

Ashford, Bruce Riley, ed. *Theology and Practice of Mission: God, The Church, and The Nations*. (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2011). Kindle E-book.

Bruce Ashford's *Theology and Practice of Mission* seeks "to provide a biblical-theological framework for understanding the church's mission to the nations" (Kindle Version, Loc 143). Prior to editing this volume, Ashford served two years as a missionary in Central Asia with the International Mission Board, before earning his PhD in Systematic Theology from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary (SEBTS). Currently, he is the Provost and Associate Professor of Theology and Culture at his alma mater. Previously, he was dean of the College at Southeastern and director of the Drummond Center for Great Commission Studies at SEBTS. The book's contributors come from various backgrounds, including seminary professors, pastors, and missionary practitioners.

The book presents a comprehensive understanding of "mission." This is broader in scope than "missions" in that the former "refers to the purpose and goal of the activity, whereas missions refers to the activities" (Kindle, Loc 1007). One might say the writers articulate what it means to live "missional," such that the gospel transforms every sphere of life, informs mission strategy, and speaks to any cultural context. The essays all share the conviction that the gospel is in essence the story of God's glorifying Himself in Christ through the salvation of the nations. Seemingly every chapter is shaped by a four-fold way structuring the Biblical narrative: "creation, fall, redemption, and restoration" (245). After grounding the Church's mission in God's own mission (Section 1), the essays focus first on the implications of this calling upon the Church (Section 2), then on the relevance of the Scriptural Story for shaping cross-cultural missions (Section 3), concluding with charges to local churches, theologians, and missionaries to put into practice a "theologically driven missiology" (8341).

In Section 1, Ashford and Whitfield argue that "mission" derives from who God is and what he has done throughout human history (cp. 584ff). Ashford rightly emphasizes the "God/world distinction" without forging a "soul/world distinction" (264, 272–73). He says, "The doctrine of the *imago Dei* is central to biblical anthropology," (297) however he does not develop this idea except to stress that the human is created "as a relational being" (305). Thus, God's plan of redemption and restoration affects all creation, transforming man's "relationship to God, to the world, to others, and to himself" (348). In chapter 2, Whitfield simply echoes the other writers when he urges a "slight refocusing on what mission is . . . a shift from the mission being *primarily* the salvation of souls to the worship of God" (649–50). Whitfield not only highlights the breadth of this mission—the whole world, in addition, he stressed that this God reveals himself *as a Trinity*. The mission theology in these chapters is far-reaching, explicitly building upon the writing of Christopher Wright and John Piper. Ashford aptly captures the God-centered message of the mission, "Our God is not a tribal deity: he is the Creator of the nations and we will not know him in his splendor until we know him as the King of the Nations" (476).

Section 2 contains a valuable collection of essays that demonstrate the practical import of this theology of mission. The Church's mission is anything but fragmented. This is because, as Pratt comments in chapter 4, ". . . the character of God . . . expresses itself in the activity of God" (1560; cp 1594). Therefore, he corrects narrow, anthropocentric views of the gospel when he

notes, “Evangelistic proclamation is itself a form of worship, as the content of the gospel message is the glory of God’s character and the glory of his saving deeds”; according, it “must be a summons to discipleship,” not just conversion (1698–1705). Kimberly Samuel similarly remarks that the gospel is a call to “submission to a King as a way of life, not simply ‘making a decision’ at one point in time” (2034; cp 1973). As a result, Doug Coleman and George Robinson helpfully mend any false dichotomy between the Great Commission and the Cultural Mandate (1321; 2340). Poignantly, Coleman states, “In other words, the Great Commission will be complete, but the cultural mandate, issued prior to the fall, will continue” (1321). In short, Section 2 argues God indeed plans for his will to be done on earth to be as it is in heaven.

The chapters illustrate a number of ways the missionary’s message, methods, and even manner of life will be radically altered. Robinson suggests that the gospel, when it is understood as God’s story, reorients people’s lives far better than mere “abstract propositions” (2211–2250). This necessarily means that to know Christ is to perceive him in light of the “Old Testament context” (2251–2310). Strategically, many writers strongly rebutted any tendency to confuse the church with God’s kingdom (1848; 2027) Accordingly, “. . . church planting is not the ultimate goal of missions; God’s kingdom is. Church planting is a means to that end, not the end itself.” (2010; cp. 1947, 2031, 2040). Not surprisingly, contributors warn against a singular stress on church planting movements (cp. 2013, 8803, 9045–48).

A unique feature of the book is its concrete emphasis on “missional” living. Alan and Katherine Carter’s “The Gospel and Lifestyle” is a must read. Their chapter powerfully applies the book’s grand theological themes to daily practice, thus equipping readers to express “a very singular desire: his glory in all things and before all people . . . even in the most mundane and ‘insignificant’ details of our lives” (3696–3700). They deal with pace of life (3876ff) and stewardship of time and money (3997–4033). Changes in lifestyle would free Christians to Sean Cordell’s call for social responsibility (Ch. 7). He insightfully broadens what being “poor” means biblically, concluding with practical principles on *how* to serve the poor. Accordingly, mission is not the work of religious professional. Therefore, Ashford draws upon James Hunter’s “sociological argument [to] suggest that gospel influence on a culture may very well come through [laypersons] who, because of their faithfulness and excellence, rise to the top of their fields” (3658).

In section 3, the contributors deal more directly with the cross-cultural missions. Their practical experience is evident. Zane Pratt, for instance, perceives the subtle ways suffering can forestall ministry, including “the very real temptation to go into survival mode” rather than being “active in advancing his glory” (6144). Perceptively, he warns of the influence of western culture and man-centered gospels in producing discomfort allergic missionaries. A number of chapters relate mission to a particular worldview/religion, such as Islam, Animism, or Postmodernity. They do not offer a lot of practical applications for ministry practice, however, they do articulate how false gospels inevitably address the kinds of questions in God’s grand narrative, like where do we come from, what is our problem, what is the solution, and what is the ideal. Most valuable in Section 3 are the many helpful insights and connections that reorient how one conceives the missionary’s task itself, which then influences strategy. For example, David Sills points out how overwork tempts workers to become reductionistic (5284–89).

The final section acts an epilogue challenging theologians and churches to take up where the writers have left off. Particularly, Ashford introduces some initial thoughts on how theological categories (like Christology, salvation, or eschatology) might shape mission practice. The practical questions he and Daniel Akin pose to churches follow from all that precedes.

Any good resource could be criticized for what it *does not* say. So here, in order not to unreasonably nitpick, I list two ways the book could be improved. First and most simply, there are no biographical notes on any of the authors (besides the editor, Ashford). While understanding the security concerns some of the writers may face, working in restricted access countries and using pseudonyms, nevertheless, some degree of introduction would lend the book credibility and give readers both greater appreciation and perspective for the contributor's insights. Second, in a book entitled *Theology and Practice of Mission*, one would expect more extensive conversation on the topic of contextualization. The concept is mentioned from time to time. It urges contextualization should be faithful, meaningful, and dialogical (3309–3347; 3622; 8621–40; 9249–50). However, the absence of this ever-relevant concern is all the more surprising given the book's stress on the holistic nature of mission in the context of "creation, fall, redemption, and restoration."

Aside from content, the book is well written. The careful attention given to the editing process is apparent. For example, the authors all clearly state a thesis, preview the flow of their argument, and make unambiguous transitions of thought. It is most apparent that the contributors agree on the importance of the gospel's narrative nature, as most chapters make an explicit appeal to the four-fold structure ("creation, fall, redemption, and restoration"). Frequently, these four-points constitute a bulk of a chapter's outline. Where authors do overlapped themes, their points seem to be complementary rather than redundant. Unusually strong for mission literature is the book's use of Scripture. These missiologists show an impressive grasp for culture *and* theology. Readers do not meander into a bog of proof texts. The lengthy bibliographies for most chapters demonstrate the high priority given to interdisciplinary research and theological engagement.

Overall, this is a recommended resource for anyone concerned about the mission God has given the Church. This volume has raised the bar for mission literature. This reviewer hopes to see future volumes of this kind follow. Perhaps, for example, there could be an anthology or even a series dedicated to more fully developing a "theology driven missiology" or a "*missiologically* driven theology." Collectively, the authors challenge missiologists to *be theologians* who simply express in practice God's mission in the world.