BOOKS I HAVE READ: WHY MISSION?

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The New Testament envisions no role for spectators. A missional reading of scripture, then seeks to bring about not only a clearer understand of scripture but also a better grasp of what it means to live as a missional people today.
Category: Observations

I'm not sure why I've only just come across this book as it was published in 2015. However, although I was late to the party, I'm very glad that I eventually turned up. Why Mission? by Dean Flemming is a short, but thought-through introduction to the way in which mission runs through the whole of the New Testament.

The book is a medium format paperback of 170 pages, of which the last thirty pages or so consist of a Scripture index and an extensive bibliography. The book assumes some familiarity with mission literature and theology, but most of the terms that it uses are explained in the early chapters. Any well-read Christian would find it easy to cope with and there is a scattering of footnotes for those who are keen. It will set you back about Â£15 for electronic or paperback versions.

Perhaps the best introduction to the scope and purpose of this book comes in an endorsement from Chris Wright found on the back cover:

> *Since writing The Mission of God, I have felt guilty that it paid so much more attention to a missional reading of the Old than of the New Testament. This fine book relieves me of that guilt. This is an outstandingly clear and faithful exposition of what it means to read the New Testament from the perspective of, and with the intention of participating in, the mission of God as revealed in the whole Bible.*

On balance, I would suggest that Why Mission? is actually a book about the New Testament, rather than a book about mission. The reason I say this is that it doesn't say a great deal about mission that is new, but it does illustrate an approach to reading the New Testament that will be new to many readers.

Flemming's approach involves bringing two concerns to bear on the texts that he examines:

> *(1) how the various New Testament writings bear witness to God's mission; and (2) how those writings call and equip Christian communities to participate in that mission. This second issue involves both how the test shaped missional communities in the first century, as well as how it continues to do so today.*
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> *p. xxi*

A short book like this could not hope to cover the whole of the New Testament, but these two issues are brought to bear on a sample of texts which give a good overview; Matthew, Luke-Acts, John, Philippians, 1 Peter and Revelation.

In some ways, the most interesting chapters are the final three which focus on books which are rarely discussed within the framework of mission. However, I think that the most important one is the chapter on Matthew, because this contains the NT passage which is most often read out of context in a mission setting.

> *... Jesus's final words at the conclusion of Matthew, his "Great Commission" (Matt 28:18-20) carry exceptional, ongoing significance for his followers.*
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> *Unfortunately, the very importance of this passage for the church has meant that too often it is plucked out of the whole narrative of Matthew and read by Christians as a freestanding text. As a result, bot the churches understand of its mission and its reading of Matthew's gospel suffer. One the one hand, Christians sometimes treats the "Great Commission" as if it is the su of what the Bible has to say about the church's mission in the world. On the other hand, readers of Matthew's Gospel often miss how this post-resurrection text connects with Matthew's whole narrative and with the entire biblical story.*
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> *p. 12*

This call to read Scripture in both its immediate context and on a wider canonical is vitally important to our understanding of mission; a field where proof texting and highlighting isolated passages is far more common than it should be. That being said, Flemming is not calling for a dry, academic reading of Scripture;

> *At the end of the day, we can only read scripture faithfully as communities of people who are actively engaged in God's mission, in our various contexts and cultures, just as the original authors and readers of the New Testament were caught up in the Missio Dei. Only as we participate in the mission of God can we hope to embody scripture's missional intent. The New Testament envisions no role for spectators. A missional reading of scripture, then seeks to bring about not only a clearer understand of scripture but also a better grasp of what it means to live as a missional people today.*
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> *p. 134*

Overall, this is a fascinating book and well worth a read. I would particularly recommend it to those who have to preach and teach through the New Testament. This is a book for pastors, rather than for missionaries. A careful reading of this book is bound to have an impact on the way that people understand and read the New Testament. It is well worth getting hold of.