

BOOK REVIEW

by

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John Vincent edits this volume which is a ‘follow up’ to his previous book entitled ‘Methodism Unbound’. **Methodism Abounding; Theology and Mission for the Twenty First Century** (Church in the Market Place Publications 2016, £9.99) is a series of essays, initiated by John and prefaced by Steve Wild. The Ex-President is very accurate in his assessment that ‘John was ahead of his time’. In his commendation he sees the book as illustrating the energy still to be found in the Methodist Church. ‘A plentiful and abundant supply of stories, thoughts and ideas. Enjoy it and be excited about it.’

The book is in two parts; the first devoted to Theology and the second to Mission. The articles get more exciting as they go along. Methodism certainly abounds in the second part. Here you will find an excellent reflection by John Howard on ‘Mission Alongside the Poor’ with a critique of recent Methodist policy. Jackie Belfield writes enthusiastically about her project ‘New Song’. Alistair Lowe has a fine article on the ‘Ecclesiology of Discipleship and Fresh Expressions’ in which he argues (from Matthew 18.20) that discipleship is the foundational aspect of Church and sharing the good news its natural corollary.

Robert Davies’ contribution is more autobiographical as he writes on ‘Grace Abounding through People and Publishing’, while David Clark more or less rehearses what he has said elsewhere about the Diaconate. The final article by Terry Drummond entitled ‘Unbinding Anglicanism’ is a brilliant *tour de force* which I found thrilling though it would leave many of his Anglican colleagues suffering with palpitations.

The first part of the book with its focus on theology is disappointing. While I agreed with Gill Dascombe that ‘we need a new Methodist Quadrilateral’ I found her suggestion that ‘wisdom, science, culture and community’ as a replacement for ‘scripture, reason, tradition and experience’ to be questionable. ‘Theology after Singing the Faith’ by Andrew Pratt was puzzling though he asks some good questions at the end. ‘An Ecological Four Alls’ by Richard Firth was rather polemical in tone. This spoilt it for me because I found some of the things I hold dear dismissed out of hand. John Vincent’s contributions about the seismic shift required in Methodist Theology from individual to corporate experience and about the Deed of Union were far too brief. I wish he had written more.

Gordon Rupp used to say that Methodism is long in organisation and short in theology. The first part of this book does reveal the weakness of our theological undergirding. I accept that Methodist theology tends to be pragmatic and that a radical revision is necessary but this first part lacked the theological depth I was hoping for. It prompts the question of how are we to produce British Methodist scholars who have precision and *gravitas*? Thankfully Theodore Runyan, the American Methodism scholar, is quoted which rescues one of the articles.

Part one concludes with an article by Stephen Skuce entitled ‘Scholarship, Research and Innovation.’ This is well placed following the articles which preceded it. He observes that there are fewer and fewer ‘presbyters and deacons within Methodism equipped at doctoral levels in some of the classical and theological areas’. His article suggests that this must be remedied, though he names Methodist lay theologians.

I rejoice that John Vincent keeps the theological flag flying by initiating this set of essays. I commend this book, particularly the Questions and Study Guide which he has written at the beginning. Stephen Wild in his preface affirms John’s prophetic role with his comment that ‘Many of the things he spoke about to complacent Methodism in previous decades have come home to bite us’.

I read this book in a couple of afternoons and it left my brain reeling with the thrill of doing theology. I am delighted that John is planning a successor to this volume. Read this book and the one before it and get excited about theology!