WRESTLING WITH ONESIMUS 2: IMPORTS

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Category: Mission

This is the next post in my series trying to get to grips with Onesimus post:Â When Missions Becomes Toxic; or, Um, They Don't Need Us Anymore.

It is quite obvious, that Onesimus has some serious reservations about the impact of the Western mission movement:

> *Now that Iâ€™ve been here (on the â€˜fieldâ€™) for a while, I am realizing that we Western missionaries are not the wonderful blessing from heaven to all these poor and lost people that we like to think of ourselves as.Â While we have been certainly busy â€˜preaching the gospelâ€™ all these years, weâ€™ve actually succeeded in reproducing some of our less savory attributes much more than anybody is admitting.Â Most people who come here as missionaries only know what they know and do not know what they donâ€™t know.Â While this is endearing in children, itâ€™s been disastrous on the mission field.Â We have reproduced not just our seriously inculturated Western understanding of â€˜the gospelâ€™, but we have also reproduced our various and seriously inculturated understandings of the church as well.Â The problem is, most of us missionaries have really not thought that much about what sort of â€˜churchâ€™ we are planting, assuming this to be obvious.Â As a result, we have succeeded merely in passing on our ignorances and prejudices, all dressed up as Bible truth.Â We came here as Baptists (of multiple sorts), Presbyterians, Methodists, Bible Church Independents, Brethren, Pentecostals, Catholics, Anglicans, Lutherans, etc, etc, and wonder of wonders is it not surprising that we have succeeded in importing all of our Western arguments and divisions and prejudices in spades.Â We excuse our differences by calling them â€˜distinctivesâ€™ and by saying that they are essentiallyÂ adiaphoraÂ (matters of indifference)â€"especiallyÂ youradiaphoraâ€"but then fight like the devil when someone actually presumes to treatÂ ourÂ distinctives asÂ adiaphoraÂ (â€˜no, really, believer baptism isÂ necessaryÂ to be a real NT Christian!â€™).*

To be honest, it is hard not to agree with much of this. I don't know how many different protestant denominations we saw in Ivory Coast, but it was certainly far more than were needed. It seemed that each mission agency, denominational or non-denominational planted churches after their own image and that different Churches hardly talked to each other. How many baptist denominations does a small country need? I lost count of them! The historical and cultural realities which gave birth to our various denominations are irrelevant outside of the West.

Onesimus is right, to highlight this negative side of mission activity. Division is the besetting sin of Protestantism and it is a great shame that we have exported our divisions and our local concerns into the wider world. However, I'm not convinced by the solutions that Onesimus has to offer.

- Onesimus, himself, has left the divided world of Protestanism behind and become an orthodox Christian. That is a solution, certainly, but it's not one that I'm prepared to take or to advocate

for a variety of reasons.
- The broader solution is a moratorium on foreign missions. I will, eventually, get on to why I don't agree with this idea - but let's park it for now.

Though I can't agree with Onesimus call for a moratorium on mission work, I do believe that he highlights that our model and expectation of missions does need to change. I'm really not sure how we deal with the fact that countries like Kenya (where Onesimus lives) or Ivory Coast have so many imported denominations. To some extent the damage has been done. Not only that, it has been exacerbated by the creation of many more local denominations. When you import division, you shouldn't be surprised that it continues!

I do believe, however, that we need to stop importing Western denominations into the rest of the world. This means that church planters from different backgrounds are going to have to talk to each other and to work together in a way that only rarely happens. It will mean that home mission boards who often measure success in terms of denominational church plants will have to think differently. It's a big challenge, and I'm not sure how it could all be done - but it needs to be.