



Mitzi J. Smith, Jayachitra Lalitha, eds., *Teaching All Nations: Interrogating the Matthean Great Commission* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 2014.

A collection of fourteen essays divided into five major divisions are compiled by Smith and Lalitha in this book. Gosnell Yorke provides a preface and the editors an introduction. The complete table of contents and a sample chapter as well as a list of the volume's contributors are easily accessible online here-

<http://store.fortresspress.com/store/productgroup/687/Teaching-All-Nations-Interrogating-the-Matthean-Great-Commission>

under the 'samples' tab. Accordingly, they won't be included here. Do, though, read that material before proceeding with the remainder of this review.

While missions and missionary endeavors have generally been seen through Christian history, and particularly since the rise of international missions in the 18th and 19th centuries, as something laudable, the volume at hand allows readers to see something of a different perspective. The impact of colonialism on the missionary endeavor and the significance of the colonial mindset (and European superiority vis-à-vis the 'dark skinned' natives of strange lands visited by Missionaries) are examined here in an eye opening and incisive way.

After quoting several sources, our authors observe

Throughout the history of European Christian imperialism's global conquest and seizure of lands, wealth, and peoples and the concomitant Christian evangelization of

the colonized, including in the Americas, the evangelizing conquest method prevailed over the missionary action approach.² The missionary action approach hoped to appeal to the reason of the natives through convincing arguments so that they would voluntarily become Christians. The violent evangelizing conquest method that dominated foreign missions proposed to gain control over native populations by any means necessary in order to facilitate their conversion to Christianity, and, by extension, the speedy and less complicated dominance and enculturation of colonized lands and peoples (pp. 1-2).

This sentiment perfectly encapsulates the mindset, aim, goal, and accomplishment of the volume. Missions never were a purely spiritual affair. That fact, generally forgotten when the tales of great missionaries are related, is extraordinarily important and our editors and authors are to be thanked for either reminding us of it or for bringing it to our attention in the first place for the first time.

Missions are problematic and complex endeavors. Our writers understand that quite well and do a tremendous job of explaining it and forcefully demonstrating why that fact is so important. Meanwhile, the part the Great Commission plays in all this is never out of view.

In *Part I. Colonial Missions and the Great Commission: Re-Membering the Past*, three essays set the stage by examining the activities of missions in Africa and the Caribbean. In the first we find

It is not the intention of this section of the chapter to give a comprehensive history of colonial missions in Africa; this has been done by a number of scholars. Rather, it seeks to explain the existence of a relationship between the missionaries and European colonists and the impact of said relationship on the missionaries' agenda. It must be noted that the actual date when Christianity came to Africa has been contested by a number of scholars. Edwin Smith believes that in "the early period of her [African] history, the church has never been absent from Africa. Christian communities existed in Africa long before they were found in the British Isles and Northern Europe." In the same vein, Labode Modupe has also argued that Christianity already existed in Egypt as far back as the third century. However, most historians attribute the introduction of Christianity in Africa to the Portuguese expedition around the fifteenth century. During this time, Islamic activity on the west coast of Africa was expanding. In order to explore the extent of this activity (with the aim of bringing it to an end) and at the same time to fulfill the Great Commission, Prince Henry of Portugal trained men and sent them to Africa. It was through that expedition that most cities in the coastal region of Africa, such as Cape Verde, Elmina, Sao Tome and Mombasa, came under Catholicism, which was then the state religion in Portugal (pp. 16-17).

That exceptional style is adhered to throughout - not only this essay- but all of them.

Part II, *Womanist, Feminist, and Postcolonial Criticisms and the Great Commission* is the most self-consciously controversial segment of the volume tackling, as it does, issues near and dear to those most concerned with things like power and feminism and privilege. Lalitha's *The Great Commission: A Postcolonial Dalit Feminist Inquiry* leads things off and Smith's *'Knowing More than is Good for One': A Womanist Interrogation of the Matthean Great Commission* wraps things up. Both are exceptionally well written albeit quite particularistic.

Part III, Theology, Art, and the Great Commission is, for the present reviewer, the highlight of the collection. The essays therein are simply masterful.

Part IV, The Great Commission and Christian Education: Rethinking Our Pedagogy may be the second most engaging part dealing, as it does, with the subject of pedagogy (unsurprisingly, given the section title). It critiques the way teaching has been done in the church on the subject of missions, and in a withering bit of 'poetic prose', Karen Crozier excoriates such, writing

The European Matthean Great Commission perpetrated evil and sin on indigenous people and their respective occupied lands of dwelling... Africa, Asia, and the Americas they ENCOUNTERED, and not discovered the commodification of people and land was the primary end...

We, the Church, have yet to recover from the death-dealing blows of such spiritual, religious, and mental dysfunction... (p. 235).

And finally, Part V, *Interrogating the Commission from Beyond the Academy* widens the 'playing field' to stretch beyond the merely academic approach to missions and its history.

The book is a grand collection of essays which hold our forebears accountable and responsible for having attitudes and outlooks which we no longer, for the most part, find acceptable. And that may be its major (and only significant shortcoming). It has always seemed, to me at any rate, more than a tad unfair to expect people who lived a hundred or more years in the past to have modern (postmodern) viewpoints. The missionaries of yore didn't see themselves as imperialists any more than present day feminists see themselves as imperialists- though both tribes can tend towards imperialistic predispositions and attitudes. They saw themselves as simple men and women who believed the Gospel, believed in heaven, believed there was a real hell, and didn't want anyone to go there.

Indeed, rather than only or primarily seeing them as motivated by imperialistic 'white man' superiority they can also be seen as persons quite concerned for all races and ethnicities. They were, in that light, the first 'equal rights' advocates.

To be sure, the authors of our several essays know that and they also know that it is the vestige of imperialism and racism and anti-feminism which still bedevils the Church in many respects.

Nonetheless, in emphasizing the need for improvement in the present several of them have been a bit hard on persons of the past.

In spite of that fact, and perhaps even because of it, this book merits serious attention; particularly by persons interested in the history of Christian missions, sociology of religion, and pedagogy.

Jim West
Quartz Hill School of Theology
Philippine Baptist Theological Seminary