

## Shaping a Missional Hermeneutic

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In chapter one I noted some of the steps that have been taken already toward a missiological reading of the Bible, but argued that none of them quite meets the challenge. Some responsibility inevitably then rests on the person who points out the deficiencies of others to come up with something more adequate. With some diffidence, since I am sure the task of establishing missiology as a viable framework for biblical hermeneutics is still very much in the construction stage, I offer the reflections of this chapter as at least some scaffolding for the project.

### The Bible as the Product of God's Mission

A missional hermeneutic of the Bible begins with the Bible's very existence. For those who affirm some relationship (however articulated) between these texts and the self-revelation of our Creator God, the whole canon of Scripture is a missional phenomenon in the sense that it witnesses to the self-giving movement of this God toward his creation and us, human beings in God's own image, but wayward and wanton. The writings that now comprise our Bible are themselves the product of and witness to the ultimate mission of God.

The very existence of the Bible is incontrovertible evidence of the God who refused to forsake his rebellious creation, who refused to give up, who was and is determined to redeem and restore fallen creation to his original design for it. . . . The very existence of such a collection of writings testifies to a God who breaks through to human beings, who disclosed himself to them, who will not leave them unilluminated in their darkness, . . . who takes the initiative in re-establishing broken relationships with us.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, the processes by which these texts came to be written were often profoundly missional in nature. Many of them emerged out of events or struggles or crises or conflicts in which the people of God engaged with the constantly changing and challenging task of articulating and living out their understanding of God's revelation and redemptive action in the world. Sometimes these were struggles internal to the people of God themselves; sometimes they were highly polemical struggles with competing religious claims and world-views that surrounded them. So a missional reading of such texts is very definitely not a matter of (1) finding the "real" meaning by objective exegesis, and only then (2) cranking up some "missiological implications" as a homiletic supplement to the text itself. Rather, it is to see how a text often has its *origin* in some issue, need, controversy or threat that the people of God needed to address in the context of their mission. The text in itself is a product of mission in action.

This is easily demonstrated in the case of the New Testament.<sup>2</sup> Most of Paul's letters were written in the heat of his missionary efforts: wrestling with the theological basis of the inclusion of the Gentiles, affirming the need for Jew and Gentile to accept one another in Christ and in the church, tackling the baffling range of new problems that assailed young churches as the gospel took root in the world of Greek polytheism, confronting incipient heresies with clear affirmations of the supremacy and sufficiency of Jesus Christ, and so on.

And why were the Gospels so called? Because they were written to explain the significance of the *evangel*—the good news about Jesus of Nazareth, especially his death and resurrection. Confidence in these things was essential to the missionary task of the expanding church. And the person to whom we owe the largest quantity of the New Testament, Luke, shapes his two-volume work in such a way that the missionary mandate to the disciples to be Christ's witnesses to the nations comes as the climax to volume one and the introduction to volume two.

<sup>2</sup>Marion Soards surveys four current issues in New Testament studies (first-century Judaism, the life of Jesus, Pauline theology, and the character of the early church) and shows how they are relevant to mission studies also. But he concludes with a converse comment in line with the point being made here: "Mission studies should remind biblical scholars that many of the writings that we study (often in painstaking and even painful detail) came to be because of the reality of mission. An awareness of, and a concern with, the key issues of mission studies may well help biblical studies find foci that will bring deeper appreciation of the meaning of the Bible." Marion L. Soards, "Key Issues in Biblical Studies and Their Bearing on Mission Studies," *Missiology* 24 (1996): 107. With this I fully agree. See also Andreas J. Koestenberger, "The Place of Mission in New Testament Theology: An Attempt to Determine the Significance of Mission Within the Scope of the New Testament's Message as a Whole," *Missiology* 27 (1999), and the works referred to there.

<sup>1</sup>Charles R. Taber, "Missiology and the Bible," *Missiology* 11 (1983): 232.

Thus Howard Marshall sees this as the focal point of New Testament theology. Obviously all the New Testament documents hang together around their recognition of Jesus of Nazareth as Savior and Lord.

It may, however, be more helpful to recognize them more specifically as the documents of a mission. The subject matter is not, as it were, Jesus in himself or God in himself but Jesus in his role as Savior and Lord. *New Testament theology is essentially missionary theology*. By this I mean that the documents came into being as the result of a two-part mission, first the mission of Jesus sent by God to inaugurate his kingdom with the blessings it brings to people and to call people to respond to it, and then the mission of his followers called to continue his work by proclaiming him as Lord and Savior and calling people to faith and ongoing commitment to him, as a result of which his church grows. The theology springs out of this movement and is shaped by it, and in turn the theology shapes the continuing mission of the church, . . . The New Testament thus tells the story of the mission and lays especial emphasis on expounding the message proclaimed by the missionaries.<sup>3</sup>

But also in the case of the Old Testament we can see that many of these texts emerged out of the engagement of Israel with the surrounding world, in the light of the God they knew in their history and in covenantal relationship. People produced texts in relation to what they believed God had done, was doing or would do in their world. The Torah records the exodus as an act of YHWH that comprehensively confronted and defeated the power of Pharaoh and all his rival claims to deity and allegiance. It presents a theology of creation that stands in sharp contrast to the polytheistic creation myths of Mesopotamia. The historical narratives portray the long and sorry story of Israel's struggle with the culture and religion of Canaan, a struggle reflected also in the preexilic prophets. Exilic and postexilic texts emerge out of the task that the small remnant community of Israel faced to define their continuing identity as a community of faith in successive empires of varying hostility or tolerance. Wisdom texts interact with international wisdom traditions in the surrounding cultures, but do so with staunch monotheistic disinfectant. And in worship and prophecy, Israelites reflect on the relationship between their God, YHWH, and the rest of the nations—sometimes negatively, sometimes positively—and on the nature of their own role as YHWH's elect priesthood in their midst.

All of the items referred to in the last paragraph deserve chapters of their own, and some of them will get one. The point being made here is simply that the Bible is in so many ways a *missional phenomenon* in itself. The individual

<sup>3</sup>I. Howard Marshall, *New Testament Theology: Many Witnesses, One Gospel* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004), pp. 34-35, emphasis added.

texts within it often reflect the struggles of being a people with a mission in a world of competing cultural and religious claims. And the canon eventually consolidates the recognition that it is through these texts that the people whom God has called to be his own (in both Testaments) has been shaped as a community of memory and hope, a community of mission, failure, and striving. Indeed, as David Filbeck has observed, this missiological thrust provides theological coherence to the Bible, including the relationship of the Testaments.

Indeed, it is this missionary dimension, so often neglected in modern theological interpretation, that unifies both Old and New Testaments and coordinates their various themes into a single motif. It is the logical connection between the Testaments that many modern theologians unfortunately seem to despair of ever finding. . . . In short, the dimension of missions in the interpretation of the Scriptures gives structure to the whole Bible. Any theological study of the Scriptures, therefore, must be formulated with the view of maintaining this structure. The missionary dimension to the interpretation of the Old Testament as displayed in the New Testament, I believe, accomplishes this in a way that no other theological theme can hope to match.<sup>4</sup>

In short, a missional hermeneutic proceeds from the assumption that *the whole Bible renders to us the story of God's mission through God's people in their engagement with God's world for the sake of the whole of God's creation*.<sup>5</sup>

### Biblical Authority and Mission

*The Great Commission* implies an imperative, a mandate. So it also presupposes an authority behind that imperative. We find this and other similar missionary imperatives in the Bible. So our involvement in mission is, at one level, a matter of obedience to the authority of Scripture, regarded as the Word of God. This offers an immediate illustration of one of the distinctions I referred to in chapter one.

A *biblical basis of mission* seeks out those biblical texts that express or describe the missionary imperative, on the assumption that the Bible is authoritative.

A *missional hermeneutic of the Bible*, however, explores the nature of biblical authority itself in relation to mission. Does a missional approach to the Bible help us in articulating what we mean by biblical authority?

<sup>4</sup>David Filbeck, *Yes, God of the Gentiles Too: The Missionary Message of the Old Testament* (Wheaton, Ill.: Billy Graham Center, 1994), p. 10.

<sup>5</sup>On the need to take the Bible as a whole in constructing a theology of mission, see also, Charles Van Engen, "The Relation of Bible and Mission in Mission Theology," in *The Good News of the Kingdom*, ed. Charles Van Engen, Dean S. Gilliland, and Paul Pierson (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993), pp. 27-36.

**Authority as command.** This is not the place for a full account of the Christian doctrine of the authority of the Bible. One aspect, however, is important for our purpose here. For many people the concept of authority that they subconsciously bring to their understanding of the authority of the Bible is a military one. Authority is what gives the officer the right to issue commands. Commands are to be obeyed. The Bible is our authority. It issues the commands and tells us what to do or not to do. Authority, then, is simply a matter of orders on the one hand and obedience on the other.

In missionary circles the Great Commission is frequently surrounded with military metaphors of this sort. This text is said to provide the church's marching orders, for example, not to mention the whole range of other military metaphors that follow—warfare, mobilization, recruits, strategies, targets, campaigns, crusades, frontlines, strongholds, the missionary "force" (i.e., personnel) and the like. The language of authority seems easily converted into the language of mission, with the military metaphor functioning as the dynamic connector.

However, even if we strongly affirm our acceptance of biblical authority, the association of authority primarily with military-style command does not sit comfortably with much of the actual material in the Bible. There are of course many commands in the Bible, and indeed the psalmists celebrate this as a mark of God's goodness and grace (e.g., Ps 19; 119). Those commands that we do have from God are to be cherished for the light, guidance, security, joy and freedom they bring (to mention a few of the benefits praised by the psalmists). But the bulk of the Bible is not command—in the sense of issuing direct commands either to its first readers or to future generations of readers, including ourselves.

Much more of the Bible is narrative, poetry, prophecy, song, lament, visions, letters and so on. What is the authority latent in those forms of utterance? How does a poem or a story or somebody's letter to somebody else tell *me* what *I* must do or not do? Is that even what it was intended to do? And more importantly in relation to our task here, how do such nonimperative sections of the Bible connect to mission, if mission is seen primarily as obedience to a command? I would suggest that it is partly because we have so tightly bound our understanding of mission to a single (and undeniably crucial) imperative of Jesus that we have difficulty making connections between mission and the rest of the Scriptures, where those other Scriptures are not obviously or grammatically imperative. We do not perceive any missional *authority* in such nonimperative texts because we conceive authority only in terms of *commands*.

**Authority and reality.** We need to widen considerably our understanding of the word *authority*. In his majestic apologia for evangelical biblical ethics, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, Oliver O'Donovan argues that authority is a di-

mension of reality that constitutes sufficient and meaningful grounds for action. The created order itself, by its objective reality, provides an authority structure within which we have freedom to act (both in the sense of permission to act and a wide range of options).<sup>6</sup> Authority is not just a list of positive commands; authority includes legitimating permission. Authority authorizes; it grants freedom to act within boundaries. Thus the authority of my driver's license and my bishop's license as an ordained presbyter in the Church of England is not to order me every day where I must drive or what sacred service I must render. Rather these licenses *authorize me* to make those choices, give me freedom and authority to drive where I wish or to take services, preach, baptize and so forth. In those contexts I am an *authorized* person, liberated by, while still subject to, the authority of the realities that stand behind those documents (the laws of the road; the canons of the church).

Authority then is the predicate of reality, the source and boundary of freedom. Now, as O'Donovan argues, the created order itself as the fundamental reality structure of our existence is also a structure of authority. A physical brick wall, for example, by its simple real existence constitutes an authority. You have freedom on this side of it or on that side of it. But your freedom ends when you attempt to run through it at high speed. It exerts its authority rather abruptly. Gravity as a force in the physical universe is an authority built into the way the universe exists. For us humans it authorizes an immense freedom of action on and above the surface of the planet provided we work with it. But it also sets limits to that freedom. You may freely choose to step off a cliff, but the authority of gravity will decree it to be the last free choice you make. Reality kicks in. The authority of the laws of nature lies in the fact that nature itself is real. The universe is simply there, and we are not at liberty to behave as though it weren't.

Now, how do these considerations help our understanding of the authority of the Bible? The authority of the Bible is that it brings us into contact with reality—primarily the reality of God himself whose authority stands behind even that of creation. In fact, the Bible renders to us several connected realities, each of which has its own intrinsic, predicated authority. Reading and knowing the Scriptures causes us to *engage with reality*. That in turn functions to authorize

<sup>6</sup>Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (Leicester, U.K.: InterVarsity Press, 1986). I have discussed O'Donovan's insight further in relation to the authority of Scripture in an age of historical and cultural relativism in Christopher J. H. Wright, *Walking in the Ways of the Lord: The Ethical Authority of the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995), chap. 2. The topic is developed further in relation to Old Testament ethics in Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

and to set boundaries around our freedom to act in the world. And more specifically for our purpose here, these realities authorize our action in mission. They make our mission appropriate, legitimate and indeed necessary and inevitable. The authority for our mission flows from the Bible because the Bible reveals the reality on which our mission is based.

I have three realities in mind, which are rendered to us first by the Old Testament Scriptures and then confirmed in the New. In these biblical texts we encounter the reality of *this God*, the reality of *this story* and the reality of *this people*.

*The reality of this God.* It is becoming increasingly important in any talk of God to be clear who we are talking about. *God* is merely an Anglo-Saxon monosyllable that in its origins would more commonly have been plural, *the gods*—the generic term for the deities of the early tribes and settlers of northern Europe. The Bible introduces us to the very specific, named and biographied God known as YHWH, the Holy One of Israel (and other titles). This is the God whom Jesus called Abba. This is the God worshiped as the Lord by Israelites and as Father, Son and Holy Spirit by Christians. This is not a generic god at all.

While the Bible does insist that there is much that has been disclosed about this God through the natural world around us (which is in fact this God's creation), it is fundamentally the texts of the canon of Scripture in both testaments that bring us knowledge of this God. Not only is YHWH the God "enthroned as the Holy One" and "the praise of Israel" (Ps 22:3), he is the God rendered to us by the lips and pens of Israel.<sup>7</sup> YHWH is the reality to which the Old Testament Scriptures testify. His, therefore, is the authority that those Scriptures mediate, because we have no other access to YHWH's reality than through these Scriptures.

This "rendering of God" in the Old Testament includes both God's identity and God's character. The point here is simply this: if the God YHWH, who is rendered to us in these texts, is really God, then that reality (or rather *his reality*) authorizes a range of responses as appropriate, legitimate and indeed imperative. These include not only the response of worship but also of ethical living in accordance with this God's own character and will, and a missional orientation that commits my own life story into the grand story of God's purpose for the nations and for creation. Mission flows from the reality of this God—the biblical God. Or to put it another way: mission is authorized by the reality of this God.

*The reality of this story.* That the Old Testament tells a story needs no defense.

<sup>7</sup>It will be evident that I am indebted here to the fascinating study of Dale Patrick, *The Rendering of God in the Old Testament*, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981).

My point is much greater, however. The Old Testament tells its story as *the* story or, rather, as a part of that ultimate and universal story that will ultimately embrace the whole of creation, time, and humanity within its scope. In other words, in reading these texts we are invited to embrace a metanarrative, a grand narrative. And on this overarching story is based a worldview that, like all worldviews and metanarratives, claims to explain the way things are, how they have come to be so, and what they ultimately will be.<sup>8</sup>

The story that engages us in the Old Testament answers the four fundamental worldview questions that all religions and philosophies answer in one way or another:<sup>9</sup>

- *Where are we?* (What is the nature of the world around us?)  
Answer: We inhabit the earth, which is part of the good creation of the one living, personal God, YHWH.
- *Who are we?* (What is the essential nature of humanity?)  
Answer: We are human persons made by this God in God's own image, one of God's creatures but unique among them in spiritual and moral relationships and responsibility.
- *What's gone wrong?* (Why is the world in such a mess?)  
Answer: Through rebellion and disobedience against our Creator God, we have generated the mess that we now see around us at every level of our lives, relationships and environment.
- *What is the solution?* (What can we do about it?)  
Answer: Nothing in and of ourselves. But the solution has been initiated by God through his choice and creation of a people, Israel, through whom God intends eventually to bring blessing to all nations of the earth and ultimately to renew the whole creation.

Now the reality of this story is such that it includes us in its scope, for it points to a universal future that embraces all the nations. It is the story that is taken up without question (though not without surprise) in the New Testament. It is the story that stretches from Genesis to Revelation, not merely as a good yarn or

<sup>8</sup>On the recent emphasis on the importance of story in biblical hermeneutics, its relevance to missiology, and a defense of treating the biblical story as metanarrative, see Craig Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, "Story and Biblical Theology," in *Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Craig Bartholomew et al. (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), pp. 144-71.

<sup>9</sup>It will be evident here that I am indebted to the helpful analysis of worldviews in J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Post-modern Age* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995).

even as a classic of epic literature, but fundamentally as a *rendering of reality*—an account of the universe we inhabit and of the new creation we are destined for. We live in a storied universe.

And once again, such a rendering of reality carries its intrinsic authority. For if this is truly the way things are, how they have become so and where they are going, then there are all kinds of implications for how we ought to respond personally and collectively. Again, worship, ethics and mission all spring to mind. These responses, including mission, are authorized by the reality of this story.

*The reality of this people.* The third reality, which the Old Testament Scriptures render to us, is that of the people of Israel. Ancient Israel, with their distinctive view of their own election, history and relationship to their God, YHWH, is a historical reality of enormous significance to the history of the rest of humanity.<sup>10</sup> Christian mission to the nations is deeply rooted in the calling of this people and in the way they saw themselves and their story. In Old Testament terms the story had a past and a future, and both are important in shaping ethical and missional response, for, like Israel, the church is also a community of memory and hope.

Israel's *celebration of its past* is legendary. It was the very stuff of their existence, for it rendered to them not only their own identity and mission, but also that of YHWH, their God.

Sing to the LORD, praise his *name*;  
 proclaim his *salvation* day after day.  
 Declare his *glory* among the nations,  
 his *marvelous deeds* among all peoples. (Ps 96:2-3 emphasis added)

The name, salvation and glory of YHWH were all bound up with "his marvelous deeds." YHWH was known through what he had done, and Israel knew that to preserve YHWH's identity they must tell this story—whether to themselves or (in some way that remained a mystery in Old Testament times) to the nations. For in the telling of the story stood the rendering of the God who was its prime character. So Israel told the story as a bulwark against idolatry (Deut 4:9-40). They told the story as an explanation and motivation for the law (Deut 6:20-25). They told the story as a rebuke to themselves (Ps 105—106; Mic 6:1-8; Amos 2:9-11) or to YHWH himself (Ps 44; 89). They told the story as a comfort and anchor for hope (Jer 32:17-25). Israel's whole theology depended on its memory,

<sup>10</sup>Among Old Testament scholars there is, of course, considerable debate over their historical reconstruction of the events by which Israel emerged in the land of Canaan and into the annals of history. But that historical debate need not concern us here since, by whatever process, Israel certainly did emerge and produce a society and a body of traditions and texts that have had an unquestionably profound impact on subsequent human history.

and Israel's memory was constitutive of their peoplehood. The same identity as the people of God with this storied memory constitutes also for us the authority for our mission.

But the story Israel told had an *anticipated future* right at its beginning. They were a people with a future in the purposes of God. The call of Abraham included the promise that through his descendants God intended to bring blessing to all the nations of the earth. That vision shone with greatly varying degrees of clarity or obscurity at different eras of Israel's life, but there is in many places an awareness of the nations as spectators both of what God did in and for Israel, and of how Israel responded positively or negatively (Deut 4:5-8; 29:22-28; Ezek 36:16-23). Ultimately, Israel existed *for the sake of the nations*. We will explore these themes in depth, of course, in the chapters to follow.

So there is a teleological (purposeful) thrust to Israel's existence as a people and the story they narrated and projected. Here is a God with a mission and a people with a mission. Israel's mission was to be a light to the nations so that ultimately "all flesh will see the glory of the LORD" (Is 40:5). Such a vision undoubtedly generated a range of responses within Israel itself. For if this is the future guaranteed by the faithfulness of God, what should be the impact on the way Israel should live now? The question remains authoritative for us too. For we share the same vision of the future, one which to the eyes of faith is a reality, "the substance of things hoped for" (Heb 11:1 κϐ), and thereby an ethic-generating and mission-mandating authority for those who live in its light.

So the reality of this people, rendered to us through the texts of the Old Testament, carries authority for an ethic of gratitude in view of God's actions for Israel in the past and carries authority also for our missional intentionality in view of God's purposes for humanity in the future.

**Authority and Jesus.** These three features of the Old Testament—God, story, and people—are affirmed as realities also for Christian believers in the New Testament. They are all, in fact, focused on Jesus in such a way that their authority and missional relevance is not only sustained but enhanced and transformed for those who are in Christ. At this point we are approaching the missiological significance of a truly *biblical* (i.e., cross-testamental) theology.

In Jesus we meet *this God*. The New Testament unquestionably affirms (as we will see in chap. 4) that Jesus of Nazareth shares the identity and character of YHWH and ultimately accomplishes what only YHWH could.<sup>11</sup> So to know Jesus

<sup>11</sup>See especially, N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996), and Richard Bauckham, *God Crucified* (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), my discussion in chap. 4.

as Savior and Lord is to know the reality of the living God. It is to know the way, the truth and the life, the Word, the Creator, Sustainer and heir of the universe. As it was for Israel in knowing YHWH, so for us knowing the reality of Jesus carries its own authority for how we are to live and act in God's world.

In Jesus we have the climax of *this story* and the guarantee of its final ending. This story is also our story, for if we are in Christ then, according to Paul, we are also in Abraham and heirs according to the promise. Our future is the future promised by God to Abraham, achieved by Jesus and to be enjoyed by the whole of redeemed humanity from every nation, tribe, people and language (Rev 7:9-10). Our lives also then are to be shaped by the gratitude that looks back to what God has promised and the mission that looks forward to what God will accomplish.<sup>12</sup>

In Jesus we have become part of *this people*, sharing the comprehensive range of identity and responsibility that was theirs. For through the cross and the gospel of the Messiah Jesus, we have become citizens of God's people, members of God's household, the place of God's dwelling (Eph 2:11—3:13). Such an identity and belonging generate an ethical and a missional responsibility in the church and the world, which the New Testament spells out in some detail.

So then our mission certainly flows from the authority of the Bible. But that authority is far richer and deeper than one big biblical command we must obey. Rather, our obedience to the Great Commission, and even the Great Commission itself, is set within the context of these realities. The Great Commission is not something extra or exotic. Rather, the authority of the Great Commission itself is embedded

- in the reality of the *God* whose universal authority has been given to Jesus
- in the reality of the *story* that the Great Commission both presupposes and envisages
- in the reality of the *people* who are now to become a self-replicating community of disciples among all nations

This is the God we worship, this is the story we are part of, this is the people we belong to. How should we then live? What then is our mission?

### Biblical Indicatives and Imperatives in Mission

Another way of looking at this issue is to focus on the point often observed in

<sup>12</sup>A fine popular-level portrayal of the whole biblical story as the story of God's commitment to his mission, with its challenge to our participation in it, is provided by Philip Greenslade, *A Passion for God's Story* (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster, 2002).

biblical theology, namely, that biblical *imperatives* are characteristically founded on biblical *indicatives*. An indicative is simply a statement of reality (or it claims to be). It is an affirmation or declaration or proposition: This is so; this is how things are. By situating its imperatives in the indicative contexts we have just considered, the Bible effectively grounds their authority in those realities.

A familiar example of this dynamic is the way the Old Testament law is set within a narrative context. The narrative expresses the indicative: Here is what has happened in your history, and these are the things that YHWH your God has done. Then the law expresses the responsive imperative: Now then, this is how you must behave in the light of such facts.

Exodus 19:3-6 classically articulates this order:

You have seen what I did . . . (the indicative)

Now, if you will obey me fully and keep my covenant, then . . . (the imperative)

Similarly, the Decalogue begins not with the first imperative commandment but with the indicative statement of God's identity and Israel's story (so far): "I am the LORD your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (Ex 20:2). In other words, the indicative of God's grace comes before and is the foundation and authority for the imperative of the law and responsive obedience.

This fundamental priority of grace over law is even more explicit in the answer the father is instructed to give his son when he asks (as countless Christians have done ever since, and might have saved themselves much theological blood, sweat and ink by attending to the father's answer), "What is [the meaning of] all this law?" The father responds not simply with a reinforced imperative ("Just do it") but with a story, the exodus story, the old, old story of YHWH and his love—that is, with the indicative of redemption. The very meaning of the law is grounded in the gospel of God's saving grace in history (Deut 6:20-25).

Now when we think of the Great Commission, it is sometimes pointed out that whereas the text is never actually given that title in the Gospels themselves, Jesus did emphatically endorse the Great *Commandment*, in so many words. Asked about the greatest commandment in the law (a familiar debating point in his day), he pointed to the magnificent *šema*<sup>c</sup> of Deuteronomy 6:4-5, which is about loving God with all our heart and soul and strength, complementing it with Leviticus 19:18, the command to love our neighbors as ourselves. But what we must not miss is that both these commandments are founded on indicatives about the identity, uniqueness, singularity and holiness of YHWH as God.

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. (Deut 6:4)

Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy. (Lev 19:2)

It is *the reality of YHWH* that constitutes the authority for these greatest commandments, on which, Jesus declared, hang all the rest of the law and the prophets.

Here, then, we have a very clear imperative—to love God with the totality of our being and to love our neighbor as ourselves. This could easily be described, with even more textual justification, as “the great commission,” for it governs the whole of life whatever our specific calling. This fundamental twin commandment certainly precedes, underlies and governs the so-called Great Commission itself, for we cannot make disciples of the nations without love for God and love for them.

So it is no surprise, therefore, to find that when we come to the Great Commission, it too follows the same formula: indicative followed by imperative. Jesus begins with the monumental cosmic claim, words that echo the affirmation of Moses about YHWH himself (Deut 4:35, 39), that “all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Mt 28:18). This is the reality behind the command, the indicative behind the imperative. The identity and the authority of Jesus of Nazareth, crucified and risen, is the cosmic indicative on which the mission imperative stands authorized.

But in order to understand all that such an indicative claim for Jesus implies and includes, we need the whole of the Scriptures—as he himself affirmed when, in Luke’s version, he draws both the significance of his own messianic identity and the anticipation of the church’s missional future from the bold indicative “this is what is written” (Lk 24:46). We need, then, both a missional hermeneutic of the *whole* Bible and its great indicatives as well as committed obedience to a major imperative text like the Great Commission.<sup>13</sup>

A missional hermeneutic, then, is not content simply to call for obedience to the Great *Commission* (though it will assuredly include that as a matter of nonnegotiable importance), nor even to reflect on the missional implications of the Great *Commandment*. For behind both it will find the Great *Communication*—the revelation of the identity of God, of God’s action in the world and God’s saving purpose for all creation. And for the fullness of this communication we need the whole Bible in all its parts and genres, for God has given

<sup>13</sup>This point is made, somewhat differently but with a similar desire to avoid “the abuse of the imperative,” by Graeme Goldsworthy. He also notes that the apparent absence of a missionary mandate in the Old Testament (i.e., that Israelites should actually go to the nations) is balanced by the assumption of what Israel was simply meant to be in the world: “The function of Israel in the purposes of God to bring salvation to the nations is in the indicative, not the imperative,” Graeme L. Goldsworthy, “The Great Indicative: An Aspect of a Biblical Theology of Mission,” *Reformed Theological Review* 55 (1996): 7.

us no less. A missional hermeneutic takes the indicative and the imperative of the biblical revelation with equal seriousness, and interprets each in the light of the other.

Such mutual interpretation of indicative and imperative in the light of each other means that, on the one hand, biblical missiology (like biblical and systematic theology) revels in exploring the great indicative themes and traditions of the biblical faith in all their complexity and remarkable coherence. But biblical missiology recognizes, on the other hand, that if all this indicative theology is indicative of *reality*, then that carries a massive missional imperative for those who claim this worldview as their own. If this is how it really is with God, humanity and the world, then what claim does that make on the life of the church and individual believers?

Conversely, a missional hermeneutic of the whole Bible will not become obsessed with only the great mission imperatives, such as the Great Commission, or be tempted to impose on them one assumed priority or another (e.g., evangelism or social justice or liberation or ecclesiastical order as the only “real” mission). Rather we will set those great imperatives within the context of their foundational indicatives, namely, all that the Bible affirms about God, creation, human life in its paradox of dignity and depravity, redemption in all its comprehensive glory, and the new creation in which God will dwell with his people.

A missional hermeneutic, then, cannot read biblical indicatives without their implied imperatives. Nor can it isolate biblical imperatives from the totality of the biblical indicative. It seeks a holistic understanding of mission from a holistic reading of the biblical texts.

### The Biblical Theocentric Worldview and the Mission of God

However, even if we accept, returning to the introduction, that Jesus offers us a Messiah-focused and mission-generating hermeneutic of the Scriptures, we may still query the claim that somehow there is a missional hermeneutic of the whole Bible such that “mission is what it’s all about.” This uneasiness stems from the persistent, almost subconscious, paradigm that mission is fundamentally and primarily something *we* do—a human task of the church. This is especially so if we fall into the reductionist habit of using the word *mission* (or *missions*) as more or less synonymous with evangelism. Quite clearly the whole Bible is not just about evangelism, and I am certainly not trying to claim that it is—even though evangelism is certainly a fundamental part of biblical mission as entrusted to us. To be sure, evangelism *is* something we do and it *is* validated by

clear biblical imperatives. But it will not bear the weight of the case for saying that the whole Bible can be hermeneutically approached from a missional perspective.

The appropriateness of speaking of “a missional basis of the Bible” becomes apparent only when we shift our paradigm of mission from

- our human agency to the ultimate purposes of God himself
- mission as “missions” that we undertake, to mission as that which God has been purposing and accomplishing from eternity to eternity
- an anthropocentric (or ecclesiocentric) conception to a radically theocentric worldview

In shifting our perspective in this way and trying to come to a biblical definition of what we mean by mission, we are in effect asking the question, *Whose mission is it anyway?* The answer, it seems to me, could be expressed as a paraphrase of the song of the redeemed in the new creation. “Salvation belongs to our God, / who sits on the throne, / and to the Lamb” (Rev 7:10). Since the whole Bible is the story of how this God, “our God,” has brought about his salvation for the whole cosmos (represented in concentric circles around God’s throne in the magnificent neck-craning vision of Revelation 4–7), we can affirm with equal validity, “Mission belongs to our God.” *Mission is not ours; mission is God’s.* Certainly, the mission of God is the prior reality out of which flows any mission that we get involved in. Or, as has been nicely put, it is not so much the case that God has a mission for his church in the world but that God has a church for his mission in the world. Mission was not made for the church; the church was made for mission—God’s mission.<sup>14</sup>

A missional hermeneutic of the Bible, then, begins there—with the mission of God—and traces the flow of all other dimensions of mission as they affect human history from that center and starting point.

**God with a mission.** The term *missio Dei*, “the mission of God,” has a long history.<sup>15</sup> It seems to go back to a German missiologist Karl Hartenstein. He coined it as a way of summarizing the teaching of Karl Barth, “who, in a lecture on mission in 1928, had connected mission with the doctrine of the trinity. Barth and Hartenstein want to make clear that mission is grounded in an intratrinitarian movement of God himself and that it expresses the power of God over his-

<sup>14</sup>See chap. 2, “God’s Mission and the Church’s Response,” of J. Andrew Kirk, *What Is Mission? Theological Explorations* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), pp. 23–37.

<sup>15</sup>For a brief survey of the history, see David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991), pp. 389–93.

tory, to which the only appropriate response is obedience.”<sup>16</sup> So the phrase originally meant “the sending of God”—in the sense of the Father’s sending of the Son and their sending of the Holy Spirit. All human mission, in this perspective, is seen as a participation in and extension of this divine sending.

The phrase became popular in ecumenical circles after the Willingen world mission conference of 1952, through the work of Georg Vicedom.<sup>17</sup> It had the strength of connecting mission to the theology of the Trinity—an important theological gain. Mission flows from the inner dynamic movement of God in personal relationship. But in some circles the concept of *missio Dei* then became seriously weakened by the idea that it referred simply to God’s involvement with the whole historical process, not to any specific work of the church. The affirmation that mission was God’s came to mean that it was not ours! Such distorted theology virtually excluded evangelism, and quite rightly therefore came under sustained criticism.

In spite of such misuse, however, the expression can be retained as expressing a major and vital biblical truth (as the title *The Mission of God* is intended to reaffirm). The God revealed in the Scriptures is personal, purposeful and goal-orientated. The opening account of creation portrays God working toward a goal, completing it with satisfaction and resting, content with the result. And from the great promise of God to Abraham in Genesis 12:1–3 we know this God to be totally, covenantally and eternally committed to the mission of blessing the nations through the agency of the people of Abraham. In the wake of Genesis 3–11 this is good news indeed for humanity—such that Paul can describe this text as “the gospel in advance” (Gal 3:8). From that point on, the mission of God could be summed up in the words “God is working his purpose out / as year succeeds to year,” and as generations come and go.<sup>18</sup>

The Bible presents itself to us fundamentally as a narrative, a historical narrative at one level, but a grand metanarrative at another.

- It begins with the God of purpose in creation
- moves on to the conflict and problem generated by human rebellion against that purpose
- spends most of its narrative journey in the story of God’s redemptive pur-

<sup>16</sup>L. A. Hoedemaker, “The People of God and the Ends of the Earth,” in *Missiology: An Ecumenical Introduction*, ed. A. Camps, L. A. Hoedemaker and M. R. Spindler (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 163. Hoedemaker provides an interesting and critical survey of the history of *missio Dei*, and its weaknesses.

<sup>17</sup>Georg F. Vicedom, *The Mission of God: An Introduction to a Theology of Mission*, ed. Gilbert A. Thiele and Dennis Hilgendorf (1958; reprint, St. Louis: Concordia Press, 1965).

<sup>18</sup>Arthur Campbell Aigner, “God Is Working His Purpose Out” (1894).



poses being worked out on the stage of human history

- finishes beyond the horizon of its own history with the eschatological hope of a new creation

This has often been presented as a four-point narrative: *creation, fall, redemption, and future hope*. This whole worldview is predicated on teleological monotheism: that is, the affirmation that there is one God at work in the universe and in human history, and that this God has a goal, a purpose, a mission that will ultimately be accomplished by the power of God's Word and for the glory of God's name. This is the mission of the biblical God.

It is of course not just a single narrative, like a river with only one channel. It is rather a complex mixture of all kinds of smaller narratives, many of them rather self-contained, with all kinds of other material embedded within them—more like a great delta. But there is clearly a direction, a flow, that can be described in the terms I have laid out. Richard Bauckham says it is important that “the Bible does not have a carefully plotted single story-line, like, for example, a conventional novel. It is a sprawling collection of narratives.” It is not an aggressively totalizing story that suppresses all others—the accusation that post-modernism makes against all metanarratives. Rather,

these inescapable features of the actual narrative form of Scripture surely have a message in themselves: that the particular has its own integrity that should not be suppressed for the sake of a too readily comprehensible universal. The Bible does, in some sense, tell an overall story that encompasses all its other contents, but this story is not a sort of straitjacket that reduces all else to a narrowly defined uniformity. It is a story that is hospitable to considerable diversity and to tensions, challenges and even seeming contradictions of its own claims.<sup>19</sup>

To read the whole Bible in the light of this great overarching perspective of the mission of God, then, is to read with the grain of this whole collection of texts that constitute our canon of Scripture. In my view this is the key assumption of a missional hermeneutic of the Bible. It is nothing more than to accept that the biblical worldview locates us in the midst of a narrative of the universe behind which stands the mission of the living God.

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost,  
As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be,  
World without end, Amen.

<sup>19</sup>Richard Bauckham, *The Bible and Mission: Christian Mission in a Postmodern World* (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster, 2003), pp. 92-94.

This is not just a liturgically conventional way to end prayers and canticles. It is a missional perspective on history past, present and future, and one day it will be the song of the whole creation.

***Humanity with a mission.*** From this theocentric starting point, *God with a mission*, we can in summary see the other major dimensions of mission flowing through the Bible, which we will explore further in the rest of this book. In its opening chapters we meet *humanity with a mission* on the planet that had been purposefully prepared for their arrival—the mandate to fill the earth, subdue it and to rule over the rest of creation (Gen 1:28). This delegated authority within the created order is moderated by the parallel commands in the complementary account, “to work . . . and to take care of” the Garden (Gen 2:15). The care and keeping of creation is our human mission. The human race exists on the planet with a purpose that flows from the creative purpose of God himself. Out of this understanding of our humanity (which is also teleological, like our doctrine of God) flows our ecological responsibility, our economic activity involving work, productivity, exchange and trade, and the whole cultural mandate. To be human is to have a purposeful role in God's creation. We will return to these themes in chapters twelve and thirteen.

***Israel with a mission.*** Then, against the background of human sin and rebellion in Genesis 3—11, we encounter *Israel with a mission*, beginning with the call of Abraham in Genesis 12. Israel came into existence as a people with a mission entrusted to them from God for the sake of God's wider purpose of blessing the nations. Israel's election was not a rejection of other nations but was explicitly for the sake of all nations. This universality of God's purpose, that nevertheless embraces the particularity of God's chosen means, is a recurrent theme and a constant theological challenge (to Israel as much as to contemporary theologians). With Israel, of course, we embark on the longest part of the biblical journey, and the great themes of election, redemption, covenant, worship, ethics, and eschatology all await our missiological reflection. They will fill part three of this book.

***Jesus with a mission.*** Into the midst of this people—saturated with Scriptures, sustained by memory and hope, waiting for God—steps *Jesus with a mission*. Jesus did not just arrive. He had a very clear conviction that he was sent. The voice of his Father at his baptism combined the identity of the Servant figure in Isaiah (echoing the phraseology of Is 42:1), and that of the Davidic messianic king (echoing the affirmation of Ps 2:7). Both of these dimensions of his identity and role were energized with a sense of mission. The mission of the Servant was both to restore Israel to YHWH and also to be the agent of God's salvation reaching to the ends of the earth (Is 49:6). The mission of the Davidic messianic king

was both to rule over a redeemed Israel, according to the agenda of many prophetic texts, and also to receive the nations and the ends of the earth as his heritage (Ps 2:8).

Jesus' sense of mission—the aims, motivation and self-understanding behind his recorded words and actions—has been a matter of intense scholarly discussion. What seems very clear is that Jesus built his own agenda on what he perceived to be the agenda of his Father. Jesus' will was to do his Father's will, so he said. God's mission determined his mission. In Jesus the radically theocentric nature of biblical mission is most clearly focused and modeled. In the obedience of Jesus, even to death, the mission of God reached its climax. For "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ" (2 Cor 5:19).

**The church with a mission.** Finally, the biblical narrative introduces us to ourselves as *the church with a mission*. As Luke 24:45-47 indicates, Jesus entrusted to the church a mission that is directly rooted in his own identity, passion and victory as the crucified and risen Messiah. Jesus immediately followed this text with the words, "You are witnesses"—a mandate repeated in Acts 1:8, "You will be my witnesses." It is almost certain that Luke intends us to hear in this an echo of the same words spoken by YHWH to Israel in Isaiah 43:10-12.

"You are my witnesses," declares the LORD,  
 "and my servant whom I have chosen,  
 so that you may know and believe me,  
 and understand that I am he.  
 Before me no god was formed,  
 nor will there be one after me.  
 I, even I, am the LORD,  
 and apart from me there is no savior.  
 I have revealed and saved and proclaimed—  
 I, and not some foreign god among you,  
 You are my witnesses," declares the LORD, "that I am God."

Israel knew the identity of the true and living God, YHWH; therefore they were entrusted with bearing witness to that in a world of nations and their gods. The disciples now know the true identity of the crucified and risen Jesus; therefore they are entrusted with bearing witness to that to the ends of the earth.<sup>20</sup> The church's mission flows from the identity of God and his Christ. When you

<sup>20</sup>It is probable that in its immediate context (Lk 24 and Acts 1), the language of "witness" refers primarily to the role of the apostles as direct eyewitnesses of the Lord Jesus Christ, and especially of his resurrection. However, since that specific and unique apostolic witness forms the basis of the continuing witness by all believers to the gospel of Christ, it is not inappropriate to discern the wider and long-term missional implications of the term here.

know who God is, when you know who Jesus is, witnessing mission is the unavoidable outcome.

Paul goes further and identifies his own mission with the international mission of the Servant of the Lord. Quoting Isaiah 49:6 in Acts 13:47 he declares quite bluntly:

This is what the Lord has commanded *us*:

"I have made you a light for the Gentiles,  
 that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth," (emphasis added)

This is a missiological hermeneutic of the Old Testament if ever there was one. As the NIV footnote shows, Paul has no problem applying the singular "you" (which was spoken to the Servant) to the plural "us" (himself and his small band of church planters). So again, the mission of the church flows from the mission of God and the fulfillment of God's mandate.

Mission, then, in biblical terms, while it inescapably involves us in planning and action, is not *primarily* a matter of our activity or our initiative. Mission, from the point of view of our human endeavor, means the committed *participation* of God's people in the purposes of God for the redemption of the whole creation. The mission is God's. The marvel is that God invites us to join in.

Mission arises from the heart of God himself and is communicated from his heart to ours. Mission is the global outreach of the global people of a global God.<sup>21</sup>

Putting these perspectives together, a missional hermeneutic means that we seek to read any part of the Bible in the light of

- God's purpose for his whole creation, including the redemption of humanity and the creation of the new heavens and new earth
- God's purpose for human life in general on the planet and of all the Bible teaches about human culture, relationships, ethics and behavior
- God's historical election of Israel, their identity and role in relation to the nations, and the demands he made on their worship, social ethics, and total value system
- the centrality of Jesus of Nazareth, his messianic identity and mission in relation to Israel and the nations, his cross and resurrection
- God's calling of the church, the community of believing Jews and Gentiles who constitute the extended people of the Abraham covenant, to be the

<sup>21</sup>John Stott, *The Contemporary Christian: An Urgent Plea for Double Listening* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1992), p. 335.

agent of God's blessing to the nations in the name and for the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ

### A Hermeneutical Map

The validity of any framework for hermeneutics or for biblical theology must always be open to critique, and the one who offers it must be humble enough to recognize that ultimately it is the text that must govern the framework, and not the other way round. This is the challenge of Anthony Billington's question: "Does this or that particular framework *do justice* to the thrust of the text in its biblical-theological context? Or does it *distort* the text?"<sup>22</sup> I repeat my agreement with Billington's concern. All I would ask is that the missional framework I propose in this volume be evaluated for its heuristic fruitfulness. Does it in fact do justice to the overall thrust of the biblical canon? Does it illuminate and clarify? Does it offer a way of articulating the coherence of the Bible's overarching message? Only the reader can answer, if he or she can stay with me through the long biblical journey ahead.

There is, however, a sense in which *any* framework necessarily distorts the text to some degree. The only way not to distort the biblical text is simply to reproduce it as it is. Any attempt to summarize or provide some system or pattern for grasping it, or some structure to organize its content, cannot but distort the givenness of the original reality—the text itself.

In this respect, a hermeneutical framework for reading the Bible (like any scheme of biblical theology) functions rather like a map. As cartographers will agree, every existing map and any possible map is a distortion to some degree of the reality it portrays. Maps of the world are the clearest examples of this. There is simply no way of producing on a two-dimensional plane the reality of the three-dimensional globe without distortion. So all world maps ("projections") compromise on where the unavoidable distortion occurs—the shape of the continents, their relative area, the lines of latitude and longitude, distortion at the poles or compass orientation, and so forth. The choice will depend on who the map is for and what it is intended primarily to show.

With larger scale maps of smaller areas (e.g., for walking in the countryside or finding one's way in a city), the question becomes one of what is included or excluded from the symbolic representation that all maps are. Not every feature of the real landscape can be on a map, so the question again is, What purpose is the map intended to serve? What are the most significant features that

the person using this map will need to see clearly? What can then be omitted—not because they don't exist in the geographical reality but because they are not of primary relevance to this particular way of viewing that reality? Somewhere there must be maps of the sewers of London. They are doubtless of crucial importance to local city engineers, but they are of limited value to tourists. It is more than they need to know. The map of the London Underground is a classic and brilliant representation of that transport system, invaluable to tourists while underground but of very limited value on the streets above. It distorts and omits in order to simplify and clarify. And indeed that iconic diagram provides a much more comprehensible framework for understanding London by Tube (subway) than any map would do that showed all the Underground lines in their actual twists and turns, distances and directions. Furthermore, we all know that the Underground map is a distortion of reality for the purpose for which it was designed—to enable us to navigate the actual reality of the Tubes simply and safely. The degree of distortion is justified and accepted for what it is, and we do not accuse it of falsehood or of misleading the public. Distortion, in this context, is not at all the same thing as inaccuracy. In its own terms the London Underground map is a comprehensively accurate document.

I think there is some value in this analogy of comparing hermeneutical frameworks to maps. The given reality is the whole text of the Bible itself. No framework can give account of every detail, just as no map can represent every tiny feature of a landscape. But like a map, a hermeneutical framework can provide a way of seeing the whole terrain, a way of navigating one's way through it, a way of observing what is most significant, a way of approaching the task of actually encountering the reality itself (just as a map tells you what to expect when you are actually in the terrain it portrays).

A missional hermeneutic such as I have sketched seems to me to fulfill some of these mapping requirements. It does not claim to explain every feature of the vast terrain of the Bible, nor to foreclose in advance the exegesis of any specific text. But when you encounter on your hike some feature of the landscape that is not marked on your map, you do not deny its existence because it has no place on your map. Nor do you necessarily blame the map for choosing not to include it. Rather, the map enables you to set that feature in its proper geographical location and relationship with the other features around you.

The more I have attempted to use (or stimulate others to use) a missional map of the Bible, orientated fundamentally to the mission of God, the more it seems that not only do the major features of the landscape stand out clearly but also other less well-trodden paths and less scenic scholarly tourist attractions turn out to have surprising and fruitful connections with the main panorama.

<sup>22</sup>Anthony Billington, unpublished written response to my Laing Lecture at London Bible College, October 1998.