

Rankin, Jerry. *To the Ends of the Earth: Churches Fulfilling the Great Commission*. Richmond, VA: IMB, 2005.

In *To the Ends of the Earth: Churches Fulfilling the Great Commission*, Jerry Rankin puts forth his vision for how churches can engage in the task of world missions. At the time of publication, Rankin served 12 years as president of the International Mission Board (IMB), having previously been as a missionary in Asia for twenty-three years. He earned his master of divinity from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and has co-authored other books, such as *Lives Given, Not Taken* and *Retracing the Steps of Lottie Moon*.

In the Preface, Rankin explains that the book is meant to be “tool for local churches,” by which they can be aware of the God’s activity among the nations, the ministry of the IMB, and ways that churches can join in the work of global missions (4). His intended readers are unmistakably Southern Baptist churches, as evidenced by the innumerable references to being “Southern Baptist.” His treatment of the world mission movement is broad and generally limited to the labor of the IMB. The book is best seen as a survey meant simply to introduce the IMB’s constituency to its governing principles and missiological practices. His chapter titles suggest Rankin equates the missionary mandate and the spread of God’s kingdom (cf. 16). Accordingly, topics in the book include the biblical basis for missions, the necessity of prayer, the strategic value of cooperation, and the universal call upon every Christian to advance God’s kingdom among every people group, whether by going, sending, or praying.

One of Rankin’s more clear objectives is to argue, “The Great Commission was not given to the International Mission Board, but to every church, every believer, and every denominational entity” (32). Thus, the book is full of practical suggestions where by local churches can utilize the IMB’s expertise, experience, and pooled resources supplied by Southern Baptist churches. A number of times, he urges individual Christians and churches not to go about the tasks of missions independently, so as to reinvent the wheel or double efforts. As it is, the lack of information, access, and resources force field strategists to be selective about who it is they will attempt to reach, spurring Rankin to ask himself, “By what criteria should any people be deprived of hearing the gospel?” (50).

Therefore, in addition to promoting the IMB, he argues for the priority of church planting and the training of local leaders in seeking to catalyze church planting movements (CPMs). In order to attain a CPM, Christians of every sort of skill-set from local churches must take up the charge “to bring all the people of the world to saving faith in Jesus Christ” (129). In one place, it seems that Rankin calls all Christians “missionaries” (110); however, for the most part, he designates “missionaries” as having a “special role” to preach the gospel “in a cross-cultural setting” (150). He bluntly states, “Missions and evangelism are not synonyms” (153). One intriguing detail is how Rankin defines a “local church” (90–91), since by this definition such church plants would not necessarily be counted as by IMB missionaries on their annual statistics reports.

Although Rankin achieves his broad objective for the writing the book, there are a number of concerns that diminish its overall value. His use of Scripture is highly questionable if

not grievous. He cites 1 John 3:17, which talks about meeting the physical needs of the poor, yet make it to mean that the verse is talking about the “lost” non-Christian without access to the gospel (197). He makes much of the word “mystery”, appealing to Ephesians, as a way of spurring people to tell of God’s revelation in Christ; however, in context, Paul thrust is different, “This *mystery* is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus *through* the gospel” (Eph 3:6, ESV; my emphasis). The reference of the term is not to the unreached (contra Rankin, 50–51), nor it is to be precisely equated with the gospel (as Eph 3:6 makes evident). Paul is dealing with the all too familiar question of how Jews and Gentiles are related.

More serious, if not offensive to many readers, is the theology behind his appeal. After he stresses the sovereignty of God over nation states (53–54), he then immediately infers that God *would have* saved people if some Christians had obeyed (56); he explicitly claims that once his people begin to pray, *then* “God is able to move in human hearts and direct his people to implement His plan” (60). He says about CPMs, “God, in His providence, chooses to move in His timing in certain places and among certain peoples,” (95) but then says that our methodologies “inhibit the spontaneous movement of His Spirit” (96). Might it also be possible that the Spirit’s movement would not be rapid nor spontaneous but rather wants results according to planned process? On p. 59, Rankin cites a sermon from Charles Spurgeon, in which he speaks of the frequency of God’s doing much through human prayers. However, Spurgeon’s rhetorical flurry becomes the ground for Rankin’s next theological claim, namely that God will “limit what He does to the prayers of His people” (59). Certainly, Rankin would want to qualify his words; nevertheless, the lack of careful nuance may import errant theology.

Despite Rankin’s efforts to affirm the worth of humanitarian ministry, his comments move beyond the mere prioritizing of evangelism (43); he pulls on the emotions and undermines “community development” by falsely posing the case that such work would amount to simply sending healthy people to hell (120). In the end, his position is apparent when he validates the use of compassion ministries, like during a “natural disaster,” so long as it is the only way missionaries can overcome government restriction to certain areas (74).

Rankin makes other remarks that simply seem counter to fact. For example, I was familiar with appointment process at least one year after this book was published yet I know for a fact that a candidate’s appointment was never “contingent upon each missionary candidate enlisting at least a hundred intercessors who will covenant to pray for them every day” (67).¹ Other comments stretch the limits of credibility, as when one read that the IMB “does not have a common global strategy” (115). Yet, one wonders what would falsify the claim; after all, the T4T methodology was already being unique pressed upon its personnel as the “best practice” for fostering a CPM. Further, the increased centralization the shortly followed this book would indicate that IMB leadership was working towards the exact opposite effect, creating something of a strategic silo. Similarly, though he says it is a “mistaken perception” that the IMB only wants to send out evangelists and church planters (109), this is a technicality at best and word

¹ The quotation is full says, “Prayer support is so important that approval for missionary appointment is contingent upon each missionary candidate enlisting at least a hundred intercessors who will covenant to pray for them every day.”

games as worst. Rankin says that theological education is a “high priority” of the IMB (94). Yet, in the IMB’s largest region, “East Asia,” the leadership was famously resistant to theological education prior to 2007. He sets apart evangelism and church planting from “other kinds of missions work such as health care, agriculture, social work, and theological education . . .,” yet says that people “fail to recognize it is not a matter of ‘either/or’ but one of choosing priorities” (102). At what point does choosing priorities *de facto* become an either/or dichotomy?

Finally, in presenting a vision for pursuing CPMs, some statement may leave the reader confused. Rankin asserts, “*Rapidly* multiplying congregations are the *only* way a massive number of new believers can be discipled and nurtured in their faith” (95, my emphasis). It is unclear why rapidity is the only way? Could not these massive numbers of Christian mature in some *non-rapid* way? In fact, it appears almost contradictory when he later adds, “A large response to the gospel is always contingent upon access and usually upon a long history of witness, plus multiple churches and local believers proclaiming the gospel” (153). This tension is all the more exacerbated when one recalls that Rankin’s greatest emphasis in the book is upon reaching the unreached, those without access to the gospel. In fact, the T4T model (which he advocates) emphasizes rapid reproduction of church leaders. Yet, this approach would seem to run contrary to his remarks that church growth is hindered by “the failure to nurture gifts within the body” and the premature passing of leadership to “an untrained local leader within the group” (93). On the same page, Rankin argues for missionaries, “after a short time” of training a local believer, to then give up “all leadership roles” (93). This is contrasted with the negative option of the missionary maintaining a leadership role for while, only then “to pass on that role to an untrained local leader within the group” (93). Why must it be that after the missionary spends a long time at the church, a local would be “untrained” yet if he leaves more quickly, the local is any more ready to assume leadership? This is difficult to make sense of. Rankin rightly urges local church autonomy and leadership. Thus, speaking of national Christians, he states, “Church growth can be deterred when others are ‘hired’ to do the work” (100). Aren’t the IMB missionaries themselves paid to do this very same work?

The book clearly lays out a programmatic vision for reaching the diverse peoples of the world with the gospel. The reader does not have to labor with complexities and nuance. His straightforward style will appeal to many. Rankin continually drops in various statistics and figures. They cover everything from the numbers of churches planted and the amount of money given by Southern Baptist churches to the population of different regions and the ratio of IMB personnel to meet the needs of the peoples. Baptist state conventions will no doubt find this resource a helpful promotional tool. However, Baptist leaders should rethink one of Rankin’s conclusions. He suggests that churches are giving less to the Cooperative Program because they do not know what missionaries are doing. This no doubt explains why Rankin has written the book. However, this is simply a non-sequiter. Rankin himself probably penned the largest reason: “less than 2.5 percent [of Cooperative program dollars given by churches] was channeled to the International Mission Board to evangelize 6 billion lost people around the world” (123).