WHAT DO WORDS MEAN?

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Sometimes we seem to be disagreeing, when in reality we are just using words in different ways.
Category: Observations

What exactly does the term missionary mean? Leaving aside that fact that many British churches and agencies are dropping the term 'missionary' altogether in favour of something less politically incorrect such as 'mission partner', there is a good deal of confusion of what we actually mean when we say 'missionary'.

Let me illustrate: a few years ago, I wrote a piece entitled "Are All Christians Called to Be Missionaries?" a question to which I gave an unequivocal YES! Meanwhile, Justin Long who blogs even more than I do on world mission wrote a piece called "Not Everyone Is a Missionary: What We Look For", in which he makes the exact opposite case. Have a read of both articles.

So who is right; me by insisting that all Christians are missionaries, or Justin who says that missionaries are aÂ specific subset of church workers?

Actually, I think we both are. The whole point of my article was to highlight the fact that all Christians have a call to witness to Christ and that this is not something that can be left to the professionals - a point that Justin agrees with. Whereas Justin is emphasising the point that there is a need for dedicated, trained and gifted people to intentionally go to places where people don't know about Jesus to make disciples; something that I fully support.

In terms of the important issues, Justin and I agree with each other. However, in these situations we use the term 'missionary' in slightly different ways. Partly this is due to different theological emphases (see my post linked to above), partly it is a UK/US difference in the way we use language (and there are plenty of those) and I suspect that it is also partly due to us seeking to emphasise different aspects of the Church's wider call to witness.

At first glance, Justin and I seem to have a fundamental difference about the nature of mission. It would be easy to stir up an online argument and get people to weigh in on both sides; and all too often this is exactly what Christians do. Like much of the rest of the online community, we look for division and exacerbate it, rather than looking beneath the surface to the fundamental agreement which exists. Meanwhile, while we get on with our arguing, the world is still waiting to hear about Jesus.

In reality, Justin and I simply have to remember that we each use the word missionary in different ways, which isn't a huge problem. We use different names for car parts, call two completely different games football and yet still manage to communicate. Oh, and just don't get me started about suspenders.