What should I study to be useful in international development? How do I get over the “experience gap”? Which development theory is correct? These are some of the very questions I asked as I began exploring Christian ministry and international development, and some of the very same questions I get today from students ten years later. With such diversity regarding specialty areas, regarding educational backgrounds, regarding the myriad of cultures, and regarding the various development theories, where is a student supposed to begin? Often the questions, left unanswered become discouraging and many students never realize their calling to serve in international development.

Roland Hoksbergen writes *Serving God Globally: Finding Your Place in International Development* (Baker Academic, 2012) to address some of these basic questions students have when seeking to enter an international development career. The questions are pervasive on Christian college campuses and Hoksbergen’s book seeks to provide guidance and motivation for these students. Hoksbergen is a professor of economics and international development at Calvin College, and has worked in various Christian international development positions. From his experience, he not only runs Calvin’s International Development Studies program, but guides students into the messy realm of discerning one’s place within international development. His book encourages students and provides avenues of direction for discernment. It affirms students, while their calling is fresh and the “iron is hot,” in their pursuit of an international development career.

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The book is a simple read with a clear organizational structure. Hoksbergen provides a brief introduction into international development, including basic synopsis of development theories, but the majority of the work is bent on helping students discern their place. His first chapter highlights four basic secular views on development. There are very brief generalizations. Modernization is the theory based on promoting productive individual freedom, where wealth creation is the key to forward movement. Dependency Theory follows Marxist development theory; particularly removing dependency is to liberate people “for what they might become.” (18) Hoksbergen describes Postdevelopment as the postmodern idea that “societies function best when they develop on their own terms.” (23) This theoretical base holds that development programs are destructive rather than helpful. Finally, he summarizes the Capabilities Approach which focuses on “allowing people to choose for themselves what kind of life they would like to live.” (31)

The four theories provided above contrast Hoksbergen’s idea of a Christian international development theory, which he understands as transformative, and of course grounded in Christ. The author does not criticize the “secular” theories he describes in the previous chapter, but rather acknowledges their values and critiques their shortcomings. Hoksbergen does also recognize differing views within Christian international development traditions. He briefly highlights insights from Catholic Social Teaching, the Reformed tradition, Mennonite development history, and the more general evangelical development ethos.

One of the most basic questions a student asks is where he or she might fit into the international development picture. Where Hoksbergen is quite astute is his view of development as large and holistic. An individual will enter international development as a very small piece of the entire puzzle, but that the entire puzzle is necessary. Development workers in every field thus need to partner in the practices of their work with workers in other fields. In this way, Hoksbergen describes the amplitude of the international development arena, but also encourages students that they don’t have to have all things figured out in order to enter, but can enter through small contributions, partnering to accomplish a grand whole.

Hoksbergen explains the assortment of careers found in international development. The arena is “deep and wide” and there are many avenues for service. This ocean of possibility is often at the crux of students’ exasperation. The author does not downplay education and experience, but reminds the student that God will utilize his or her calling in international development based not on a projected path of expertise, but upon the accumulation of education, experience, and personality that the student already has and will encounter. This does not mean that a student can assume to enter into an international development career willy nilly, naïve, or arrogant, but rather that the formation of the student must first be in their relationship with God. The student ought to choose a major in school, pursue some fields of study, and seek out experiences, but let the time be of exploration, trying out a variety of fields in development to see where they may or may not fit. Hoksbergen does not necessarily answer the “experience gap” or “generalization versus specialization” questions, but he provides encouragement to not be so anxious with these questions.

The book alludes to the importance of relationships and networks to enter into an international development career. Unfortunately, it does not stress this point enough and how to develop and maintain such a network. Volunteer experiences are good for gaining some much-needed headway into a variety of fields; however a lack of maintaining this network leaves for “dead” contacts that do not serve so well in the future. Hoksbergen could have provided more direction in this area, and explained that these networks can and will carry on throughout the duration of one’s career, often helping not just to gain a future job, but to solve issues where a person’s expertise might be lacking.

Hoksbergen’s book is a good introduction and guide for the student beginning their education
and exploration into an international development career. It is a great resource for a mentor to recommend to a student wrestling with their place in international development and the myriad of questions that circle the exploration of their calling. Its simplicity is helpful in calming anxiety. While not sufficient in exploring the depth of such questions, readers of Hoksbergen's book will finish the book encouraged. The questions that I once asked (and sometimes still do) and the questions my students have today, after reading Hoksbergen's book, will prove less paralyzing and more mobilizing.