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Book Review

Missionary Motivations: Challenges from the Early Church

By Matthew Burden
William Carey Publishing, 2023
131 pages
US$10.99

Reviewed by Ryan Jensen, PhD in intercultural studies (Biola University). He has lived and served in China for nearly five years and is the author of Seeking God’s Face: Practical Reflections on Honor and Shame in Scripture.

This book is immensely important and helpful for growing in one’s understanding of what should motivate engagement in missions. Personally, my excitement for missions was primarily birthed out of passages like Isaiah 6:8, the Great Commission in Matthew 28, and Romans 10:14-17. These motivations involve obedience to Jesus’s commands and the necessity of answering the call to meet the world’s tremendous needs. Such motivations have been common among missionaries for the past several hundred years, but have they always been the primary drivers for the missionary enterprise? We know that Christianity spread rapidly throughout the Roman Empire in the first few centuries, so what was motivating these early Christians? Perhaps surprisingly, Burden notes, “Many of the most commonly articulated motivations in our day appear only sparsely in early records, if at all” (113).

A key strength of Missionary Motivations is that it synthesizes the difference between modern conceptions of missionary motivation and that which influenced the early Christians. And importantly, Burden does so
with a largely balanced and nuanced approach as he recognizes that neither early Christians nor modern believers have things completely right nor wrong. The focus of the book is on answering the question “What does mission look like when undertaken in the spirit of early Christianity?” (89). It largely reads like a modified dissertation and is organized as such: an introduction to the subject matter (Introduction and Chapter 1), a survey of the history of early Christian missionary motivations (Chapters 2 through 6), and a discussion of the findings of the research (Chapters 7 through 9).

Burden begins by explaining the impetus for his research, which began with the realization that “the writers and missionaries of earlier eras of the faith seemed to be operating on a somewhat different theological wavelength, and it resulted in different answers to the question of missionary motivation” (viii). While much is known about the early Christian church from a historical perspective, not much has been written specifically regarding the missionary motivation of those early Christians. He expressly states, “This study aims to help fill that gap by opening a window on the way that Christians in the early centuries of our faith thought about the task of global mission” (ix).

The bulk of Missionary Motivations is a historical survey of the motivations of early Christian missionaries. Chapter 2 covers the time of the expansion of Christianity within the Roman Empire. Next, the expansion east in modern-day India, Armenia, Central Asia, and Eastern Asia is discussed. The expansion south in the Arabian Peninsula and parts of northern Africa is then considered. Next, the expansion into central and western Europe is discussed. Finally, the growth of Christianity in modern-day Ireland, Scotland, England, and Germany is explained.

The final section — Chapters 7 through 9 — synthesizes the broad survey of the previous five chapters and sets out to draw some conclusions regarding what motivated the early Christians in terms of missions. The first distinctive quality is that “the spirit of early Christianity is communal and ecclesial” (89). Burden says that the primary goal of the expansion of the early church was not the salvation of individual people but instead to establish communities of faith which “constituted a new incarnation of the reality of the reign of Christ” (90). This motivation was driven by a Christus Victor theology, which primarily views the work of Christ “as the triumph of God over the powers of sin, death, and the devil” (115). Burden summarizes the difference in missionary motivation between modern Christians and the early church by saying that “early Christian expansion appears to have been motivated less by Jesus’s commands and more by his pattern of life” (114).
One shortcoming of this book is that Burden almost makes it seem like a fool’s errand to discover the missionary motivations of the early church. While admitting the difficulty in answering the central question, Burden (2023) says, “Our sources often amount to chance lines in works of apologetics or sermons, along with apocryphal and hagiographical stories written generations after the events they describe” (16), “What can we discern of the missionary motivations of those who went to the Goths? Unfortunately, we know next to nothing of the original Christian contacts” (64), and “We have only a few hints as to how [Christianity] grew, and still less to what motivated Christians to evangelism or mission” (113). While being self-aware of the limitations of his conclusions, Burden does undersell what he has brought to light.

Another shortcoming is that the book reads like a modified dissertation. There is a lot of repetition throughout, and the bulk of the book reads almost like a literature review, which can be a bit cumbersome to get through.

Overall, Burden (2023) has brought to light legitimate motivations for missions that are quite frankly missing from contemporary Christianity at large. The current primary motivations for missions are most certainly not wrong, but they may be incomplete. As global Christianity continues to expand and the non-Western church increasingly becomes the primary driver of global missions, it would be wonderful to see a more comprehensive understanding of what can and should motivate missionary activity – and this book can contribute to that goal.