ALMOST BUT NOT QUITE

Posted on February 11, 2014 by Eddie

Albert Mohler has written an interesting article about mission in the twenty-first century, which manages to ignore the most important aspects of the modern mission movement.
Categories: Church: World, Mission

Albert Mohler, who is President ofÂ Southern Baptist Theological Seminary has just published an article entitled Christian Mission in the Twenty-first Century. It is an interesting piece and well worth a read. However, the most significant things about the article are not what it says, but what it doesn't say.

Mohler makes some interesting remarks about a move towards focussing on people groups rather than on nation-states, which is good, but hardly new:

> *The new vision for world missions is directed toward the reaching of people groups rather than nations. Missiological focus upon the nation-state is a remnant of the nineteenth century, when nations were conceived as singular units and national identity was paramount. This paradigm was long out of date by the end of the twentieth century. Christians now recognize that there are thousands of distinct people groups, each identifiable by culture, language, and social structureâ€"and they are not always divided neatly by political boundaries. Each of these people groups represents a distinct missiological challenge, and each must be considered in its own right.*

There are some interesting comments about generational changes in the US (though I'm not entirely convinced that these are accurate):

> *This generation demonstrates a readiness to take on new challenges and to go where no previous generation has yet taken the gospel. They have been born into a culturally diverse world, and they are gifted with skills in intercultural communication. They are impatient with the cultural isolationism of previous generations. They see no political boundaries to the Gospel. They are ready to cross political borders and see no limitations on the Great Commission. Where previous generations wanted toÂ supportÂ missions, this generation is determined toÂ doÂ missions. Incubated in an experience-driven culture, these young Christians are not interested in missions by proxy.*

And there is something about grass roots changes in American Churches:

> *This new vision for world missions is also remarkable in the fact that much, if not most, of the energy is coming from grassroots Christians rather than from institutional structures. Perhaps the greatest missionary advance among American churches is seen in the widespread participation of Christian laypersons in missionary trips and short-term mission projects. Churches that encourage and support this hands-on approach to missions will bear testimony to the powerful impact it has upon the participants and upon the missionary commitment of the entire congregation.*

However, what you won't find is is any mention of the growth in the world church and the role of majority world believers in the spread of Christianity beyond a couple of tangential references:

> *Reviewing the history of the missionary movement, it is clear that great gains were made for the gospel.*
>
> *One missionary leader has defined this mobilization as â€œall of Godâ€™s people reaching all the peoples of the earth.â€ That motto sets the issue clearly.*

Admittedly he does mention 'all of God's people' but he rarely seems to imply that this means anyone outside of the USA.

Albert Mohler is an excellent theologian and a great writer; I very much appreciate his writings, especially on the subject of Bible translation. However, in this piece he is setting out a vision of the future of Christian mission that owes far more to the past than it does to the future. Welcome to the twentieth century.

A vision for the future of mission that does not take into account the explosive growth of the Church worldwide and the way in which majority world Christians are spreading the Gospel - often without reference to traditional missionary models - is grossly inadequate. Even if the article is aimed simply at an American audience (as this one seems to be, though it doesn't say as such), it does a disservice to its audience by not pointing to the context in which American missionaries will need to work and live in the future.

Mohler quite rightly points out some of the failings of a previous generation of missionaries:

> *At the same time, every generation has left its own imprint on the missionary task, and each generation is blind to some of the cultural baggage it takes along with the gospel. At the height of the missions movement in the Victorian era, it often seemed that missionaries were just as intent on Westernizing native peoples as in evangelizing them.*

However, in painting a future of a world mission movement that is essentially American and which ignores the shift in the centre of gravity of the Church, he is, sadly, committing the same mistake that these forefathers made. There is some good and interesting stuff in this article, but unfortunately its major flaw outweighs the good.