

**Changing the Mind of Missions:
Where Have We Gone Wrong?**

Reviewed by Murray Decker

Engle, James F. & William A. Dyrness. 2000 Changing the Mind of Missions: Where Have We Gone Wrong? Downers Grove, IL; Intervarsity Press.

Where Has This Book Gone Wrong?

These are exciting days to be a part of what God is doing in missions worldwide. God is pouring out his Spirit, lives are being changed, communities transformed, and entire nations are being impacted with the grace and truth of Jesus Christ. Yet to read Engle and Dyrness's book *Changing the Mind of Missions: Where Have We Gone Wrong?*, you are given the impression that things have never been worse, and that the contemporary North American contribution to global mission is in crisis. The book paints a picture of a church that has lost its voice, of mission agencies who continue to repeat the mistakes of earlier eras, and of Christians who are living in blind disregard for the lost. Reading their description of the state of missions, I repeatedly wondered "how can we possibly be looking at the same thing, yet come to such completely opposite conclusions?"

The sub-title of the book helps us best understand the posture of what Engle and Dyrness are seeking to do: *Where Have We Gone Wrong?* When you set out to locate failure, you are

sure to find it. The authors write in their forward “Nor do we want to sound a pessimistic note”, yet in their criticism of the state of the church, their pessimism far outweighs the handful of positive examples they cite. The lack of balance in their critique undermines the intended message of the book (that we’ve got some significant problems in certain segments of the greater evangelical missionary community), ultimately leaving the reader disillusioned, or in my case, discarding much of what they say because it just doesn’t mirror what I know to be taking place in contemporary missions.

The authors correctly emphasize the Gospel is far more than the presentation of prepositional truth with the goal of “reaching” the maximum number of converts. They accurately describe the centrality of a healthy and activist church, of Kingdom communities, in global mission. Their criticisms of the false dichotomies of previous eras (social action vs. evangelism) are not new thoughts, but a helpful reminder. Yet the description they present of the current state of mission, personified in their fictitious but supposedly “representative” First Church of Rollingwood and Global Harvest Mission, is simplistic, static (perhaps these stereotypes would have been accurate in the 1970’s) and grossly inaccurate. Certainly churches and mission agencies such as Rollingwood and GHM exist, but they are a drying and dying wineskin. New wineskins emerge daily; the gospel of the new wine demands new contextual expressions, and God, through the Spirit, continues to be poured-out in exciting new churches and ministries. There is a shelf-life to these wineskins, so as older agencies die, this hardly constitutes a “crisis in contemporary missions” (p. 68).

Dyrness and Engel point to several positive examples of the advance of the Gospel in the Two-Thirds World. They speak warmly of the African, Asian and South American church taking increasing leadership in mission. This is true, yet they fail to acknowledge that these Two-Thirds World churches and leaders are the spiritual children and grandchildren of thousands of Western missionaries who have given their lives in missions. The authors write: “It is time to return to the example of Jesus who

walked and lived among those whom he served—who took time to understand their spiritual awareness, fears and dreams through observation and listening” (p. 70). When did the world-wide missionary force ever leave this way of life? This tone is a back-handed insult to those who continue to give selflessly of themselves for the Kingdom. Certainly there are ethnocentric and controlling missionaries. There always have been and always will be. But these are the exception, not the norm, or it’s doubtful we would see the spiritual fruit they cite in the Two-Thirds World.

The central critique of the book is that the evangelical church has so completely bought into the worldview of modernity that we have become “Mission, Inc.,” driven by a managerial mindset and informed by values of efficiency and productivity. Modernity, they argue, has blinded us with a preoccupation with numeric success, creating a mindset that ties numerical success with mission funding. Having established this over-simplified straw man of modern managerial missions—Missions, Inc.—they proceed to kick it repeatedly. They write, in the voice of the fictitious president of a dying mission agency,

I can only conclude that most of us who are committed to world missions have seriously lost our way. The church of Jesus Christ and a bunch of agencies like GHM have become like a tree with a meager yield of fruit. We are just kidding ourselves by all this propaganda that the Great Commission is almost fulfilled. Our theology and our methods have become nearly bankrupt (p. 56).

Later, the authors write (in their own voice):

So it is with the church, which by and large now has only the “lingering grin”, a surface indicator of a privatized faith without moral and social impact. In so doing, the church has dug its own grave, while the smile lingers on (p. 65).

The global church is anything but a fruitless tree and disem-

bodied “lingering grin”. Can you make the blanket condemnation that world missions has been reduced to a managerial exercise, and that Western churches and agencies still function as they did 100 years ago? Some of the most exciting things happening around the world are in direct response to missionaries in their 20’s and 30’s, through agencies that didn’t exist 25 years ago. Dyrness and Engel’s distinctions of we vs. they, Western missionary vs. National Leader, just do not hold true any more. The largest mission agency in the world is Youth With A Mission, which has sought to erase such distinctions from its inception 40 years ago. Loren Cunningham, founder of YWAM is fond of saying “We’ve deregulated missions”. Old categories of nationality, ethnicity, gender, denomination, age, and length of service are secondary to a unified vision of proclaiming God’s glory to the nations.

Hundreds of this breed of new agencies (both Western and Two-Thirds World) and thousands of new churches function as anything but Missions, Inc. Spend any time with missionaries from Operation Mobilization or churches from the Calvary Chapel or Vineyard movements, and you will realize that there is far more going on in the advance of the Kingdom than we can even begin to report. Missions is increasingly non-western in origin, leadership and funding. The emerging “McWorld” generation (both Western and non-Western “post-modern” young people) flies in the face of these shotgun criticisms leveled by Dyrness and Engel. The changes they suggest are not new, as the authors recognize. What they fail to recognize is that most of their suggestions are already embodied in the lives of the missionary force worldwide.

Had this book been written 30 years ago, perhaps it would have had some validity and a prophetic voice. Perhaps the question “what has gone right with missions?” should have been addressed at some point. As written, there is little here that merits deeper reflection.

Reviewer

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