

A CONVERSATION WITH N. T. WRIGHT ABOUT A MISSIONAL HERMENEUTIC AND PUBLIC TRUTH

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INTRODUCTION¹

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 program. 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 program 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 N. T. Wright has referred to Newbigin’s notion of the gospel as public truth as expressing something that defines his own work. Of course, Wright comes at this from a different angle—as a biblical scholar rather than as a missiologist—but there is indeed, in my judgment, a remarkable similarity in his and Newbigin’s approaches.² My task is to explore the way that mission is a central element in the big picture that shapes Wright’s work.

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¹ This was a paper originally given at a conference entitled *A Dialogue with N. T. Wright—Jesus: A Public Figure Making a Public Announcement: Mission, Worldview, and the People of God*. It was a conversation for biblical scholars initiated by two papers—one from the Roman Catholic scholar Scott Hahn and this paper, with a response from N. T. Wright. It has been slightly revised and updated.

² In his foreword to my book *The Church and Its Vocation: Lesslie Newbigin’s Missionary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2018), Wright says: “Certainly, as I reflect on the beliefs about the church’s vocation that I have come to hold over the years . . . I begin to realize that at my best I have simply been thinking Lesslie’s thoughts after him” (xii).

I come to this dialogue as one whose scholarly work has engaged 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.³ In my study I have found wonderful resources in Wright's work and so, in this brief article, 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 Bauckham himself calls it) a "missionary hermeneutic." According to Bauckham, a missional hermeneutic is a way of reading Scripture

- "for 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," and
- which seeks to "inspire and to inform the church's missionary praxis."⁴

In the rest of this paper I will briefly touch on these three aspects as they appear in Wright'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 Wright's work begins with the confession that Scripture tells the true story of the whole world, that it is public truth.⁵ 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 Wright'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 of the covenant. So, the question of the missionary nature of the Church, that is, the

³ Michael W. Goheen, ed., *Reading the Bible Missionally* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016). Wright contributed a chapter.

⁴ Richard Bauckham, "Mission as Hermeneutic for Scriptural Interpretation," in Goheen, *Reading the Bible Missionally*, 28–29.

⁵ N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, vol. 1 of *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (London: SPCK, 1989), 41–42.

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.⁶

Similarly, Wright 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.”⁷ By the time we reach the mission of the new covenant people in Wright’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-centeredness”⁸ has marginalized 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 privatize 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 adds.⁹

Similarly, Wright says that in the last 200 years we have “overemphasized the individual at the expense of the larger picture of God’s creation.”¹⁰ 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.” Wright 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?”¹¹

The logic of the biblical story that will nourish a robust missional hermeneutic is cosmic-communal-personal. God’s goal is a *cosmic*, creation-wide renewal; he chooses a *community* to bear and embody that future for the sake of all; and each *person* is called to join this community and play a role in the bigger story.

⁶ Johannes Blauw, “The Mission of the People of God,” in *The Missionary Church in East and West*, ed. Charles C. West and David M. Paton (London: SCM Press, 1959), 91.

⁷ N. T. Wright, *Justification: God’s Plan and Paul’s Vision* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2009), 11.

⁸ G. C. Berkouwer, *The Return of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1954), 211.

⁹ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 179.

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 80.

In his paper, Scott Hahn rightly emphasized the centrality of the covenant to the biblical story 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.”¹² Indeed, for Wright 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.*”¹³ The covenant envisages a people “who are to be his special people for the sake of the world.”¹⁴ 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.”¹⁵ To forget this missional aim of the covenant is to “betray the purpose for which that covenant was made. It is as though the postman were to imagine that all the letters in his bag were intended for him.”¹⁶

Rooted in the Abrahamic and Sinaietic covenant, Israel was to “function as a people who would show the rest of humanity what being human was all about.”¹⁷ Yet, the people failed in their vocation, treating the covenant as an “exclusive privilege.”¹⁸ Called to “model genuinely human existence,”¹⁹ they were unfaithful to that commission. They served the same idols as the nations around them to whom they were to be a light, 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.²⁰ In his life, death, and resurrection, he deals with the sin of the world, including the sin of Israel, so that the people 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.²¹ Jesus sends them to continue his own mission, the original mission of Israel. They are to discharge their mission to the world as he had to Israel. With the outpouring of his Spirit, God calls “into being the new covenant people,

¹² Scott Hahn, “A Dialogue with Tom Wright” (unpublished conference paper), 2–3.

¹³ N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 118 (italics original).

¹⁴ N. T. Wright, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 69.

¹⁵ N. T. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), 119.

¹⁶ Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 108.

¹⁷ N. T. Wright, *Bringing the Church to the World: Renewing the Church to Confront the Paganism Entrenched in Western Culture* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1993), 59.

¹⁸ Wright, *Paul*, 36.

¹⁹ N. T. Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God: How to Read the Bible Today* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 39.

²⁰ Wright, *Bringing the Church to the World*, 66; N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, vol. 2 of *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (London: SPCK, 1996), 288–89.

²¹ Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 136.

the restored Israel-for-the-world.”²² This renewed Israel transformed through Jesus and the Spirit is now a “multi-ethnic, non-geographically-based people charged with a mission to the world.”²³ 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.”²⁴ 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.”²⁵

This all too brief, and no doubt incomplete, summary of some of Wright’s high points of the story highlights the centrality of mission in the story the Bible tells. But I want to emphasize here that this is not simply tracing the theme of mission but focusing a hermeneutical lens on the whole of Scripture. For example, about the Old Testament Wright 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.²⁶

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 this idea is simply a theme. The point is that mission is a hermeneutical lens to read the whole of Scripture. Similar statements could be found in Wright’s work about the gospels, Acts, and Paul’s letters. For example, of the gospels Wright 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’s 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 itself with the shape and content of that mission in order to carry out its own.”²⁷ This offers to us a missional lens for reading the gospels.

Mission is a central part of the big-picture narrative that shapes Wright’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

²² Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God*, 49.

²³ Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God*, 54.

²⁴ Wright, *Simply Christian*, 204.

²⁵ Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 200.

²⁶ Wright, *Paul*, 109. My emphasis.

²⁷ N. T. Wright, “Whence and Whither Historical Jesus Studies in the Life of the Church?,” in *Jesus, Paul, and the People of God: A Theological Dialogue with N. T. Wright*, ed. Nicholas Perrin and Richard B. Hays (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2011), 151.

Evangelists to [his] defense.”²⁸ A central thread in that large narrative in Wright’s head that he uses to interpret the Gospels, as well as the Old Testament and Paul, 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 the missional church, and so Wright correctly says at one point that “we must also reshape our ideas of mission itself.”²⁹ How does he understand mission in the biblical story?

Wright 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—that is, 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. Wright says:

As long as we see salvation in terms of going to heaven when we die, 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.³⁰

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.”³¹

I have already referred above 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 Wright’s work: (1) a strong theology of creation; (2) the resurrection that inaugurates the new creation in which the church participates; (3) the ascension, where Christ is enthroned as Lord over all creation with mission as a call to make known his lordship; (4) a gospel of the kingdom that is the good news of the restoration of God’s rule over all creation; and (5) a comprehensive salvation that is the restoration of the whole world.

In language reminiscent of Abraham Kuyper and C. S. Lewis, Wright says, “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.”³² And so he can speak of moving from worship straight into tasks like humanizing and

²⁸ Wright, “Whence and Whither Historical Jesus Studies?,” 131.

²⁹ Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 193.

³⁰ Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 197.

³¹ Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 200–01.

³² Wright, *Bringing the Church to the World*, 150.

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, organizing 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.”³³ Wright’s comment on farming and caring for soil is similar to 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.³⁴

Thus, essential to mission are the various callings believers have in all walks of life.

The gospel of Jesus points us, 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.³⁵

Mission in our vocations is not simply a matter of evangelism and personal ethics—although it is that in Wright’s work—but also 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.³⁶ In fact, the gospel—an announcement of God’s victory in Jesus over the powers of evil—is laughable unless the church is 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.”³⁷

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, Wright says, “on worshiping Jesus in the place where other forces, other

³³ Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 265–66.

³⁴ Lesslie Newbigin, “The Christian Layman in the World and in the Church,” *National Christian Council Review* 72: 186.

³⁵ N. T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1999), 151; see also Wright, *Bringing the Church to the World*, 142, 150.

³⁶ Wright, *Challenge of Jesus*, 143–44.

³⁷ Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 227.

gods, hold sway” and “planting the flag in hostile soil.”³⁸ 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 Wright’s comprehensive understanding of mission that encounters a different story: (1) suffering will be essential to the church’s mission; (2) the church will need to develop a robust worship and prayer life; and (3) there is a need for community to support and nourish the people of God in their new life in Christ.

THE 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 Wright has made to a missional hermeneutic, even though this section will be much too brief.³⁹

The Scriptures do not only *record* God’s mission through his people to bring salvation to the world; they also function as a *tool* to bring it about effectively. They don’t only tell us the story of God’s mission but also take an active part in accomplishing his mission.⁴⁰ The authority of Scripture must be understood, then, in terms of its place and role in this story, or, as Wright puts it another way, provocatively perhaps, biblical authority is a “sub-branch . . . of the mission of the church.”⁴¹

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.”⁴² To rightly understand the authority of Scripture, then, is to understand its formative role, how it works powerfully 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 has large implications for biblical scholarship and its importance for theological education and pastoral leadership. I close with three things that are important for biblical scholarship.

First, the more general point: If we are to interpret Scripture correctly, “we must

³⁸ Wright, *Bringing the Church to the World*, 150.

³⁹ I have written on this elsewhere: “Continuing Steps Toward a Missional Hermeneutic,” *Fideles* 3 (2008): 90–97.

⁴⁰ See Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God*, 21–59; *Simply Christian*, 180–90;

⁴¹ Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God*, 27–28.

⁴² Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God*, 29.

learn to read and understand it in the light of that overall story.”⁴³ Biblical scholarship needs to be shaped by the worldview or controlling story of Scripture itself. Yet, the Enlightenment story and worldview has played an enormous role in shaping biblical interpretation, often undermining many things that have been emphasized 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.

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 remains rare in mainstream biblical scholarship. The noteworthy work of Wright, David Bosch, Chris Wright, Richard Bauckham, Joel Green, and other fine scholars is a wonderful start. But it remains an exotic item on the fringes of biblical scholarship where, it seems, it can be safely ignored.⁴⁴ This has to change for the sake of the church and the world.

Finally, biblical scholarship must ultimately serve the church in its mission. 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.⁴⁵ We need much more work, for example, on how the various genres of both the Old and New Testaments can function as tools to equip God’s people for their mission.

Wright’s work has been widely influential but the widespread reception of his work seems not to have engaged the fundamental importance of worldview,⁴⁶ big picture themes in biblical scholarship, or the centrality of mission in the biblical story.⁴⁷ Surely, there is a major blind spot and a disabling prejudice (to use Gadamer’s terminology) at work here in biblical scholarship that needs to be explored and addressed.

⁴³ Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 281.

⁴⁴ See my article “A History and Introduction to a Missional Reading of the Bible,” in *Reading the Bible Missionally*, 3–27.

⁴⁵ Bauckham, “Mission as Hermeneutic for Scriptural Interpretation,” 29.

⁴⁶ See Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, 29–144, where he offers a sophisticated analysis of worldview and its importance for biblical studies.

⁴⁷ He has, however, more recently contributed two chapters to books on a missional reading of Scripture: “Reading the New Testament Missionally,” in Goheen, *Reading the Bible Missionally*; and “The Bible and Christian Mission,” in *Scripture and Its Interpretation: A Global, Ecumenical Introduction to the Bible*, ed. Michael J. Gorman (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2017). 388–400.

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