

Paul S. Williams, *Exiles on Mission: How Christians Can Thrive in a Post-Christian World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2020). 256 pp. \$19.90 paperback.

In writing this review I should declare that Paul Williams is a friend, and Alphacrucis Honorary Professor, who has deeply influenced some of our students through his teaching of the Business Entrepreneurship and Mission unit in our Master of Leadership, as well as his talks at events when he has visited Australia. Paul is CEO of the British and Foreign Bible Society, previously Academic Dean and Professor of Marketplace Theology at Regent College Vancouver, and previously a London investment banker and Oxford graduate.

This is his first book, but it draws on many years of speaking, teaching and writing on these issues. It is a challenging book for the contemporary church, as becomes clear in the prologue where he writes of the twin difficulties of contemporary mission “First...almost the entire institutional infrastructure of the church and the assumption that underlie it are now outmoded....Second, the culture is now not simply increasingly pagan but is pagan with an anti-Christian flavour... Western culture is fragmenting into incoherent and incommensurable discourse, but each fragment has a different grudge against the church.” Similarly challenging are the eight hard truths about the contemporary church which in abbreviated form are: (1) Protestant Christian culture perpetrates a sacred-secular divide. (2) Whole of life discipleship is a rare experience but a strong desire for most young people (3) Ministry and mission of whole people of God is marginalised by church leaders and training (4) The Church has lost a clear, gracious, intelligent public voice (5) Much Christian public engagement is lobbying for privilege not mission (6) Church leaders tend to be internally focused (7) The Church remains vulnerable to ideological capture (8) Investment in Bible confidence among Christians is low (page 22).

A strength of the book is the diagnosis of our cultural situation and the responses of the church to it. In chapter one Paul Williams identifies three contemporary church responses:

1. Retrenchment. Either in the benign but ineffectual form of “try harder” or the toxic “shout louder” response to contemporary culture.

2. Ecclesial Mission. This has two variants

(a) The emerging church movement which is commended for engaging with contemporary culture, though Paul has concerns about cultural accommodation and doctrinal loss of nerve.

(b) The missional church movement, exemplified by the work of Lesslie Newbigin and Gospel and Culture Networks in the UK & NZ.

3. Lay Ministry. Paul Williams describes post-WWII writing on the theology of the laity, then the growth of Christian business professional and academic groups, then the faith at work

movement. Despite its promise the faith at work movement has its problems, including clerical colonization, the channelling of lay involvement towards maintaining church structures, theological colleges treating it as marginal, and incoherent clerical critiques of business and capitalism which undermine the movement.

Overall he identifies the missional church and faith at work movements are the most promising (p20).

Paul Williams ambitiously summarizes missional developments across the UK, Europe, the US and Canada, countries where he has spent most time, but each country is subtly different. How does his analysis relate to our Australian situation? Much of his critique applies to Australian mainstream churches in, but in my view we are in a healthier situation because new churches such as Hillsong, C3 and other pentecostal churches have addressed some of the problems he identifies and have accordingly grown rapidly. These churches are highly missional and engaged with contemporary culture, and the sacred-secular divide is much less pronounced. Many of their ministers have had substantial experience outside the Christian cultural bubble and benefited from business and leadership training offered by Alphacrucis. They often combine ministry with outside employment or a business they have started and run. Faith and work tends not to be a topic of discussion, instead the terminology is whole-of-life discipleship or mission, but for Australian Pentecostals the problem of a sacred-secular divide just does not arise. It is a very different culture to US or UK Pentecostalism. These churches also trade on the longstanding Australian suspicion of clericalism and religious institutions, a healthy suspicion in my view. Besides the Pentecostals we have thought leaders within the evangelical churches such as Robert Banks and Tony Golsby-Smith and Kara Martin who have shown a way out of the sacred-secular divide, though their influence remains limited. Another feature of our Australian situation is the strength of Catholicism, partly because of large scale immigration from Catholic counties since the 1950s. The Catholic church is now the largest Australian church in terms of attendance, followed by the Pentecostals, and then the Anglican church and a collection of declining mainstream churches. Catholics are an interesting case – certainly clericalism is a problem and maintenance of the institutions absorbs resources – but Catholic social teaching provides a much richer framework for whole of life discipleship than anything similar in the non-Catholic world. Catholics also tend to have a healthier approach to faith and reason than Protestants – John Henry Newman’s circle of knowledge and Thomas Aquinas synthesis of Aristotle and the Christian tradition are outstanding examples. And Catholic spirituality in my experience supports such discipleship in a way that a lot of Protestant spiritual practices do not. So overall with our new Pentecostal churches, some hopeful signs within Australian evangelicalism and Catholicism I’m more hopeful for the future of Christianity in Australia than in the US or UK.

Another thing I particularly appreciated about the book was the emphasis on the spirituality alongside analysis. For instance the discussion in chapter three of how fear feeds our temptations to assimilation and withdrawal that some churches have succumbed too. Another example is the discussion in chapter five of the place of lament in our Christian life. Paul Williams observes that something would be seriously wrong if we are not angry and grieving about the condition of the church (p71) but that lament needs to turn listening and in due course to action.

The spirituality of the book is profoundly biblical, attending both to the large story of God's redemptive purposes and to particular passages that enlighten and encourage us in pursuing the mission. Mission is defined in chapter eight as necessarily emerging from God's purposes rather than being a particular set of activities, and the church is missional by nature in accordance with the scriptures. Paul Williams' discussion of vocation in chapter six emphasises how foundational our calling as Christians is for any other particular callings we might have. I found the Psalms he points readers to in chapter five particularly helpful. And he tells us that he is praying for his readers.

Various images run through the book. There is the image of exile introduced in chapter two which characterises our cultural situation—both the exile from Eden described in Genesis and the later exile from Jerusalem in Babylon. Both are exiles of God's people and Paul Williams emphasises that God's people share the judgement of their broken societies. Moral superiority is unbiblical and blocks mission. Another image introduced in chapter seven is of Christians as ambassadors, drawing on II Corinthians 5:19-20. Paul Williams observes that Christians are foreigners in their own countries and suggests that they can see themselves like the Roman envoys Paul and his readers knew, who have a task and authority from a ruler. Later in chapter twelve there is the image of pilgrimage. Sometimes I was unsure how these images fitted together, and why they were chosen over other biblical images. For instance, the New Testament image of incarnation, and the church as the Spirit filled continuation of the incarnation seem to me more prominent and in some ways more helpful images than the ambassador image.

Despite Paul Williams criticism of the contemporary church he affirms the scriptural truth that the church is at the centre of God's purposes in the world. He makes use of the work of the work of Alphacrucis graduate and Honorary Fellow Julian Ogereau's work on the meaning of *koinonia* as an active businesslike partnership in mission rather than a tame evening bible study over a cup of tea. He calls for a more radical approach to giving than the scripturally dubious rule of tithing, echoing the New Testament scholarship of our own David Parker. His critique of traditional theological education is similar to that which animates our work at Alphacrucis, in particular the bringing together of the worlds of theology and business/economics. There are many connections with Alphacrucis Honorary Professor Robert Banks critique of theological education.

A valuable feature of the book is the practical guidance on worldviews and cultural translation offered in chapters nine, ten and eleven. His discussion of the culture of contemporary capitalism for example is spot on, with attention to the effects of our economic culture on character and desire as well as the analysis of its implicit theology. Naturalistic scientism and environmentalism receive similar treatment. His motto in these chapters, borrowed from the Venn Foundation in NZ is “know the Gospel, know culture” and Paul Williams rightly sees translation as a missional activity.

As the reader might have guessed by this stage, Paul Williams *Exiles on Mission* is a book I recommend to church leaders, pastors, theological educators and others. It is hard to say how it will be received in church circles –if lack of awareness is the problem in these circles it may be a book which catalyses change – but if instead the problem is individual and institutional self-interest then change is harder. Though as Paul Williams points out God loves the church, a love expressed through care and discipline, so we must not succumb to the cynicism and pessimism that is so easy to fall into. Cynicism and pessimism are especially tempting for those of us trained as economists.

His conclusion is “For some time the church in the West has given its main energy and focus to propping up institutions and models that are clearly no longer fit for purpose, to accommodating to judgementally critiquing Western culture, and to anesthetizing ourselves to the missional challenges we face through our consumerism and pietistic withdrawal. It is time to face up to the missional challenges of our generation, to sharpen our focus, perception and prayer lives; to resolutely seek awareness of what God is doing so as to follow him; and to harness our resources as if we mean business” (p230). I add my prayer to Paul Williams’, that readers will deepen their prayer life and discipleship, and follow God’s leading in meeting the missional challenges of our age.

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Paul Oslington

Alphacrucis College