BOOKS I HAVE READ: ADVANCING MODELS OF MISSION

Posted on September 28, 2021 by Eddie

Paul doesnâ€™t seem concerned with establishing the church in each ethnolinguistic people group, even though he and his team were intent on crossing cultural barriers. Rather, Paul was concerned with planting churches in cities that were composed of all people in the city.
Category: Observations

I really enjoyed this book and have already posted a few quotes from it, however it is also rather frustrating. Let me explain. Advancing Models of Mission: Evaluating the Past and Looking to The Future is a multi-author Evangelical Missionary Society publication. As the subtitle suggests, there is a broad theme running through the book, that of past and future models of mission - there is also a section on the present, though that doesn't occur in the title. However, the sheer breadth of the theme means that there are a lot of disconnects and the book doesn't really gel as a coherent whole. However, this is mitigated by the fact that the individual essays are excellent and well worth reading. If you are interested in the study of mission - especially if you have a focus on some of the issues raised in the book - you cannot afford not to read this.

Published in September 2021, this 240 page paperback is written for a broadly academic audience. Some chapters are harder going than others, but none of them are particularly difficult. Each chapter has a range of footnotes and a bibliography if you want to follow anything up (I've already bought a couple of other books as a result of reading this). It will set you back about Â£13 for the paperback and just over half that for the electronic version. (I need to write a blog post about why I think reading a book on Kindle is better than getting a hard copy - controversial opinion.)

As I've hinted, the book consists of three sections, focussing on the past, present and future of mission.

Looking Back Missionaries and Models from the Past

The chapters in this section cover a lot of ground; including shifting theological concerns revealed in a Chinese mission journal, the transnational nature of evangelicalism and the important (though unrecognised) role of women of colour in the history of mission. If you have a special interest in the topics raised here, you won't want to miss the particular chapter, however there is a great deal for a generalist like me to glean as well.

Revisiting Long-Held Models

I, perhaps, did the book a little bit of a disservice when I said that it didn't hold together in a coherent fashion. The first three chapters in this section take a necessary hard look at the interrelated themes of people group theory, the homogenous unit principle and "finishing the task". Approaching the issues from different dimensions, the various authors clearly demonstrate both the theological and the pragmatic weaknesses that underpin much of the modern mission industry. Over the last thirty

years many mission agencies have shifted to what is termed a people-group approach. This book clearly demonstrates the weak foundations of these models.

> *â€œWhen we are used to thinking along one track (the gospel within a people group), we think only about the role of intra-ethnic relationships, not inter-ethnic relationshipsâ€ (Baker 2017, 10). Our missional vision is not merely a Jesus movement within a people group manifesting reconciliation with God, but a Jesus movement which envisions comprehensive reconciliation, expressing the fullness of Christâ€™s reign over all human relationships.*
>
> *loc 1,850*

One of the most popular theological justifications for people group thinking comes from John Piper's book Let the Nations Be Glad in which he tries to show that the Greek phrase *Ï€Î¬Î½Ï„Î± Ï„á½° á¼"Î¸Î½Î·* which is translated as "all nations" in the NIV (Matthew 28:19) actually refers to distinct ethnolinguistic groups. However, as the author of this chapter writes:

> *It is noteworthy that biblical scholars, even those close to Piper, never reduced ethne to â€œpeople groupsâ€ (Carson, Wessel, and Strauss 2010, 9:597). Scholarly consensus is that the phrase intends to refer to â€œeveryone everywhereâ€ (Baggett and Arnett 2016, 71; KÃ¶stenberger and Oâ€™Brien 2001, 50; Nolland 2005, 1266).*
>
> *loc 2,107*

Nor does the New Testament praxis seem to support a people-group approach.

> *Paul doesnâ€™t seem concerned with establishing the church in each ethnolinguistic people group, even though he and his team were intent on crossing cultural barriers (cf. Acts 14:8â€“23). Rather, Paul was concerned with planting churches in cities that were composed of all people in the city.*
>
> *loc 2,232*

There are other problems with this approach too:

> *Despite the fact that the category of â€œpeople groupâ€ is not specifically defined in Scripture, is not a recognized sociological category, and has endured wide critique (Appadurai 1988; Rynkiewich 2002, 2007; Lee and Park 2018), â€œpeople groupâ€ remains the principal category for identifying and promoting church-planting goals.*
>
> *loc 1,728*

> *The very nature of â€œpeople groupingâ€ is a quest of simplification: the process of reducing ethnic, linguistic, and cultural complexities into clean, manageable categories.*
>
> *loc 1,727*

> *Missiology has been more cognizant of its need to embrace cultural diversity and listen to global voices, but it has been much slower to embrace diversity and listen to the voices of people with disabilities.*
>
> *loc 2,690*

This short section is worth the price of the book on its own. To sum it up:

> *Quite simply, a missiology that does not include everyone everywhere, because some do not fit in the people-group boxes, is inadequate.*
>
> *loc 2,120*

It saddens me that those who most need to read this critique and take it on board - the mission leaders who have uncritically adopted a people group approach - are unlikely to do so. One of the observations from my PhD research was that there is a distinct gulf between mission scholars and practitioners. This gulf needs to be bridges and practitioners need to read books like this.

Moving Forward: Missiological Models for Missions in the Future

I'll just pull one quote from this section, but it goes a long way to summing up the arguments from the different chapters:

> *While the Global North (a minority of Christians) still speaks with the loudest voice, Christians of the Global South (the majority of Christians) are producing new and exciting perspectives on leadership, delving into different cultures and connecting them to address the worldâ€™s most pressing issues. These perspectives differentiate a global organization, one that is polycentric in its decision-making, from an international organization, which radiates its leadership from its home country. Which is your style of leadership? Global leaders and their organizations will be the ones that show the way to mutuality and solidarity in our endeavors.*
>
> *loc 4,078*

This should be carved in stone in every mission agency headquarters around the world!

So, who should read this book? Without question it should be on the shelves of every Bible college and theology seminary in the English speaking world - particularly those who have any claim to training people for mission. Mission scholars need to be aware of it and should have a tattered, marked up copy on their own shelves. Above all, I'd make a plea that mission leaders and board members of agencies that focus on people groups should read the first three chapters of section 2. Quite frankly, if you don't, you are not doing your job. You may not agree with them, but you can't ignore them.