this not what we, as Protestants, affirm? Of course, it can lead us into huge hermeneutical problems and rampant individualism if we are not reading and willing to be corrected in community, but essentially we can come to the Scriptures, with the aid of the Holy Spirit, to be taught, rebuked, corrected and transformed. In my opinion, 'unlocking' the Bible is an unhappy metaphor which raises more questions than it solves.

### The whole book and the whole person

The book is long and so it is not for the faint-hearted. The Contents page shows us that it is divided into four parts and fifteen chapters. This is followed by an 'Outline of the Book' which helpfully divides each chapter into further headings and sub-headings. This is fine in order to provide a quick overview of the book but not very helpful if you are searching for something as there are no page numbers given in the Outline. There are minimal but adequate footnotes, good indexes of both names and subjects and a full bibliography. It should be noted that the book focuses heavily, but not exclusively, on the Old Testament. Chris is, after all, an Old Testament specialist. But because of the book's thematic approach the

New Testament does get a fair hearing. Of the eight and a half pages of Scripture references at the back of the book, two and a half refer to the New Testament. Perhaps this is a fair representation after all.

One final comment before moving on to engage with some aspects of the book. I always find it deeply reassuring when I know the author (artist, musician) leads (or tries to lead) an authentic life. I know we are broken people and that life is messy and that great beauty can emerge from the most extraordinary messiness. I admire the work of Picasso, for example, but I do not admire the way he used some women as his muses which was, in my opinion, quite simply, exploitation. However, I know Chris has tried to lead a life transformed by the love of Christ. This is worth a lot for this is what Christian discipleship is all about – the integrity and harmony of scholarship backed up by a life well lived.

In what follows I am going to give you a brief overview of some of the things I liked, what I did not like, and, finally, how this book has made a difference to me.

## What I Liked

### I - Definition of mission

Defining mission seems to be a vexed question so I am glad Chris deals with it at the beginning. He gives us a clear and holistic definition, focussed on God (God appears five times in the definition) and our role

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. (23)

This definition takes the focus off us and puts it on God but it invites us to participate with God in God's world here and now. It also highlights redemption for the whole of God's creation.

The Five Marks of mission have been generally accepted by the Anglican Communion as our understanding and outworking of mission although the fifth mark concerning creation care was a latecomer and added subsequently to the other four marks. They are:

1. To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
2. To teach, baptise and nurture new believers
3. To respond to human need by loving service
4. To seek to transform unjust structures of society
5. To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth

The Five Marks seem to focus more on mission engagement while Chris' definition focuses rather on the source – God and God's purposes for humanity. He also succinctly deals with all the derivative terminology – missionary (which has morphed into 'mission partner' for some agencies), missiology, and also (clearly distinguishing between the two) missological and missional.

## II - Multicultural Hermeneutics and Missional Hermeneutics

'Slowly but inexorably the world of Western academic theology is becoming aware of the rest of the world.' (38) Finally! For me, this immediately calls to mind the Kenyan theologian, John Mbiti's impassioned plea,

Theologians from the new (or younger) churches have made their pilgrimages to the theological learning of the older churches. We had no alternative. We have eaten theology with you; we have drunk theology with you; we have dreamed theology with you. But it has all been one-sided; it has all been in a sense your theology... We know you theologically. The question is do you know us theologically? Would you like to know us theologically?<sup>4</sup>

This plea was made in 1976, over thirty years ago. Chris reminds us that mission has radically changed the map of global Christianity and that 75% of today's Christians live in the Global South or Majority World. We know that the centre of gravity of the Christian world has shifted to the Majority World and we have known this for at least ten years. Back in 1996, Scottish missiologist, Andrew Walls told us that

the representative Christian lands now appear to be in Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, and other parts of the southern continents. This means that Third World theology is now likely to be the representative Christian theology.<sup>5</sup>

This latter statement is still sadly untrue if one casts even a cursory glance over theological curricula in any Western seminary where course content remains determinedly and unashamedly Western. Chris states that we 'now live with multicultural hermeneutics' (38) and that the concept of multicultural hermeneutics goes right back to the Bible itself as the early church exhibited different ways of handling the Scriptures depending on context and the needs being addressed. We are creatures of context and I fail to understand why so many people seem to be uneasy or suspicious of context. It seems to me intellectually dishonest. We are creatures of time and place – with all the limitations and richness of perspective which that can offer. Exegesis without cultural assumptions is just not possible.

In a recent article on theological method in an era of world Christianity, Kevin Vanhoozer suggests that

the sea change in twentieth-century hermeneutics – the shift from epistemology to ontology, away from questions of method to questions of human being – has everything to do with context.<sup>6</sup>

We dare not claim either objectivity or universality. We are situated in a context and inevitably our social location will affect our hermeneutics. Chris is therefore reminding us not only of 'the multiplicity of perspectives and contexts from which and within which people read the biblical texts' (39) but also and more importantly for us in the West (as non-representative world Christians) what we can learn from those in other contexts. He writes,

What persons of one culture bring from that culture to their reading of a text may illuminate dimensions or implications of the text itself that persons of another culture may have not seen so clearly. (39)

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Bediako 1997: 155.

<sup>5</sup> Walls 1996: 9-10.

<sup>6</sup> Vanhoozer 2007: 93-4.

This echoes what Kwame Bediako wrote recently,

...the new Christian reality in the world enables a fresh understanding of Christianity itself, so that African (as well as Asian or South American) perspectives can have relevance beyond their immediate settings.<sup>7</sup>

And how we all need this in our globalised world today! Chris goes on to illustrate this with an example which is found unfortunately in the footnote not in the main body of the text. He relates (39) how Chadian Arabic believers who read the Joseph story for the first time in their language understand so well the protracted reconciliation incident in this story.

We all need more of this.<sup>8</sup> We need the insights from our sisters and brothers from other countries and contexts, to open up new insights and dimensions for us. As liberation theologian Carlos Mesters put it so beautifully, 'when the people pluck the string (the biblical text), it resonates in the community and out comes the music'.<sup>9</sup> And so a multicultural hermeneutic will lead to a missional hermeneutic.

But is there not a danger that all this will merely amount to 'aggregating all the possible ways of reading its [the Bible] texts, from all the multicoloured church and mission contexts around the globe' (40)? Chris argues for diversity with methodological and theological limits as well as for a hermeneutic of coherence. This is where it gets tricky, I feel. Who determines the limits and what is the criterion for coherence? Argentinian theologian, Rene Padilla, suggests 'hermeneutics that gives priority to life recovers the biblical emphasis on the actual *doing* of the will of God *vis a vis* the intellectual assent to truth'.<sup>10</sup> A theology of the road rather than the balcony.

Chris suggests,

*Jesus* himself provided the hermeneutical coherence within which all disciples must read these texts, that is, in the light of the story that leads *up to* Christ (messianic reading) and the story that leads *on from* Christ (missional reading). (41)

Jesus provides the key – I like that. With Jesus as the key we can be trusted. Chris goes on to explore the hermeneutic of 'interest' found in contextual theologies while also discrediting the myth that Western theology is somehow context-free.

His brief section entitled, 'Exploding the missionary stereotype' (43-5) is well worth reading. Here he reminds us that 'much more than half of all the Christian missionaries serving in the world today are not white and Western' (43). This naturally has huge implications for mission. No longer can Christian missionaries be accused of representing and exporting colonialism or oppression. They may be accused of other things and we hear in the religious media what the Global North thinks of the Global South. I felt that Chris could have expanded this section to reflect on what may be the implications for the church and mission as we experience this great reversal. But at least he has made us aware that just as the heartlands of Christianity have moved, so has the impetus in missionary sending.

Chris concludes this section with a recognition that postmodern hermeneutics, while celebrating diversity, rejects any 'unitive coherence' (45) and maintains that he is offering a missional hermeneutic after the Bible:

7 Bediako 2006: 43.

8 See Pope-Levison and Levison 1999 for an example of a multiplicity of perspectives on a variety of biblical texts.

9 Mesters 1992: 54.

10 Padilla 2000. Lecture given at the Bible College of New Zealand (Auckland campus).

the Bible which glories in *diversity* and celebrates multiple human *cultures*, the Bible which builds its most elevated theological claims on utterly *particular* and sometimes very *local* events, the Bible which sees everything in *relational*, not abstract, terms, and the Bible which does the bulk of its work through the medium of *stories*. (47)

### III - Exodus and Jubilee

I have always loved the Exodus story. God hears the cries of his people and God acts in history to rescue them. This is a very clear picture of salvation and liberation. I appreciated Chris' treatment of God's comprehensive redemption – a biblical understanding of redemption presents us with this fully-orbed and material approach to redemption. Chris explains that in the Exodus story 'we have the first and foundational account in which the God of the Bible is presented as Redeemer' (268). We are presented with a comprehensive redemption encompassing the political, economic, social and spiritual aspects of life. He also explains how the Israelites' slavery prevented them from fulfilling their destiny – to serve and worship God. This is a poignant reminder for us in this year, 2007, in which we remember not only the abolition of the slave trade but also the millions still enslaved in various ways in our world (women enslaved by sex trafficking, child labour, addictions of various kinds) and how they too are prevented from fulfilling their destiny. Chris states that 'YHWH is the exodus God. YHWH is the God who sees, hears and knows about the suffering of the oppressed' (275). In a world of increasing brokenness and despair, whether in the West or in the Majority World, this is the message of good news; the message of a God who cares, a God who is neither removed nor aloof, a God who understands the nature of the human condition and a God who acts to save us. Chris takes the exodus event as paradigmatic for redemption (275). Therefore our mission must have the same contours of both social engagement and spiritual wholeness.

Chris then proceeds to explore jubilee as restoration.

If the exodus was God's idea of *redemption*, the jubilee was God's idea of *restoration*. Both are equally holistic. That is, the jubilee also is concerned for the whole range of a person's social and economic need, but cannot be understood and cannot be practised without attention to the theological and spiritual principles that are intrinsic to it. (290)

He clearly explains the principles and purpose of jubilee and puts it in its original context. He then draws out the ethics of jubilee and how this might speak to us today. He considers how the economics of jubilee might critique 'massive private accumulation of land and related wealth' (297). He looks at the issue of debt – both personal and international – and he has a most interesting and pertinent section on 'time ceilings for the growth of money' taken from Geiko Muller-Fahrenheit who poses the question,

Does it make sense to attribute to money qualities that no created thing can ever have, namely eternal growth?...The capital knows no natural barriers to its growth. There is no jubilee to put an end to its accumulative power. And so there is no jubilee to put an end to debts and slavery.<sup>11</sup> (298)

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<sup>11</sup> Muller-Fahrenheit 1997: 109.

So, as well as these very material factors, Chris sees in the jubilee a model that foreshadows 'the wholeness of the church's evangelistic mission, its personal and social ethics and its future hope' (300). He concludes this chapter with an excellent and extended section on holistic mission in the New Testament looking at issues such as evangelism, violence, politics and sin. He also helpfully addresses the (still!) thorny question of evangelism having priority over all else. I think he treats this very fairly, looking at issues of language (what do we really mean by 'priority' for example) and the human condition (the irony of Rwanda or Northern Ireland). You will need to read this for yourselves (316-323) to find your answer to Chris' question, 'Is the *church as a whole* reflecting the wholeness of God's redemption?' (322).

#### **IV - Creation and HIV/AIDS**

I think Andrew Kirk was one of the first missiologists to include a chapter on creation, entitled 'Care of the Environment', in his book, *What is Mission?* (which was published in 1999)<sup>12</sup> so it is good to see some further reflection on it here. Chris provides a biblical reflection on why we should care for creation and some compelling arguments as to why it is an urgent issue in today's world. He laments the fact that few would encompass creation care within their biblical understanding of mission. It is indeed strange that creation care has been a latecomer to the mission scene. One of God's original requests to humanity was to care for the garden but it seems that we have been spoiling it ever since. Chris gives us (413) a 'depressingly long' list of environmental destruction, most of which you will be familiar with. He concludes by affirming that

Christian environmental action is in fact also evangelistically fruitful, not because it is any kind of cover for 'real mission' but simply because it declares in word and deed the Creator's limitless love for the whole of his creation ...and makes no secret of the biblical story of the cost that the Creator paid to redeem both. (419)

I found Chapter 13 on 'Mission and God's Image' particularly fascinating because of his suggestion that HIV/AIDS is 'a paradigm evil' (433). HIV/AIDS may well be the greatest and most urgent issue facing the church today. Chris claims that it is 'unquestionably the greatest emergency facing the human family today' (433). Having lived in Africa, and working for CMS, I have experienced at first hand the terrible and devastating scourge that HIV/AIDS is. It was Scottish missiologist, Kenneth Ross (no relation!) who caused Chris to think again about the critical nature of HIV/AIDS in relation to mission. Chris cites Ross' article entitled 'The HIV/AIDS Pandemic: What is at Stake for Christian Mission?' with its subtitles: 'The Church at Stake – New Frontiers for Faith; Gender at Stake – Sexual Power and Politics; Mission at Stake – the Need to Practise Presence'.<sup>13</sup> Christian reflection on these issues is vital and those working with HIV/AIDS sufferers claim that questions of gender subordination and patriarchy must be urgently addressed as women are the most at risk of infection. Chris reflects on how HIV/AIDS mirrors aspects of evil and the Fall. He gives (435-7) a long list of fifteen points of which I outline a few here:

- It is mysterious in origin and cause
- It invades life and causes inevitable death

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**12** Kirk 1999.

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**13** Ross 2004.

- It thrives on gender imbalance preying predominantly on women
- It creates widows and orphans at a rapid rate
- It destroys the future and hope
- It exposes the vast inequality between rich and poor countries as ARVs (antiretroviral drugs) are usually affordable in the West and often not in Majority World countries
- It affects every aspect of the human condition and lays waste to whole communities

HIV/AIDS is indeed a huge and urgent issue and yet not one that you read much (anything?) about in most theological or missiological texts. Why not? Too far removed from us? Too complicated? Because it does not affect us? As Chris says, HIV/AIDS is too big for one line answers but surely it must be on our agenda to address as a mission issue.

### What I did not like

Mostly I liked this book as a book on mission with a holistic approach. However, it reads as a very Western book and I find in this a sad irony, as this somehow detracts from its very message. It verges on the neat and tidy. While this has a certain stylistic appeal for ease of access to information, I am not sure that this reflects the reality of mission which is not streamlined, which is not neat and is certainly not tidy. However, these are small points and would I want to read a book that was messy anyway?

My main objection is that I would have liked the book to have more stories. Although Chris' writing is accessible I think that stories to illustrate some of his major points would have greatly strengthened the book. Having lived in India, and as International Director of Langham Partnership International, I would have thought Chris would have access to a fund of stories from all over the world. Stories, especially stories from other places (and it is a book on mission after all!) would also give the book universal appeal. I loved the footnote on the Chadian Arab Christians and how they interacted with the Joseph story. Why was this just a footnote? Could we not have had more living examples like this to illustrate redemption, worship, wisdom, confronting idolatry (for example) in other places? *A Rocha* is mentioned (418, 419 – you will not find them in the index) as an organisation involved in creation care. Here is an example of an organisation doing what Chris is writing about in his chapter on creation. In my opinion we could have had more of this. For it is in the stories that the theology comes alive. Chris makes the point that the Bible 'is not an aggressively totalizing story that suppresses all others' (64) and of course our stories are part of God's larger story. And it is in hearing others' stories from other places, 'living data' as Bediako so cleverly puts it, that we begin to enlarge our tent pegs and learn more of Jesus.<sup>14</sup>

### Conclusion

How has this book made a difference to me? Not all books make a difference and I often think of The Teacher's weary (or wary?) words in the book of Ecclesiastes,

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<sup>14</sup> Bediako 2006: 44.

'Of making many books there is no end' (Eccl. 12:12). This book has caused me to think, to react and to discuss. I have had several conversations with others about this book. I have used it (and will continue to use it) in teaching as there are some good, clear explanations on many issues. I have recommended it to students.

I think this book also fills a gap for books published in this area in mission studies. Strangely, there is no recent book that surveys the biblical text so thoroughly. There is, for example, Bosch's book, *Transforming Mission*, with his paradigmatic approach, Bevans and Schroeder's *Constants in Context, A Theology of Mission for Today*, Kostenberger and O'Brien's *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth, A Biblical Theology of Mission* and David Burnett's helpful little book, *The Healing of the Nations, The Biblical Basis of the Mission of God*.<sup>15</sup> But none of these survey and reflect on the wide sweep of the biblical text as Chris does.

Mostly, I have appreciated the thorough scholarship combined with a respect for the biblical text. Moonjang Lee comments that 'the critical attitude that Christian theologians have toward their own sacred scripture reflects the collapse of Christendom and the failure of Christianity in the West'.<sup>16</sup> He goes on to state that in Asia the various faith communities respect their sacred texts. Chris combines good scholarship with a deep (but not naïve) respect for our sacred text, the Bible. He is not uncritical but he displays what we could call a reverent criticism that seeks to understand and explore with a proper recognition of who we are and who God is. There is a genuine warmth of engagement with the text.

I have, finally, also appreciated Chris' attempts to apply scholarship. This is scholarship and study for a purpose, which is neatly summed up as

The proper way for disciples of the crucified and risen Jesus to read their Scriptures, is *messianically* and *missionally*. (30)

If we can truly attempt to do that, then this book will make a valuable and lasting difference indeed.

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**15** Bosch 1991; Bevans and Schroeder 2004; Kostenberger and O'Brien 2001; Burnett 1996.

**16** Lee 2008.

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Reviewing a book about missions by Chris Wright makes me feel a little like a grown-up Pinocchio writing a critique of Geppetto's toy-making skills. Chris was very much involved in introducing me to the mission of God and to the God of mission when he served as a curate in my parents' church when I was between the ages of 3 and 9. I still have pleasant memories of Chris leading a Holiday Bible Club in Cage Green Hall, Tonbridge and sharing the gospel in a clear and faithful way. And Chris and his family were the first ones to embody the reality of overseas missions for me. I remember sitting by a Conversation with the Pastors. John Piper + 3 Sep 29, 2006. More by this author. Tim Keller: In an article entitled "Soft Difference," Mirslav Volf points out from 1 Peter 2 that the pagans will glorify God through the good deeds of Christians "but it also assumes Christians will be persecuted too (Volf, "Soft Difference: Theological Reflections on the Relation Between Church and Culture in 1 Peter").