

John C. Nugent. *Endangered Gospel: How Fixing the World is Killing the Church*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2016.

In his latest work, John C. Nugent offers a proposal for how Christians should understand the church's relationship to the world. In contrast to popular paradigms which view the mission of the church to be that of "making this world a better place," he asserts that the church's role is primarily "to be the better place that God has already made and that the wider world will not be until Christ returns" (20). For Nugent, this approach, which he labels the "Kingdom-centered" model, is marked by prioritization of the Christian community, rather than the world, in every aspect of a Christian's life. To defend this argument, he provides a survey of the biblical narrative, calling attention to the unique social position to which God calls his people, one whose primary mission in the world is that of "forming communities that embrace, display, and proclaim God's kingdom, and scattering them throughout the world as witnesses to God's accomplished work in Christ" (171).

*Endangered Gospel* is dependent on an inaugurated eschatology to undergird its thesis. For Nugent, the Kingdom is here and now among God's people, the church, but nevertheless awaits its maturation in the age to come. The church's mission, therefore, is to be a witness and a foretaste of God's reign, testifying to Christ's victory at the cross while it awaits the passing away of the present order and the renewal of God's creation. While God's reign is understood to transcend the boundaries of the church, the author nevertheless argues that obedience to Christ's specific directives to his people should result in the church recognizing that it has a special role to play in the world: that of providing a unique and explicit witness to the Kingdom of Jesus Christ in both word and deed, with particular attention to maintaining its own common life and integrity.

Thus, Nugent argues, the church's operational strategy for engaging the world should be one that is "*vocal* in proclaiming the gospel of God's kingdom, and *visible* in living it out as a community" (167). For the author, such an approach untangles Christians from the distractions of partisan politics and culture wars, and liberates them to focus on embodying God's Kingdom in the life of the church. He outlines the practical implications of

this principally ecclesial view of Christian social engagement in the third part of the book, where he describes what this vision of the church as “the better place that God has already made” (20) means for discipleship, friendship, political witness, fellowship, family life, vocation, and mission.

Nugent can be simultaneously excessive and vague in making his point. Prioritizing the local church, he naturally wants Christians to raise their expectations of church membership. Unfortunately, in doing so he can be graceless and perfectionistic. For him, “Attending one or two weekly meetings, giving a set portion of your income, and finding a few concrete ways to serve the body will not do” (124). This critical admonishment demonstrates lack of pastoral tact at best and legalistic idealism at worst, leaving a reader asking what level of commitment would satisfy the author’s demands. Daily prayer? Common-pot income sharing? Refusal of insurance in favor of church-based support? Unfortunately, Nugent never provides an answer. While his calls for Christians to “commit to a local body” and “join a revolutionary people movement” (127) are valid, he fails to sympathize with the everyday struggle of the average North American Christian trying to order her life towards God’s Kingdom and righteousness while being relentlessly subjected to the culture’s counter-narrative. Nugent instead categorizes her as a lesser member, one who can be identified among the false disciples of Matthew 7 to whom Jesus says, “Away from me, you evildoers!” (127). Readers not already convinced by the author’s vision of the church are likely to be ostracized by such moral elitism.

If one can look past its penchant for perfectionism, *Endangered Gospel* nevertheless succeeds in offering a lay-accessible vision of the church in Anabaptist perspective. Small groups and individual congregants of churches seeking an alternative way to engage with the world will be enriched by its scholarly yet approachable exploration of ecclesiological themes in scripture. Unfortunately, the book’s relatively steep price and its publication on an academic imprint may limit its viability for congregational use.

*Timothy Colegrove*, Church Planter, Conservative Mennonite Conference, Jamaica Plain, Boston, Massachusetts