DON'T BE SELFISH

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We are not to be self-dependant, but interdependent. This is true of individuals, but it is also true of Churches. To plant churches which are fully independent and self-reliant is as much of a problem as planting churches which are wholly dependent on foreign missionaries.
Category: Observations

People are divided about Church history. In my experience, most Christians aren't interested in it in the slightest and reckon that anything that pre-dates Matt Redman is ancient history and should be forgotten. Those who do take an interest in history, tend to be rather passionate about it and have distinct views about who the most important people are. This means that if you suggest that someone is an important figure from church history, a large slice of your audience will yawn and switch off, and the rest will immediately tell you that he isn't as important as Calvin, Athanasius or DH Moody.

For what it's worth, I reckon that Henry Venn is a key person in church history; though he wouldn't be in many people's top ten list. Venn was the head man of the Church Missionary SocietyÂ for over thirty years at a key time in the growth of the British missionary movement.

However, it is not as a mission administrator that Venn is best known, but as a mission thinker. This excellent paper gives a good overview of his thoughts.

> *Regarding the ultimate object of a mission, viewed under its ecclesiastical aspect, to be the settlement of a native Church, under native pastors, upon a self-supporting system, it should be borne in mind that the progress of a mission mainly depends upon the training up and the location of native pastors; and that, as it has been happily expressed, 'the euthanasia of a mission' takes place when a missionary, surrounded by well-trained native congregations, under native pastors, is able to resign all pastoral work into their hands.*

Venn had noted that churches that were planted by missionaries often remained dependant on the mission for their income and leadership and made very little attempt to reach out to their own people. His answer was to say thatÂ missionaries should look to plant churches which areÂ *self-supporting, self-governingÂ* andÂ *self-propagating*. This became known as the three-self formula and variations on this theme are still commonly talked about in the mission world today.

There is a lot of wisdom in this view. However, 150 years after Venn, we still see missionaries planting churches which are entirely dependant on the outsiders for leadership, finance and evangelism.

However, (dare I say it?), Venn's vision is also fundamentally flawed. Self-dependancy was a high value in Victorian England, as it still is today. But it isn't actually very Biblical. We are not to be self-dependant, but interdependent. This is true of individuals, but it is also true of Churches. To plant churches which are fully independent and self-reliant is as much of a problem as planting churches which are wholly dependent on foreign missionaries.

To be fair to Venn, he was a good Anglican and assumed that all of the churches planted by missionaries would be under some sort of Episcopal supervisionÂ and not fully independent. However, true interdependence goes a step further and that step was probably a step too far in the

Victorian age. Missionary sending churches, agencies and countries need to realise that they have something to learn from the young churches that are planted around the world. It's not just that they need us; but we need them - and, perhaps, our need is greater than theirs.

Somewhat surprisingly, perhaps, this post is inspired by a conversation that I had with friends over lunch at the CMS offices in Oxford.Â