WRESTLING WITH ONESIMUS 4: MISSIONS

Posted on October 13, 2012 by Eddie

Category: Mission

This is the fourth in my series looking at a post from Onesimus:Â Â When Missions Becomes Toxic; or, Um, They Donâ€™t Need Us Anymore. In this one we are looking at the second of his reasons for suggesting that Western missionary work in Africa should draw to a halt.

> *Secondly, this sort of dynamic works the other way, too.Â There are too many Western mission organizations and NGOs who, except for spiritualized lingo, have become little more than giant corporations, with layers of management, following every leadership and management trend, focused on the bottom line and becoming ever more efficient in connecting donors with the product as well as expanding the market for the product (i.e. the field/area in which we missionaries or NGO people can â€˜serveâ€™).Â Weâ€™ve become increasingly a missions and aidÂ industry, with our own versions of success and upward mobility, jetting all over the globe to this and that conference, looking always to expand our ability to raise ever more money to fund our salaries and lifestyles and â€˜ministriesâ€™.Â Weâ€™ve made ourselves indispensible by convincing ourselves and our donors (and our clients) that we really are not only necessary, but the best, most efficient, most biblical and most convenient way to get whatever done.Â Weâ€™ve done a superb job of creating a market for what we have to offer.Â Some â€˜missionsâ€™ in the countries where I have lived have been there for 80, 90, 100 years and more.*

Once again, there is a good deal of truth in what Onesimus says here. One of my friends reacted to this on Facebook by writing:

> *His comments about how mission organisations have become like multinational corporations rang a few bells... especially as I've been reading an early Wycliffe book about how the team heading to start work in a country had $90 in the account and said that was sufficient because God would provide what they needed. Oh to return to those faith-filled days.*

That sort of idealism is almost impossible in these litigious days. Organisations like Wycliffe have to be able to demonstrate that they are taking appropriate care of their staff and not exposing them toÂ unnecessaryÂ risks. When donors give money to support translation projects we have to be able to report back to both the donors and the government and prove that the money is being well spend. In this day and age, there is an amount of bureaucracy and red tape that can't be avoided.

However, once again, I fear that Onesimus' reaction is extreme. The answer to bad practice is to do things better (though that can be difficult). Â I would suggest that there are a couple of things that need to be looked at:

1. We need to be prepared to close down programmes or organisations when their purpose is fulfilled. It is far too easy for a Christian organisation to concentrate most of its energy on self-

preservation; to lose focus on mission and the call of God. We need to be prepared to call a halt and not to simply carry on doing things because that is what we do.

2. We need a thorough going theological review of our activities and our fund raising strategies. There is a huge temptation to place human activity at the centre of things, rather than God's providence. We can fall into statements such as 'your gift can change the future for people', or 'we are making a difference to the Church around the world'. Well it can't and we aren't. God may graciously choose to use your gift and he may work through ourÂ organisationÂ but he is the one who makes the difference. I'm not just being picky here. A great deal of modern management and fund-raising technique effectively squeezes God out of the equation. When we do this, our organisations take Centre stage in a way which is not helpful to our work or to the organisations themselves.