

Sinclair, Daniel. *A Vision of the Possible: Pioneer Church Planting in Teams* (Colorado Springs, Co.: Biblica, 2005).

In *A Vision of the Possible: Pioneer Church Planting in Teams* (Colorado Springs, CO: Biblica, 2005), Daniel Sinclair aims to draw out some of the practical implications of the concept of apostleship, which he takes generally to refer to “pioneer workers” who take “the gospel to unreached people, resulting in new communities of the body of Christ” (3, 259). Pulling from over 20 years experience as a missionary among Muslims, his approach is thoroughly practical, dealing primarily with a range of specific issues common to the experience of contemporary missionaries in pioneer settings. Any review of Sinclair’s text must keep in mind that it is not meant to be theologically dense, though he clearly wants to delimit his counsel with Scripture.

Central to his premise is the notion of “apostleship.” He properly distinguished between the “Twelve” and a more general charge, as applied to Barnabas for example (Acts 14:4, 14). He improves upon too generalized treatments that regard every Christian was “sent” (the verbal root of “apostleship”). Therefore, taking this distinction seriously, he sees an apostle essentially as an “ambassador” for King Jesus (9). This well accords with Paul’s manner of defending his apostleship in 2 Corinthians (appealing to the ambassador motif directly 5:20). Therefore, he helpfully avoids the banter between “missions” and “mission” by appealing to an idea found within the Bible itself. The change in Paul and Barnabas’ nomenclature (in Acts 13–14) strengthens the plausibility of his definition (256).

Sinclair tone and approach to Scripture is most refreshing. Again and again, he qualifies his remarks, admitting the limits of his interpretations and applications, admitting when he is simply giving his best advice in light of experience. He consistently appeals to biblical texts, as they fit in their original contexts, to address issues of “our strategy and problem-solving” (247). His balance steers him from being dogmatic on issues like *only* using unpaid national workers (207). Furthermore, he soberly recognizes the diversity of historical and Scriptural settings that prevent the formulaic use of methods, whether in evangelism or church planting (202, 218). As a result, Sinclair amends the common overemphasis on rapid reproduction by stressing church “DNA” through “quickly *developed* national leadership” (my emphasis; 204–5). Development and appointment of leaders are not equivalent. That said, he does not allow for another extreme, instead reminding the reader that “*fully qualified* individuals may never not come for “an awfully long time,” in which case “The elders can be mature *collectively*, even though individuals will have gaps” (229).

Rather than simply giving generally principles, Sinclair delves into a number of practical questions. Among these include language acquisition (Ch. 6), the missionary’s use of time (63, 159–180, 244, 281–282), and even children’s ministry within a pioneer setting (217). His more unique contributions concern the formation of churches. For instance, he helpfully delineates between starting a church and “working toward gathering” (57). He does not overlook the importance of pre-gathering fellowship, both relationally and respective to security. Moreover, all of Chapter 14 lays out critical considerations in forming the first group of elders.

The book avoids a pitfall of many others by giving shape and definition to the most crucial concepts related to the missionary task. In addition to an “apostle,” he also summarizes what constitutes a church. In short, he explains this includes those who assemble together, out of their faith in Christ, for the sake of an “active community life,” “under a common leadership” (27–29). The value of this summary is that it differentiates between what is simply a local church and what are *healthy characteristics* of a church. Though he does not fully expand upon the meaning of the “gospel,” his qualifications are valuable. He challenges conventional ways of thinking and acting by noting that “friendship evangelism . . . was *not* the model of the apostles in the New Testament” (132). Likewise, he comments, “Pre-evangelism . . . in the sense of creating a more positive impression about Christ over time, as opposed to direct preaching of the gospel in its central components . . .” is an insufficient path to church planting (119). Also, “The evangel is much more than just the basic of *The Four Spiritual Laws*”; accordingly, gospel teaching must be given “. . . rather than focusing only on the initial forgiveness of one’s sins” (150). Therefore, it is not surprising that Sinclair does not reduce the “discipleship” to conversion (i.e. 141, 234–36).

Allowing for the book’s particular purpose, a few points still need further attention and clarification. When talking about elders, it appears that he collapses “equality” and respective roles (224–25). Particularly, if he opposes single-eldership and in the egalitarian spirit of our times, further definition would be helpful. More critical is the ambiguous distinction between those elder qualities that are “social traits rather than spiritual ones” (228). It is very unclear how these are in anyway to be differentiated. Another area in need of elaboration is contextualization, which only gets passing mention. Admittedly, his practical wisdom is very contextually sensitive, however, it would seem that if anywhere warrants the conversation, it would be in a pioneer ministry. Finally, Sinclair states that believers “were saved for a purpose beyond themselves—that is, for the building up of the church” (203). Assuming he does not identity the church *as* God’s kingdom, discussion on the latter is tragically omitted. This is especially critical in view of the strategic implications resulting from the distinction.

Overall, Sinclair’s book is one of the best practical guides on church planting. He offers biblically principled wisdom without baptizing methodological formulas. The questions posed spur thoughtful reflection regarding an area rarely addressed from a practical perspective in mission literature—pioneer missions. One matter he raises deserves further conversation by missiologists. He suggests, “Until indigenous leaders who have the spiritual and character qualification to become elders are appointed, the work is not done. The church planters cannot simply walk away and say, ‘We planted a church here,’ as the foundation is not yet complete” (186). Thus, the vast task of missions and the limited resources at hand demand missiologists consider earnestly what it means to have “planted” a church? To extend the metaphor, is it enough to lay a seed or a tree in a hole, to then walk away from the task of tending the soil until it can grow on its own? When is the *missiological/pioneer* job done? Sinclair’s *A Vision of the Possible* is a commendable work of applied theology worthy of reading by mission practitioners, whether new to the field or well established in leadership positions.