



BOOK REVIEW: THE WITNESS OF GOD: THE TRINITY, MISSIO DEI, KARL BARTH AND THE NATURE OF THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY, BY JOHN G FLETT

This is not a book for the faint hearted. It is at points highly technical and constructs a very complex and detailed set of arguments. In addition, it would seem at first glance to be dealing with issues that for many are obscure and of limited interest. All that is true at one level but at another level Flett offers a wonderful piece of analysis around some critical issues that are impacting the church now.

He begins by asking some questions about the origins of the term missio Dei and challenges the contention that the phrase originated with Barth's theology from the early 1930's. Along the way he gives us a glimpse of how early the concern about Christendom and its future began to emerge. From there he examines the origins of missio Dei at Willengen in 1952 and demonstrates that it was a term that did not really have substantive content until much later. Flett suggests that Newbigin had a key role both in Willingen and in the much later debate about missio Dei and its implications.

Critically he points out some of the problems with missio Dei and seeks to use the concept to open up

the debate about the true source of mission in the community of the Trinity. From there he is able to ask some penetrating questions about the church and mission. In particular, Flett is convinced that the contemporary development and use of missio Dei is insufficiently grounded in an adequate Trinitarian theology. He believes that the limited reference to Trinitarian thought simply identified God the Father with Creation and the Spirit with pneumatology merely as distinct from Christology.

For Flett this kind of stripped down Trinitarian thought is completely inadequate as a basis for reflection on the missionary task. Interestingly he locates this tendency in a flawed connection with Barth. His solution is to break the connection between Barth and the term missio Dei and then to seek to interact with Barth's theology in a more integrated and comprehensive fashion. 'By severing any link with Barth, we can take the opportunity to reformulate the Trinitarian ground of mission using his work.' (p164)

Many of the debates that the church currently faces in the west are potentially enriched and resourced through this excellent though difficult book. In the last but one chapter he attempts to deal with the Christian community itself as a living embodiment of mission lived, not for its own sake but for the cause of the Kingdom. His final chapter summarizes the rather complex and more detailed arguments located in the rest of the book. One could argue that the weakness of the book lies in its failure to offer explicit practical illustrations of what this community might look like. While that is true, Flett nevertheless offers some helpful theological tools for those who might attempt that task.



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