MISSION: PRAGMATIC OR BIBLE BASED?

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Category: Mission

Thanks to Ben, I've just come across the 9 Marks magazine which has a mission focus in the current edition. One of the articles is by Andy Johnson and is called Pragmatism, Pragmatism Everywhere. This touches on an issue that is very dear to my heart; the dilema which sometimes faces missionaries of whether to base their work on what seems to work or what seems to be Biblical.

> *First, Iâ€™ve noticed the exceeding popularity of books on missions that seem to argue their method based primarily on their results rather than on biblical exegesis. With some hesitation, Iâ€™ll mention a couple of examples of this pragmatic approach to missions, starting with a book written by a person with whom Iâ€™m somewhat acquainted and who evidences a great love for Jesus and the lost: David Garrison, Church Planting Movements (WIGTake Resources, 2003) . Garrison uses the image of â€œreverse engineeringâ€ to describe with candor how he developed his CPM methods, not from Scripture, but by analyzing a movement that was producing the results he wanted. Or, for an example of this trend in a popular missionary journal see the April 2009 edition of the Evangelical Missionary Quarterly: John Tanner, â€œA Story of Phenomenal Success: indigenous mission training centers and Myanmarâ€ EMQ 45(2), 152-157.Both works are written by self-professed evangelicals, but both base their arguments mainly on results, rather than on the biblical faithfulness of their approach...*
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> *Also, Iâ€™ve noticed a trend for mission organizations to focus on numbers of â€œresponsesâ€ rather than the biblical faithfulness of their workers as their primary evaluative metric. Again, itâ€™s not that these organizations are wholly unconcerned about theological integrity. They likely have their workers sign a doctrinal statement, and they might be quick to address open heresy. But at the functional level, they seem to assume their workers are faithful and then actually test them by measurable, immediate, visible resultsâ€"â€œnumbers.â€ Â ...*

I think the author is raising a very important point here, but I also think he is being extremely simplistic in his approach, which is unfortunate. There are a couple of basic problems with the case he makes.

Firstly, I don't think the dichotomy that he creates between being biblical and pragmatic is quite as clear cut as he makes it. Just because people don't use biblical arguments to defend or describe what they are doing does not mean that they have not thought the issue through biblically. Equally, sticking 'the Bible says' into your strategy statement doesn't actually make it biblical. There are plenty of bad readings of the Bible out there. Ben (him again) quotes Goldingay on this question:

> *The use of scriptural terminology does not guarantee that oneâ€™s thinking is in accordance with scripture, as the Arians famously showed. Conversely, doctrinial thinking does not have*

> *to confine itself ot scriptural terms in order to be scripturalâ€"other wise there would be no orthodox doctrine of the â€œTrinity.â€*

The second and perhaps most important problem with the article is the same one that affects any piece of this sort; when the author says *biblical* what he seems to mean is *my reading of the Bible*. All too often what we see as unblibical is actually just contrary to our own understanding of the Bible. Â Yes, we have to be biblical in our approach, but this means that we will have an open, questioning approach as we seek to get a full understanding of Scripture, rather than a doctrinaire one that seems to have the Bible all sewn up in our comfort zones. Brian addresses this in a post on his blog today:

> *A missional approach to the Scriptures is acutely aware of the complexity of the interpretive process and the subtle danger of the readerâ€™s situatedness in reading the Bible. But instead of despairing, a missional approach advocates a two-fold response.*
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> *First, it is vital for readers to be aware of their blind spots and presuppositions. What are blind spots? These are the unstated assumptions about life, God, and the world that we as interpreters bring to the table. Here are some of the categories that can influence us: age, ethnicity, sex, socio-economic level, political persuasion, theology, geographic location. (read more)*

When we Westerners criticize mission work around the world, we need to realise that we are doing so from a reading of the Scriptures which is shaped by our culture and history.Â Our understanding of what is biblical needs to be open to critique from brothers and sisters from other backgrounds. I suspect that if the author had more cross-cultural experience, he would have realised that you can't be quite as cut and dried as he seems to want to be.

Overall, I thoroughly endorse much of what the article has to say. This extract is absolutely excellent.

> *We need more careful, biblical critiques and more books and articles extolling faithful methods deduced from the pages of Scripture. We need to be thinking about ways to evaluate our workersâ€™ performance more on their biblical faithfulness and much less on reported numbers of immediate, visible responses. We need to be more diligent in encouraging thoughtful, faithful workers even if fruit is slow in coming to their ministry. Ultimately, we need to openly reexamine our actual commitment to the authority and sufficiency of the word of God.*

But it is absolutely vital that these biblical critiques and books come from the whole spectrum of the Christian church and not just from the ivory towers of Western academics.