BOOKS I HAVE READ: TRANSCENDING THE MODERN MISSION TRADITION

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Category: Observations

I have no hesitation in saying that the most important book on mission written in the last few years is Transcending Mission by Michael Stroope. It is a book that I believe that anyone with an interest in evangelical mission and especially those with a leadership or governance responsibility must read. It is provocative, iconoclastic and absolutely essential reading.

However, it is also a fairly hefty book and not particularly cheap, so it hasn't had the readership that it deserves. This is where the wonderful people at Regnum Press step in. They have recently published Transcending the Modern Mission Tradition, which is essentially an abridgement of the original book. It is a relatively small paperback and will set you back a fiver for the electronic book and a bit more for the paperback. The text is quite dense and it isn't easy reading, but it won't take you more than a few hours.

I need to make a few remarks at this point. The first is that I've had the pleasure of meeting Michael Stroope on a number of occasions. He is a thoughtful, gracious, godly man with a long career in mission work and education. He knows and cares about the movement that he covers in this book. He is not a brash, disaffected iconoclast.

The second thing is that a lot of people will not be happy with what this book says - but they should still read it. Let me be blunt, if you are involved in mission leadership at any level and you do not grapple with the issues that this book (and its predecessor) raise, then you are not doing your job. You may decide that you don't agree with what Stroope but you must wrestle with the issues. Now that the abridged version of this book has been published, then there can be no excuse for mission boards and leadership teams ignoring this book.

The thesis of the book is fairly simple. The term "mission" as it is used in the church today has modern origins. When we read the term back into history and into the Bible we impose modern connotations onto historical characters and (more significantly) onto the biblical text.

> *Because Paul is assumed to be a missionary, those who accompanied him are seen as missionaries and part of his missionary team. But to characterize Paul as having a â€œmissionary organization,â€ presents an erroneous picture of the nature and scope of his work and those who labored with him.*

There are two implications of this. The first is that our modern language of mission means that we

fail to discern what the original text or church history tells us. The second is that rather than imposing our language and modern concepts on the Bible, we should rather allow the Bible (and church tradition) to shape our language and concepts.

I have to admit that I find Stroope's call to shift away from the language of mission to be very difficult. I sympathise with his position, but the mission language is so embedded in the life of the church, that I'm not sure that a change is possible. However, the church and mission are changing; we cannot doubt that. The concepts and structures that undergirded mission in the 19th and 20th centuries are not those of the future. The problem is, that for many in the west, the language and concepts that we have grown up with, prevent us from really getting to grips with what we are called to do in this changing world.

> *My concern is not just to dismiss mission language or to harm the churchâ€™s witness and service to the world. Nor do I believe it is possible or even wise to abandon mission language altogether. Rather, the aim is to identify the source and severity of the mission problem and offer language that I feel more appropriately expresses the churchâ€™s being and activity for the time in which we live.*

Even though this is a short book, there is a lot more depth than I have managed to convey in this short post. A few quotes will illustrate some of the issues that the book raises.

> *When â€œmissionâ€ is exalted to the status of a biblical word as a means for justifying contemporary paradigms and programs, it diminishes the place of more theologically rich and biblical concepts, such as covenant, reconciliation, witness, and love. The great themes of Scripture become lost or obscure when â€œmissionâ€ and â€œmissionaryâ€ control the text. Scripture becomes a means to justify mission.*

> *The more demanding task today calls for us to do more than justify, revise, promote, and bolster mission. Rather, the pioneering task is to acknowledge the habits of language and thought that developed around â€œmissionâ€ beginning in the sixteenth century and to trial new expressions for the churchâ€™s encounter with the world.*

Missio Dei now is the latest branding for a variety of causes and practices, the headliner for youth events and national women conferences, and a way of validating particular strategies. The stamp of missio Dei becomes certainty and proof of divine approval, a wide gate through which almost any concern can pass whether ecclesiology, ecology, ecumenics, liberation or justice. Missio Dei is everywhere and means everything.

And yet, mission history, all too often, creates the mistaken illusion that Christianity was established exclusively by outside agents and neglects the role of the cultural insider, often countering or even negating this wider, more diverse story.

While Western mission is part of the story, it not the history of the churches in Africa.

The level of the Reformersâ€™ proselytizing activity might be open to debate, but what is certain is that mission language was absent among Protestants during the early years of the Reformation. â€œMissionâ€ and â€œmissionaryâ€ were not adopted until the early eighteenth century and did not become established until the nineteenth century.

As modernity declines so will mission. Introduced at the outset of the modern era, mission grew alongside modernity and embodied its ideas and sensibilities. Mission and modernity grew up together as siblings in the same household and thus learned from each other and mimicked the language and ways of the other. Each has family resemblance and traits of the other, because they share the same Enlightenment birthright. Mission is inhibiting its own progress with memories and ideas that have their origin not simply in the Bible, but, more specifically, in Western dreams of control and knowledge.

Rather than preaching mission, advocating for mission, mobilizing for mission, or revising mission, the biblical injunction is to proclaim, promote, and live the kingdom of God.

Mission becomes a perversion of pilgrimage when missionaries are viewed as the only true

> *pilgrims while everyone else observes their journey and vicariously participates.*