LET'S GET UNENLIGHTENED

Posted on January 22, 2018 by Eddie

However, it is the technology and the reliance on rationalism that holds us back in our participation in God's mission ... The thing that we boast of and rely on is actually our biggest handicap!Â

Category: Observations

> *When the only tool you have is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail.*

There is a lot of wisdom in this old saying. The tools (physical or metaphorical) that we have at hand not only define how we solve a problem, but, I would argue, that they also define how we conceptualise the problem in the first place. If this is the case, then a quote from my last blog post becomes extremely important:

> *I believe that a great deal more effort needs to be given to linking the new demands of twenty-first-century mission to revitalizing and enriching worship and spiritual formation. The traditional tools of missionâ€"communication theory, cross-cultural skills, and an understanding of contextualizationâ€"alone do not seem up to the challenge.*
> *(FromÂ Engaging GlobalizationÂ by Bryant Myers.)*

Myers suggests that the traditional tools of mission - the things we train people to do - are not enough to meet the challenges of mission in the C21. I would take this a step further and suggest that because we are constrained by these tools, we are not really capable of grasping the nature of the challenges that we face.

Let me just dig into this a little deeper. In this short quote (and reflected through the whole book) Myers talks about two types of "tool". Worship and spiritual formation on one hand and communication theory etc. on the other. The first group could be referred to as "spiritual"; they are to do with formation as a disciple of Jesus. The second set of tools are "secular"; they are derived from the social sciences albeit with a Christian overlay in the context of mission.

We in the post-Enlightenment Western world, automatically draw these distinctions between sacred and secular. It's part of the culture that shaped us and we find it hard to imagine that there is any other way to view the world. The endless debates about the relative priorities of proclamation and social action in mission reflect this divide and it even extends to the way that we run our Christian business meetings. They say that if you want to know about water, you shouldn't ask a fish, because they don't know any different, likewise, it is hard for us to envisage a world without this divide between the sacred and secular.

However, for most of history and in many parts of the world today, people have viewed the sacred and secular in an integrated fashion; without drawing a hard and fast line between them. The Bible writers certainly view the world in this way; despite the best efforts of commentators to impose a Modern, Western worldview onto the text of the Bible.

So where does this take us? Myers argues that an approach based on the Enlightenment distinction between the sacred and secular is not enough to meet the challenges of mission in the C21. I would

suggest that those tools don't even allow us to define what the challenges are. Here are a few suggestions for a way forward.

- It is unwise, indeed impossible, to try and diagnose, much less solve the issues in world mission without significant input from Christians from outside of the Western world. This means that mission agencies and their boards need to consider how to include people with different experience and different worldviews to their own. To put it bluntly, if you board is all middle-aged and white, you are almost certainly missing some important points. Mission think tanks and conferences need to ensure that they have a mixture of input - not out of any sense of political correctness, but because without it they may not get to the real issues. This almost certainly means that there will be less opportunity for people like me to get involved in some of these things and to be honest, I'm not happy about that - but it is the right thing to do!
- We need to rethink how we run our planning meetings. The sacred-secular divide that means that we have a devotional and then get down to serious work must be discarded. We need to integrate prayer and meditation on the Scriptures into all parts of our work. To be honest, this isn't always comfortable for driven, task-orientated people, but if we are to meet the challenges of the present, much less the future, we need to learn to be uncomfortable.
- We need to acknowledge that the current fashion for data driven missiology is not, in an of itself, a solution to anything. There is, of course, a place for gathering information and setting targets, but that needs to be placed in a much broader, integrated approach to mission planning. We must not let statistics squeeze the Holy Spirit out of our decision making.
- We in the West need to reorientate our thinking and grow in humility. One result of the Enlightenment is that Westerners have tended to view the rest of the world as superstitious and primitive because of their worldview, whereas we are superior because of our technology and education. We may not use those terms today, but the attitude persists. However, it is the technology and the reliance on rationalism that holds us back in our participation in God's mission today and so people with a more integrated view of the spiritual and material worlds are taking our place. The thing that we boast of and rely on is actually our biggest handicap!
- This is not to say that there is no place for Westerners in mission; the worldwide church should be inter-dependant. We have our place, but it may not be the leadership role that we often assume is ours.