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Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-First Century (Book Review)

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Book Reviews

Tennent, Timothy C. *Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-first Century*. Invitation to Theological Studies Series. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic and Professional, 2010. 559 pages. ISBN: 978-0-8254-3883-7. Reviewed by Wayne A. Kobes, Professor of Theology at Dordt College.

Those familiar with contemporary reflections on world missions will undoubtedly be familiar with Timothy C. Tennent, president of Asbury Theological Seminary. Serving for many years as professor of world missions and director of missions programs at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Tennent clearly states his intent: “This book seeks to bridge the gap between a practical-oriented missions textbook and a more reflective missiology that explores the undergirding foundations of missions practice” (9).

This statement suggests that this volume might be helpful to those deeply involved in missiological studies or to missionaries actively involved in bringing the gospel to the unreached but of little interest to the majority of Christians who have been called to other areas of service. This response would certainly miss the mark! As Tennent explains in the preface, “[T]he way missions mostly has been conceptualized over the last generation is no longer adequate for the peculiar challenges and exciting opportunities that await us in the unfolding of twenty-first-century missions” (9). Since every Christian is called to be involved in the task Christ entrusted to his Church—the proclamation of the gospel to every creature under heaven—an inadequate or less-than-fully-biblical view of missions should be a concern for all Christians. Furthermore, a person’s understanding of missions and the Church shapes virtually every aspect of living the Christian life.

The widely shared perception of “missions” held by North American Christians is seldom examined and even less frequently questioned. It is a view largely unchanged from that of North American Christians over the past several generations. It assumes that the West is the center of “Christendom,” that Western culture has been fundamentally shaped by the gospel of Jesus Christ and is therefore the model expression of the faith, and that North American Christians are the ones who have the maturity and responsibility to send out missionaries to other cultures who still live in the grip of paganism. It is

the Christian West that writes theology, defines orthodoxy, models Christian piety, demonstrates how the Church ought to look, and provides leadership to churches in the developing nations. These assumptions continue to shape how most North American Christians envision and carry out missions.

Tennent challenges his readers with the new realities by focusing on seven “megatrends” that are re-shaping twenty-first century missions. These megatrends range from the dramatic loss of Christian influence in Europe and North America to the significant statistical shift of the center of Christianity to the east and the south. It will come as a shock to most North Americans that Christians in the West are rapidly becoming a small minority within global Christianity. Further, it is important to understand that where the Christian Church is experiencing phenomenal growth—in the South and East—much of that growth is among Pentecostals. Pentecostalism now takes its place as the fourth major branch of Christianity alongside Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and Protestantism. The old centers of Christianity are collapsing, and many new dynamic centers are arising in non-Western cultures. Tennent notes that in 1900 the majority of the world’s 16,000 missionaries were sent out by the Church in the West. Today only 12-15 percent of over 420,000 missionaries come from the West. This “new reality” will shock most readers.

Christians have reason to rejoice in the fact that for the first time in history there is a Christian presence in every country in the world. Already at the Lausanne Conference in 1974, some representatives from mainline churches in North America concluded that the Great Commission had been fulfilled and therefore called for a moratorium on missions. Ralph Winter countered by challenging the Western Church to break out of its imperial model that perceived missions primarily in geopolitical terms, with the gospel going from Western Christendom to the non-Christian world. He noted that even in areas where the Christian Church had gained a significant presence, there

remained large numbers of ethnic and linguistic blocks that were still unreached. In addition, there are formidable challenges posed by the pervasive secularism of the “post-Christian” West as well as those presented by significant communities of recent immigrants from non-Christian cultures who have found new homes in Europe and North America. Christians in the West are now faced with a major paradigm shift in their view of global evangelism.

Tennent does not simply challenge his readers’ outdated concepts of the Church and missions, however. He urges us to move from a perception that Western Christians are called to teach spiritually immature followers of Christ in other parts of the world to one in which they listen to and learn from fellow believers in other cultures. In the new reality of a truly global Christian Church, the riches and insights of each community of believers will serve to deepen the whole Church’s understanding of the gospel, as well as lead followers of the Lord Jesus Christ to more faithful living.

Tennent argues that this deepened understanding and vitality can only occur if Christians are shaped by a thoroughly biblical understanding of the Church and its mission. He asserts that any theology that would empower the Church faithfully to serve its Lord must think and live within a framework that acknowledges the Triune God and his work. It must be shaped by an understanding of God the Father who established his kingdom at Creation, who recommitted himself to his creation in the face of humankind’s fall into sin, reclaimed it in the death and resurrection of the Son, and who, through the powerful working of the Holy Spirit, will bring a new (renewed) creation with the return of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Throughout history and around the globe, various Christian communities have tended to emphasize certain aspects of the redemptive mission of the Triune God at the expense of others. This is true of the Western Church and its theology as it is of other parts of the global Church. The result is a truncated understanding of the gospel and a less-than-fully-biblical grasp of the mission God has entrusted to his people. Tennent explores aspects of a

robust Trinitarian theology and highlights what Christians in the West can learn from their sisters and brothers in other cultures. For example, Tennent notes that while the biblical teaching of the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church in the present age of missions is affirmed in Western theology, the Western Church largely ignores the reality and power of the Holy Spirit’s work today in and through the Church. The explosive growth and vibrant expressions of the faith found in Pentecostalism in the global Church challenges Western Christians to rediscover a central biblical reality. Similarly, he focuses the reader’s attention on what North American Christians must learn about the place of suffering in the Christian life from the millions of fellow Christians living under persecution throughout the world.

Tennent persuasively confronts his readers with the new situation of global Christianity and its significance for the Church of Jesus Christ as it is called to carry out God’s mission in the world. He clearly develops a Trinitarian theology in a way that exposes the reductionistic views of the Western Church’s understanding of salvation and the mission God has entrusted to the Church. Drawing on insights and practices of the global Church, Tennent demonstrates how Christians in the West can come to deepened insights and a mature faith that will lead to a more faithful response to God’s call to be busy with his mission in today’s world.

Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-first Century is an important book for all members of the Church in North America and a crucial read for those in leadership roles. His insights and the challenges he lays before the Western Church have profound implications for contemporary mission strategies, the use of the resources God has given his people, and the understanding that the Church in the West has of itself in relation to the rapidly expanding Church in the rest of the world. The book will not only challenge but also encourage believers as they grasp more fully how God is establishing and maturing his Church around the globe.