MISSION AND THE BIBLE

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Category: Bible & Mission

People are forever making claims about doing mission in a biblical way. The problem is that the Bible offers us lots of different examples of how to do mission and some of them are not altogether positive. There is a case to be made that says that Jonah is the first cross-cultural missionary in the Bible, but I don't think many people wouldÂ recommendÂ his methods or his attitudes. In this post, I'm going to compare a couple of examples from the early Church to see what we can learn for our current context.

For the first thirty or more years of the Christian era, Jerusalem was the centre of the life of the church. It was there that Jesus had taught, died and risen again. The apostles were, for the most part, based there and it was to Jerusalem that the growing church looked for advice and guidance on issues of belief and practice. The Jerusalem church was the mother church, the mature church, the place to go for sound theology and good church practice. Away from Jerusalem in Asia Minor, North Africa and Europe the church was expanding rapidly and as it expanded, people started trying new things and breaking with the established traditions.

For example, in Acts 11:20 Christians in Antioch start to preach to Gentiles, not just to Jews. Up until thisÂ point, Christianity had essentially been a Jewish faith. The only Gentiles who had come to Christ were special cases such as the Ethiopian eunuch or Cornelius. It just wasn't done to preach willy-nilly to any old Gentiles - but that's what the Christians in Antioch did. So, the mother church sent out a missionary to check out what was going on:

> *Â News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch.Â When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.Â Â He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord. (Acts 11:22-24)*

Barnabas went out to Antioch, he saw the way in which people were breaking with tradition, realised that God was with them and got stuck in! He didn't come over all heavy handed and explain to them how things were done in Jerusalem, he didn't insist that people do things in the time-honoured fashion and he didn't claim any sort of authority over the local believers. He worked along side them and God blessed them all. Within a short while, the Church in Antioch even took up a collection to help the believers in Jerusalem.

Compare Barnabas' attitude with that of the men who came from James (in Jerusalem) that we read about in Galatians 2:

> *When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned.Â Â For before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles*

> *because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group.Â The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray.*

These guys came from Jerusalem, found that Gentile Christians in the Galatian church were not being circumcised in traditional way, and immediately started to throw their weight about. They came from Jerusalem, they knew how things aught to be done and all Christian males had to be circumcised. They didn't ask about the local situation, they didn't seek to understand Paul's point of view, they just insisted that their way was the right way and that everyone should follow them. They were so insistent that even Peter and Barnabas were swayed by their arguments; but they were wrong!

Today, the Church in Europe and North America has a long history, we have a strong sense of who we are, we have a brilliant theological and doctrinal heritage and we send out missionaries to the rest of the world. But, it is in the majority world that the Church is growing the quickest. How do we go about doing mission in this context. Do we in the Western church use our heritage, our sense of authority or our financial muscle to impose our views and programmes on the rest of the world? Or do we, like Barnabas, see God at work and humbly join in alongside our more creative and adventurous brothers and sisters?