BOOKS I HAVE READ: LEGITIMACY IN MISSIONS MATTERS

Posted on July 16, 2021 by Eddie

A short ebook that anyone involved in mission should get hold of. Oh, and it is a free download.
Category: Observations

One of the mission Twitter accounts that I really benefit from following belongs to Steve Schirmer, the President of Silk Road Catalyst. I'm continually challenged by Steve's concern for the lost and his desire for authentic, Christ centred mission. Even when I disagree with him (which isn't often), I'm challenged to review my thinking.

I'm a little late to the party, but Steve has written a little ebook (which is available for free download) entitled Legitimacy in Missions Matters. The book won't take much over an hour to read, but it is very good and should interest many people who follow Kouyanet (did I mention it was free?).

One of the issues that we face in mission today is that the places where there are very few Christians are, for the most part, situations where traditional missionaries are not welcome. In order to share the Gospel in these situations, mission workers need to find creative solutions; these include running businesses or enrolling for language courses. However, there is a concern that in some cases these creative solutions are little more than pretexts; people spend ten years or more "learning the language" or run businesses which lose money but continue to thrive.

Steve's book considers the different types of platforms that Christian workers use and insists that they must be legitimate. If we say that we are studying the language, then we have to attend language classes and make demonstrable progress; this can't carry on indefinitely with any degree of integrity. Likewise, a business must be a real business which provides a service and has a demonstrable financial basis. This is not to say that receiving outside support is wrong, but if we say we are doing something, then we should actually be doing it.

> *Is sharing the Gospel enough for missionaries? Have you ever considered how your presence on the mission field appears to the locals you serve? Have you considered whether the reasoning you use to enter a community or country is legal, even if you are able to obtain an Entry Visa? How ethical is our presence as disciple-makers? If we declare we are there to do a certain job or task beyond ministry, do you do it? Or, is it all a front in the name of proclaiming the Gospel?*
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> *From the book's web page*

As the book demonstrates, people are not fooled when missionaries claim to be doing one thing, but are really using it as a pretext do do mission work. This disconnect between claims and reality undermines the message that the missionary seeks to impart. How can we claim to represent the

truth, when we start off by lying to people?

The book share's Steve's journey and the evolution in his thinking as he grew to realise that having a legitimate presence in a situation is key to sharing the gospel. It then sets out five factors that are key to anyone who wants to ensure that their ministry is both legitimate and effective. This is not an easy-how-to guide to mission, it sets out principles rather than giving precise methods and it certainly isn't a book that says that everything will be easy. It is realistic; hopeful and yet challenging.

This short, thought-provoking book is well worth a read. Even if you had to pay for it (did I mention it is free?) I would suggest that those working in creative access situations and agency HR departments should read it. As it stands, I can't see any reason that anyone involved in mission work from church leaders supporting mission partners to missionaries on the field would not get hold of a copy. The principles that it sets out are relevant well beyond the the particular mission situations that the book focuses on.

If I have one quibble, it is with the title. Personally, I would have swapped the word "legitimacy" for "integrity". Legitimacy focuses on our relationship to the country in which we work (which is very important), but integrity points to who we are as people and our relationship to God. The message of the book wouldn't change, but I think it would be reinforced. That being said, I understand the rationale for the current title and I'm not really complaining.

I'll be interviewing Steve sometime in the next month or two about his life, this book and the work of Silk Road Catalyst - I'm really looking forward to it.