

BOOK REVIEW

Bevans, Stephen B. 2024. *Community of Missionary Disciples: The Continuing Creation of the Church*

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Reviewed by James Butler

I've been excited to read this book since I first heard that Stephen Bevans was writing it, and then even more so when I heard him present the main ideas from the book at a research seminar at the University of Roehampton. His book seeks to develop an ecclesiology based on the insight that it is not that the church has a mission, but the mission has a church. He argues that the church is continually coming into being on its pilgrim journey. For those familiar with Bevans' writing the book has a familiar feel. It has his detailed, insightful and generous approach, showing his deep engagement with his own Catholic tradition, as well as an informed and appreciative engagement with theologians and sources from across the ecumenical spectrum. Some of the discussion draws heavily from his previous work, bringing ideas from a number of his books and articles into one, longer treatment of mission ecclesiology. One thing I particularly appreciated was Chapter 2, which is a complete revision of the first chapter of *Constants in Context*, telling the story of Acts. This story is narrated in a much more pneumatological way, picking up much more clearly the Church coming into being through the mission of God and the work of the Spirit.

The book is split into three parts which focus on three different words from the title *Community of Missionary Disciples*. Part 1 focuses on "missionary" exploring of the *missio Dei* and the essence of church as missionary. There is plenty of biblical work in Chapters 1 and 2, followed by engagement with church teaching in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 explores mission as a "single, complex reality" with depth and breadth before giving an account of prophetic dialogue in Chapter 5. Part 2 focuses on "community", developing an account of church through the biblical metaphors of the "people of God" (Chapter 6), "Body of Christ" (Chapter 7) and "Creation of the Holy Spirit" (Chapter 8). Chapters 9 and 10 explore the credal marks of the church,

which Bevens prefers to see as dimensions. Part 3 focuses on the word “disciples” with the comment that the structure of the church serves mission. He discusses the identity of disciples in their baptism (Chapter 11) before turning to discussion of leadership (Chapter 12), ministry (Chapter 13) and ordination (Chapter 14 and 15). Those aware of Pope Francis’ writings, and particularly *Evangelii Gaudium*, will immediately notice that the phrase he has picked up for talking about church – the community of missionary disciples – is straight out of Francis’ work. Pope Francis is a key conversation partner for Bevens throughout the book, and he highlights the ways in which Francis’ work has drawn out these key themes from the Catholic tradition, particularly the writings of the Second Vatican Council.

This book is more clearly Catholic than many of Bevens’ writings, spending a lot of time engaging with papal documents and the Catholic tradition. This, I think, is a real strength, drawing out insights which come from Catholic theology about ecclesiology in the light of the *missio Dei*. The book also acts as a helpful commentary on Pope Francis’ missiological and ecclesiological emphasis, combining his writings with his biography and history. This book still demonstrates Bevens’ commitment to ecumenical work as he engages with a wealth of missiology across the traditions. The comprehensiveness and detail which he goes to does, however, mean that the book has more of a textbook feel for much of the time. We are taken in detail over many arguments and discussion which will be of great service to those approaching these ideas for the first time, but in developing an argument for the church as a community of missionary disciples I wondered if perhaps some of the details could have been referenced and footnoted rather than included within the main text.

The skill of Bevens is of being able to bring together a huge wealth of writings, knowledge, wisdom and theology, in a coherent and engaging way. This is one reason among many that he will have an impact on the field of missiology for many years to come. Perhaps, though, this breadth and depth means that at times Bevens’ own voice becomes slightly lost. For someone who has had such a significant impact on the field, I think he could feel a little freer to speak in his own voice and make clearer his own constructive contributions. Perhaps this is in part down to his humility and generosity, where he sees the good in everything, and values the diversity of missiology. Which brings me to the second point, that at times I would like to have heard a more critical voice. While it is great to have the diversity of voices, I couldn’t help thinking that voices which he engaged with together, might have quite robust critiques of each other, and perhaps this kind of conversation would have benefitted the book. For example, Christopher Wright’s framing of the *missio Dei* is distinct from, say, Pope Francis or the conversation in the missional church literature and these differences could have been explored.

This book will be a significant textbook for mission ecclesiology, and will be used by many students to great effect. Personally, the thing which I most value about the book is the way Bevens offers a commentary on Pope Francis' thought about mission and ecclesiology, placing his *Evangelii Gaudium* and *Fratelli Tutti* in the wider context of Catholic missiology and in Pope Francis' own history as an Argentinian priest. I would highly recommend the book as a thorough and detailed engagement with a breadth and depth of writing and reflection around mission and ecclesiology. At the same time, I would like to see Stephen Bevens write a shorter book, perhaps 80 pages or so, which take this book as a foundation and allow him the freedom to articulate his own account of mission ecclesiology more clearly. I'm thinking of something like Herbert McCabe's *God Matters*, offering pithy insights and theological depth, freed from the need to heavily evidence, reference or footnote.

About the Reviewer

James Butler, University of Roehampton, London; Church Mission Society, Oxford.
Contact: James.butler@roehampton.ac.uk