WHAT IS CHRISTIAN MISSION?

Posted on October 5, 2005 by Eddie

Category: Mission

I've been mulling over the question of the nature of Christian mission for a while now. I've not come up with anything new - others have looked at this in more depth and with more knowledge than me. However, I am repeatedly struck by the way that many evangelicals stick to using the *Great Commission* (Matthew 28:18-20) as their defining statement of what mission is about. The great thing about this passage is that it underlines the need to make and baptise disciples from all nations. That is to say that it really emphasises the geographical spread of mission. What it doesn't do, and what Jesus does elsewhere, is give a full picture of the types of work that God is interested in. In Luke 4:18-19 when Jesus started his ministry in Nazareth he said;

> *The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.*

In other words, his work was more than preaching and teaching, which of course we see illustrated amply in the Gospels. Yes, Jesus did set out to bring salvation to humankind, but he also improved the lot of the people around him. His teaching on the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of Heaven makes it clear that he has a concern for justice and righteousness in the here and now as well as for salvation for our souls.

Of course, you could read all of this into the command to 'make disciples' from Matthew 28, but it is very easy to take the *Great Commission* and just see mission in *spiritual* terms. I wonder whether, for the sake of clarity, missionaries wouldn't be better opting for another passage - one of the Kingdom parables, or the passage from Luke mentioned above as a basis for explaining and promoting their work.

One of the things that I really appreciate about working in Bible translation is that we do have a holistic ministry which seeks to make the Gospel relevant through the dissemination of the Bible, but also seeks to improve the lot of the people we work with through literacy and basic education.