MISSIONARY SAYINGS: BIBLES, MAPS AND THE WILL OF GOD

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When what William Carey said isn't what we understand.
Category: Observations

Generally, my blog posts on famous missionary sayings have a standard format. I quote the phrase, point out how it can be helpful and then show that despite this, there is an underlying flaw in what was said. This post will be slightly different because I fully agree with the phrase as it is written, my problem is with how people read it today. So, let's get going.

> *'To know the will of God, we need an open Bible and an open map.' - William Carey*

There are two important things to note about this phrase. The first is that at the time that Carey was writing many Christians believed that Christ's call to mission in Matthew 28, Acts 1 and elsewhere applied to the original Apostles, but not to the contemporary church. The second is that in Carey's context, the phrase "the will of God" was a theological term which referredÂ primarily to the overarching things that God was bringing about in history.

The point of this phrase is to call the church back to world mission, something which had been neglected in many circles. In his famous EnquiryÂ (which isn't long and is well worth a read), Carey followed the pattern set out in this phrase. He examined the biblical case for mission, gave a geographical survey of the state of Christianity around the world and then set out a methodology for reaching the nations. It was a bold statement to correct a long-standing error.

Our problem is that we read Carey's phrase in an altogether different context. Firstly, world mission is a part of the life of the church today (not as big a part as some of us would like, but that's not the point). Secondly, when we read the phrase "the will of God" we tend to read it in terms of 'what does God want me to do?'. For Carey, "the will of God" was all about God, in contemporary society it's all about me and my place in the world.

So we read Carey's call to the whole church as a recipe for what individuals should do and these are two very different things. The problem with this, is that an open Bible and an open map are not enough to guide individuals.

Though it runs counter to our individualistic age, Christians are called to be part of a community and a call to mission is worked within the community. To know what God is calling you to do (as opposed to Carey's much broader "will of God"), involves a lot of prayerful discussion with friends, church leaders and others. An open Bible and a map (and other resources) should be part of the process, but they have to be read, studied and prayed through in community. We famously talk about some of the opposition that William Carey faced in his desire to be a missionary, but we tend to overlook the fact that he had a good number of church leaders and others who supported him.

There are a couple of common reactions to posts like this one. Some people, just can't see the importance of Christian community in decision making. Western individualism is so engrained in our psyche and our approach to mission that we find it hard to really take on board the true communal nature of our calling as Christians. The other reaction is to point to famous Christians who did

respond as individuals and go off on their own. The problem is that these people are the exception and not the rule and for every Hudson-Taylor who broke with convention and successfully did his own thing (though with a lot of support from others) there are many more who crashed and burned and who never got books written about them.

So, I'd like to rewrite Carey's phrase for the contemporary situation:

> *'To know the will of God, we need an open Bible and an open map; to know what God wants me to do as part of his general will, I need the wisdom of my friends and leaders."*