WHAT HAS ATHENS TO DO WITH JERUSALEM?

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Category: Observations

Over the past couple of weeks, I've been musing on the relationship between mission theology and practice. In particular, I'm interested in the differences between the way that academics and theologians talk about mission as compared to the way that missionaries and other practitioners talk about it.

For example, yesterday I came across this phrase:

> *We cannot understand evangelism and mission, without a theology ofÂ missio Dei.*

However, my research and reading suggests that many mission practitioners get on perfectly fine without a theology ofÂ *missio DeiÂ* (in English or Latin). These phrases and the concepts behind them are all over the more scholarly mission literature, but it is far harder to find them in mission magazines and they don't often crop up in conversations with mission leaders.

My observation is that mission theologians and academics speak a different language and have different concerns to mission practitioners. I'm not making a value judgement; I'm just stating what I have observed. So what is going on here?

It seems to me that there is a disconnect between the academics and the practitioners. Over the last decade there have been two fora for mission scholars, leaders and other practitioners to get together and discuss issues, but both are currently moribund. That's a shame.

I don't have any solutions, but here are a few random thoughts.

Most mission leaders are incredibly busy people and do not have time to keep up with current trends in mission theology. If they have time to read and think, they need to see some practical, short-term benefit from their reflections. Perhaps there is a need for academics to look at the practical outworkings of their ideas and to publish some more pragmatic works.

It takes ten to fifteen years of experience before people move into mission leadership. This means that some of the cutting edge issues that they discussed at Bible college are well out of date before they get to a position where they can implement them. Perhaps it will be another decade or so before a generation comes into leadership who are heavily influenced by thinking about the Mission of God. At which point, the academy might well be highlighting something else.

It could also be the case, that academics are neglecting to adequately contextualise their work. By not interacting with current practitioners, they are failing to take into account the realities and concerns of those on the coal-face of mission. To adapt John Stott's famous maxim, perhaps mission theologians need to study with the Bible in one hand and a mission agency magazine in the other.

Caveats

I realise that Tertullian's prhase that I used for the title of this blog post was referring to the secular

academy, not to Christian scholarship. It just seemed too good not to use.

More importantly, I know people on either side of this issue who don't fit the pattern. There are academics who are well rooted in practice and practitioners with a good academic background. However, these are the exceptions and the generalities of my post still stand.Â