POSTS FROM THE PAST: WHEN WILL MISSION STOP

Posted on August 24, 2017 by Eddie

In which I dare to suggest that John Piper's famous quote about the purpose of mission may not tell the full story.
Category: Mission

One of my less noble ambitions is to come up with a brilliant phrase,Â that is short, profound, easily remembered and which gets quoted in books, sermons and on websites. A man can dream, canâ€™t he?

One such quote, which has become rather iconic in the mission world, comes from John Piper:

> *â€œMissions is not the ultimate goal of the Church. Worship is. Missions exists because worship doesnâ€™t. Worship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not man. When this age is over, and the countless millions of the redeemed fall on their faces before the throne of God, missions will be no more. It is a temporary necessity. But worship abides forever.â€*

FromÂ Let the Nations Be Glad!: The Supremacy of God in Missions

However, the problem with a quote like this, is that someone, somewhere will probably pick holes in it. Before I proceed to do just that, let me say that I think that Piper has hit on a really important point here. Mission and worship are intimately entwined. As Piper says, mission ends in worship, but it also starts in worship as I somewhat less pithilyÂ pointed out:

> *If we are not moved to worship him, then it is unlikely that we will get off our metaphorical rear ends to witness to him to the ends of the earth either. Worship is the start of mission; it involves appreciating, enjoying and reflecting back to Christ his greatness, grace and majesty. If we canâ€™t be moved to tell Jesus how wonderful he is, we are unlikely to be moved to tell the same thing to our neighbours!*

There is some really good stuff, in Piperâ€™s quote and it deserves to be a well known as it is. But, it doesnâ€™t tell the whole story.Â A few years back, I quoted a couple of AussiesÂ who showed that if you see mission as more than simply winning converts, it doesnâ€™t cease in eternity, as Piper says it does.

> *Someone once challenged us that in heaven thereâ€™ll be no mission only worship. We couldnâ€™t disagree more. Sure, we wonâ€™t be feeding the poor or planting churches. Those missional activities will cease when every knee bows, every tongue confesses, and every tear is wiped away. But in the world to come, we will still be charged with the task of declaring Jesusâ€™ rule over all of life. We are looking forward to that unhindered mission of the new age and to worshipping through the process of offering our world back to God.*

I recently came across a quote fromÂ Stephen Holmes, who comes to the question from a different angle, but makes a very similar point:

> *There is one more consequence of suggesting that God is missionaryÂ in se: the divine mission cannot ever come to an end. There must, therefore, be an eschatological continuation of Godâ€™s mission. For all eternity, the Father will continue to send his Son and Spirit to bring peace and joy to creation. For all eternity this mission will be Â centred on the event of the crossâ€¦*
>
> *â€¦Because the grace of God is infinite, Godâ€™s gracious gifts to his church in Christ can never be exhausted, and so the gracious mission of our missionary God will never come to an end.*

Holmes (2006) from the International Journal of Systematic Theology.

Another strength of strength of Steveâ€™s statementÂ is that his eschatological picture centres on God, not on humanity. I find Piperâ€™s contention that mission will end, but worship wonâ€™t because â€œGod is ultimate, not manâ€ to be a little strange. Because mission and worship are both things that we do in response to God and when you put them centre stage, you put humanity centre stage, too.

Ultimately, mission is about Godâ€™s love as he reaches out to a lost world, through Christ. It isnâ€™t about what we do.

This is another post in my very irregular series onÂ mission sayings, in which I question some statements which are accepted at face value, but which may not be as straightforward as they seem.

This was first posted in August 2014