LOOKING AT MISSION THROUGH METAPHORICAL LENSES

Posted on August 2, 2017 by Eddie

Four different ways of looking at mission, some of which are more helpful than others.
Category: Mission

Like millions of other people, I wear glasses. I don't need them for reading, but for everything else, it helps if I wear them. The world looks slightly less fuzzy, I get fewer headaches and I'm less likely to walk into things. Seeing the world through the lenses of my glasses makes everything clearer. Of course it does, that's why I wear them.

When it comes to mission, I reckon that people look at mission through one of four different metaphorical lenses; some of which make things clearer and some of which make them a lot more fuzzy.

The Lens of Myself:Â some people look at mission through their own experience. What they should do, where they should go and whether they have a call to do something important. The defining principle in mission is them. A while ago, I had the temerity to suggest that people going on short-term mission trips should receive some training or orientation in advance. One commentator replied in high dudgeon that I was restricting the right of young people to go on mission. Nothing about the needs of the people they were going to serve and nothing about the glory and honour of the God in whose name they were doing mission - everything was about them and what they wanted/felt called to do.

The Lens of Others:Â for some people, mission is all about others, the people who are the recipients of the mission activity. Focus might be on unreached people or the poor and marginalised - but it's all about them and what their needs are. This is good in as far as it goes, but when our focus is on people and meeting their perceived needs, we can lose sight the bigger picture of God at work through history.

The Lens of Conversion: people need to be reconciled to Christ through his death and resurrection. This is vitally important and while there are many agencies doing great humanitarian work, only Christians announce the Good News. This is all true and because of it there are some who say that the only legitimate form of Christian mission is proclaiming the Gospel, everything else is good, but it is secondary and not really mission. (As a corollary, I don't know of any agencies that say that social action is the only legitimate form of mission and Christian agencies shouldn't be involved in proclamation - but I do know a few who act that way.)

The Lens of the Whole Bible: reading through the Bible as a whole, you get an amazing picture of God at work and of the things that concern him. Justice, truth-telling, caring for the poor, the marginalised and the refugees, reconciling people to himself - indeed reconciling all things in heaven and earth through Christ. The cross and resurrection are the centre of the story, the pivot around which everything hinges, but they are not the whole story. Jesus taught us to pray that God's Kingdom would come on earth as in heaven and that calls for societal transformation in the here and now. He didn't tell us to pray that people would be saved so that they could be whisked off to heaven where everything would be wonderful. God has been involved in a wide range of things down through history and looking at mission through a whole Bible lens means that we will see

mission in a broad sense.

There are (at least) two problems with this scenario.

The first is that the whole Bible lens is all very well, but as I hinted in the Conversion section, there is a tendency for people to drop the uncomfortable stuff about proclamation in favour of the headline grabbing social action. Because of this, some people argue that we should only call proclamation mission, so as to avoid the drift. I understand the argument and have some sympathy with it's aims, but I think we would do better to recognise the totality of what God is calling us to do while taking care not to neglect any part of our calling.

The second problem, is that I've painted this in black and white terms. The truth is that we need to look at mission through all of the different lenses at different times. It is perfectly appropriate to consider what it is that you are called to do as an individual or to think about the needs of the people you are reaching. The important thing is to have the right default lens, the one that governs our actions as a whole.

Yes, I am aware that I have simplified some fairly complex ideas. I prefer to think of it as popularising!