WHAT MISSION ISN'T

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A discussion about what mission is not, that comes to conclusions that many will find unsatisfactory.
Category: Observations

A couple of days ago, I wrote a short definition of mission that I plan to use in some posts in the future. For the most part, reaction has been positive. However, one friend on Twitter said that it would be helpful if I would say what mission is not because non-mission activities can distract resources and effort from mission itself.

I'm going to give it a go, but this is actually a more difficult concept than it might initially appear. The first thing to note is that mission in its modern sense is not strictly a Biblical concept. It is a term which has been adopted to describe certain things which are found in the Bible, but which the Bible itself does not necessarily lump all together. Michael Stroope has discussed this in some detail (see this interview and the links).

Because mission is not defined in the Bible, there is significant disagreement over what actually constitutes mission (and therefore what mission is not). Many people argue that mission is defined in the so-called great commission passage at the end of Matthew's Gospel and that anything that does not contribute to "making disciples" cannot be called mission. Without going into detail, I would argue that we should be looking at the whole of Scripture for our description of mission and not simply taking a few verses out of context and building a whole edifice on that.

I have constantly argued that we should not define mission in terms of the things that we do. In other words, we can't simply say that some things are mission while other things are not. I define mission in terms of God's purposes and activities, not in terms of our actions.

So, with that in place, let's try to think about what mission is not. In order to do this, I want to look back at the definition that I posted a couple of days ago.

Mission is, glorifying God through our intentional participation in his purpose to reconcile all things to himself by making peace through Christâ€™s blood shed on the cross.

I'd like to pick up on three elements of this:

- Mission is about glorifying God.
- Mission involves reconciliation.
- Mission revolves around the cross.

Let me take reconciliation, first as the other two work together. Reconciliation is at the heart of God's work through the Bible and it lies at the heart of mission (Jesus prayer in Jn 17 demonstrates this most clearly). Work which actively seeks to set people against each other (particularly if it involves creating factions or competing groups in the church) cannot be called mission. Many people would see church planting as an axiomatic form of mission activity. However, if a church is planted in a way that divides and creates a lack of unity between committed Christians, I would struggle to think of it as mission.

Mission is about glorifying God and it revolves around the cross. If you want more on this, John 2021 shows that Jesus sends us out into the world in the way that the Father sent him: in humility and self-sacrifice. Activities that are about us and about our benefit or our good reputation are not mission. If a mission agency talks more about themselves and what people get out of working with them, then I would struggle to call what they do mission. A few months ago, I examined the way in which short-term mission trips are advertised in the UK and found that for the most part, agencies do well, but there is no ground for complacency (you can find my report here, but you have to pay for it). In my thinking, mission is more defined by our attitudes than by our specific activity. Social action done for the right reasons in the right way can most definitely be mission, while evangelism and church planting done for the wrong reasons and in the wrong way is not mission.

This isn't much help to anyone who wants a clear checklist of what does and what does not constitute mission. I'm sorry about that. In the end, prayerful discernment is required when looking at any activity. In some ways, it might be easier if we just dropped the term "mission" altogether. If churches asked whether they should be doing a particular action in a particular way with specific partners, it might be a more fruitful discussion than whether something was or was not mission.