BOOKS I HAVE READ: OVERTURNING TABLES

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An excellent, thoughtful book which looks at some of the underlying problems of the American mission movement.
Category: Reviews

It's only when you read the subtitle that you realise whatÂ Overturning Tables: Freeing Missions from the Christian-Industrial ComplexÂ by Scott Bessenecker is about. From there on in, it is more or less self-explanatory.

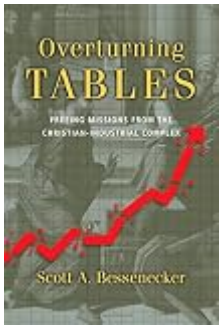
This is a small format paperback of about 200 pages aimed at a popular, rather than an academic audience. There are some footnotes, but not many. Sadly, the printed book is outrageously expensive on Amazon in the UK, though the Kindle version at around Â£6 is a good buy.

The book consists of eightÂ chapters, which are described in the introduction.

> *"Chapter one will contrast the corporate structure of the first American mission agency with the American slaves who represent the earliest American missionaries. Chapter two deals with the roots of the marriage between Protestantism and a corporate-capitalist mindset. Chapter three grapples with the paralysing centrality of funding in our models. Chapter four explores moving away from a product mentality to our mission and toward something more holistic. Chapter five will look at replacing the emphasis on privatization and individualism with a more communal approach. Chapter six will help us to bring those excluded by the corporate paradigm in to the centre of our life and mission. Chapter seven will highlight the critical need to move away from partnership as a carefully delineated business arrangement toward a more interdependent approach, and chapter eight will make a case for rejecting the metrics rooted in the corporate vision for numeric increase in exchange for signs of the arrival of the kingdom of God."*

And there you have it; the contents and central argument of the book laid out clearly (and I didn't need to do much work).

Some thoughts:



- Though the introduction quoted above sets out the contents of the book clearly and articulately, I actually found the book itself to be a bit meandering. It wasn't always easy to follow the arguments which seemed to loop back on themselves in ways I did not expect.
- Despite this reservation; this is a very good book. The arguments and criticisms of the mission movement are not thrown out at random or the work of some spiteful, disillusioned ex-

missionary. The authorÂ criticisesÂ western society and the mission movement which sprung from it on the basis of the gospel. Though it addresses some very practical concerns, this is a deeply theological book.
- This is an American book, by an American author addressing American issues. I don't say this as a criticism, far from it, but the mission movement in the US has taken a different trajectory from its counterpart elsewhere. Some of the issues that Bessenecker addresses are relevant on this side of the pond, but others aren't; if you are looking for a critical analysis of the global mission movement, this isn't it.
- That being said, this book is an important one. Though the US mission movement is only one strandÂ of a global reality, it is an extremely important (and sometimes problematic) strand - not least because of the financial clout it wields. If this book causes some agencies to rethink some of their approaches, it will have done a great service.

Who should read this book?Â To be blunt, I think that everyone involved in mission agencies in North America should get a copy and read it - but it is likely to be an uncomfortable read. Likewise, though it doesn't directly address the situation in Europe, there is enough thought provoking material in here, that I would recommend mission leaders and boards over here to give it a read, too.

Let me finish with a few quotes.

> *"Protestant churches and mission ought to animate structures that are economically lean and easily allow the poor to serve as missionaries, resisting the creation of a professional missionary class occupied almost exclusively by middle class, formally educated individuals." p.50*
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> *"The Protestant church unintentionally accelerated a consumerist mindset rather than offering an alternative vision to the corporate model commanding our fidelity. Seeking first the kingdom of God ought to consume us; rather we have turned the kingdom of God into a consumable.*
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> *We've attempted to press the gospel into product form - a privately owned salvific experience obtained through a business-like transaction. This is the modern Protestant equivalent of purchasing indulgences. The good news has lost its cosmic meaning and has been truncated from the reconciliation of all things by the grace and governance of a good God to an individual purchase of fire insurance. We buy God's friendship at an individual level with the transaction of a sinner's prayer." p.97*
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> *"Protestant missionaries are rarely sent out as a community from a community. Jesus paired the disciples he had been living and traveling with and sent them out in fellowship pairs. The Antioch church sent Paul and Barnabas, a duo who worked together over many years to build the church that sent them. The church community discerned together that these two*

> *leaders were called and equipped and the community sent and supported the missionary team. Within the Western Protestant context we usually decide independently that we are missionaries and apply as individuals to work with a mission organisation in much the same way that we might apply to take a position withÂ Proctor & Gable or Walmart. We sign a contract, undertake an individualised job description, work alongside people we have never before met, and work under a supervisor we may see for the first time on the field. This is the corporate paradigm as distinct from the more communal process of joining a Â guild of tradesmen or a small business. For most Protestants, we raise individual support, asking individual donors to give to our individual ministry needs. We are employed by corporate-styled organisations with a revolving door of executives and a board of directors with whom we have little to no relationship. Our lives have become more and more disconnected from others and we have forgotten the communal approach to mission." p. 130*
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> *"If church and mission structures have not completely broken free of colonial mindsets, if they require large infusions of capital, if they are principally founded on the idea of gospel as product and if they are built on a mainly European individualistic vision of the world, then how will the burgeoning, poor, outcast, majority of this world living in barrios, favelas and bustees see that the kingdom of God is good news to them?" p.142*
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> *"But the sad truth is that Protestants universally seem to accept growth as the sole measure of health. This is not only true in the West. Numeric growth is the holy grail among churches and ministries around the world. We act as though the Great Commission of Christ is some sort of numbers game, rather than about the reign of God over all things. The increase of Christ's government and peace defy the easy metrics of the business world which the church often translates into number of baptisms, congregants and churches, or the size of annual budgets, staff or the number of people served through various ministries. These numbers may provide some helpful information, but they are flimsy indicators of Christ's reign. and when we succumb to measuring the mission of God solely by these metrics, we succumb to the principalities of profit and miss the true signs of kingdom health.*
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> *Large churches or ministries are not promised to the faithful servant of Christ; suffering is." p. 162*

I realise that in these fevered days, some of my readers may feel that I have singled out the American mission movement for unfair criticism, while not criticising its counterpart in the UK. The UK mission scene does have its problems; but this book doesn't deal with those, so I've not mentioned them. If anyone is aware of a counterpart to this book which looks at the UK or Europe, please let me know.