HEARING THE GOSPEL ONCE OR TWICE?

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Category: Bible & Mission

No one has the right to hear the Gospel twice while there remains someone who has not heard it once. (Oswald J. Smith)

This is the second post in what may become a series on famous sayings about Christian mission (the first one is here). This quote by Smith is one that turns up in lots of missionary writing and at first glance it seems to make sense, but like many things that make sense at first glance, it is actually rather problematic.

On the positive side, this quote encourages us to reflect on the importance of taking the Gospel to places where there are, as yet, no Christians. This is something which is absolutely key to the work of Wycliffe Bible Translators and something which motivated St. Paul, too.

> *My ambition has always been to preach the Good News where the name of Christ has never been heard, rather than where a church has already been started by someone else. (Romans 15:20)*

That being said, this quote raises an awful lot of questions.

"No one has a right to hear the Gospel twice"; I'm not sure where the language of rights comes from - it certainly isn't in the Bible. Scripture talks about the responsibility of Christians to bear witness to Christ all around the world, but it is silent on the rights of people to hear the message. Surely, hearing the Gospel, once, twice or a hundred times is all about God's grace in reaching out to His creation, not about our rights to hear.

So, what about this notion that people should only hear the Gospel once while others have not heard?

The first thing to say is that this is not how Paul operated. Despite his desire to preach in new situations, he spent serious amounts of time in some cities, building up and encouraging the Church and on more than one occasion he went back to visit a city where he had previously planted a Church.

This phrase comes from the sort of thinking which I addressed at a number of points in my series on the Great Commission. It stems from the idea that mission is nothing more than announcing the Good News of Jesus and moving on, it ignores the Biblical injunction to make disciples (Matthew 28:19,20) and fails to take Jesus commands to love and care for people seriously. Are we only supposed to give thirsty people one drink? Or should we visit prisoners once and then move on? (Matthew 25:38-40) Of course we wouldn't limit these commands in this way; but there is nothing about the command to teach the Gospel that would allow us to limit that either.

Christian mission is about long-term engagement with people. It involves building relationships, serving people and telling them the Good News about Jesus. It takes time, often lots of time, for

people to move from not knowing Christ to becoming his disciples. They may need to hear the Gospel many times.

However, the main problem with this phrase, and the sort of missiology that it represents, is that it places us and our strategy in the lead position in mission, rather than having us follow the Spirit and joining in where he is at work.

Phrases like this one are powerful, all the more so because they contain a grain of truth, but they can shape our thinking in ways that are not helpful. Sadly, it can be a lot easier to use sayings like this to shape our mission strategy rather than being guided by the complex and sometimes confusing narrative of Scripture.

If you want to look at this quote in more detail, take a look at what Ernest Goodman has to say (and follow the comments), here is a taste of his thoughts:

> *I cannot accept a missiology that essentially puts us on â€œauto-pilotâ€ in terms of to whom we should go. The second we assume where and in whom God is going to work, we get ahead of Him and disqualify ourselves from full participation in what Heâ€™s doing. This missiology is essentially either/or; missions is either relating to those people that God leads us to, or it is targeting the next â€œlostestâ€ people group according to our statistics and research. It cannot be both, because the second assumes a monopoly on the first. How else can we explain so many of our workers feeling called to work among â€œreachedâ€ peoples?*
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> *God is at work redeeming humankind to Himself. I believe that missions is crossing cultural barriers to be part of that. Until we seriously rethink our missiology, we will continue to build our strategies on a broken foundation.*