

## **'Located' Questions for a Missional Hermeneutic**

By Michael Barram on November 1, 2006

Good afternoon! It is a pleasure to be here for what is now the fifth of these annual special sessions at the AAR/SBL dedicated to exploring a missional hermeneutics, a forum that is heartening for those of us who have become convinced (1) that truly critical hermeneutical engagement with the Bible must incorporate missional questions and (2) that solid biblical work plays a crucial role in healthy missiological research. Our work has two basic goals: On the one hand, we are seeking to articulate a thoroughly and holistically missional approach to the Bible. At the same time--and no less importantly--we're attempting to articulate an ever more biblical approach to mission. To accomplish both goals will necessitate robust and ongoing collaboration between biblical scholars, missiologists, theologians, pastors, and laypersons.

Of course, the hermeneutical task will become inevitably more complex as interdisciplinary conversations bring even more perspectives and questions to the table. At this point, the very notion of a "missional hermeneutic" remains rather elastic and elusive. When we call for a "missional hermeneutic," what do we have in mind? Do we picture something specific, which can be defined narrowly and precisely? Or is anything that deals with mission and the Bible to be understood within a broad umbrella of what we are calling a "missional hermeneutic?" Up to this point, various themes have been proposed, meta-narratives have been sketched, and prolegomena have been debated; yet this idea of a missional hermeneutic has received relatively little concrete definition.

Such latent ambiguity is not necessarily a bad thing. Indeed, it seems appropriate that we have not rushed too quickly to define precisely something as potentially paradigmatic as a hermeneutic that would take the mission of God as its starting point and framework. The self-consciously circumspect subtitle of this session--*Toward a Missional Hermeneutic*--is therefore fitting and appropriate; we've been careful to say that we're moving "toward a missional hermeneutic," not that we are producing mature examples of an already established approach to the biblical text. Many questions remain.

We should not shy away from ambiguity and the questions it inspires. In fact, I suggest that it would be difficult to overestimate the significance of good questions for a viable missional hermeneutic. Yet most of us in this room live, work, and interpret the Bible in a society dominated by the market, in which means are regularly ignored in order to justify ends, and in which individual autonomy has been elevated to a social virtue of the highest order. We swim in cultural waters that emphasize answers and solutions over thoughtful, introspective, and critical questions.

Those of us who hope to articulate a biblical hermeneutic that is both critical and faithful are not immune to cultural fixations with bottom lines, quick fixes, and technological innovation. Biblical scholarship has raised many significant questions over the years, and yet the non-stop development of often faddish methods in critical exegesis--each with its own set of assumptions, tools, and loyal adherents--may well reflect a wider societal emphasis on style and technique over substance and philosophical reflection. Likewise, the story of the church in mission is replete with examples of reductionisms rooted in unquestioned cultural assumptions, unrepentant allegiances to power and privilege, and an obsession with numbers, strategies, and dubious definitions of success.

Socrates' principle--that "the unexamined life is not worth living"--is instructive. When our biblical or missional work becomes formulaic, emphasizing method and technique over open-ended curiosity and introspection, we run an even greater than normal risk that our efforts will mirror our interests and proclivities rather than God's. As I've suggested in a recent book, *Paul's Mission and Moral Reflection*, and in an essay to appear in the January edition of the journal *Interpretation*, our often-careless use of mission language betrays something of a cavalier tendency to equate what we do with what God wants done. We must continually examine our perspectives and presuppositions by asking ourselves difficult,

self-critical questions--questions that can help protect us from ourselves.

I can scarcely avoid noting at this point that when I recently asked my introductory Bible students--many of whom are secular, politically unaware, undergraduates--which election issues American Christians are concerned with, they immediately responded, "abortion," "gay marriage," and "stem cell research." Biblically and missiologically, it is worth asking how these three concerns have come to represent for many Christians and non-Christians alike the comprehensive mission of God in America--especially since the Bible never explicitly mentions any of them as such. The appropriate treatment of the poor and marginalized--widows, orphans, and aliens--is a relatively infrequent topic in American Christian discussions, despite the fact that the Bible addresses the issue directly, emphatically, and repeatedly. In fact, the Bible defines our terms and shapes our assumptions far less than we like to admit. To the extent that our presuppositions, practices, and products with respect to the Bible and mission remain unexamined, we are always flirting with idolatrous self-delusion. In this light, critical questions can serve as one of the Spirit's greatest gifts for faithful discipleship.

The Bible itself illustrates the importance of questions in understanding the character and mission of God in the world. Questions punctuate critical turning points in Scripture, in many cases providing the opportunity for a deeper understanding and appropriation of God's purposes and intentions. Moses asks whom he should say has sent him to Egypt, leading to God's self-identification and eventual liberative action on behalf of those enslaved by Pharaoh (Exodus 3:13). Isaiah hears the voice of the Lord calling out, "Whom shall I send?," leading to the prophet's commission (Isaiah 6:8). Micah clarifies God's expectations regarding human conduct when he asks, "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8). Upon hearing John the Baptist's call for a repentance exemplified by "worthy fruit," Luke describes the crowds, tax collectors, and even soldiers asking the pivotal, potentially life-changing question, "What should we do?" (Luke 3:10, 12, 14). Mark's Gospel reaches its climax as Jesus asks the disciples not merely what others say about him, but more importantly, who do they say that he is? (Mark 8:29). According to John's Gospel, Nathaniel and Pilate both articulate fundamental questions that ironically point to the very heart of Jesus' identity and mission. Nathaniel asks, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" (John 1:46). The obvious answer for John's readers is "absolutely!" Likewise, Pilate's frustrated query, "What is truth?" (John 18:38), seems particularly poignant near the end of a Gospel that repeatedly describes Jesus, the Father, and the Spirit in terms of truth. Over and over again, Paul uses a variety of rhetorical questions in his letters to further his primary line of reasoning and to expose erroneous perceptions regarding the implications of his gospel (e.g., Rom 6:1, 15; 7:7).

We could go on to passage after passage in which various questions lead to crucial insights, refreshed priorities, and more faithful discipleship. Indeed, the Bible suggests that seemingly innocuous, inarticulate, and even half-baked questions can prove to be remarkably important. Consider, for example, the lawyer's surprise in Luke's Gospel when he has heard Jesus' response to his question, "Who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:29). Or how about the confusion and disappointment the apostles must have felt at the beginning of Acts, when they asked, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). Jesus' answer demonstrates that human expectations are far smaller and more provincial than anything God has in store, even as he clarifies the apostles' missional calling as witnesses (Acts 1:7-8). It is tempting to suggest that a fairly complete and compelling portrayal of the *missio Dei* could be written by focusing on biblical passages that feature question marks!

Perhaps more than anything else, a missional hermeneutic should be characterized by the relentless articulation of critical questions. Let's return to a very basic one: What, exactly, do we mean by a "missional hermeneutic?" Is such an approach to the biblical text to be characterized by a process, a product, or some combination of the two? Is a missional hermeneutic to be rooted in a set of theological convictions, a particular philosophical paradigm, a meta-narrative summary of God's actions in the Bible or, in some sense, all of the above? What, exactly, would be unique about a missional hermeneutic? What would be its particular contribution?

Last year in this session, Colin Yuckman presented an excellent paper in which he catalogued a number

of serious shortcomings of traditional historical-critical methods. Yuckman suggested that the presuppositions and consequent methodological problems characteristic of the historical-critical revolution could be overcome by a missional hermeneutics--and I agree. Still, it is unclear to me how the actual process of exegesis would change within such a hermeneutic.

The thesis I would like to propose is that at its most basic level, a missional hermeneutic is concerned primarily with the articulation of questions--questions that we ask of the text--and more importantly, questions that the text may ask of us. A missional hermeneutic should not be characterized primarily by methodology per se--that is, as something akin to, albeit an improvement on--traditional form-, redaction-, or narrative-critical approaches to the Bible. Rather, in my estimation, a viable missional approach to Scripture will involve asking missional questions--fundamentally, questions about purpose--God's and ours. Just as missiology and biblical studies adopt methodological approaches from other fields--as long as they serve to illuminate a topic or text--a missional hermeneutic will appropriate any and all methods that help to clarify the purposes of God and the vocation of God's people.

If a missional hermeneutic is not to be characterized primarily by methodology, neither will broad, meta-narrative sketches of the *missio Dei* in Scripture be its main contribution. To be sure, we would not even be here discussing the prospects and possibilities of a missional hermeneutic if we had not become convinced that God does, indeed, have a mission--a mission that can be traced across the wide narrative of Scripture. And yet I envision a missional hermeneutic that will incorporate and then ultimately move beyond broad overviews of biblical mission toward focused and contextualized exegetical engagement with particular pericopes, including those that have not been understood heretofore in terms of mission.

The uniqueness of a missional hermeneutic will be found in its relentless commitment to articulating critical questions aimed at faithfully articulating the *missio Dei* and the community's role within the purposes of God. Of course, asking questions per se does not guarantee a missional perspective. A missional framework must form the context for our questions. I believe that framework should be articulated in the broadest and least restrictive sense possible, however, in order to guard against our ever-present tendency to define mission in terms of our own presuppositions and proclivities. At this point, I would define a missional hermeneutic as an approach to the biblical text rooted in the basic conviction that God has a mission in the world and that we read Scripture as a community called into and caught up by those divine purposes. This affirmation, which is at once disarmingly simple and dauntingly comprehensive, provides the requisite missional framework and context for asking critical questions. Christian congregations caught up in the *missio Dei* read the Bible from a social location characterized by mission. From this "location," every interpretative question becomes a "missional" question.

Darrell Guder proposes a set of five missional questions for biblical study: "How does this text evangelize us?"--which Guder calls "the gospel question." "How does the text convert us (the change question)? How does the text read us (the context question)? How does the text focus us (the future question)?" And finally, "How does the text send us?"--which Guder calls "the mission question." As he notes, some of these questions may be more relevant in certain cases than others. In any event, they helpfully provide an initial framework for asking increasingly specific, located questions.

In order to move beyond my general, theoretical call for questions, let me attempt to articulate a few of the missional questions I find myself asking again and again. As located questions, they reflect the context or contexts in which my own community reads the Bible and thus may or may not reflect the pressing questions that would bubble up in other social locations. The important point is not that every question is equally applicable to every community, but simply that missionally located questions have inherently located implications for the communities who ask them. Some located questions:

How does our reading of a given text demonstrate humility--recognizing that we see and understand only in part?

Does our reading of the text challenge or baptize our assumptions and blind spots?

In what ways are we tempted to "spiritualize" the concrete implications of the gospel as articulated in this text?

How does the text help to clarify appropriate Christian behavior--not only in terms of conduct but also in terms of intentionality and motive?

Does our reading emphasize the triumph of Christ's resurrection to the exclusion of the kenotic, cruciform character of his ministry?

In what ways does this text proclaim good news to the poor and release to the captives, and how might our own social locations make it difficult to hear that news as good?

Does our reading of the text reflect a tendency to bifurcate evangelism and justice?

Does our reading of this text acknowledge and confess our complicity and culpability in personal as well as structural sin?

In what ways does the text challenge us to rethink our often-cozy relationships with power and privilege?

How does this text expose and challenge our societal and economic tendencies to assign human beings and the rest of creation merely functional, as opposed to inherent, value?

Does the text help clarify the call of gospel discipleship in a world of conspicuous consumption, devastating famine, rampant disease, incessant war, and vast economic inequities?

How does the text clarify what love of God and neighbor looks like in a particular context?

How does this text clarify what God is doing in our world, in our nation, in our cities, and in our neighborhoods--and how may we be called to be involved in those purposes?

Does our reading allow the text the opportunity to define everything about our mission in the world--including our assumptions, processes, terminology--everything?

I do not highlight these particular questions because they are the only important ones to be considered; they're not. I don't call attention to them because they will translate readily into congregational study curricula; they probably won't. I raise these questions because they are precisely the kinds of critically important missional questions that my social location has conditioned me to overlook or avoid. To ask these kinds of honest and difficult questions--and an endless variety of others--will inevitably lead to new insights and ever newer questions as we seek to read Scripture faithfully.

By way of a conclusion, let me simply reiterate the thesis that a missional hermeneutic should be understood as an approach to Scripture that self-consciously, intentionally, and persistently bring[s] to the biblical text a range of focused, critical, and located questions regarding church's purpose in order to discern the faith community's calling and task within the *missio Dei*. Such questions will be inherently contextual--rooted in the fundamental conviction that we read the biblical text as those who have been drawn into the larger purposes of God. Ultimately, to read the Bible from a missional perspective is not an eisegetical enterprise but merely an honest acknowledgment of our primary interpretive location as we seek to read the Bible more faithfully today. In that sense, the social location of the people of God is at the very heart of a missional hermeneutic.

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