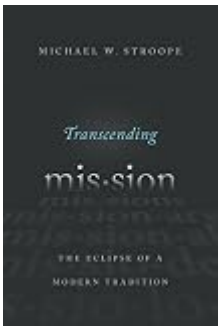
BOOKS I HAVE READ: TRANSCENDING MISSION

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A longish review of the most thought provoking book that I've read in a long time!
Category: Reviews

It's been a strange experience readingÂ Transcending Mission: The Eclipse of a Modern TraditionÂ by Michael Stroope; it's the book I've been wanting to read for the last ten years or so; I just didn't know it. It asks questions I hadn't been able to formulate and it provides answers that I find convincing. It is very, very good.



Essentially, this is a book about language; in particular the language of mission (missionary, missional and so on). We use language to describe the world around us, but also to shape and characterise the world. Our current language of mission arose in a particular cultural situation and when we read it back into the Bible and describe Jesus and Paul as missionaries, we unintentionally impose some of the baggage that comes with the term back onto the Bible. Equally, when we talk about the future of mission, we cannot fully escape the connotations that the language brings with it.

> *A book about the language of mission is important because our talk about mission determines who we are and what we do. Language forms identity as words shape and express belief and ideals, choices and purpose. Notions conveyed in words and phrases provide the framework on which life decisions are made and efforts are expended. Because mission language forms particular ideals and notions that shape identity and purpose, that determines why and how we act, an exploration into the origin and use of these words is more than semantic quibbling. And more to the point, mission is important because it is the language that determines our stance toward the world and the means through which we respond to surrounding realities.*

This is a large, (over 400 pages) and very thorough book (with extensive footnotes and indices). I'm not sure of the exact dimensions and number of pages as I read it as a pre-publication electronic copy. It will be released sometime this month and it isn't cheap.

Transcending MissionÂ is meticulously researched as revealed by the voluminous footnotes and references. However, it is not a heavy read; though it undoubtedly helps to have more than a passing knowledge of church history and modern mission thinking if you are to get the most out of it. It's also a brave book, anyone who is prepared to disagree with Chris Wright, Stephen Neil, Mike Goheen, Andreas KÃ¶stenberger and K.S LaTourette isn't afraid of a little controversy! Above everything else, it is a well argued, well thought through and well written piece of iconoclasm. I loved it! My only slight reservation, is that Stroope makes his arguments so forcefully, that sometimes it feels a little repetitious.

The book starts with a longish introduction which raises the issue of why the language we use about mission is a problem and closes with an epilogue which sets out a proposed way forward. Between these two are three sections sub-divided into ten chapters which form the meat of the book.

Section 1: Justifying Mission

In this section, Stroope investigates the way in which people use the Bible and history to provide a justification for mission. It is impossible in a short review to do justice the depth of his argument, but this short quote captures the essence of his conclusion:

> *So, in answer to theÂ first of our questions above, we can say mission and missionary are not strictly biblical terms.*

I'd highlight two issues that Stroope raises here. Firstly, to use the Bible to justify our viewÂ of mission, is to take our modern practice and to read it back into Scripture, when it would be far better to do the opposite. Secondly, he thoroughly debunks the notion that "mission" is a Biblical concept because it shares the root meaning of "send" with the the Greek terms *apostellein* and *pempein.Â* However, as he demonstrates arguing from etymology (especially across three languages) is not tenable and anyway, this does not reflect the way that mission language developed in the life of the church.

> *To characterize Jesusâ€™ ministry and identity as mission and missionary misrepresents the uniqueness of revelation and consigns divine being and act to categories of contemporary vocational identity and organizational structures.*
>
> *The most pressing problem with conventional readings of the early church is that the concepts of mission and missionary are not developed in the book of Acts, nor do they exist as terminology or ideals toward which the early church aspired. is language distorts the storyâ€"a modern misreading.*

On similar grounds, he demonstrates that mission and missionary were not terms used during the early spread of Christianity

> *Lauding the early church through missionary language may present an inspiring picture of early believers, but it does not aid us in understanding the dynamics of the faith and witness in their context and at their time. The language of mission and missionary prejudices our reading of the text so that a clear understanding of motives and intentions is impeded by a retrospective burnishing of Christian history.*

Section 2: Innovating Mission

This section covers the spread of the Roman Catholic Church in the first half of the last millennium; from the Crusades to Ignatius Loyolla. Though the Church spread in a variety of ways, it wasn't until

Loyolla that the terms mission or missionaries were used.

> *Patrick and the Venerable Bede tell this story in language quite different from that of modern mission historians. Instead of mission, these early historians employ the language of witness, pilgrimage, and martyrdom. Rather than missionaries, they name the actors as bishops, pilgrims, servants, and apostles.*

We might have a limited understanding of what a monk or a pilgrim did; but it is all to easy to overlay these terms with a modern veneer by substituting the word "missionary".

> *Mission does not enlarge or activate our understanding of peopleâ€™s motives and actionsâ€"it obscures them.*

When the terms mission and missionary were adopted, they emerged from a specific context in early modernity and were originally limited to a very particular context.

Section 3. Revising Mission

The two chapters in this section trace the way that Protestants adopted the Catholic use of "mission" and repurposed it for their own uses. Stroope suggests that the view that the Reformers had no interest in mission is not strictly true; they were interested in the spread of the Gospel, but they were very reluctant to use the, then Catholic, language of mission to describe it.

This sectionÂ follows fairly familiar ground from the Moravian to the Edinburgh 1910 conference by way of William Carey. It underlines the fact that the growth of Protestant missions was tied to both the European colonial project and the notion of Christendom.

The section concludes by pointing out that the world in which the language of mission evolved has changed and as a result the language itself is confused and inadequate to describe current realities.

> *As modern rhetoric, mission can obscure the calling and witness of historicalÂ figures, hinder a clear reading of the biblical texts, and totalize a single aspect of church and ministry to the point that the gospel and its implications are muted or obscured. We mayÂ find ourselves defending a tradition and its language rather than defending the good news of the gospel. The necessity of transcending the rhetoric of the modern mission movement is critical, given its past associations and its present implications. The historical legacy and modernization of mission call into question the future of the whole enterprise. To return both conceptually and rhetorically to more biblical language will be an unnerving venture for some. However, through such a risk we acknowledge and embrace the enduring work of God in the past and point toward Godâ€™s future.Â Through its long sojourn from the death and resurrection of*

> *Jesus to the present day, the gospel has survived all manner of shifts, movements, and traditions.Â The original impulse of the gospel endures and awaits new expressions. To discover and participate in these fresh manifestations of the gospel will require that we acknowledge our weakness before the powers and principalities of the present age and seek the Holy Spiritâ€™s work in and through our lives. Transcending mission is more than a shiftÂ in rhetoric; it is witness to our continual conversion to the gospel story.*

Epilogue: Toward Pilgrim Witness

Having spent the majority of the book showing the problems with the way in which we use the language of mission, Stroope suggests a Biblical solution. In short, he suggests that we should use the language Jesus used:

> *The language of Scripture refers to the already-and-coming kingdom of God rather than the mission of God. Jesusâ€™ instruction to his disciples, their speech to one another, and Jesusâ€™ prayer to the Father center on the coming reign of God rather than mission. Rather than preaching mission, advocating for mission, mobilizing for mission, or revising mission, the biblical injunction is to proclaim, promote, and live the kingdom of God. Jesus does not proclaim the arrival of mission but the coming of the kingdom. Jesus shows the disciples his pierced hands and feet and then says to them: â€œPeace be with you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send youâ€ (Jn 20:21). Going and sentness are incidental; wounds and sacrifice are essential. Jesusâ€™ meaning is clearâ€"in the same manner and for the same purpose I was sent, I am sending you. But when sending becomes the overwhelming focus, the reconciling deeds of the kingdom are diminished or lost.*

I think there is a need for some caution here in as much as the kingdom of God has been used by some as a way of advocating for Christian involvement in social-action, without any overt call to conversion. However, this is clearly not the author's position.

By my standards, this has been a longish review and it certainly hasn't done the book adequateÂ justice. However, for me readingÂ Transcending MissionÂ has been an enlightening experience. I think it's fair to say that people view me as a radical thinker, wanting to shake up the way we think about and practice mission. I've certainly been involved in lots of workshops, discussions, seminars and what-have-yous along those lines. However, this book has taken me a step further back and made me realise that we aren't addressing some of the issues that we need to because too much of our discussion is limited by the vocabulary we are using. We need a much more radical shake up than I had thought.

My concern is that we have so much invested in the 'missionary' industry, that we will be deaf to the

arguments of this book; which will be a great shame.

Who should read this book? It's not a book for everyone, but if you've read Bosch, Wright's Mission of God, Bevans and Schroeder or any other serious missiology book, then you MUST read this one, too. You may not agree with all of it, but you have to read it.

The publishers of this book provided me with an electronic copy of this book in return for a review. However, had the book been rubbish, I would have said so... it isn't.