Western Christians in Global Mission: What’s the Role of the North American Church?
Paul Borthwick
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Reviewed by: Hayward Armstrong

We’ve all heard good news/bad news stories. My favorite goes something like this:
Doctor: “I have good news and bad news. Which do you want first?”
Patient: “Give me the good news first.”
Doctor: “You only have 24 hours to live.”
Patient: “If that’s the good news, Doc, what’s the bad?!”
Doctor: “I meant to tell you yesterday.”

Borthwick’s book is somewhat like a good news/bad news story. On his “journey into global Christianity” (11), he walks his readers through celebration and lament, joys and concerns about the rise of the church in the Majority world, as well as successes and failures in the Western church’s attempt to fulfill the Great Commission. He searches for the place of the North American church in the global family of believers. Missiologists, cultural anthropologists, church historians and futurists may find no great surprises in the book, although current data, fresh packaging and new illustrations are always welcome, and are supplied abundantly. Many readers, perhaps not as informed about the church on mission, may find themselves like the doctor’s patient, wishing they had gotten Borthwick’s diagnosis earlier.

The book is organized into two parts. In the first, “Where Are We Now?” Borthwick sets the backdrop for the journey by underscoring dramatic changes in the world that must be at the forefront of any discussion of the role of North American Christians in the Majority World church. He reminds us that the world is young, restless, uncertain, non-white, non-Western, non-wealthy, technologized and lonely, conflicted about faith, migratory, globalized, and urbanized. Such descriptors apply to the non-Christian and Christian world alike and cannot be dismissed by
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agencies, churches, or institutions seeking to make an impact on the world for Christ.

Borthwick addresses this first overarching question by offering chapters on the current state of the world (an admittedly presumptuous task), and appraisals of the church in North America and the Majority World. His statistical data, illustrations, and implications of the fast-paced changes happening in today’s world are mind-numbing, even for those who are already concerned about and thinking about those realities. Readers not yet attuned to the Church’s changing context, confronted with the likelihood that the center of the global church will soon have moved from North to South and is apparently moving from West to East, that churches from traditional mission fields are quickly becoming mission senders, and that the Western church is quickly losing its focal point on the map of Christianity may find such facts incredible and disturbing. The good news about the North American church (generous, wealthy, optimistic, well-trained, multicultural, and with the benefit of history), may be offset by the bad news (pluralism, globalization, territorialism, faulty ecclesiology, disconnectedness with the poorer world, lack of information, a propensity to oversimplify the world and to nationalize God, failure to think critically, option overload, and the possibility of a cross-less Christianity). Strengths, the good news about the Majority World church, which is moving from everywhere to everywhere, might include zeal for the Lord, zeal for missions, expectancy and faith, and a rugged, sacrificial faith. Concerns, the bad news, may be reflected in the abuse of power, making converts rather than disciples, prosperity theology, and ignoring societal transformation. Taking all this into account, Borthwick is hopeful that “when we join together – rich and poor, Western and non-Western, brothers and sisters – we can learn how to steward our mutual resources toward the vision of a global family in worship: from every tribe, language, people and nation” (101).

In Part Two, “Moving Forward,” the author reminds us that regardless of what is happening in our fast-changing world, including an emerging, vibrant Majority World church, we still have a
God-given mandate to carry the Gospel to the world. How we do that in the best possible way? Borthwick recommends joining God’s global agenda rather than defining it, rejoicing in the fact that the growth of the global church is not confirmation of the decline of the church in North America but of the rise of the church everywhere else. This is where the author attempts to carry us in this second, more practical section. Perhaps his clearest summary answer to the question of where we fit in the global church is “it depends” (106). It depends on things like a renewed understanding of Biblical continuity, humility, purposeful reciprocity, sacrifice rather than generosity, partnership equality, and just good listening, all of which are essential, and all of which he deals with extensively.

In the final chapter, the author offers his most practical suggestions about how we might appropriately get connected to the Global Church, including twenty-five very specific research recommendations to prepare ourselves for cultural sensitivity. Borthwick’s insights and recommendations, the product of decades of extensive world travel, research, teaching, and strong relationships with leaders in the Global Church, make this book a valuable resource for anyone involved in long or short term cross-cultural missions, and for those who are calling them out and preparing them to go.

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