IS THE COMMISSION REALLY THAT GREAT?

Posted on February 5, 2020 by Eddie

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Category: Observations

The modern missionary movement is focussed on the passage at the end of Matthew's Gospel which is often referred to as the great commission. The rationale for mission is found in the command to go into all the world and make disciples and its endpoint is often described as "fulfilling the great commission". However, if this saying of Jesus is as important to world mission as we say it is, how come Paul (who is often described as the greatest missionary) never used it to justify his missionary work? In fact, Paul tends to defend his work entirely from the Old Testament as Thomas Shirrmacher notes in his excellent Biblical Foundations for 21st Century World Mission.

> *The letter to the Romans provides an obvious example. In this letter, PaulÂ continuously quotes from the Old Testament (e.g., Habakkuk 2:4) to justi-fy mission. In Romans 15:14, he seamlessly segues from Old TestamentÂ quotations about the peoples of the world and goes directly to his practi-cal mission plans, repeating much of what he had already said in the in-troduction. If one contrasts the introduction (Romans 1:1â€“15) with theÂ concluding section of Romans (15:14â€“16:27), one recognizes mission asÂ the current occasion for the letter and in the process finds the topic ofÂ the letter in the first and lastÂ verses (Romans 1:1â€“6; 16:25â€“27). â€œObedienceÂ to the faithâ€ is to be proclaimed and planted among allÂ peoples, as the OldÂ Testament had stated in advance (compare, for example, Romans 15:21Â with Isaiah 52:15 and the broader context of Isaiah 52:5â€“15, from whichÂ Paul often quotes in Romans).Â*
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He goes on to point out that when Jesus' command is mentioned it is invariably linked to Old Testament precedent (cf Acts 10:42-43).

I realise that the argument can be made that early in the church's life they did not have access to written Gospels, but they still clearly had an oral tradition of Jesus' words to fall back on. It's also true that to some extent, Paul was writing to convince Jews, so it is natural that he would use the OT. However, even with these *caveats* in place, the case still remains that Paul and the other NT writers found their justification for mission across a broader range of Scriptures than many people do today. We should follow his example.

I'd like to make a few observations based on this thought:

Firstly, I think that this is an illustration of Bosch's view that the paradigm for mission has changed

over the life of the church and that these paradigms and, as David Smith has pointed out, find different scriptural justification. Since William Carey, the dominating evangelical approach to mission has been rooted in the great commission without attention to the broader scriptural context and this has led to a rather one-dimensional view of mission which aligns with the enlightenment separation of sacred and secular. We struggle to reconcile proclamation and good works in a holistic way because of the way that our world-view and our scriptural basis for mission work together.

Secondly, we need to develop a missiology which is much more broadly based in Scripture than has generally been the case up till now. This is particularly the case in a situation where the world has changed dramatically and mission is now a poly-centric reality. In a situation where the more numerous and motivated churches of Africa, Asia and Latin America are taking a lead in mission alongside the more traditional but economically and politically powerful churches of the European diaspora, we need to reflect deeply together about what mission looks like with such a disparate church. Perhaps, some sustained reflection on the implications of the dividing wall between nations being broken down in Ephesians might provide fruitful ground for helping us find a way forward. I fear that if we don't engage in this sort of reflection, then we are likely to see two unhealthy tendencies develop alongside each other. In the first, the West will become less relevant as their approach to mission does not work in a new context. The second is that Western agencies and churches will continue to pour money into majority world missions, effectively paying other people to do mission our way rather than theirs.

That being said, many Western agencies are reflecting on how to reposition themselves in the emerging mission context. However, I'm not always confident that these reflections are going deep enough. Some agencies are functioning at the management level, concentrating on changes they need to make in order to stay viable, while others are looking at how to integrate Christians from around the world into their mission without considering whether their mission itself needs to adapt. We need profound reflection on Scripture, mission practice and the current context and this needs to done together with brothers and sisters from across the globe.

Please let me insist in closing that I am not suggesting that the great commission is not important (the provocative title, notwithstanding). However, as with any Scripture, it must be read and applied in the context of the whole Bible. Yes, we must take Matthew 28 seriously, but we also need to look at the rest of the Bible too.