THE MISSION MOVEMENT: EXEMPLARY PEOPLE

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The mission movement and historical people on pedestals.
Category: Observations

This is my second post on the characteristics of the modern mission movement according to Michael Stroope in his book Transcending Mission: The Eclipse Of A Modern Tradition.

> *â€œSuch heroic individuals as William Carey, Henry Martyn, Hudson Taylor, and Lottie Moon embody the values and spirit of the movement. The founding acts of the movement can be found in the imagery of young William Carey at his cobblerâ€™s bench with leather maps of the world on the walls and at the meeting of ministers at Kettering where Carey delivered his sermon. These lives and their actions have grown to mythological proportions, providing a powerful narrative for many of the beliefs of the tradition.â€ [p. 324]*

It is certainly true, that you can't go far in reading about mission agencies and the mission movement without bumping into one of these giants. William Carey, Hudson Taylor, CT Studd, Jim Elliot and Brother Andrew are among the names that crop up time and time again in popular literature about mission work and in agency literature and social media feeds. I'm not sure of the significance (or otherwise) of the fact that most of the "big names" in mission are male when for the last hundred years or so the majority of missionaries have been female. I'll let someone else deal with that one,

These heroes tend to be mentioned in three (and in some cases four) different ways.

As Examples of Piety:Â these great people are presented as models to emulate in terms of their faithfulness in prayer, reading the Bible and trusting in God.

As **Examples of Entrepreneurial Faith:**Â their faith in God allowed these people to do extraordinary things. They went to places to which others would not go, they saw opportunities for service in areas that were long overlooked and they opened up new frontiers for the gospel.

As Sayers of Pithy Sayings: I will return to this in a later blog post, but these famous people are almost all associated with one or two short, dramatic sayings which have taken on enormous significance in the mission movement.

As Founders of Agencies: Obviously, this doesn't apply to all of the great people but a significant number of them were instrumental in the foundation of mission agencies.

It is good for us to look at people from the past and to learn from them. However, I have a few concerns about the way in which these exemplary people dominate much of the mission publicity landscape. Here are a few thoughts:

They are not the norm: reading some mission biographies and history books would give you the impression that these extraordinary people are the norm in mission work. In truth, most missionaries are normal people, with the same struggles, frustrations and doubts as everyone else. They just have their struggles and doubts a long way from home and in a foreign language! More importantly, the spread of Christianity around the world has always been dependant on local people passing the

message on to their friends and families. Written history tells the stories of a few important people, whereas lived history is really all about millions of ordinary people whose names are forgotten. This is as true in church history as in the broader subject.

They Weren't Perfect: the way in which many of these people are presented in popular literature and mission publicity is rose-tinted, to say the least. Attempts to present objective, warts and all, biographies of these heroes are often seen as hostile, which is unfortunate.

They Aren't Always Good Examples: all of these characters were people of their time. They are not universal examples who can be followed uncritically in a different age. Of course, we can learn things from them, but we must do so critically and with discernment. For example, many of the pithy sayings for which these people are famous don't stand up to serious examination (more of that later) and in many cases, they showed a very poor understanding of the place of the church in mission.

An interesting question is why does the mission movement refer to these characters quite so frequently?Â I'm not sure that I have an answer, but I'm not entirely convinced that it is healthy.