

## Book Review

### Michael T. Cooper, *Ephesiology: The Study of the Ephesian Movement*

Reviewed by Tim Keene

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This is a book of considerable ambition, such as is needed in missiology. It combines theology, biblical studies, and church history with reflections on contemporary mission in about 200 pages. Its brevity is not a shortcoming. The broad sweep of its argument would inevitably be lost if it were subjected to a five volume *magnum opus*. Readers from any of the backgrounds of theology, biblical studies, church history, and contemporary mission will find the book sets out a profitable map for further discussion. Nonetheless, its brevity does involve some sacrifices. Its assertions and arguments would need to be greatly filled out if it is to satisfy anybody with a focussed interest.

With such a broad sweep, a focus is needed and for this Cooper has chosen Ephesus. This choice is a happy one, as it enables Cooper to interact with a great deal of the New Testament, early theology, and early church history. Even so, the book's actual contents and purpose perhaps do not quite justify the title. This book is as much about contemporary mission and theology as it is about ancient Ephesus. The book is about what the "Ephesian Movement" might contribute to contemporary mission, rather than about the movement as such. This more present-day emphasis opens up the question as to where the author is coming from.

From reading the book it is clear that he is greatly influenced by Pentecostalism and also by the Church Planting Movement (CPM) community. People who share this background will find it far easier to understand and benefit from this book. It is the author's comparison of CPM with the New Testament and early church history that provides the spine of the book. If you do not share Cooper's CPM background, as I do not, some of the arguments will seem opaque or at worst tendentious. Of course, perhaps the changes that I believe are needed should occur at least as much in me as in the book.

The importance of CPM is boldly asserted in the title of the second chapter, "Church Planting Movements in the Book of Acts," when a more neutral title, such as "The growth of the church in the book of Acts," could have been chosen. That such a distinction is not just pedantry is suggested by the way in Korea, for instance, "Church Planting" and "Church Growth" are almost placed in opposition to each other. In both cases, Church Planting and Church Growth are specific "ideologies" rather than simply planting or growing. Even with its present title, however, the second chapter's starting point in the Book of Acts is extremely welcome.

Chapters 3 and 4 are on missiological exegesis and reflection. They clearly come from the author's background in American Pentecostalism rather than from a wider missiological perspective. The theologian of the Lausanne Movement (which is global rather than just American), Christopher Wright, has written extensively on just these areas, but nowhere does there seem to be much consciousness of his contribution or of similar conversation partners.

Chapter 5 hurtles into the realm of systematic theology. Before tackling scripture (other than the instruction to Ephesus in Acts, in chapter 2), we have the doctrine of God and the importance of a theocentric approach. Within this theological discussion, there is a comparative analysis of views between classical theism, free will theism, and open theism. Those outside the U.S. will struggle to interact with such an approach. Certainly, this discussion has only a marginal place in British circles. And when the Cappadocian Fathers are labelled as Open Theists, I am left confused. It seems as if American categories are being applied anachronistically. Indeed, the misplaced character of the approach seems to be acknowledged by the author when he says, “the current debates on the various views of God are largely Western and articulated by Western evangelical theologians”; I would prefer to say American rather than Western.

When the author moves from theology to missiological theology, he also moves from abstract categories to narrative, to God’s story and our part in it. This transition is most welcome and helpful. Perhaps this missiological theology should not be attached so closely to Paul that this narrative missiology is not seen as also the missiological theology of Jesus or of the canon as a whole; but perhaps my concern here is pedantic.

When John’s Gospel is tackled, there are vigorous claims that, first of all, an Ephesian provenance can be assumed and secondly that this is vital to understanding the Gospel of John. As an Ephesian provenance may or may not be true, I reckon the jury is still out on both claims; hence their importance for understanding John must also be doubtful. Arguments may be adduced to support such claims, but they are not really given in this book. Unsupported assumptions are made elsewhere, caused by the need for brevity. Bold claims are made about scripture that might startle biblical studies scholars, but without much evidence. I have similar difficulties with the use of Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians. The missiological aspect of the election of Israel (Ephesians 1:3-12) widened to include Gentiles seems ignored. With such unsupported claims, the book can only function as the start of several conversations and not their conclusions.

One bold objective of the book is to reduce an emphasis on the institutional aspect of the church and re-emphasise the church’s relational aspect. The book discusses this point through the nature of the church as a whole and its leadership structures. One distinction that seems most fertile is the contrast between movement leadership and charismatic leadership. Unexpectedly to me, the book does not contrast charismatic leadership (good) and professional leadership (bad). It is charismatic leadership that is questioned. An interrogation of the nature and value of charismatic leadership and how the terminology of ‘movement leadership’ helps needs to be taken further.

To address some remaining points briefly, I have a built-in resistance to the employment of exponential mathematics to church growth. When I became a Christian 50 years ago, I was taught how one person could convert the entire world in 30 years. It has not happened (to my shame).

The book then moves on to how the church thus planted should function. This important topic is dealt with helpfully but of necessity briefly.

To summarise, then, this book is a great conversation starter - especially if you are Pentecostal or a sympathetic follower of the Church Planting Movement approach. The book has a broad scope in view that challenges everyone who seeks God’s kingdom on earth. While only a starter, *Ephesiology* should catalyse any number of constructive interactions.