WHITHER EVANGELICALISM?

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I wonder how history will remember the year 2011? Will it be for the Arab Spring, the ongoing financial crisis, or perhaps the leadership transition in North Korea? It could be that history will reveal the most important event this year was something that didn't even hit our news-screens at the time it happened, but which has huge consequences for the future. Perhaps our grandchildren will be able to tell us!

Looking back over the things that I've covered in this blog over the past year, there is one issue which may well prove to be more significant than most. Back in January, I covered the publication of a pamphlet called 21st Century-Christians by the Evangelical Alliance in the UK.

This survey is not important because it contains "groundbreaking research by the Evangelical Alliance and Christian Research". To be honest, there have been plenty of similar pieces of research done in the past. What is significant is, despite calling itself "a snapshot of the beliefs and habits of evangelical Christians in the UK"Â it makes no mention whatsoever of overseas mission. As I wrote at the time:

> *I can imagine a number of reasons why overseas mission is not mentioned; perhaps it will be the subject of a later report in the same series, or perhaps it did not cross the radar of the people drawing up the survey. However, it must be significant that the first release of some important statistics about Evangelicalism totally ignores what was, until recently, one of its defining characteristics. Whether it has been totally ignored, or simply moved down the agenda, it would seem that for the authors of this report, overseas mission is not at the heart of the Evangelical Church. This is a huge change and probably the most important thing revealed by the report.*

It could be that the survey may tell us more about the concerns of the people compiling the questions and the location of the survey than it does about the Evangelical Church as a whole. The majority of the questionnaires were handed out at large evangelical festivals, which, as Phil has shown, don't reflect a great interest in mission work (at least as far as their publicity goes).

Thankfully, when I visit Churches, I find that, by and large, they have a much greater interest in overseas and cross-cultural mission than you find reflected in the EA survey. Then again, it is the case that churches which invite me to speak do so because they have a prior interest in mission or Bible translation - that's why they invite me and not someone else.

In truth, the EA survey tells us nothing at all about how much the UK Church is interested in overseas and cross-cultural mission. However, the fact that a body like the EA could carry out a piece of work like this and not ask any questions about the subject is very significant.

At the end of the year, I reported on another, rather better, survey which was carried out by the Pew Foundation, entitled Global Christianity: A report on the size and distribution of the world's Christian

population. What this report clearly shows is that the British Church represents a shrinking proportion of the number of Christians around the world. This raises a number of questions about all of the activities and self-confidence which flows out of the EA survey.

The EA document closes with these words:

> *However, itâ€™s important that we donâ€™t just look at the picture. We need to prayerfully reflect on what it reveals. We need to have the conversations that it stimulates.*
>
> ***And then we need to take action.***

We certainly need to take action; but some of that action must be to redress the imbalances revealed in the survey or its methodology. Our missionary concern must involve more than getting bums on seats, giving money to aid programmes and going on short-term trips. If the British Church does not prayerfully and intentionally engage with what God is doing in the wider world, both to serve and to learn from the Global Church, then I believe that evangelicalism in the UK is in real danger.