BOOKS I HAVE READ: GOD OF THE REMNANT

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Category: Observations

Those who regularly read this blog will know that one of my frustrations is that the mission movement tends to think in pragmatic or programatic terms rather than in theological ones. Indeed, I wrote a book on the subject. One of the areas in which this pragmatic thinking emerges is in our attitude to minority people groups. We tend to describe them in terms which fit our mission's program; "unreached people", "Bibleless people" or what have you. Rather than thinking biblically about the nature of people groups and their place in the overarching mission of God.

God of the Remnant: The Plight of Minority Ethnic Groups in Africa by Sunday Bobai Agang is a helpful corrective to the way in which mission agencies think about minority people groups.

This is a short book (88 pages in print) and can easily be read in a couple of hours. There are a wealth of scriptural quotations and a good dose of references to the wider literature, with notes for those who want to follow up more. It is pitched at a level that is accessible to the general reader, rather than the specialist. A print copy will set you back around Â£9 with the Kindle version less than half of that.

It is important to stress that this is a short book, it does not set out to be a full treatment of how ethnicity is dealt with in the Bible. You'd be better off getting hold of From Every People and Nation (which I note is currently heavily discounted) if that's what you are after.

God of the Remnant, simply aims to look at the question of the place of minority groups (particularly in Africa) from a couple of theological vantage points. The author is a member of a Nigerian minority (though he never mentions which one) and his experience informs the discussion. The fact that the author is African, allows him to pass some judgements on contemporary African society that might be very uncomfortable to some.

As the title suggests, the central theme of the book is the Scriptural notion of the remnant; those of God's people who survived various judgements and who were the vehicle for the continuance of his purposes. The book gives a brief overview of how the theme of the remnant is developed through the Old and New Testaments. The author suggests that the concept of the "remnant" can be applied to individuals or groups who have survived, or - to put it better - have been preserved by God's grace. This includes minority groups in Africa who have faced various forms of persecution and prejudice over history.

This leap from the Biblical notion of the remnant to contemporary sociology is initially

uncomfortable. However, the following two chapters which explore the notion of covenant in the Bible and the way in which God's covenants and the notion of the remnant intertwine brings the Biblical and the contemporary together in a helpful fashion.

The following chapters explore the divided nature of human societies and the way in which our assumptions about the way things work and should work can hinder our ability to address the deeper needs. The final chapter provides some practical suggestions for those who belong to both majority and minority ethnic groups.

The book is primarily written for an African, particularly Nigerian, audience. It is very much to be welcomed as a theological study addressing contemporary issues. However, I would suggest that anyone whose work addresses ethnicity in Africa, whether that is Bible translation, unreached people work or some other field, should read it. We need to base our work on sound theology, not simply on pragmatics. This book is a great place to start.

As usual, a few representative quotes:

> *I know from my own experience that life is not easy as a member of a minority group in Africa. Your options are limited and you and your people are at the mercy of majorities who control all aspects of community life.*

> *Paul understood that the remnant is an outward demonstration of Godâ€™s faithfulness not just to the Jews but to the whole human race, and especially to those who believe in Christ and constitute the spiritual Israel (or what he calls â€œthe Israel of Godâ€ â€“ Gal 6:16).*

> *Sadly this situation does not only apply in society: it also applies in the church, which too often acts as if ethnic minorities are not as important as the majority ethnic group in Godâ€™s eyes.*

> *All of us, minorities and majorities, have a responsibility to care for the creation that God has entrusted to us. And we should never forget that Godâ€™s creation includes our fellow human beings â€“ all of them, whether they come from minority or majority groups.*

> *So those of us who are minorities are not obliged to sit back in silence while majorities speak over our heads. We can speak out with confidence, knowing that in the past God has spoken through minorities, and there is no reason why he cannot do so again.*

> *We Africans like to remind the world of the African concept of ubuntu. There can be no doubt that the concept is a good one, but if we are honest we must sometimes admit that we apply it more in the context of people who are like us than we do people from other ethnic groups.*

> *The smugness of the majority has meant that the African church has largely remained silent in the face of overwhelming human rights abuses suffered by minorities and by socially disrespected groups such as women, widows, children, orphans, the poor and the weak.*

> *We must make suggestions and should propose suitable members for our church councils or diaconates. But we must do this in humility to serve the church, not our ambitions or our group. It must not become a campaign to exalt minorities over others but to further Godâ€™s kingdom.*