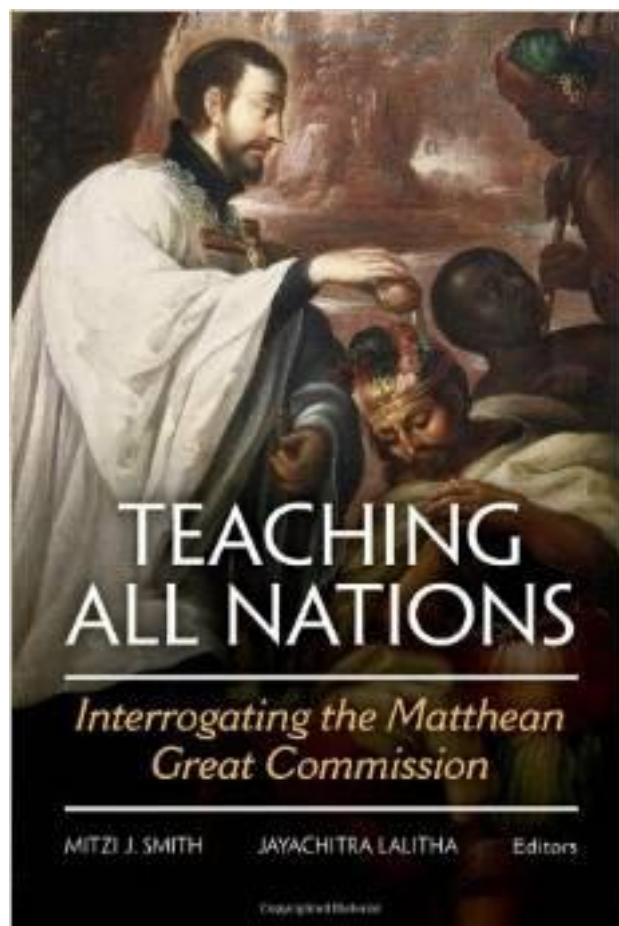


MITZI J SMITH AND JAYACHITRA LALITHA, EDITORS, *Teaching All Nations: Interrogating the Matthean Great Commission* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014). xiv + 318 pages. Paperback. US\$49

It is a curious fact of the history of mission and of Biblical interpretation that colonial practices have been promoted by adducing Matthew 28:16-20 as the Magna Carta of mission, not least by labeling it the Great Commission. Two main problems of the so-called “Great Commission” are that Matthew does not call it that, and it has not always been used holistically. Focusing, as it does, on teaching, readers who have selected it above other mission commissions have by implication elevated teaching over mercy ministry, and proclamation over service. Moreover, the teaching it seems to have encouraged subordinated dialogue and conversation with the other to the more dominant genre of one-directional instruction. As Gosnell Yorke comments in the Preface of *Teaching All Nations*, the Bible has been a humanizing and liberating agent in many contexts, but also at times a brutal and blunt tool of oppression. During the time of European colonization and American imperialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Matthew 28:16-20 has been the dominant passage of missionary motivation. This has brought liberation as well as oppression, but its dual (and dualistic) influence is only recently being critiqued by writers such as R S Sugirtharajah and Muse Dube. This volume brings a range of other writers into the necessary conversation.

The editors are Mitzi J Smith is Associate Professor of New Testament and Early Christian Studies at Ashland Theological Seminary, USA. Jayachitra Lalitha is Associate Professor of New Testament and Greek at Tamilnadu Theological Seminary, India. They have assembled fourteen academics and/or activists from Africa, Asia, United States and the Caribbean who draw on biblical studies, womanist and feminist criticism, history and art history, postcolonial and missiological perspectives. The



writers contribute fourteen chapters in five parts that critically reflect on the Great Commission and its use or abuse.

Beatrice Okyere-Manu, David Gosse and Mitzi Smith in Part 1 examine the historical nexus of colonialism and mission, in chapters on Africa, the Caribbean and African slaves. Missionaries taught liberation from sin, but colonial mission practice propagated race and class stratification, let alone slavery and other sinful inequalities incongruent with the gospel.

Part 2 offers womanist, feminist and postcolonial critiques. Jayachitra Lalitha offers a postcolonial dalit feminist inquiry about why women were absent in the later part of Matthew 28, and challenges the Indian vernacular translation of nations as *jaathigal*, meaning caste groups. The passage ought to be read, she maintains, in the context of Jesus' opposition to Empire, and applied to dalit women in ways that liberate them from Brahmanism and patriarchy. Lynne St Clair Darden examines the role of African American women missionaries, and how they inadvertently propagated racism and classism. Mitzi Smith challenges the exaltation of teaching over social justice in Matthew. Her refocusing away from Jesus as teacher of the nations to Jesus as *God with us* is one of the highlights of the book: "As God with us, in Jesus social justice and teaching do not strive for mastery over each other and are not at war in his incarnate body. But Jesus' practice of social justice and teaching organically constitute the interactive presence of God with us" (130).

In Part 3, themed around art and theology, Sheila F Winborne illustrates how art can exercise power and control, especially with renderings of a white Christ. Michelle Sungshin Lim appeals for an awareness of the "white-supremacist-capitalist-patriarchy" that denigrates religious practices of the other. She uses *Minjung* theology to appeal for listening to and empowering the poor in the global South. Rohan Gideon advocates in another direction for listening – to the voices and agency of children, as was discussed at Edinburgh 2010 and affirmed by the Child Theology Movement.

Christian education is the focus of Part 4, especially considering the psychological and moral damage on black peoples. Karen Crozier reclaims Jesus' Kingdom of God message and its implications for fully-orbed emancipation. Anthony Reddie adopts a human development framework and highlights the importance of fostering identity and self-

esteem. Lord Elorm-Donkor discusses the absurd discrepancy of mission growth alongside sociopolitical degeneration in Africa, and reframes the Matthean commission to include love of neighbor as summarizing “everything Jesus commanded his disciples”.

Part 5 introduces some voices from beyond the academy. MarShondra Scott Lawrence calls Christians to love and promote social justice for our urban “*glocal ghettos*”. June Rivers draws on her family heritage and short-term mission experience to elevate the importance of not one but several texts as mandates for missionary engagement, and which not only talks about but embodies the love of Christ.

Teaching All Nations is an important volume for three main reasons. Firstly, it is a multi-voiced interrogation of Matthew 28:16-20. To understand its use and influence we need to hear from those who have been motivated as well as those who have been influenced by it. Secondly, although the different writers bring differing perspectives and emphases, a common call is to pay attention to the social justice and service elements of mission. These elements of holistic mission resonate with other aspects of Jesus’ ministry and other passages commissioning his disciples to mission, but they are also implicit in a broader interpretation of Matthew 28. Thirdly, it is important to evaluate the use and abuse of the Matthean Great Commission as a tool of colonial oppression, but it is also appropriate to take a fresh look at the passage as a postcolonial challenge of Empire, an invitation to liberating interdependence and a call to cooperate with Jesus who is with us in his kin*dom and holistic ministry. The Great Commission and its history of interpretation deserve postcolonial critique, but interpreted in the larger context of the Gospels it also has its own postcolonial contribution to the message of liberation. As such, *Teaching All Nations* is worthwhile reading for students and teachers of postcolonial criticism, biblical and Matthean studies, missions and mission history, and global theology.

Review by
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