WE DON'T MAKE THINGS GROW

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By promising big things, we are usurping God's role in mission. He is the one who brings growth, not us, and we need to avoid making any claims that suggest otherwise.Â
Category: Observations

> *I planted the seed in your hearts, and Apollos watered it, but it was God who made it grow.Â (1 Corinthians 3:6)*

Paul and Apollos were two very different people, who seem to have approached the issue of mission and evangelism in different ways; so much so that people took sides and compared them unfavourably. Paul's response is pretty simple; he says that he and Apollos are not really significant; it is God who brings success in mission work, not people.

Leaving aside the supposed rivalry between Paul and Apollos - though I may come back to it another day - I believe that there is some important stuff in this verse for those of us involved in mission today.

Do Your Own Job

Paul's statement makes it clear that it is God who brings success in mission, not us. Our job is to plant and water, not make things grow. This means that we need to concentrate on the way that we do our planting and watering and not fretting about the success of our our actions. This means that rather than worrying about the outcome of our mission, we need to concentrate much more on the way we are doing things.

We need to ensure that the way we carry out our mission work isÂ loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, good and faithful. This rules out any sort of manipulation of people, or information in order to get bums on seats or to seem to produce some sort of success. We have to get the basics right and in Christian mission, the basics are all about character and morals. No amount of strategic planning and no wonderful techniques can substitute for Christlikeness in mission.

Of course, there is a place for looking at results and learning from what works and what doesn't, but we have to approach all of this sort of planning and review with a large dose of humility.

We can't guarantee success; only God can do that. But we can plant and water in a way which is pleasing and honouring to him.

Don't Over-Promise

Mission publicity is full of big promises; fulfilling the Great Commission, changing the world, ending Bible poverty and so on. The problem is that these all fall into the "God made it grow" category, not the planting and watering one.

We can't actually promise any of these things. We can promise to witness to Jesus, to serve the poor and needy and to translate the Bible (though in truth, even these promises are pretty hard to keep when push comes to shove), but we can't promise what will happen as a result of these activities.

All that mission agencies can promise is that they will do their best, empowered by the Spirit and aided by the prayers and financial support of God's people, to faithfully and honestly serve their Lord by witnessing to Christ in whatever way they are called to do. Anything beyond this is in God's domain, not theirs.

Of course, the promise with this is that saying that you will be a faithful witness is nowhere near as sexy as saying that you will change the world.

Of course, I do recognise that one day, the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Glory of God as the waters cover the sea and every knee will bow to Jesus. World mission will be ultimately successful. However, what neither I nor anyone else knows is when this will happen, nor who will be the actors in the penultimate act of the divine drama. It may be modern mission agencies or it may be some other movement which hasn't even emerged yet.

So why do I get all hot and bothered about this sort of thing?

Firstly, I believe that the quest for success in mission and the urge to promise big accomplishments puts mission agencies on dodgy ground. It is easy to say and do things that might bring numerical success or raise more support, but which are not scrupulously honest or theologically valid. That's a problem.

A bigger problem, however, is that by promising big things, we are usurping God's role in mission. He is the one who brings growth, not us, and we need to avoid making any claims that suggest otherwise.