

## **Book Review**

### *When Everything is Mission*

By Denny Spitters and Matthew Ellison

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Reviewed by Kenneth Nehrbass. Kenneth earned a BA in classical civilization from the University of California, Irvine, an M.Div. from Anderson School of Theology, an MA in education from Biola University, and a Ph.D. in intercultural studies from Biola University. He is an associate professor of global studies for Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University.

Spitters and Ellison – both pastors and mission leaders – have written the most comprehensive argument for prioritism to date (other than the New Testament itself). The prioritism-holism issue is an “in house” debate among evangelicals that dates back to the early 19th century. The central question is whether proclamation of the gospel (especially among the unreached) should take priority in the missionary task. Spitters and Ellison argue that not only does cross-cultural proclamation of the gospel take priority, it is the only activity that can truly be called “missions.” Yes, missionaries do a lot of things, but the “bullseye,” they say, is reaching the unreached.

Some of the recent watering down of the definition of missions has to do with a postmodern distaste for clarifying any terms. Spitters and Ellison critique David Bosch’s deconstructionist claim that “missions” is impossible to define because it has gone through major paradigm shifts. Further, they argue that Christopher Wright’s well-intentioned project to find a missional hermeneutic ends up conflating “missions” with the missio Dei. What we need, they argue, is clarity.

Getting the definition of missions right is more than semantics. Their thesis is that how the church thinks about missions impacts the way it engages

in missions. (Ideas have consequences). There are financial, ethical, and spiritual implications when “missions becomes everything.” From a financial standpoint, if missions is “anything the church feels called to do,” it will (and does) devote almost all of its budget to local causes. The financial issue becomes an ethical one: The authors give several recent, prominent examples where churches diverted money that was given for the missions fund to pay the utility bills and salaries of the staff. But if missions is everything, what is to keep the church from going down this slippery slope? And from a spiritual standpoint, if anything that a church is passionate about can be called “mission(s)”, then the task of reaching the unreached will be the last priority for many congregations, leaving hundreds of millions of people in spiritual darkness.

But will an emphasis on conversion detract from laudable efforts like social action? Not at all. The authors briefly explore Robert Woodberry’s landmark work that showed conversionary Christianity has been responsible for much social uplift throughout the world. They also take time to problematize the accusation that missions has ridden on the coattails of colonialism.

The authors define missions as inviting people from all tribes, tongues and nations to worship the Lamb (Rev 7:9). (Note that the connection between missions and worship, influenced by John Piper, is woven throughout the book). With such a narrow classification for the term “missions,” Spitters and Ellison subvert the notion that “everyone is a missionary” (they give a number of famous permutations of this meme). Yet they heartily agree that all Christians have a role to play in missions. In fact, this may seem counterintuitive, but their high regard for the special place of missions actually drives their high ecclesiology: The Church is essential to the entire missionary task, from identifying potential missionaries, to training them, to sending them out, to keeping them on the field, and to holding them accountable to their work. Therefore, revering the task of missions does not lead to disparaging other aspects of the church. The authors clearly champion other Christian engagements, such as youth ministry, social action, and Christian radio. They are just fans of clarity: Call youth work “youth work” and call social action “social action.” Such precision enables the church to be honest about where its money is going, and what its personnel are up to.

The book works as the main text for an introductory course on missions, because it is more than an apologia for prioritism: It traces the history of the Protestant missions era; it provides a biblical theology of missions; it introduces readers to important missiologists; and it introduces missiological concepts like ethne, unreached people groups, and a conscious, eternal hell for unbelievers. Additionally, because this text brings together a number of voices who have argued for prioritism, it could also be used in higher level missiology courses, where students could critique prioritists’ arguments.

If your senior pastor or elders have been lumping the church’s various outreach (and in-reach) programs under the moniker of missions, this book

could help transform their understanding of the precious term “missions,” and may even give them a fresh vision for reaching the unreached.