BOOKS I HAVE READ: THE NEW TESTAMENT'S VISION OF MISSION

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Your mission committee, agency leadership team or board should read this book together. It is very good.
Category: Reviews

I have a bit of an allergy to some mission literature; I really don't like books are articles that present mission as a one dimensional activity or which see mission as being based on one text of Scripture (that one at the end of Matthew). The thing is, mission is a complex phenomenon and its nature is derived from the overarching narrative of Scripture itself. This doesn't mean that books about mission need to be long and complicated (though some are) but they do need to respect the way that the church's mission is developed in Scripture.

An excellent example of how to talk about mission in a (very) short book comes in Ian Paul's latest offering, The New Testament's Vision of Mission. Ian will be known to some Kouyanet readers as the host of the excellent website Psephizo, but he is also the managing editor of Grove Books who have published this new booklet. Grove produce a regular series of booklets on a variety of topics and they are generally of a very high standard; this one is no exception.

The booklet is 30 pages long and consists of 7 short chapters the majority of which conclude with questions for reflection and it will set you back Â£3.95 from the publishers. The material is dense, but not particularly academic and it would make ideal material for a group Bible study.

The book consists of seven chapters, the first and last of which provide an introduction and conclusion. The central material comes in chapters 2-6 which provide five Bible studies based around passages which from the Luke's Gospel and Acts.

- Does the Bible Believe in Mission?
- The Kingdom of God Grows 'All by itself' (Mark4:26-34)
- Grace and Judgment in the 'Nazareth Manifesto' (Luke 4:14-28)
- The Sending of the Seventy-two (Luke 10:1-20)
- The Missionary People of God at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-21)
- The Gospel Comes to Europe (Acts 16:6-15)
- Conclusion

The first chapter introduces us to the complexity of mission as a concept.

> *But Scripture is always ready to surprise us, and we need repeatedly to return to the vision set out here, since (God says) â€˜my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my waysâ€™ (Isa 55.8). The first and biggest surprise that it has for us is that, despite the importance of â€˜missionâ€™ as an idea in Christian ministry, the word (in the sense we normally use it) does not occur anywhere in the Bible!*
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> *p.4*

> *With the call of Abraham, we are immediately introduced to a vital dynamic of mission for the people of God: it is about them, but it is always also a means to the wider end of Godâ€™s reaching out to the whole world.*
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> *p.5*

The chapter takes us on a whistle stop tour through the Old Testament before concluding with:

> *God continually reaches out to his world, and most often does this by calling, commissioning, releasing, sending and even sometimes throwing his people into the task of proclaiming the good news of his invitation to be saved from judgment.Â*
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> *P. 6*

Four themes are identified which are then followed up in the chapters on the New Testament.

- the sovereign initiative of God;
- his response to the cry of his people;
- the disruption that his missionary activity creates; and

- the dynamics of going and being sent.

Chapter two, picks up a passage which doesn't immediately seem to resonate with mission, the parable of the growing seed and the mustard seed. The theme here is the sovereign initiative of God in mission.

> *Like other Western denominations, the Church of England, in which I am ordained, is obsessed with Mission Action Plans, strategies, church planting and reorganization. All these things are neededâ€"but the danger is that they give the false impression that, if only we got our strategies right, then the growth of the kingdom will come. This parable, and the central term automate, tells us that this is a lie. The kingdom of God will grow because God is sovereign, and Jesus is Lord, not because of any resolutions of synod, grants of funding, or strategies of dioceses.*
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> *p.10*

The same can, of course, be said for mission agencies. Another comment which is very apposite for mission agencies in our day and age comes from page 11.

> *There is no justification for seeing the image of a large tree as pointing to the (historical) triumph of the institution of the church growing and dominating culture. This organic image refers to the kingdom of God in all its diversity, not any one or collection of institutions.*

Chapter three takes us into the Nazareth Manifesto in Luke 4, which might be considered more traditional mission material.

> *The link here between Isaiah 61 and Isaiah 58 is created by the repetition of the language of â€˜releaseâ€™ in relation both to the prisoners and the oppressed in Luke 4.18. Although this is commonly read as something social rather than spiritual, it marks Jesusâ€™ ministry in a number of ways in Lukeâ€™s gospel, and is used as often in relation to the release from (that is, forgiveness of) sin as it is in other ways, including in one of the other programmatic statements, the Benedictus (Luke 1.77).*

> *p. 12-13*

> *Jesus, it appears, has not done away with the justice and judgement of God. But in his ministry a window of grace has opened up, inviting all who receive his good news of release from sin and sickness to know the restoration of God before the time of reckoning, when we must all give an account to God.*
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> *p.14*

In chapter four, we are taken into another familiar mission passage, the sending of the seventy-two from Luke 10. These few pages have a lot of wise observations which challenge much Western thinking about mission. I'll give a couple of examples.

> *In the West, it feels to me as though our conceptualization of the missionary task is that we are more than ready, but it is jolly hard work and people are just not interested. In other works, the workers are willing but the harvest does not appear to be ready. Jesus here says exactly the opposite; the harvest is there, and ready, and all that is needed is for workers to go out and reap it! This in turn raises questions about what we are willing to do, and whether, despite our best efforts, we are really engaging in the kind of mission that Jesus has in mind.*
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> *p. 15*

> *To â€˜eat what is set before youâ€™ would be a shocking thing for Jews who want to observe the food laws and who visit those who are less kosher than they are, but is completely in line with Jesusâ€™ other teaching which prioritizes relationship over the niceties of legal conformity. In many parts of the world, being willing to receive hospitality is essential in establishing relationships; I wonder if Christians in the West need to learn more humility in receiving.*
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> *p. 16*

We stay in familiar territory (especially for Kouyanet readers) in chapter five which investigates Pentecost from Acts 2. Again, there is a great deal in a short space, but I'll highlight two quotes which

strike me as being particularly important. The first is something that I've repeated many times here.

> *The disciples speaking in all the languages of their hearers is not, as commonly preached, an undoing of the confusion of Babel (Gen 11), since Luke offers no echoes of any Old Testament text from that episode. Undoing Babel would imply eliminating linguistic difference and giving everyone a single language to speak. In fact, the gospel does something quite differentâ€"uniting people in one community whilst retaining their different ethnic, social and cultural differences, expressed in the four-fold phrase â€˜every tribe, language, people and nationâ€™ that we find seven times in the Book of Revelation (Rev 5.9, 7.9, .)17.15 ,14.6 ,13.7 ,11.9 ,10.11*
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> *p. 21*

> *...it is also worth noting the constant interplay here between God as Father, Jesus and the Spirit. The resurrection of Jesus and the pouring out of the Spirit were both things done by God and both testify that Jesus is both Lord and Messiah. So how should we respond to what God is doing? Believe in Jesus and receive the Spirit.*
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> *p. 22*

The last study turns to Acts 16, where we find Paul and his companions crossing into Europe, having been prevented by the Spirit from preaching in Asia.

> *At one level, all this is of historical interest. And yet we live in the same age of the Spirit, and all the evidence suggests that Luke intends later readers to see this as an example and pattern of ministry for us to follow. We too should see the gospel as speaking into questions of power, wealth and ethnic diversity, and asked fundamental questions of differences we find in our culture as the gospel relativizes them. We too should expect the Spirit to be actively at work, directing and guiding our actions and decision. And we too should expect to see fruitful growth of the word, as people from all walks of life respond to the gospel as we faithfully proclaim it.*
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> *p. 26*

The concluding chapter draws together the various themes which have emerged from the study and in a page and a half presents a clear picture of some of the essential issues surround mission, today.

A short booklet like this one involves making difficult choices. It is impossible to include all of the New Testament's teaching on mission and perhaps the title: The New Testament Vision of Mission is too ambitious. Were I choosing the texts, I would probably have taken a broader approach, including passages from Matthew, John and Paul as well as Luke. However, in limiting himself to the Lucan canon, Ian Paul has given a structure and consistency to his work that a more scattergun approach would have lacked. In any case, these are minor points. It is a small booklet, which is intentionally limited, yet nevertheless covers a wide range of ground and makes some excellent points which are well grounded in a study of Scripture. You won't read many better short books on mission.

So, who should read this book? Frankly, at this price, I don't see any reason why any Christian wouldn't - but then again, I'm a bit of a mission-book junkie. I would suggest that this would make an excellent text for groups of people who are responsible for leading mission in any context, whether that be church mission committees or agency leadership teams and boards. The format of short chapters followed by excellent probing questions make this an ideal resource for getting people to think through some important issues from a Biblical standpoint.

I must point out that I was provided with an electronic version of the text of this booklet in exchange for this review. I have tried not to allow this to impact what I have said, if I thought it was a stinker, I would have said so.