

God's People and the Seduction of Empire

By Graham Turner

Sacristy Press, 2016, paperback, 218 pp, £9.99 ISBN-13: 978-19105190043

This book is a compelling read with useful material for group work. With the world experiencing change and upheavals on an unprecedented scale, it is a timely call to attention for Christians both lay and professional, as well as those working in commerce and industry. Instead of seeing the decline of church congregations in the developed world as the death throes of Christendom, Turner sees this as just one of the many casualties of empire-building in a social climate where individual identity, personal ambition and self-serving concentration of power hold sway with an ever widening gap between the haves and have-nots. "Empires come in many shapes, sizes, guises and styles. Our contemporary empires are sometimes more difficult to detect than the imperial nation states of the past. Yet today's empires influence and control so many aspects of our lives without us realising, unless we stop to think about it. While not every nation, corporation or organisational structure acts like an empire, most tend to. It is as if groups of people with any degree of power have a default setting they cannot help but move towards. This in time becomes a major flaw, if we allow it.... It does not have to be this way, but sadly we are seduced into following the way of the big, the better, the impressive, the successful and the powerful. It is a hard temptation to resist" (p.33).

In contrast he selects the biblical concepts of the commandments (Sinai), diversity (Babel), respite from work (Sabbath) and a chance to recover (Jubilee) as being God's way for humankind. He outlines the counter-intuitive values of God's kingdom described by Jesus, where love is power, loss is gain, the suffering can see themselves as blessed, outcasts become insiders and failure can be the springboard to new life. In particular he sees the liminal state where all seems lost as the place where true prophecy will arise. This is sure hope, no

matter how confusing and threatening the times may be.

Making his points about the ten commandments received in Sinai, God's new way after oppressive exploitation in Egypt, Turner takes the case of the rich young man in Mark's Gospel. He points out how Jesus omits the early

commandments that would enable the rich man to earn salvation by pious observance. Jesus simply lists those applying to neighbour: murder, stealing, adultery, false evidence, and then, 'defrauding' (as in Leviticus 19:13) instead of coveting, implying that riches accumulate from defrauding others. In Jesus' answer to go sell everything, redistribute wealth and set the poor free, the system that gave the rich man his privilege is exposed. Today it seems that hardly a week goes by without yet another case of corporate or individual sharp practice being exposed.

Turner sees in the story of the Tower of Babel a fortress mentality of sticking together for safety in numbers, rejecting both diversity and trust in God. A monumental,

'collective ego' is erected on the backs of the poor as with brick-making slavery in Egypt. This picture of empire-building by concentrating power and wealth in one place opposes God's purposes of outreach and diversity. The industrial exploitation of workers making bricks in India and textiles in Bangladesh are cited as examples. But similar woes such as the quest to build the tallest skyscraper and the most powerful weapons are aided and abetted by designers, industrialists and financiers.

Busyness is seen as a disease of empire, where our lives are crammed with an extent of activity that has become a mark of importance and significance, even a virtue. This 'fast' approach has a tendency to make people controlling, hurried, superficial and impatient – with deteriorating diet and health so often the outcome – at the expense of colleagues, family and themselves. "We

