MISSION IS THE MOTHER OF THEOLOGY

Posted on January 5, 2018 by Eddie

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> *Contrary to the approach of many scholars, Paul was not a modern-day theologian sitting in his air-conditioned office reflecting on word usage, how he was really helping Jews and Gentiles resist empire, or how he was going to convince everyone that love is the answer. Paul was commissioned to deliver a message from Jesus Christ and was struggling with languages, finances, rejection, and lack of places to stay. He was especially struggling and praying to establish new Christian communities along the highways of the late Roman Empire. He was persecuted for his stubborn refusal to deny his commission. His intent was to proclaim the Kingdom, and his writings were all in service of that commitment (or commission). His writings were, in fact, missionary letters, and they should be read at least from this perspective. They also shed light on matters of ethics, moral behavior, and relations to civil authoritiesâ€"but incidentally, not essentially. (FromÂ Understanding Christian Mission: Participation in Suffering and GloryÂ by Scott Sunquist)*

Paul didn't write systematic theology, he wrote letters to churches who were dealing questions about the meaning and practice of their faith. Paul's own practical preoccupation with the question of how gentiles could be integrated into the covenant given the background of Old Testament teaching was never far from his thoughts and writing.

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Luther and the Reformers found fresh inspiration in Paul's letters when they applied them to the missionary situation they found themselves in Northern-Europe buried under stale Catholicism. The Reformers weren't dealing with Paul's original question about the integration of Gentiles into an essentially Jewish movement, but their grasping of the concept of justification by faith was incredibly important.

It might be obvious, but we are no longer in the first century, nor the sixteenth. We live in a very different world to the ones that Paul and Luther inhabited. Our cultural and missionary situations are different to the ones that they faced and we need to read Paul's work against our background. This does not invalidate the understandings of the past - far from it. But it does mean that we need to study Paul against the background of current challenges, not just look to the past for our understanding.

What does Paul's radical call to break down the barriers between races (originally Jews and Gentiles) mean for the church in the modern day UK? What about his teaching on "meat offered to idols" - how is this relevant to multi-cultural, multi-faith Britain. For hundreds of years, we have been used to living under a government which was broadly sympathetic to the Christian faith; what does Paul have to teach us about living under an increasingly hostile government? What can we learn

from the way that brothers and sisters in other parts of the world read and understand Paul against the background of the challenges they face?