INTEGRAL MISSION ISN'T

Posted on July 22, 2015 by Eddie

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Category: Observations

I will admit it, I'm turning into a grumpy old grammar pedant.

One of my pet hates is the way in which adverbs seem to be vanishing from the English language. "Yeah, I did good", says the sportsman on TV, "No! You did well", I roar from the sofa.

Of course, my frustration is pointless, language is in a constant state of flux. Words change their meanings and grammatical structures shift over time. There may be some things that make my toes curl, but language change is actually a fascinating subject.

A dictionary or grammar book can only ever be a snapshot of how the language was at a particular point in time. The real definition of a word is found in the way that the word is used by the general population, not in the pages of the Oxford English Dictionary.

Take the phrase Integral Mission.

My copy of theÂ Dictionary of Mission Theology: Evangelical FoundationsÂ somewhat unhelpfully tells me to look atÂ *holistic mission* and then gives a long and very interesting article rather than a short definition. However, this quote gets us to the heart of things:

> *...the actual commission itself must be understood to include social as well as evangelistic responsibility seems to suggest a real integration of the vertical and horizontal dimensions of mission, which is at the very heart of 'holistic' mission.*

Wikipedia, in this case, is more helpful:

> ***Integral mission*** *(also known as* ***transformational development***, ***Christian development*** *or* ***holistic mission****) is a term coined in Spanish as misiÃ³n integralÂ in the 1970s by members of the Latin American Theological Fellowship (FTL, its Spanish acronym) to describe an understanding of Christian mission which embraces both the proclamation and the demonstration of the Gospel. It has since grown in popularity in Evangelical groups in all the other continents of the world.*

So integral mission is mission which includes both social action and proclamation of the Christian mission. TheÂ development of integral mission over the 20th century is a fascinating story and one that I might return to one day. But for now, integral (or holistic) mission includes both proclamation and practical service.

Except it doesn't.

Yes, the dictionary definition of integral mission includes these two aspects and that is how theologians and mission scholars use it. However, in my experience, that isn't how the term is used in general parlance. I would argue that in general use, the term integral mission is now used to

describe various forms of social action, but that the overt proclamation of the Gospel has more or less dropped off the agenda. In practical terms, holistic mission isn't holistic and integral mission isn't integrated; a huge chunk of what mission is all about is simply not included.

I can imagine a few mission theologians choking in their cornflakes as they read this. "This isn't what the term means - you are wrong!" But their protests will have as little effect as my despair about the loss of adverbs amongst British sportsmen.Â The meaning of the term has shifted and we need to deal with that.

I reckon it leaves us with two big questions:

- Why has proclamation been dropped from many mission agendas?
- How do we describe the phenomenon formally known as integral mission?

I know that some people don't like to distinguish between service and proclamation (I don't either), but really don't believe that we can avoid it in the present climate - see this post for why.Â

Edit: my friend Paul has picked up on this theme and given another way in which mission is sometimes not integral.