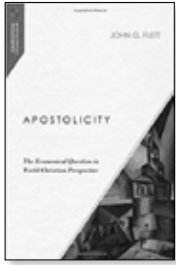


# Book Reviews

*Apostolicity: The Ecumenical Question in World Christian Perspective*, Missiological Engagements, by John Flett  
(Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016, pp. 393)

—Reviewed by Brad Gill



A brake light usually goes on in any discussion of movements to Christ among the religious world of the Buddhist, Hindu or Muslim. Suspicions arise and theological armament is readied prior to examining any particular case. In Muslim contexts, the focus has usually been on key theological terms or the way believers express their own

ecclesial identities. It's more like an emergency brake has been applied.

But, by contrast, there is less frequently an examination of our own assumptions in evaluating these movements. We more easily assume our own faithful appropriation of the gospel and the way we have conserved it through Christian history. Do we as a Christian movement actually need an audit of our own presuppositions before we try to discern what's valid or invalid in these movements?

Mission theologian John Flett enters this vital discussion from a promising angle—from the perspective of a 21st century world Christianity. His recent book, *Apostolicity: The Ecumenical Question in World Christian Perspective*, is a lengthy meditation on how the burgeoning pluriformity of world Christianity tests the way an historic, “apostolic” church understands its faithfulness to its origins (i.e., apostolicity). By highlighting the one term “apostolicity,” Flett exposes how the church's sense of faithfulness to its biblical roots carries an underlying *logic of continuity*—and that logic can limit the diversity of world Christianity.

Apostolicity, defined as faithfulness to origins expressed in the continuity of mission, often prioritizes historical continuity and its associated institutional means. *Precise limits are consequently applied to cross-cultural engagement and appropriation of the gospel.* (my emphasis, 16)

For 336 pages he examines how and why the Western church's understanding of apostolicity can inappropriately restrict the parameters of Christian identity in culturally diverse settings. It's those parameters, that delimiting of cross-cultural engagement, that reflects an underlying logic that Flett intends to expose. He cuts through any superficial

celebration of world Christianity and analyzes the deep structure that can constrict the freedom to appropriate the gospel in non-Western settings. Fortunately, he goes beyond mere critique and recreates a new sense of apostolicity (i.e., historical continuity) that's emerging amidst world Christianity. He concludes by grounding our historic continuity in Jesus Christ in a way that revitalizes our perspective on frontier mission today.

The “problem of apostolicity,” according to Flett, is essentially the tendency of the church to prioritize the *cultivation* of the faith over the *communication* of the faith (chapter 1). Faithfulness and continuity with our historic origins requires a maturity, which then favors pastoral concerns and all the accompanying structures, practices and interpretive measures of that maturation. Mission (communication, extension) is a derivative of that cultivation, and therefore is shaped by the cultural presumptions which can reside in a territorial (Western) church.

Flett believes the most prevailing cultural presumption that colors any discussion of apostolicity is the Protestant-Catholic concerns for ecumenicity (chapter 2). A deep suspicion of difference and the fear of schism cloud the debate and Flett addresses this predisposition by mapping out the conciliar church's discussion over the past century. It's a rather unfamiliar world of persons, conferences and arguments for the typical evangelical; but, by introducing us to a parallel world, I believe Flett is able to bring into relief that same logic in our own evangelical orientation.

Flett identifies at the core of a misguided apostolicity an understanding of the church as a culture (chapter 3). It's a belief that as the church progresses through history it doesn't just take on a culture—*the church is a culture*. Presumably, it's this that is supposed to maintain continuity faithfully. Flett introduces this perspective by analyzing the work of an ecumenical theologian, Robert Jenson, whose writings make explicit the ecclesiological premises which must undergird any true continuity of the faith. That legacy is a culture of doctrine, liturgy and institutions that has matured in a particular territorial church and must be repeated faithfully as it extends into other geographical and cultural areas.

The power and success of this church-is-a-culture logic is evidenced in its ability to unify and colonize over the centuries (chapter 4). This church's specific institutional form is required to answer the modern forces of globalization which threaten to fragment the cultural legacy of our faith. Flett reveals the plausibility of this apostolicity, and readers can easily identify its effects in the attitudes and practices of their own churches and mission situations. But, again, the problem is that it blinds us to the new questions being raised as the gospel is appropriated among new peoples.

*The church's apostolicity, its continuity through history, has occurred only as the gospel has moved across cultural boundaries and been appropriated in the language, thought forms and structures of this other history.*

So Flett shifts and uses the second half of his book to explain how world Christianity is forcing us to reconfigure our fidelity to New Testament origins. In chapter 5, he pivots with a rather surprising plunge into the work of J. C. Hoekendijk, a controversial Dutch mission theologian whose post-WWII writing for the emergent World Council of Churches was considered far too radical. Flett, whose meticulous studies have woven together insights from both American and continental missiology, recognizes how Hoekendijk's views begin to offer an answer to the deficiencies of this apostolicity. He insists we can't throw the baby out with the bathwater.

Hoekendijk's cogent assessment of what he calls the "residential" tendencies of the Western church's apostolicity is summed up in an analysis of ecclesiocentrism, i.e., to make the church the alpha and omega of mission. The problem lies, according to Hoekendijk, in the sending church's ecclesiology. He introduces an alternative perspective and terminology in the "apostolate," which is "to conceive of mission in relation to history" and to focus on "God's faithfulness to his promises, his sending of the promised Messiah and his eschatological calling of all nations to himself" (189). His emphasis on the church-as-instrument in the Kingdom of God demotes the church in a way that causes great reaction; but Flett believes Hoekendijk's shift in perspective is a significant step towards a more positive definition of apostolicity. His insights are able to move the discussion from a Christianity defined by the cultural and historical closure of one territorial, residential church to one that engages with the multiple histories we now see in world Christianity.

Flett's last three chapters offer a reformation of our sense of historical continuity. He first takes us through a keyhole into world Christianity (chapter 6) by reviewing the historical perspectives of Andrew Walls, Lamin Sanneh and Kwame Bediako. They take up the baton from Hoekendijk and help us see just how Christianity is actually a non-territorial religion that is embodied, concrete, and visible in diverse cultural settings. It's a reinterpretation of apostolicity in which

the church, according to this argument, has been historically continuous *only* because it has moved across cultural borders. The very non-territoriality of the church is the nature of its historical continuity and so the nature of its embodiment. (243)

World Christianity forces us to overturn the church-is-a-culture logic and replace it with a gospel-is-in-cultures perspective. Rather than one continuous, territorial history,

apostolicity is a redemptive course which involves a constellation of histories.

Continuity lies not in place, language or institution. It is found in the centrality of the person of Jesus Christ, in a certain understanding of history, including the consciousness of belonging to a community connected across time and place, and in the use of Scripture, bread, wine and water. (248)

Flett moves from this historical re-interpretation to reorient our apostolicity to the person of Jesus Christ (chapter 7, "Jesus Christ, the One Ground of the Apostle"). He re-examines the biblical material surrounding the apostles and their strategic role in grounding the church in the Risen Lord. Other reviews of Flett's New Testament interpretation will critique his hermeneutical work here, but he offers a wonderful picture of how the gospel is appropriated locally and then released globally in the Acts. The phenomena of a world Christianity may not be enough to reform those who grip ever so tightly their paradigm of apostolicity, but this burgeoning global movement is transforming our ability to see what is actually happening in the book of Acts. Flett will help you appreciate the church as a "movement toward the ground in which it exists," and that is the risen Jesus Christ. That grounding is releasing, revitalizing and reorienting for the frontier missionary.

Flett concludes by offering frontier missiology a new definition of apostolicity (chapter 8).

The church's apostolicity, its continuity through history, has occurred only as the gospel has moved across cultural boundaries, and been appropriated in the language, thought forms and structures of this other history. (334)

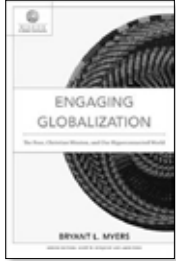
Apostolicity is the community's participation in Jesus Christ's own history. (335)

Jesus Christ's history is self-multiplying. His own apostolic movement into the world means the integration of multiple histories into his. The church finds its identity not in itself and the gifts given to it, but beyond itself in the history of Jesus Christ. (336)

This renewal of our imagination when it comes to the church apostolic—non-territorial, embodied, multiple, continuous, grounded in Jesus Christ—may require new and creative use of terminology, especially as we engage new religious frontiers. But changing terms is not enough. We need to wrestle with John Flett's thoroughgoing analysis of the ecclesiological superstructure that inhibits the appropriation of the gospel across these remaining frontiers. Any assessment of the movements happening today among other religious worlds must be based on the kind of keen self-assessment Flett provides us in this survey of our own apostolicity.

*Engaging Globalization: The Poor, Christian Mission, and Our Hyperconnected World*, Mission in Global Community, by Bryant L. Myers (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017, pp. 304)

—Reviewed by Dave Datema



The last two hundred years of globalization represent as significant a historical transition as did the rise and fall of the Roman Empire, the radical economic and social transformation of Britain, or any other historical watershed.

That statement will be much more believable after reading Bryant Myers' new book, a primer on globalization for Christians. Myers is eminently qualified to write the book, having worked for thirty years with World Vision International and the last eleven years as professor of Transformational Development at the School of Intercultural Studies, Fuller Theological Seminary. Using complex adaptive social systems as a framework to understand the inextricably complex nature of globalization, it is presented as an uncontrolled yet influence-able system. Myers portrays globalization as an amoral reality with inseparable dimensions of both original good and original sin. Equally important are the "globalisms," influential political, economic or religious value systems that shape its direction, of which Christianity is a primary one.

Historically, the book is comprehensive, covering globalization throughout history, yet also specific, looking more closely at the last two hundred years. Theoretically, it is significantly descriptive, giving up-to-date overviews of globalization theory, development theory, and Christian engagement theory, yet also original in the final chapter where Myers sets forth his own agenda for encouraging Christians toward engagement, his chief concern throughout the book. Here is Myers' passion: that evangelicals today, like those of the Victorian era, regain the confidence to take their place in helping provide the missing moral ecology of globalization within their sphere of influence. Myers says that the individual Christian in the pew is the place to begin, by helping ordinary Christians discern between the good news of the gospel and the good news of the two dominant globalisms of our day: modernity and neo-liberal capitalism. Surprisingly, Myers sees the key to this discernment in discipleship and formation which help ordinary Christians live out the good news in their context.

Compared with other macro-missiological books with massive subject matter, this contribution of Myers is refreshing. As a working man's scholar, one senses that he could have said much more but that he refrained in order to place the material on an appropriate shelf. It is an introduction not a theological treatise. In so doing, it avoids getting into so much detail that it loses punch and practicality. At the same time, it is a superb synopsis of a vast literature and a timely call for Christians to be found "engaging globalization." **IJFM**

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