MISSION AND ANTHROPOLOGY

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There are a number of deeply held views and assumptions about cross-cultural mission which don't always stack up. This post reflects on some of these (again).

Over at Mission Misunderstood, Ernest Goodman has written a superb article entitled the anthropological approach to missions. Now would be a good time to read it, partly because it is an important piece of work, but also because this post won't make much sense if you don't.

There are three things that I'd like to highlight from this post; the need for a biblically informed missiology, the issue of people groups and the problem of eschatology. These are all issues that have been raised more than once here at Kouya Chronicle, though, perhaps not as ably as at Missions Misunderstood.

Biblical Missiology

In a sense this is the background to Goodman's whole article. As Goodman hints good deal of missiological thinking and practice is rooted in the social sciences, rather than in Scripture. Very often the key question asked in mission circles is whether something works or is effective, rather than whether or not it is biblical.

There is, of course, a place for scientific thinking in mission work, but it must be subordinated to biblical thinking and reflection. In one of his books, David Smith points out the interesting paradox that it is those Christian churches and organisations that make the most of their reliance on the Bible who are the most likely to turn to social sciences to inform their mission work.

It is striking that in the comments on Goodman's article, the only person who disagrees cites no serious Scriptural grounds for his disagreement. One of the underlying problems is that mission leaders tend to be practical souls and often do not have a thorough grounding in theology or biblical studies. Equally, theologians are often isolated from the burly-burly of cross-cultural mission. There is a desperate need for a new generation of missionary-theologians.

People Groups

In a sense, the next two points are illustrations of the first one. Goodman demonstrates that the concept of people groups, as used in much mission literature, doesn't quite fit with the observed situation around the world and, more importantly, does not fit the biblical record;

> *While ethnography is helpful to us in missions, it is not strictly biblical. Jesus never mentions the idea of unreached people groups; His emphasis was on those who believed and those who did not. In Acts 1:8, without any mention of ethnolinguistic groups, Jesus further commissions His disciples to be His â€œwitnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.â€ Paul seems to have only two missiological categories for people groups: Jews and Gentiles. This was the radical shift in the New Testament concerning the recipients of the gospel: Christ is the only salvation for people of*

> *any ethnicity. Otherwise, there is no evidence that any of the New Testament authors displayed any anthropological savvy in their missiology.*
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> *So what about all the mentions of â€œnationsâ€ (ethnos) in the scriptures? You only get â€œethnolinguistic people groupsâ€ if youâ€™re very selective. Itâ€™s true that the Great Commission sends us to make disciples of â€œall nations,â€ but that same term is used elsewhere to mean something other than ethnolinguistic people groups. In the Pentecost account in Acts 2, Luke writes that â€œNow there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation (ethne) under heaven.â€ If he actually meant that there were Jews and devout people from every people group, well then the â€œtaskâ€ of â€œreachingâ€ them was accomplished in the first century. If instead he means only that Jerusalem was quite diverse at the time, it presents a problem for this particular understanding of the word.*

Of course, there is a value in noting where the Gospel has not been preached, and Bible translators have a special need to be aware of groups who have no Scriptures available to them. However, we have to avoid a simplistic approach which treats people groups a binary items on a checklist. The biblical (and anthropological) picture is not quite so simple.

Eschatology

> *Thereâ€™s even a dangerous heresy that springs out of the people group thinking interpretation of Matthew 24:14. Some have come to assert that Christ will not return, indeed cannot come back until this task of reaching every unreached people group is completed. Some have even taken to using this as a motivation for missions- that Jesus is just waiting in the wings, unable to return until we finish the job. This, of course, contradicts verse 36 of that same passage, where Jesus says that no one- not even the Son of Man, knows when He will return.*

There are a number of reasons which lie behind this particular misreading of Matthew and, certainly, The issue of anthropology is one of them. The notion that Jesus, a first century Galilean, talking to other first century Galileans, was using terms in the same way as twentieth century anthropologists is stretching credulity a little too far. But once again this highlights the need for good biblical understanding to undergird our missionary strategy.

This particular issue can engender a short term approach to mission thinking that concentrates on listing which people groups are reached (or have some translated Scripture) rather than thinking about our long term call to make disciples (or translate the whole Bible.

However, the greatest danger of an anthropological approach to mission (as it is with other

managerial approaches is that it places humanity, and not God at the centre of things.

> *The greatest danger in the anthropological approach is that it has made missions a problem to be solved rather than our very identity in Christ. Francis Dubose, who coined the word missional, wrote that God is a sending God. We are a sent people. As Christopher Wright reminds us in his book, The Mission of God, the Father was sending long before He sent the Son. Itâ€™s His nature. And ours, as His people, is to be sent. Thereâ€™s no other way to be a follower of Jesus.*
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> *So mission will not end when the last of the people groups is reached. We are not sent because of the temporary need in the world (which is indeed great!) because God is a sending God and He is glorified in our obedience. We must recognize that mission is the very nature of God and the basis of our relationship to Him. Mission isnâ€™t a task to be finished, itâ€™s our identity in Christ.*

This is the first long blog post that I have written on my iPad. The process has beebread much les smooth than it would have been on my laptop and I apologise if this is reflected in the way tis has turned out.