

# The Key to the Interpreting the whole Bible – The Mission of God

This document summarises what a *missional* understanding of the Bible looks like, in three parts;

- the missional direction of the story
- missional engagement with cultures
- missional locatedness of the readers

Each section is followed by some general questions that can be asked of pretty much any Bible text (though each question is not relevant to all texts), to help to understand in the context of the whole Bible and our life now, what it means for us to be part of God's mission. These can be used as aids in preparing to teach God's word, or to understand it better for yourself. They are probably not suitable as Bible study questions as they are, but may help in developing appropriate questions which are more specific. Firstly, a few key thoughts on why **mission** should be the key to understanding the whole Bible, from Chris Wright (Truth with a Mission):

*“Fundamentally, our mission (if it is biblically informed and validated) means our committed participation as God's people, at God's invitation and command, in God's own mission within the history of God's world for the redemption of God's creation.”*

*“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.”*

*“Now to say, “mission is what the Bible is all about,” is a bold claim. I would not expect to be able to turn any phrase that began “the biblical basis of...” around the other way. There is, for example, a biblical basis for marriage, but there is not, I presume, “a marital basis for the Bible.” There is a biblical basis for work, but work is not “what the Bible is all about.” However, I take some encouragement for my claim from an impeccable authority. It seems to me that Jesus comes very close to saying, “This is what the Bible is all about,” when he gave his disciples their final lecture in Old Testament hermeneutics (interpretation). “This is what is written,” he said. “The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning in Jerusalem” (Luke 24:46-47).”*

*“Luke tells us that with these words Jesus “opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures” (Luke 24:45); or, as we might put it, he was setting their hermeneutical orientation and agenda. The proper way for disciples of Jesus of Nazareth (crucified and risen) to read the Scripture is messianically and missiologically.”*

## PART 1 - Missional direction of the story

### *(the world of the text / context of the whole Bible)*

The missional direction of the story links in with biblical theology following important themes through the Bible, such as Gospel & Kingdom (Graeme Goldsworthy) and God's Big Picture (Vaughan Roberts). Throughout the Bible we see that:

- God has a mission for his whole creation, which is to bring glory to himself and thereby to enable all creation to enjoy the fullness of blessing that he desires for it. Humans have turned away from God and his purposes (**Genesis 3-11** +), but God's purpose is to turn them back to himself and his mission.
- God's mission is to be known as the only God, unique and universal as the only creator, owner, ruler, judge, revealer, lover, saviour, leader and reconciler of the whole world, and he will (and invites us to) battle against all forms of idolatry.
- God chose Israel, as the particular people through whom that he would bring about his universal mission to bless all the nations - the Exodus is a model for redemption, the Jubilee: a model for restoration.
  - He made demands on their worship, social ethics and total value system, so that they would showcase living as the redeemed people of God, a life which should attract others towards his, the subject of **Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy**.
  - God's mission is comprehensive and therefore has, political, economic, social and spiritual (and many other) aspects.
  - **Job, Ecclesiastes, Proverbs & Song of Songs** are interested in navigating successfully through life in the world God made. So, the wise can observe life and deduce principles for living in God's world and this may prepares people for truth about God, since he is the beginning of wisdom.
  - The history books (**Joshua - Esther**) show how sometimes Israel fulfilled God's mission for blessing all the nations, often they failed, but God was still at work. The Biblical prophets called Israel back to their original vocation, maintained an international focus of both salvation & judgement for the nations, but also announced the Messiah as the fulfilment of Israel and the true Israel, where they had failed.
- Jesus of Nazareth, his messianic identity and mission in relation to Israel and the nations, through his incarnation, life & ministry, his death, resurrection, ascension and future return, is central to God's mission. He is *the* way that God achieves his comprehensive mission for the whole of creation, and this is both the message and the model for the church's mission.
- God calls the church, the community of believing Jews and Gentiles who constitute the extended people of the Abraham covenant, to be the agent of blessing the nations in the name of, and for the glory of, Jesus. **Acts & the letters** show both how this did and ought to happen.
- God has a future plan to bring his comprehensive mission to fulfilment which will happen when Jesus returns, this includes the arrival of the new heavens and new earth (**Revelation**).

## Questions to ask of any part of the Bible:

- What is God's mission or purpose in this text?
- Where does this text fit in God's mission in the big story of the Bible?
- Where are these different aspects of mission – the uniqueness of God and Jesus Christ (he is the only real God to whom all must bow), the universality of God and Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all, and excludes no-one who comes to him), blessing to all the nations, ethical visibility, role of God's people, the comprehensive nature (social action, work, evangelism + ++), and the end times – find expression in the text?
- Are there tensions between the subject of this text and other parts of the Bible? Is our reading of the text distorted because we do not see it in the light of all of these aspects?
- What are the forces that challenge either the uniqueness or the universality of Jesus in your society or context?
- Does the community in which you are located experience the mission of the church as a blessing? In what ways?
- How might we become more effective in being a blessing to those around us (individually and corporately)?
- In what ways might our approach to ethics hinder our mission? How might we engage with ethical issues in such a way as to enable mission?
- What might it mean, for individual Christians and churches to be ethically visible?
- How does having an eschatological perspective affect the way we view mission?

## **PART 2 - Missional engagement with cultures**

### ***(the world behind the text / the context of the writer & first reader)***

God's word ALWAYS comes to us in a specific cultural context. It is God's word, but it was communicated to and through a particular person / language / culture / time period. Just as God supremely revealed himself by becoming a human in the person of Jesus, different parts of the Bible were God's revelation into our world in a way that we can understand.

#### **Questions to ask of any part of the Bible:**

- How did the culture of the writer or the first readers shape the text?
- Did the writers borrow anything from the culture (quotes, stories, assumed knowledge etc)?
- Was the text written for a particular mission to a new culture or situation?
- Does the text challenge or affirm any particular assumptions of that culture?
- Does the text provide a model for engaging people of a particular culture with God's message?

## **PART 3 - Missional locatedness of the readers**

### ***(the world in front of the text / application to current context)***

The Bible is not just a book to be studied from a historical point of view, but God's living word for us today. God has a mission for all of us too – and the Bible needs to be read in the light of our own situation.

#### **Questions to ask of any part of the Bible:**

- How is our situation similar to or different from that of the writer or first readers? Does this change the application of the text to us? (Taking into account section 1&2!)
- How would you present the text in a way that is relevant to the people you are sharing it with?
- What assumptions do we bring to interpreting this text from our culture (including church culture)? How does the text challenge these assumptions?
- Does our reading allow the text the opportunity to define everything about our mission in the world - including our assumptions, processes, terminology - everything?
- How does this text serve as an invitation to join God's mission?
- How does this text clarify what God is doing in our world, in our nation, in our cities, and in our neighbourhoods - and how may we be called to be involved in those purposes?
- How do we need to change in order to live out this text corporately and individually?
- How does the text help to clarify appropriate Christian behaviour - not only in terms of conduct but also in terms of intentionality and motive?
- What questions would unbelievers ask of this text?
- How could we use it in our evangelism?

## Epilogue Questions from *The Mission of God*

You won't really get the force of these piercing questions unless you've been through the epic 533 page journey of the whole book. Someone said to me that they are questions for our time and may not be relevant in even 10 or 15 years with where our church / culture is at, but for now they do challenge our thinking.

- We ask “Where does God fit into the story of my life?” when the real question is where does my little life fit into this great story of God's mission.
- We want to be driven by a purpose that has been tailored just right for our own individual lives (which of course infinitely preferable to living aimlessly), when we should be seeing that the purpose of all life, including our own, wrapped up in the great mission of God for the whole of creation.
- We talk about the problems of “applying the Bible to our lives,” which often means modifying the Bible somewhat adjectivally to fit into the assumed “reality” of the life we live “in the real world”. What would it mean to apply our lives to the Bible instead, assuming *the Bible* to be the reality – the real story to which we are called to conform ourselves?
- We wrestle with the question of how we can “make the gospel relevant to the world” (again, at least that is clearly preferable to treating it as irrelevant). But *this* Story, God is about the business of transforming the world to fit the shape of the gospel.
- We wonder whether and how the care of creation, for example, might fit into *our* concept and practice of mission, when *this* Story challenges us to ask whether our lives, lived on God's earth and under God's gaze, are aligned with, or horrendously misaligned with, God's mission that stretches from creation to cosmic transformation and the arrival of a new heaven and new earth.
- We argue about what can legitimately be included in the mission God expects from the church, when we should ask what kind of church God expects for his mission in all its comprehensive fullness.
- I may wonder what kind of mission God has for *me*, when I should ask what kind of me God wants for his mission.

## Bibliography

*If you like this and want more, start with this booklet:*

Wright, C. 2005. *Truth with a Mission: Reading Scripture Missiologically* (Grove Biblical Series Booklet, easy and short >30 pages)  
<[http://www.sbts.edu/resources/files/2011/09/2\\_sbjt-v15-n2\\_wright.pdf](http://www.sbts.edu/resources/files/2011/09/2_sbjt-v15-n2_wright.pdf)>

*These ideas and questions are either taken from or based on:*

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Goheen, M. W., 2011. *A Light to the Nations: The Missional Church and the Biblical Story*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic.

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*For a full list of resources see Redcliffe College's Bible & Mission Blog:*

<<http://bibleandmission.redcliffe.org/resources/bible-and-mission-books/>>