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Books I Have Read: Challenging Western Christians and Their Neighbours

In short, believing men and women are called to tell the world in which they live that God is loving and merciful and that He gives deliverance from sin and death to all who in faith surrender to Christ.

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The bottom line for this review is that this short book, with a long title, is well worth a read.

[Challenging Western Christians and Their Neighbours: Be Participants in the Mission of Jesus, At Home and Abroad](#) by Steven (Not Stefan) Paas is essentially a motivational, Reformed, theology of mission and it fills a bit of a gap in the market today.

The paperback is a normal format book of just over 100 pages, unfortunately, it is priced at £14 on Amazon, which does seem a little steep for something that the author describes as a booklet. The style is slightly formal and there is a good selection of footnotes and references for those who like that sort of thing, but it is not a difficult or over academic read. There is nothing here that will stretch anyone who is a regular reader.

The real strength of this book is that subjects which are often treated as distinct issues are placed within a broader biblical and theological context. For example, the issue of mission to different religions is dealt with as part of the discussion of the universal nature of our mission. This means that some questions which can be quite tricky in isolation are simpler to deal with because of their context. There is a significant amount of argument and discussion running through the book. For example, in the section on religions, the author does not simply lay out his view point, he lists three alternatives and briefly discusses their strengths and weaknesses, before outlining which he prefers.

Rather than work through the book in sequence, I'd like to highlight some of the issues that I found most helpful and which I believe are essential to a proper understanding of mission today.

The first is that Paas places our work in mission within the broader context of God's mission, the *Missio Dei*. For reasons that I don't fully understand, Christians from the Reformed tradition have been slow to pick up on this understanding of mission, which is odd given their focus on the sovereignty of God.

The mission of Christians is a high calling, for it does not stand alone. It has been derived from the task Jesus Christ has received. God the Father sent His Son to the world! He himself is and remains the Sent One, who precedes us. After His ascension, the mission of the Son has continued through the spread of the gospel and the work of the Holy Spirit. The fact that Christians have a mission, therefore, means that they have been included in the mission of God the Son by God the Father.

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Placing mission within the broader actions of the triune God is incredibly important if we are to grasp what it is that God is calling us to.

A second feature that I greatly appreciated is the stress that mission is not simply the concern of the individual, but that congregations are called together in mission. This has huge implications for the identification and support of missionary candidates which are not fully developed in this book, but which do need some serious thought.

[All individual Christians have been sent on mission](#)

[into the world by Christ. Likewise, the congregation](#)

[or the church as an organism has been sent by Him](#)

[TOO. CLICK TO TWEET](#)

I greatly appreciated the global nature of the call to mission in the book. Paas rightly points out that our mission starts locally and he highlights some of the challenges that this raises. It isn't always easy to reach our own people with the gospel. However, he doesn't ignore the fact that the Bible lays a stress on mission to the ends of the earth, either. This truly global and local view of mission is increasingly rare as people stress the one to the exclusion of the other.

Jesus' selection for the starting point of missionary activities contains an important lesson for today in our Western culture. Jesus indicates that for us as well missionary work, first of all, begins next door, in our relationship with our neighbours. That is not easy. Because like the first disciples, Christians are in danger of colliding with the familiar climate of their own country and people.

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While on the subject of global mission, Paas does not skirt around the rather conflicted past that Western nations have with regard to the rest of the world. The shadow of colonialism and oppression still looms large in many parts of the world and those who would take the message of Christ from the West need to understand this.

This book is written from an unashamedly Reformed position and it does not shy away from complex subjects such as limited atonement. Those who find their Calvinism discourages them from an interest or involvement in mission will find themselves very challenged by what Paas has to say.

The final thing that I'd highlight is that Paas is fully aware that an involvement in mission is difficult and counter-cultural in our current situation. He examines some of the reasons why this is the case and poses a number of solutions.

All this being said, I do have one significant reservation about the book. In the opening Paas outlines the view that mission is derived from the *Missio Dei*, which is revealed in the whole of Scripture. However, in the rest of the book he equates mission with "The Great Commission"; reductionist language that is at odds with his earlier statements. This inconsistency is not helpful and would seem to indicate that the author has not reflected as deeply on the nature of mission itself as he has on some of the issues surrounding mission. This is unfortunate as it reinforces those whose view of mission is more shaped by the Enlightenment separation of the sacred and secular than by the holistic teachings of Scripture.

So who should read this book? Despite my reservations, I believe it should find a place in any Bible college or mission training college library. It's the sort of book that any ministry trainee, whatever work they were thinking of going into should consider. I'd also suggest that this should be high on the reading list for anyone involved in leading a Conservative Evangelical Church in the UK. It presents mission within a framework that they will find approachable, but it will also challenge and encourage them. I defy anyone to read this book and not find their horizons stretched.

As usual, I'll finish by highlighting some quotes that I found particularly helpful.

Jesus Christ is the greatest love gift God has given to the world, to humanity. Unbelievers and ignorant people do not recognize this gift. Therefore, they are in the dark, trapped in the dangerous situation of death and sin. But believers recognize this gift. They know Christ. That is the very characteristic of faith. Believers extend their hands to this gift of God the Father. They accept Christ and embrace Him as their Saviour.

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In short, believing men and women are called to tell the world in which they live that God is loving and merciful and that He gives deliverance from sin and death to all who in faith surrender to Christ.

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On the one hand, the institution of universal mission is completely new. Christ's victory has created a new situation in which He has made the world accessible for the gospel. On the other hand, world mission is a *continuum*, a continuation in new ways of the Old Testament situation, in which the peoples had to pay attention to another number of twelve – namely the 12 tribes of Israel – in order to see a micro-demonstration of God's intentions with the whole world. Israel's functioning as an educational model of God's cosmic plan, however, was temporary, flawed and shadowy. The world did not see much of it. But God's acts with the tribes of Israel culminated in Jesus. For that matter, 'Moses and the prophets' had already foretold this. He became the King of the new Israel, now ethnically and geographically unlimited, embodied in all believers in Christ of all times and places.

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All individual Christians have been sent on mission into the world by Christ. Likewise, the *congregation* or the *church* as an organism has been sent by Him too.

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If the church or the congregation is mixed with political and economic powers, this immediately affects the other side of the missionary medal. After all, the congregation has not only been sent, but it is also a sender herself. Actually, the history of the church can be described as a history of mission. The congregation is essentially a missionary institution. However, a congregation that gradually allows worldly influences to determine her identity is in the process of losing her nature as a

missionary community. It is important to stop that shocking process. In order to do that, we need the redeeming power of Jesus.

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Western Christianity allowed itself to be used for supporting the economic and political advantages of colonial powers. Today, this attitude still resonates when Christians from their privileged countries call 'Own people first' or 'We defend Fortress Europe' to the world struggling with problems of war, poverty and hunger. This practice has seriously damaged the credibility of the Christian faith for many vulnerable people. That is why the missionary capacity of Western Christians and congregations has been weakened or paralyzed.

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The great commission of Jesus does not define the congregation as a closed organization, but as an open missionary organism. Her outward-looking mission, the spread of the gospel, should be supported by all her internal characteristics: those of the faith of the Christians, the sections of the organization, the content of preaching, the pastoral care, and the diaconate.

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I am grateful to the publishers for providing me with an electronic review copy of this book. I have not allowed their generosity to impact my words. If I thought it was a stinker, I'd have said so. It isn't.