THE MISSION MOVEMENT: THE BIBLE

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All too often, references to the "Great Commission" are little more than proof-texting. We should know better!
Category: Observations

Whether you agree with his central thesis or not, I would suggest that Michael Stroope's book Transcending Mission: The Eclipse Of A Modern TraditionÂ is the most important book on world mission published in the last ten years or so (review here). It's a big book and not particularly cheap, but no one who is involved in leading, promoting or participating in cross-cultural mission can afford not to read it. Ten days ago, I had the privilege of helping to lead a seminar which discussed the book; Stroope himself and one of my heroes, David Smith, were among those speaking. You can read a report here.

Starting on page 324, Stroope looks at the modern mission movement and gives 8 characteristics of the tradition. Over the next few weeks, I'd like to briefly examine each of these in turn and then I may add a few of my own at the end. His first point relates to the Bible.

> *...interpreters from a range of denominational and confessional perspectives construct justifications for the modern mission movement by way of biblical foundations and themes.*

To be honest, this shouldn't come as much of a shock; of course, mission is based on the Bible. However, it is worth thinking a little about the way in which the Bible is actually used. Very often, the justification for mission is drawn from a very restricted set of texts. To quote Bryan Stanley:

> *Protestant and Catholic mission theology in the nineteenth and earlier twentieth century had derived the origin of Christian mission narrowly from the parting command of Christ to his disciples, or what evangelical Protestants in the course of the nineteenth century began to term the "Great Commission", by the early twentieth century they had come to associate this phrase almost exclusively with Matthew 28:18-20. (Christianity in the Twentieth Century: A World History. p.196)*

What is surprising is that good, conservative writers who would baulk at proof-texting as a method of biblical exegesis seem perfectly happy to base the whole of the outward expression of the Christian faith on three verses from the end of Matthew. They really should know better! The closing verses have to be read in the context of the whole Gospel, which in turn, has to be read within the whole canon of Scripture. You simply cannot isolate a few verses and build a whole methodology on them; we wouldn't do it in any other area of Christian practice, so why do we do it for mission?

An alternative approach is not so much to see mission in the whole Bible but to read the whole Bible through the lens of mission. The idea is not to look for the Biblical basis of mission, but to consider the missional basis for the Bible. Sometimes called a missional hermeneutic, this approach argues that the whole Bible was written from the perspective of mission. It is the story of God's mission to humanity. It is also the product of God's mission, in as much as it was written by people coming to grips with how to serve God in a complex and hostile world. Finally, it is also the tool of God's

mission because it contains his revelation that we are charged with taking to the whole world.

Leaving aside Stroope's question about whether "mission" is an appropriate term in the first place, I find the missional hermeneutic approach much more solid than the reductionist way in which too many people talk about the Great Commission. Whether we go the whole way to adopting a missional hermeneutic, at the very least, we have to read Scripture in context and not just take a few verses out of context because they appeal to our worldview and our organisational strategies.