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Symposium Review: *Awake, O Church!: A Serious Look at Christian Outreach*—Barry Grant

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Symposium review: **Grant, Barry. 2021. *Awake, O Church!: A Serious Look at Christian Outreach*. Harrisonburg, VA: Christian Light Publications. Pp. 179. \$10.50.**

Review 1

By Christopher Petrovich
Unaffiliated Amish, Mali Drenovac, Serbia

True to its pithy title, author Barry Grant calls the Christian church to awaken from its spiritual slumber, the result of North American materialism manifesting itself on the foreign mission field. *Awake, O Church!* is one of few recent appraisals of plain Anabaptist mission, and one of the only that indicts the plain Anabaptist church communities and networks that send missionaries from the pen of an active missionary. This book is remarkable in that it is a sustained critique of one of the most heavily endowed Protestant humanitarian organizations in the world, and is published by a reputable plain Anabaptist (conservative Mennonite) organization.

Grant lays the groundwork in the first chapter. He assesses current mission work as a failure because missionaries are going to the mission field for the wrong reasons, and they are not doing what God called them to do. They are doing it in the wrong way, with “their pockets full of money” (p. 8), and as a result, lack the power of God. In short, Grant argues that many modern missionaries are having very little success because although they communicate facts about Jesus Christ through their words and literature, they actually teach materialism through their actions. The rest of the chapters cover these topics in greater detail, often in story form.

Chapter two notes that Jesus should be the reason for missions. The third chapter argues that “souls” should be at the center of mission. The fourth chapter encourages trust in God, and contrasts it with economic success and materialism, with the logic that God is enough for most people’s present circumstances. Grant does not sug-

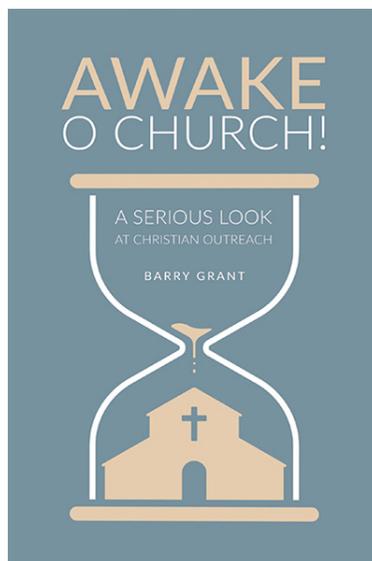
gest that people are never in need of material help. He simply thinks that “poor” is not equivalent to any lifestyle that is less comfortable than what is typical for a middle-class American household. Chapter five is where Grant traces poor outcomes on the mission field back beyond wrong motivations, mistaken theory, and poor practices to the very moral and theological fiber of the communities that send missionaries. Although Grant seems to draw on experiences he had with mainstream Protestant missionaries he met in Haiti, his critique goes far beyond mainstream Protestant mission work. This book is ultimately a critique of plain Anabaptist people he serves alongside. Why else would it be published by CLP rather than, say, InterVarsity Press? How many Evangelicals will pick up a book published by a conservative Mennonite publishing house?

The sixth chapter is pivotal because it cuts against the grain, critiques the type of pacifist theology and practice that plain Anabaptists are increasingly embracing. Anabaptists have historically taught that Christians should not take revenge against their enemies. For example, the fourteenth article of the Dordrecht Confession is titled ‘Of Revenge.’ Popularly known as ‘non-resistance,’ it is increasingly looking like a doctrine of non-confrontation, even among the Amish, especially in economically prosper-

ous, urbanizing settings. Grant intuitively senses that there is a link between a modern “peace” doctrine that neglects spiritual warfare in favor of warm feelings and positive inward states and the embrace of American-style materialism, emerging on the mission field because it is present in the communities that are sending the missionaries.

The remaining seven chapters address the missionary’s goal, the concept of training in the work of discipleship, how deeply we should despair for lost souls, whether we are willing to invest in “the battle,” the value of missions, the act of “going” in the light of an ethic of obedience to God, and the compassion that should motivate mission work.

Awake, O Church! was a pleasure to read. It was well edited in terms of spelling, grammar, and readability. The only drawback is that unrelated



topics were occasionally grouped together. For example, the first subtitle in chapter twelve is ‘Are Self-Help Programs the Answer?’ It is not clear, at least to the present reviewer, how the theory of self-help programs fits with a chapter titled ‘What Are We Waiting For?’

Barry Grant became a Christian on the floor of a jail cell, and after a period in a home church movement, joined the Charity church in Allen County, Indiana (the congregation recently joined the new Agape Christian Fellowship movement). Having moved from a jail cell to a Charity church, it is no surprise that Barry’s writing is sharp and direct. What is more unexpected is that his critique has fallen on relatively receptive ears among those who are its intended audience, prompting informal and formal discussions at Christian Aid Ministries (CAM), with whom he now serves after being sent by his home congregation. Incidentally, although CAM has their own publishing house, Barry didn’t approach them about publishing this book, expecting that it would probably be rejected due to conflict of interest.¹ It will be interesting to see how this conversation might alter the trajectory of plain Anabaptist mission in the coming years.

My primary objection to *Awake, O Church!* is that Grant endorses the Evangelical Protestant conception of “saving souls.” The Christian doctrine of salvation is a doctrine of redemption of lives, of entire persons, and of all creation. If I may piggyback on Grant’s logic that foreign mission work mirrors patterns set in the home community, the Allen County Christian Fellowship meetinghouse is an exact replication of the concept of “saving souls” because the meetinghouse is plain and reflects the sobriety and seriousness of the Christian life but neglects its beauty. The very act of centralization is problematic. Meetinghouses move Christian gatherings away from lively homesteads—graced by an ancient clock on a bookcase, chickens running freely in the yard, and horses peacefully grazing in an adjacent field—to a stolid and static building where we gather once a week more to figure out how to “save souls” than to redeem lives.

Barry Grant is in a unique position to speak to a wide variety of plain Anabaptists on the subject of foreign missions. He has taken the time to do so, and in a very accessible format. The thesis of

the book is compelling. Its message resonates with an increasing minority of Amish—for example, Amish minister Jonathan Stoll, publisher of the bi-monthly, *The Vanguard: A Publication of the Separated Christian Life*—who are uncomfortable with mission organizations that are moved by Protestant Evangelical missionary methods and a materialistic lifestyle that is at odds with the gospel of Jesus Christ as a call to self-sacrifice, radical discipleship, and the redemption of the earth. I, for one, am rooting from the sidelines for the reform that Grant is urging, and I’m also looking forward to a second book by Grant, giving us a vision of how saving souls transforms lives, in all of its organic complexity and fullness within the context of redemptive community. In a broader sense, this book should be a wakeup call for plain Anabaptists, to help us realize that we’ve taken up Protestant missionary theory hook, line, and sinker, adorning it with a few Anabaptist concepts and symbols that are little more than window dressing for the masses. The church is the mission of God in the present age, full stop.

Christopher G. Petrovich is a small-scale farmer, carpenter, and Amish theologian who joined an Amish congregation in Allen County (IN), from which the founding members of Barry’s home congregation emerged.

Review 2

Jennifer Anderson

Ind. scholar / Conservative Mennonite

Barry Grant, in *Awake, O Church!*, illustrates why mission projects and organizations should be called humanitarian efforts (at best) and not missions. Grant, at the time of publication, worked for the largest plain mission organization, Christian Aid Ministries (CAM), and as such, presents many first-person accounts. From his experiences in Haiti, he emphasizes a need for more teaching of the Gospel, as humanitarian (economic and material) efforts have been counterproductive.

Awake has three areas of focus. The first focus of *Awake* describes the problematic situations caused by current mission programs, especially noting situations in Haiti, where plain Anabaptists have numerous mission organizations. The second focus attempts to describe why North American

¹ Personal communication with author.

plain churches lack interest in missions. The last portion (final chapter) suggests possible solutions to the problem.

Grant's book is very approachable. His first person accounts suggests his argument is based heavily on personal experience. His writing style suggests he is passionate about his topic. Grant's book debuted in good timing, as plain international missions (mainly CAM) have gained increasing international attention.² The book opens discussion on current international missions and needs for reevaluation and reform.

Awake, O Church makes a strong argument, and I share his criticism of North American plain people's more recent financial-material preoccupation. I believe, however, that the problematic mission scenarios he describes hold some irony when set against the context of his own mission organization's material and economic teachings. Namely, Grant's approach to wealth at times mirrors teaching from Christian Aid books by Gary Miller (e.g, p. 104), whose teaching about wealth management helps sustain North American plain people's preoccupation with financial-material theology.³ Material emphases embedded in mission programs abroad are the consequence of these same emphases at home. Hence, he will be unable to create effective solutions to the material problems he identifies so long as he keeps pulling water from the wells that create these problems.

Along these lines, Grant's last chapter is a disappointment. He seems to back pedal from his bold statements challenging how North American plain people view missions, as if needing to provide some silver bullet answer to a complex problem. It is confusing that he suggests CAM's SALT programs (micro-finance loans and financial accountability groups), especially with the increasing research demonstrating tragic results due to superimposing a western economic way of think-

ing on non-western cultures. The use of "proper balance" is also confusing (p. 171), suggesting a noncommittal answer and a surreal Eastern philosophy. In my opinion, the book would be stronger without the last chapter.

I also believe that Grant frames two supposed failures of the North American churches unfairly. First, Grant laments quibbles and hypocrisy over dress and other standards (pp. 112, 119), yet he doesn't catch that demands for dress changes are signals of broader change in thought and philosophy—often toward assimilating Western material culture. While adherents are pressing toward a materialistic lifestyle, they are not *fussing* over church practices such as dress—as Grant suggests—but how to philosophically *deconstruct* them to align more closely with cultural Western materialism.

Second, predominant mission narratives among plain people set up readers for dramatic narratives of gunpoint and narrow escape (Anderson and Anderson 2014). Grant falls prey to this same problematic narrative, suggesting persecution happens abroad because of the energy of missions abroad and lackluster among Christians in North America (pp. 135-41). In North America, our Anabaptist church divisions are viewed as evidence of antagonism toward true Christianity. Yet, these divisions carry their own brand of "persecution from within," more characteristic of the Old Testament prophets or the religious readers of Jesus' time than persecution of Bible-times Jews by pagan Assyrians or Romans. While people are not burned at the stake, socially and economically powerful opinion leaders spread rumors and destroy reputations of people who oppose them, chase church members out of churches and settlements, and sabotage people's livelihoods and businesses.

Grant's mission organization, CAM, is a development agency that is also interested in "developing" plain populations to more western ways of thinking, believing, and living. CAM literature and presentations have suggested that stricter Anabaptist groups represent opportunities for evangelizing, yet they also use them to raise funds and for volunteer labor in a day when their own adherents—Beachy Amish-Mennonites and Conservative Mennonites—are largely disinterested in CAM, especially among younger generations. Whether abroad or among plain

² Custody case and international kidnapping to Nicaragua (2011), measles epidemic brought back from the Philippines by Ohio staff (2014), sexual abuse by CAM staff member of Haitian boys (2019), and hostage crisis of CAM staff by Haitian gangs/activists (2021).

³ TGS books (an arm of CAM) teach plain people about perceived needs around the word. Gary Miller books teach wealth management and missions. CAM storybooks also cast foreign populations as needy, pathetic, and sometimes racially inappropriate depictions, thus generating sympathies and funds.

churches, those resisting Western socio-economic development and political interference are in the crosshairs. While dramatic martyrdom may not be well-known in North America, churches and individuals of today are struggling with antagonistic persecution by other plain churches and organizations.

I would recommend *Awake, O Church* for anyone who is interested in the presence of plain churches in global affairs. With the guidance in this book, further studies could be done on the plain perceptions of foreign populations, mission and financial books, the historical participation of plain people in world events, and the post WWII "mission era." Among the plain people, a reflection on the mid-20th century mission movement's enduring influence on the churches and the accompanying theological shifts may be interesting. Perhaps plain people have found themselves in noncombatant status within the war of westernization against the rest of the globe? Grant's book, *Awake, O Church*, is a good start to answering some of these questions.

Jennifer Anderson is an independent researcher and co-author of the book Amish-Mennonites across the Globe which joins Grant in offering a critical appraisal of plain people's foreign missions.

References

Anderson, Jennifer, and Cory Anderson. 2014. "Conservative Mennonite Storybooks and the Construction of Evangelical Separatism." *Journal of Amish and Plain Anabaptist Studies* 2(2):245-77.

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