THE UNITED STATES AND WORLD MISSION

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Some thoughts about the future of the US world mission movement.
Category: Church: World

Itâ€™s all too easy to fall into thinking in terms of stereotypes. For example, I suspect that if you mentioned the term â€œAmerican missionaryâ€ to most Brits, it would conjure up the image of someone with a big hat, a big Bible and a bigger mouth. Stereotypes are rarely flattering.

The problem with this particular stereotype is that it is just plain wrong. In thirty years working with American missionaries, Iâ€™ve only met a handful who would fall into the big hat, Bible and mouth bracket (and Iâ€™ve met a few Brits who were like that, too). The majority of Americans I know who are involved in world mission are thoughtful people who devote years to learning languages and cultures so that they can faithfully share the Good News with people around the world. What is more, is that for the last hundred years or so, American churches and missionaries have provided the human driving force for the spread of Christianity around the globe. The world owes a great deal to the enthusiasm, devotion and self-sacrifice of American Christians.

I have many American friends from all sides of the political spectrum . On Facebook and Twitter I get to see not only what they are thinking, but also what their friends and friends think. It is clear that on many issues Christians in the United States are deeply divided. However, what really concerns me is that I see signs that indicate that the US may be pulling away from its historic role in supporting world mission.

What Others Think of Americans

For years, an American passport has been an almost magical document. It gains you easy access into countries where Europeans and others need visas. Churches and missions in the US have made the best of this privilege for both short and long-term mission. However, if the current move to tighten up access to the US continues, it is likely that there will be tit-for-tat responses from other countries and Americans will have to go through costly and time-consuming visa application processes. This wonâ€™t stop world mission, but it will make significantly more difficult, especially for short-term trips.

However, bureaucratic and administrative hassles are not the only thing that the future may hold for US missionaries. In a world where an outspoken American president speaks out against whole nations and religions, it is likely that there will be increasing hostility towards American citizens in those countries who feel they are being attacked. It will be harder for American missionaries to gain a hearing for their message and it is very possible that they will face physical violence in one form or another. This is compounded by the fact that those countries that the American government condemns the loudest are often those with the fewer Christians and the greatest need for missionary outreach from the US.

What Americans Think of Others

The President has said that he wants to put America first and this is a theme that is echoed in many comments that I read on social media. It isnâ€™t my intention to discuss the wisdom of this policy in the economic and political sphere; plenty of others have done that. However, I am concerned that this same principle is filtering down into church life. There are large parts of the Evangelical church in the US that see themselves as under threat from all sorts of directions. The temptation will be for them to put America first, to cater for their own needs before considering involvement with the wider world. This is a well worn path; one that the British church has been following for a significant amount of time. In many church situations in the UK, the word â€˜missionâ€™ has been more or less shorn of any international dimension. There is a danger that the church in the US puts America first and falls into the same trap.

Christian mission is at its best and most effective when missionaries and those directing them are aware that they share a common humanity with those they are seeking to reach; when the evangelist realises that they are in no way superior to the evangelised. Humility and love lie at the core of the Christian message and where these are absent, our witness is at best flawed and at worst non-existent. Sadly, in Facebook and Twitter discussions, Iâ€™m seeing an increase in the number of self-identified Christians in the US speaking about foreigners (especially Muslims) in derogatory and hostile terms. It is hard to see how those who view people as their implacable enemies can reach out to them with the Christian message in any coherent fashion. This can only lead either to a retreat from global mission or to the adoption of a superior, neo-colonial approach which will be counterproductive in the modern world.

I owe a huge debt to my American friends and colleagues and to the missionary scholars and pioneers from the US who have helped to shape my thinking. However, I am concerned (as I know many of them are) by some of the currents that I see developing within US society and the church. Ultimately, I believe that the health of any church depends partly on the extent to which it is obedient to Christâ€™s call to be witnesses to the ends of the earth.

However, though I am concerned for the situation in the US, I am not concerned for the state of world mission. We are living through an exciting age and as we face new challenges and issues, God is raising up a new mission movement in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

He will build his church and the gates of hell will not stand against it!

Please feel free to comment about how you see the future of world mission below. If you'd like to comment on the US political system, please do so somewhere else!