BOOKS I HAVE READ: LIBERATING THE GOSPEL

Posted on June 3, 2016 by Eddie

Revelation did not descend out of a clear blue sky to a person living a life of tranquility and undisturbed intellectual reflection.
Category: Reviews

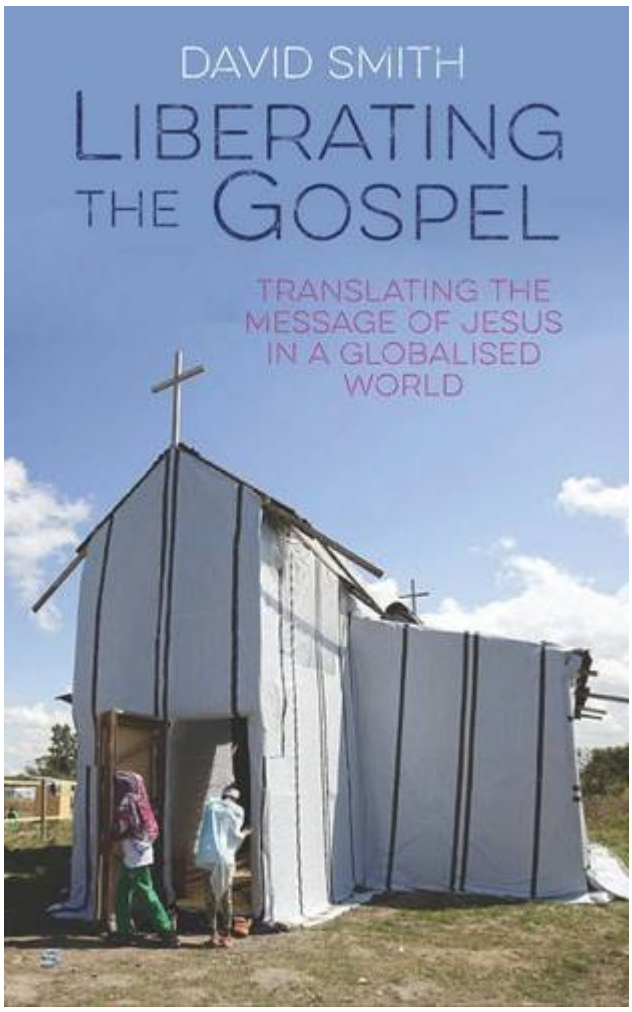
It's only just the start of June, but I think I've just read the best book that I will read all year. This review probably won't do it justice, butÂ Liberating the Gospel: Translating the message of Jesus Christ in a globalised worldÂ is an incredibly important read.

It's a normal format paperback and about 260 pages long. Though it is not an academic book, 60 of the pages are notes and references in case you want to look into any of the issues raised more deeply. It will currently set you back about twelve quid on Amazon and, as far as I can see, it is not available electronically. However much you pay for it, it is worth every penny.

In this book, David Smith takes up the challenge posed by N.T. Wright that we should read the Scriptures with "first-century eyes and with twenty-first-century questions". ThisÂ means acknowledging that the Bible was written in and to a context very different to our own. It also means that we need to realise that the Bible addresses the social, political and economic issues of the day; if we see Scripture as just a "spiritual" document, we are missing a great deal.

The book divides into five chapters, a relatively short introduction and conclusion are separated by three long chapters; one on Jesus, one on Paul and one on Revelation. By paying particular attention to the socio-economic context that both the writers and readers of the Scriptures experiences, Smith draws out new insights from the text and develops a coruscating critique of the inequalities of our

globalised world.



Recently we have been mourning the death of Kenneth Bailey whose books did much to illuminate the cultural background of the Gospels. I don't think that it is unjust to say that David Smith does something very similar with the political and economic background to the New Testament.

For me, the highlight of the book is the chapter on the Book of Revelation; it's worth the price of the whole thing. I'll try and illustrate this with quotes from the opening and closing of the chapter.

> *"The recognition that the context in which Jon of Patmos wrote his Apocalypse was one of multiple crises is important both for the proper understanding of his complex work, and for the discovery of its relevance and power in similar situations in our world today. Revelation did not descend out of a clear blue sky to a person living a life of tranquility and undisturbed intellectual reflection. Rather this book emerged from a tumultuous period of history when the very foundations of life were shaken and death and suffering stalked the earth. It is a response to a deep personal, spiritual and social crisis in which the dissonance between the hope inspired by the gospel (a hope which, as we have seen, motivated Paul's universal*

> *mission and the demonstrable reality of a world dominated by a pagan power arrogating to itself the rise of the saviour of all nations demanded fresh vision and anew kind of theological language."*
>
> *"This brief sketch of the history and reception and interpretation of the book of Revelation and its profound and lasting influence on Western culture compels us to consider some uncomfortable but unavoidable questions. Catherine Keller asks whether it is 'mere coincidence that the last book of the holy book of the Western world envisions a cataclysmic end, given that the West seems in its modernity hell-bent on producing some literal form of that end'. How do we explain the strange paradox that while Western modernity espouse the optimistic millennialism of progress it hasÂ engaged in 'busily facilitating the most demented of ecological or nuclear dooms?'"*

The book closes with an incisive critique of Western consumer culture and its ability to effectively marginalise those who would offer an alternative approach to life in the shape of the Gospel. However, this is not a book full of doom and gloom; it points to a hopeful future, but one where hope is found (as in the first century) not in the centres of imperial power, but on the sidelines, on the edges of empire.

> *"At a time when Christian in Europe continues to experience drastic decline such an agenda may seem impossibly daunting, but if the dynamic movement which burst into history at the beginning came to birth in the margins of an imperial society, the loss of power and privilege and the ending of Christianity's role as the chaplain of an increasingly secular culture can be viewed as a blessing, creating the space within which Christians in the West may rediscover what genuine discipleship of Jesus Christ might look like. Furthermore, the shift in the centre of gravity of Christianity to the Global South were millions of believers confess Jesus as Lord in impoverished and exploited contexts, including the slums and favelas of the megacities of Latin America, Africa and Asia means that the new heartlands of this faith are often located at the imperial margins where millions are reading the Bible with very different lenses from those provided by the Enlightenment"*

This isn't a difficult read, but it's not a page-turner either. You will want to take time to take in all of the details and I certainly expect to return to read it two or three times in the next couple of years.

On a personal note; I have never met David Smith (though we have spoken on the phone), but I owe him a huge debt. If I had not readÂ his excellentÂ Mission After Christendom, IÂ suspect that my thinking, my career and this blog would have taken a very different turn. If you read this, David, thank you.

Please note, I was provided with a copy of this book by the publishers in exchange for an honest

review. I have not allowed this generous provision to shape what I have written. If I thought the book stank, I'd have said so. It doesn't. It's brilliant. Buy it. Give a copy to your pastor.