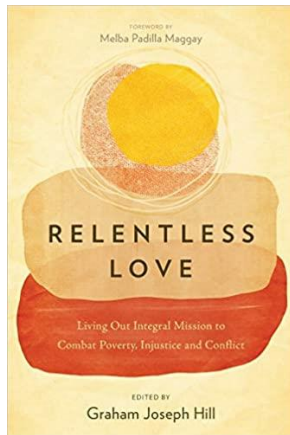


BOOK REVIEW

Relentless Love: Living Out Integral Mission to Combat Poverty, Injustice and Conflict

By Graham Joseph Hill, Ed.

Reviewed by Alfred Sebahene



Carlisle, Cumbria, UK. Langham Global Library:
\$27.44

My four months' journey of reading *Relentless Love* has refreshed and challenged me to look back into and reflect on my thirty years of ministry in the Church of God in Africa as both a pastor and an academic. Yes, some of the contributors' biblical teachings in the book have challenged me to understand who I am and what my responsibility is as a child of God in Tanzania and a world that is not mine. The main theme of the book is the "resilience" of communities and nations in their efforts to comply with the subtitle of the book, *Living Out Integral Mission to Combat Poverty, Injustice and Conflict*. The book is a collation of the sessions and papers shared at the triennial Micah Global consultation held in the Philippines in 2019. The many contributors, motivated by and rooted in their variety of Christian traditions and experiences, combine to provide readers with a comprehensive and compelling real-world study of the ideas and practices of "resilience" as it relates to integral mission.

This timely and significant word, which in simple language means the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties, is well-reflected in the context of "integral mission." In my view, nothing more important has been highlighted in the entire book than writers, knowingly

or unknowingly, being guided by the gospel truth about *Missio Dei* – what God does in the world to make "a new heaven and a new earth" (xvii). Among the many issues explored are worship, compassion, gender, urban poverty and development, North-South relations, partnership, the theology of peace and justice, local church ministry, corruption, and much more. And always the discussion comes back to resilience in joining with God in the *Missio Dei*.

There are over fifty contributors to the thirty-two chapters of the book, and every one, in whatever approach, interest, focus, knowledge, expertise in the field, and writing, opens the door for the Church, theological students, pastors, and laymen and women to ask the question why so many churches have not been living out integral mission and have therefore become less effective in addressing or combatting poverty, injustice, and conflict. We need also to evaluate the performance of governmental actors, for the Church's witness should not be undermined in the public arena. Still, let the biblical metaphor of "the speck in the government's eye" being emphasized at the cost of "the plank in the churches' eye," not be the case for Christians.

The government reference is not only important, but of special interest to me, because of my public theological inclination and passion to see how a reflective Christian may go about doing theology in a way that contributes to public issues affecting society.

Whether there was an agreement among contributors or they were asked to do so, or it is by mere coincidence, on reading the book, I noted right from the endorsers, to the words of the foreword, preface and to the entire Parts I-V of the book, that the word "call" has a strong foot in the book. Interestingly, the contributors' tone on the word "call" is, in my view, deliberately conversational and also homiletic in parts, covering the themes of the Church, poverty, injustice, and conflict.

Having noted this unique appearance of the book, I took interest in the style and approach of the leaning and emphasis on "call." Their interpretation is well-located and significantly broad. I will give a few

examples. Most contributors emphasize the whole Church and each single believer as being called and sent; others, in the same spirit, emphasize the word “call” in a variety of ways. For example, *called... for a renewal of faith and energy; called out to take responsibility; to influence governments and speak to power; to love and repentance in all areas of life; to serve individuals, people groups, and whole cultures, to serve Jesus and his world; to declare the whole gospel to the whole world, in word, sign, and deed, and to keep together*, to mention a few. This special trajectory on the word “call” cannot be ignored for it brings weight to the book.

One small theological/cultural/geographical issue I find with the book arises from my African understanding of the sense of community as well as my understanding of an aspect of the doctrine of the Church. The Church can and should impact every aspect of God’s world regardless of what is happening to her and where God placed it.

My concern is that the entire book provides a picture of unbalanced readership location for the book. As I read it, it is as if *Relentless Love* is a good piece of work that is only or relatively more applicable for Africa, Latin America, Caribbean, and Asia. In fact, some aspects of the book stand out only and immediately for readers from these geographical locations. I know some of the authors in the book are from the Global South, but most seem to be from the Global North. This is not a problem, but for a well-adjusted focus and in the future, we shall need more commentary from leaders in the Global South. A book like this needs more authors from the Global South whose discussion on issues of combatting poverty, injustice, and conflict is global and not for a particular region. This will avoid the common way of viewing the globe. I would rather emphasize that this book, which is fairly well-painted by its biblical truth and, in many ways, culturally applicable, should be and is intended for a wider readership. In fact, I see the book as a wake-up call for the global Church, where evangelical reflections on mission by Church leaders are also much needed.

So, I would wish to remind all who read this volume to remember that power to bring transformation should always be drawn from individual believers in the global Church being in Christ and his good news, especially in relation to integral mission which has to flow from believers being in Christ (xxvii). In fact, the book makes it clear that the power to bring transformation is drawn from our being in Christ and his good news, which we are called to proclaim and demonstrate (xxviii) regardless of where we live and/or despite the different levels of poverty, injustice, and conflict we experience.

Likewise, all church communities, regardless of boundaries, should continue to reflect upon their engagement *with* the world. Let us not lose sight that the biblical-theological bases that frame the Church’s mission hinge on building and nurturing the body of Christ. And all churches have enormous God-given potential for empowering individuals and communities with the knowledge, attitudes, skills, and strategies they need to address poverty, injustice, and conflict.

That said, I agree with much of the current research, testimonies, and facts about the global shift of the center of gravity in the Christian world, and that it keeps shifting away from Europe and North America, and toward Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Oceania, where a larger percentage of all Christians now live. This brings me to another point that needs brief mention, which is that the book is written exclusively in English with authors forming an international team. This book needs to be written in and/or translated into many languages.

Beyond such minor concerns, I find the book biblically and theologically sound. I know not everyone will agree with every word in this book. Yet it is my hope that it will enjoy a wide readership and help many to appreciate the rich knowledge in it that suggests that when local churches are equipped and enabled to understand and fulfill their God-given mandate to bring whole life transformation to their communities, the result is flourishing and resilient communities. I pray that, through this book, the Church will be guided through the process of learning and change, leading to practical church-based actions to act by living out integral mission and thus to combat poverty, injustice, and conflict.

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