MISSIONS: A WITNESS TO THE GOSPEL WHERE THERE IS NONE

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Category: Short-Term Mission

In the C20, the church spread around the world and mission work, as we know it, changed as a result. The meaning of â€œmissionâ€ expanded and became an all-embracing term that included the whole task of the church to witness to the gospel.

As a result of these changes, the cross-cultural task of taking the gospel to the unreached became obscured.

In the 60s there was a struggle to change â€˜missionsâ€™ to â€˜missionâ€™; removing the â€˜sâ€™. People like Newbiggin argued to keep the term â€˜missionsâ€™ so as not to lose the focus of reaching the unreached as part of the total package of mission.

MISSION, MISSIONS AND CROSS-CULTURAL PARTNERSHIPS

Making Distinctions

Mission is the whole task of the church to witness to the whole gospel in the whole world. It is synonymous with what some people call witness.

Missions is one aspect of mission; narrower and more focussed. The focus is to establish a witness to the gospel in places or among people where there is none, or where it is weak.

Missions is usually cross-cultural, but it is not this that defines it.

Missions is not cross-cultural partnerships. This is where people go to other cultures in order to help people take part in mission: for example an expat teaching in an African theology seminary. This is not to diminish the importance of cross-cultural partnerships.

The Importance of these distinctions

These distinctions are important:

- Because we have tended to regard anything that happens overseas as missions. This means we use a lot of missions resources for cross-cultural partnerships. Just over 1% of our finances and 10% of our finances are used towards establishing a witness to the gospel where one does not exist.
- Missions keeps us focussed on the ends of the earth and not simply on our own neighbourhood.

OUR LEGACY: REDUCTION AND RESPONSE

The legacy of modern missions

The C19 and C20 mission movement has been both praised and criticized.

Much of the criticism must be acknowledged as true.

- The Western missionary movement was not sufficiently critical of the Enlightenment worldview and colonial mindset that shaped it.James Engel and William Dyrness want to know where we have gone wrong in the missionary task They analyze the way that post-Enlightenment modernity has impacted the modern missionary movement and ask, 'What has gone wrong with the harvest," They speak of the mission of modernity into Christianity' Running through the heart of modernity is a fundamental cultural dichotomy between the sacred and secular, the private and the public. As the Christian church capitulated to this unbiblical dichotomy, the gospel was excluded from most of life. This affected mission in three ways. First, there were two omissions from the Great Commission: the omission of social action and of rigorous, holistic discipleship in favor of evangelism. Second, an optimistic and secular confidence in progress through instrumental reason, technology and specialized institutions led to a managerial missiology replete with organizational brilliance, highly centralized bureaucratic structures, and preoccupation with strategies and methods. Third, an uncritical embrace of Western individualism led at to focus exclusively on individuals: the task of mission was to reach and evangelize individuals. In this process the church, God's chosen instrument for his mission, was displaced.
- A second critique is that mission has been reduced to missions. The whole mission of the church has been reduced to a narrow focus on evangelism.

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The response of the C20 church to the legacy of modern missions

Broadly speaking there is a two-fold response:

- The Ecumenical tradition has been painfully aware of the way that modern missions was corrupted by modernity and colonialism.
- In the Evangelical world, there has been a commitment to missions and business as usual.

The problem is a failure to distinguish between Western culture and the biblical imperative to mission. On one hand, people reject mission because of its Western trappings, while others accept the Western trappings because of their commitment to mission.

We need to accept the task, but re-evaluate it in the light of Scripture.

A RETURN TO SCRIPTURE

We can set out four basic biblical principles to guide mission.

- The gospel is true and has universal significance.

- Godâ€™s mission has a universal horizon: all the nations have been included since the beginning.
- We have to take the model of the church in Antioch (Acts 11 and 13) seriously:
    - Organic mission; the church grew through normal daily witness (mission)
    - Sending; the church commissioned Paul and Barnabas to go out into the world (missions)
- Mission is the task of the local congregation. The organic mission mode leads to the sending mode. As Paulâ€™s mission grew, other churches got involved to support him.

WORLD NEED

For Paul, the need was clear; anywhere beyond Jerusalem and Israel. During the C19 and C20, the same could be said; the need was beyond the West. But what about today? Is there a need for western missionaries? Yes! There are still people without a gospel witness, but we need to find ways to identify them.

Unreached People Groups

This concept has been popular for the last couple of decades. It gained traction at Lausanne in 74 from Ralph Winter. The terms change, but the idea remains in evangelical thought.

The discussion about definitions revolves around two things; what is a people group? What does it mean to say they are unreached? Today four types of model are used to identify people groups:

- Linguistic
- Ethno-linguistic
- Ethnic
- Unimax (the largest group that can be reached by one church-planting movement).

Answers to the question about what unreached means vary, but they revolve around the idea of their being no adequate witness in the group.

The Joshua project says there are 16,804 people groups in the world, and 7,289 of them are unreached representing 40.7% of the worldâ€™s populations.

There are concerns about the concept of UPGs, including the fact that the definitions work best for nonurban, traditional populations.

However, it is a useful tool to help us focus on the job. However, we need to avoid turning missions into a managerial enterprise. Data-crunching and refined statistics can lead into an Enlightenment-based technological approach to mission.

Three Major Blocs

Muslims, Hindus and Chinese; this is a fairly simple way to envisage the remaining task. However,

there are lots of complexities behind the simple statement.

10/40 Window

This first appeared at the 1989 Lausanne meeting in Manila. Five reasons to take it seriously:

- This is where the people are. Two thirds of the worldâ€™s population live in the window.
- It contains the overwhelming majority of the unreached.
- It is where we find the majority of the major religious blocs; Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism.
- This is where the majority of the worldâ€™s poor live.
- Only a small percentage of missionaries work in this aea.

Asia

Another simple way to conceptualise the remaining task is simply to say â€˜Asiaâ€™. Again, there is a lot of complexity here, but you get the idea.

PROBLEMS HINDERING A FRESH MISSIONS INITIATIVE

Lack of Fervour

This is always a challenge.

In the ecumenical tradition relativism has eroded the conviction of truth of the Gospel and for the Evangelical there is the lure of comfort and accommodation to the spirit of the age. A self-centred lifestyle is the primary reason for the missionary malaise.

Prayer and spiritual renewal are the appropriate responses.

Inadequate allocation of resources

Only a small amount of our resources (perhaps 1.2%) is allocated for reaching the unreached.

We need to both increase giving and see it more appropriately allocated.

Legacy of Colonialism

How can the church in the West use its gift of riches to help the world church without disempowering it?

The relationship between western mission agencies and majority world churches is often ambiguous.

STRUCTURES OF MISSIONS Â€“ WHO WILL DO THE JOB?

Historically, emperors and popes took the lead and recently western mission agencies have organised missions. Today we see two new themes:

- Local congregations are waking up to the fact that missions is their responsibility.
- The missionary force of the third world is increasing dramatically.

Local churches and mission societies

In the last century there has been a recovery of the missionary nature of the church. In the story of the Bible the church is the primary organ of Godâ€™s mission. So how do we deal with the historical place of mission societies?

Engel and Dyrness have wrestled with this:

â€œA central theological reality is that the church is uniquely equipped to be the locus of missions because it is essentially missionary by its very nature. This means that the church itself is the missionary reality that God sends into the world â€“ *it is far more than an institutional source from which funds and missionaries are sent or agency developed programmes carried outâ€*

Every church should have some role in taking the Gospel to the ends of the earth.

â€œThe way forward will be a partnership that finds a way to allow the local congregation to be the primary engine of missions while at the same time utilizing the vast experience and expertise of mission bodies to equip, enable and coordinate the church in its task. The role of mission societies should be to come alongside the congregations with their expertise and administrative structures to equip the church for its missionary task. For this to happen, a renaissance and institutional transformation of these missions organizations must take place.â€

Growth of third-world missions

Exact statistics are hard to get hold of, however according to Operation World the five largest sending nations are USA, China, India, S. Korea and Nigeria. Only one of these is western.

Partnership: this is a theme which has been discussed in mission for a quarter of a century. There is a theological drive (recognition that the church is one body) and a pragmatic one (it can be more efficient and cheaper).

There are problems with partnerships; financial dominance on one side and dependency on another is a big problem.

NEW INITIATIVES TODAY

Many, but not all, of older patterns of mission are obsolete, but new patterns are emerging.

Supporting national missionaries.

The move to fund national workers picked up after World War 2. Costs are lower for national missionaries and they are often more effective at reaching their own people than expats.

Tentmaking

It could be that the majority of missionaries will fit into this category in the future.

- Tentmakers can get into resistant countries
- They donâ€™t have to raise support funds
- They have natural contact with unbelievers

There are questions as to the effectiveness of tentmakers and their ability to do mission work when they are already involved in a full time job.

Short-term missions

There is a huge debate about the advantages and drawbacks of this. Most short-term missions is not missions at all, but cross-cultural partnerships.

This is the final part of my continuing series making notes onÂ Â Introducing Christian Mission Today: Scripture, History and IssuesÂ by Mike Goheen.Â If you are finding these notes helpful, a small contribution to the running costs of Kouyanet would not go amiss â€“ or you could get us a book from the list on the right.Â