

Response Paper to “The Mission of God” by Chris Wright

by

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Chris Wright defines mission as “ 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 (p. 23).” By mission Wright does not just mean evangelism. He does not define it in any anthropocentric terms nor as being our human agency, or “missions” that we undertake. Instead Wright’s concept of mission is radically theocentric. It is the ultimate purpose of God himself, it is that which God has been purposing for eternity to eternity. God’s ultimate end in this mission is his own glory that is accomplished by his own word. God’s mission is Habakkuk 2:14 which says, “The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.” According to Wright God’s mission is to restore all of creation to its full original purpose which is bringing glory to himself by which God enables all of creation to enjoy in the fullness of the blessing which God desires for it. This mission that God undertakes arises from God’s heart, which he then communicates to our hearts. There is a major missional trajectory which God’s undertakes in this mission, it is demonstrating his deity to all nations.

The mission that God undertakes exposes all false gods to be the worthless false deceptions that they are. Today some people may be inclined to think that this exclusivism is intolerant and may well be inclined to look on such patent exclusivism with disgust. However, in contrast to this view people are so inclined to Wright suggests that this exclusivism is not intolerant. Not only is exclusivism not intolerant, in the mission that God undertook God was motivated by love. He expresses this wonderfully when he says, “God’s battle with the gods is an essential part of God’s mission. God’s mission is the blessing of the nations. And the blessing of the nations must ultimately include ridding them of gods that masquerade as protectors and saviors, but are actually devouring, destroying, disappointing deceptions. The battle to do so is a battle of divine love (p. 178).” Since, this great overarching cosmic drama of the Bible involves God and Christ fighting against idolatry and every satanic and human effort to diminish God’s glory by the erecting of idols, then this drama must inevitably involve us in our efforts to extinguish everything that opposes God and his reign.

Jesus is central to understanding the mission of God. Jesus is identical to YHWH. God desires to be known through Jesus. According to Wright, in the New Testament the divine will to be known is focused on Jesus. It is through Jesus that God will be known to the nations. It is by knowing Jesus as Creator, Ruler, Judge, and Savior that the nations will come to know God. Jesus is not only the

agent by which the knowledge of God is communicated, but is the content of that communication. As in 2 Corinthians 4:4-6, the glory of God shines through wherever Jesus is preached.

Wright sees the most fundamental distinction that the Bible reveals to us about God as being the distinction between the Creator and creation. This distinction was challenged in the fall. The serpent promised man that if he would eat the forbidden fruit then he would be like God knowing both good and evil. Wright thinks that this knowledge of good and evil entails moral autonomy. The right to define good and evil for oneself and the usurping of God's role to define good and evil is what man wanted in the fall. This is the root of idolatry which tries to dethrone God and enthrone creation. In his mission God undertakes the restoration of creation to be what it was intended to be, God's creation ruled over by man and giving praise and glory to him.

Wright portrays God as being centered on himself. God's ultimate end in his mission is his glory. He aims to restore creation for the purpose of bringing glory to himself. The major missional trajectory of God is to display his deity to all the nations. God takes on idols to expose them as false gods in order to demonstrate that he alone is the one true God worthy of all glory, praise, and honor. God acts for the sake of his own name. That God acts for his own name is seen in Ezekiel 36:16-38. God acts in forgiveness and restoration primarily for the sake of his own name. God reveals himself through his acting in history to demonstrate that he alone is God (i.e. in the exodus God reveals himself to be incomparable to other Gods). Though God is centered on himself Wright notes that it is good when he quotes Richard Bauckham as saying that the good of God's creatures requires that he be known as God and that there is not vanity but only truth and revelation in God demonstrating his deity to the nations. By casting his presentation in such a strong narrativist structure, I realized that to interpret scripture faithfully I need to view the Bible as a narrative and take a historical approach in understanding the story. Though this was discussed in Covenant Theology I just realize how important this is to my own view of scripture I've been thinking on myself.

God is also portrayed as being a God that reveals his character and attributes through his historical acts. Through the exodus God communicated to Israel his love, power, and faithfulness. The outcome of the exodus was that Israel should know God and some fundamental truths about him which include: that he is king, he is incomparable, and he is unique. Through the exile God revealed

himself as: having no favorites, being faithful to his people in judgement (i.e. Israel under judgement is still God's people for God's purpose), a righteous judge, and a sovereign who can use any nation as an agent for judgement. In coming out of exile Israel could learn about God: that he acts for his names sake, that he exercises his sovereignty by his word, and that he is sovereign over the course of history.

In Wright's book God is portrayed as absolutely unique. Other gods are nothing in comparison to YHWH. Other gods are only something in relation to their worshippers and nothing in relation to YHWH. YHWH alone has existence, the other gods are non-existing and are nonentities.

Deuteronomy 4:39 and Isaiah 45:5 point to there being no other god than YHWH. YHWH is the God who has unrivaled power throughout the cosmos. The earth and heavens are his and by contrast the other gods are impotent nonentities that cannot even deliver their own people. There is more than just mono-Yahwism, there is no other god to compare to him.

I think that there are definitely advantages to the way Wright depicts God. It helps us to see that God's ultimate purpose in redemption is more than just our individual salvation. God purpose is to glorify himself and to restore creation to its original purpose. In this way it challenges our anthropocentric view that redemption is all about me. While it is true that God redeems me, God had his own purposes in mind in what he did in the cross. He had in mind the restoration of all creation. Wright's approach also has the advantage of forcing us to read the Bible as a whole and seeing it as a single story. It forces us to read the Bible in terms of a narrative and as history. God speaks, acts, and reveals himself in history, because of this we must interpret scripture in light of history.

Wright's telling of the biblical story confirmed what I had previously thought regarding God's purposes. Prior to reading this I thought that God's ultimate aim in creation was to glorify himself. I came to understand this through reading Jonathan Edwards and Wright confirmed this. I had been thinking that the biblical story told an overarching metanarrative of God redeeming his people for his own glory. I thought that everything which happens and has been revealed in scripture has a place in this grand narrative. Wright's assertion that the Bible is radically theocentric also confirmed my view. I have come to see that the Bible is more about God than about man. Wright's assertion

that Hab. 2:14 is the mission of God confirms my view. I had been taught this in a “Perspectives” course that I took and I am glad to see that Wright agrees.

The story that Wright tells also helped me to see more things about the biblical narrative than I did before. Wright’s writing helped me understand how idolatry relates to God’s mission. I realized while reading “The Mission of God” that confronting idolatry and false gods plays a central role in God’s mission. God does not just want to be known, God wants to be the only object of worship. To be the only object of worship God must confront idolatry. I also found Wright’s insight that it is loving for God to confront false gods and expose them for what they are helpful. I have at times read on pluralism and how some people view exclusivism as being intolerant or should be considered wrong to hold that view. Here I think Wright’s view is insightful and helpful. Since, God truly is God alone and the good of humans, God is right in taking on false gods. Since, God does this and is worthy alone, then we have a right to hold to exclusivism by believing that God alone is God and there is no other way to God than what is revealed in the Bible.

I think that Wright’s overall argument is successful. It is very well exegeted and argued. There are not any significant flaws in his writing that I can find. The only possible shortcoming that I can see that someone could comment on is if they thought Wright’s radically theocentric view makes God look selfish or unconcerned for people. I think that would be a mistake though because as Wright notes, there is not vanity in God displaying his deity to the nations only truth. It may also be helpful to note that God when he act for his own sake demonstrates his goodness and faithfulness to people as well as his concern.