THE BIBLE IS THE GREATEST MISSIONARY

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Category: Observations

This is another in my very occasional series examining famous missionary sayings. This time I want to turn my attention to some words of William Cameron TownsendÂ who said:

> *"The greatest missionary is the Bible in the mother tongue. It needs no furlough and is never considered a foreigner."Â*

I must admit, I've had a few second (third and fourth) thoughts about looking at, perhaps, the most famous statement from the founder of the organisation that I've worked for since 1985. Then again, I've looked at the founder or another organisation, so just out of fairness, I should look at ours...

Before I get into the phrase in detail, let me quickly state that I believe fervently in the importance of mother tongue Scriptures. Don't be in any doubt about that. But...

There are a couple of details I'd like to look at before getting to the heart of the phrase.

- It is absolutely true that the BIble never needs a furlough. Then again, an increasing number of cross-cultural missionaries are no longer taking traditional furloughs. The idea of serving four years on the field and then one year at home doingÂ *deputation* is increasingly unpopular in an age of jet travel.
- Secondly, I'm far from convinced that the Bible is never considered a foreigner. In fact, I would go so far as to say that it *should*Â be considered a foreigner - unless it is being read by people in the Middle East, where the Bible originated. Even then, the past is a foreign country. Adaptions of the Bible which attempt to place it in a contemporary geographical situation tend not to be very successful or well regarded and no serious translation would attempt to hide the essential foreign and ancient nature of the texts. This doesn't mean that the Bible can't communicate well to people all around the world, but it is clearly not of our time or place.

So is the Bible really the best missionary? Actually, though this is a really good sound-bite, I'm not convinced that it is true. On a simple level, I'd argue that the facts speak against it. Very few people become Christians simply by reading the BIble. It happens, but not all that often, most people become Christians because they have been influenced by someone's life and words. We are social beings and conversion to Christianity tends to occur in a social context.

More importantly, I think there is an approach to mission (and the Bible) underlying this phrase that I don't fully agree with. The notion seems to be that people encounter individual missionaries and encounter the Bible on their own. Once again, I'm not sure that this is how it should be. In Acts, we very rarely see individual missionaries doing their thing on their own; they work in groups or teams (yes, I know there are exceptions). So, biblically speaking, I'd argue that the best missionary is a group of missionaries!

Equally, I believe that the best way to encounter the Bible is with other people; this is especially the

case for those who have not yet come to faith. Reading the BIble in community; exploring and applying its message together is the most powerful way to get to grips with Scripture. People don't simply need to read the Bible, they need to engage with it.

As I hinted at the outset of this post, I feel slightly disloyal writing it. However, this is a statement of its time and place and reflects the values of its origins. The underlying message that the Scriptures need to be translated and are essential for Christian growth and discipleship is as true now as it was then... but the phrase itself needs updating. If we are to be faithful to our founding vision, we need to revisit it in the light of changed and changing circumstances.

How would I express it? Well, something like this. *The best missionary is a growing Christian community who read and engage with the Bible together*. It's no where near as snappy as the original and will probably never get repeated....