IT'S BETTER TO BURN OUT, THAN IT IS TO RUST

Posted on August 31, 2015 by Eddie

In which I get rather angry at a trite phrase.
Category: Observations

Last week, I was sitting in a discussion session on Christian responses to violence. It wasn't an easy afternoon; we discussed persecution of Christians in the Middle-East, violence against women and other tough subjects.

At the same time, this quote came across my twitter timeline:

> *Burnout is the result of doing the work of God apart from the presence of God.*

Like many short, pithy sayings, there is a grain of truth in this, but only a grain.

Burnout is a mental and emotional response to severe or sustained stress and trauma; faced with overwhelming circumstances, people stop functioning normally and exhibit a variety of different symptoms.

Sitting in a seminar on responses to violence, I was reminded - once again - that Christian workers often find themselves in very difficult and stressful situations. War, robbery, disease, rape; it is not unusual for missionaries to find themselves confronted by stresses such as these; and it is not unknown for people going through these stresses to suffer burnout. I've been close, myself.

To say that people who suffer burnout in these situations have been 'doing the work of God apart from the presence of God' is the worst sort of sanctimonious tripe. No one says that getting malaria is due to not being in God's presence, so why do we assume that Christians won't face the normal human responses to stress and trauma?

Trite little phrases like this one don't help; instead they heap guilt on the heads of people who are already suffering as a result of following God into tough places. A far better response comes from Marjory Foyle, who's book on stress among missionaries is calledÂ Honourably Wounded. We should honour and respect those who have been hurt on the front line, not make them feel bad.

In the end, suggesting that 'working in the presence of God' will prevent you facing the problems of stress and trauma is nothing more than the prosperity Gospel in another guise. I wrote this in an earlier post, which is worth revisiting on this subject:

> *I know people who have been (unfairly) dragged through the courts in a foreign country, mugged in the street, robbed with violence in their own homes and the list goes on. Some friends have lost children to tropical diseases and others have lost their own lives to disease, violence or accident. In all of these cases it was because people had put themselves in harmâ€™s way because they were following Jesus.*

If you are interested in a serious look at the causes and responses to missionary stress, this paper is a good place to start.

A prize of a round of applause will be given to the first person to identify where the title forÂ this post comes from.