Eddie Gibbs


Eddie Gibbs is professor emeritus of church growth in the School of Intercultural Studies at Fuller Seminary. From this location, Gibbs has a learned vantage point on issues related to mission and he writes this volume out of the wealth of that experience. In this book, he attempts to bring together a post-Christendom critique of Western Christianity that lies at the heart of the missional church conversation, insights related to urban missiology, and a close reading of texts related to Paul’s own urban ministry experience.

Gibbs’ hope in writing is to contribute to the development of a “post-Christendom Western” missiology that is both “biblically rooted and culturally engaged” (ix). In using Paul’s writing as his basis for “biblically rooted,” Gibbs cautions that “the urban world of Paul’s day was very different from urbanization in the twenty-first century.” Still, he hopes that we might still have much to learn from Paul’s experience as “we seek ways of birthing new faith communities in order to reach the 90 percent … who no longer darken the doors of churches” (x).

Gibbs divides his work into two parts, the first assessing contexts, both ours (twenty-first-century Western post-Christendom) and Paul’s. The remainder of the book, entitled “Issues and Insights,” attempts to bring these two worlds into meaningful dialogue. The two sections read very differently. In section one, Gibbs marshals resources into extended arguments. In section two, he moves from textual observations to comments about lessons or principles we can learn from these texts. Section two reads less like an argument, and more like loosely related observations stitched together by summary paragraphs at the end of each chapter.

From my perspective, Gibbs is more successful in making his point in the first section of the book. He seems more sure-footed when comparing first and twenty-first century contexts. In the first chapter, particularly, he rehearses well the missional church critique of Christendom, particularly insights from Frost and Hirsch. Those familiar with this critique will not find much new here, though I especially appreciated his treatment of Phillip Blond’s work on the breakdown of meaning in the UK, and by extension, in the US.

His accompanying chapter on first-century contexts also uses familiar sources for those acquainted with late twentieth-century Christian scholarship on the Greco-Roman world. He weaves together the insights of Meeks, Ferguson, Grant and others who saw Greco-Roman backgrounds as crucial for understanding early Christianity. Gibbs ends section one with observations about the
importance of prioritizing cities and the need to be informed about both their complexities and unique features. His observations are sound, but the reader is left wondering if these observations depend in any necessary way on all the descriptive work done in the opening chapters.

In part two, Gibbs reads both Acts and the letters attributed to Paul to give readers a sense of the shape of Paul's ministry. Paul becomes his model in urban contexts for developing new churches, caring for those churches, incorporating new members, upholding the apostolic message, and managing the engagement between church and world. This section moves immediately back and forth between observations on Paul's practice and possible implications for today—a paragraph or two on Paul, a paragraph or two about our situation. The strength of section two is Gibbs' own wisdom. The reader gets the sense that he/she is sitting in class with Gibbs as he reads a verse or two from Paul and makes observations from his own rich experience.

Gibbs bills the second section of the book as the result of a “missional hermeneutic ... to see what lessons we can learn and to what extent they relate to our current situation ...” (57). Those hoping that he will move the ball down the field in the important conversation concerning missional hermeneutics will be disappointed. Though Gibbs warns early in the book not to expect much in the way of direct parallels between first and twenty-first century contexts (x) and cautions later against “restorationism” as a temptation to idealize and copy the first churches (25), his own reading nevertheless feeds these impulses by reading Acts and Paul's letters for principles or precedents for ministry.

The author fails to mine the rich vein in recent Pauline studies for the “deep structures” of Paul's thought that make him a certain kind of practical theologian, bringing together in dialogue elements of the tradition with the particularities of local situations. This lack of appreciation for recent trends in Pauline studies is particularly apparent in the chapter on “Upholding the Apostolic Message.” According to Gibbs, Paul's “key belief” is that salvation by faith through grace “lies at the heart of the gospel” and must “be explained and defended in every age” (172). While an important theme for Paul, recent scholarship has moved away from seeing this as the animating center of Paul's thought. This, in turn, has revealed a richer soteriology rooted in Paul's apocalyptic eschatology. The irony I find is that these shifts in Pauline studies have also shed significant light on Paul's understandings of both gospel and mission. Thus, the chapter, which features very few footnotes, reads more as a defense of classic Protestant theories of atonement than as a careful reading of Paul.

In the introduction, Gibbs notes his hesitancy in writing this volume given the fact that he is not a Pauline scholar. Unfortunately, his lack of familiarity with recent trends in Pauline studies is a significant weakness of the book.