THE MISSION MOVEMENT: HISTORIC FIGURES

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They weren't evangelicals and they weren't missionaries, so how come they are examples of evangelical mission?
Category: Observations

In his book Transcending Mission: The Eclipse Of A Modern Tradition, Micahel Stroope says that the modern mission movement has eight characteristics. Following on from yesterdays post about modern-dayÂ exemplary people, today's considers historic figures.

According to Stroope:

> *The mission tradition... is built on a line of progenitors, represented in individuals and groups, that can be traced back through the medieval period and Constantine to the early church and Paul (p.325).*

While I recognise this tendency in evangelical mission's writing, I am not convinced that it is as strong a feature as Stroope implies - at least not at a popular level. Partly, this is because at a popular level (in the UK at least) evangelicalism has very little interest in history. People are far more interested in what Anna from Milton Keynes is doing in Malawi today than they are in what Boniface from Crediton was doing in Europe thirteen hundred years ago.

With that *caveat* in place, I think it is still true that the evangelical mission movement coopts people from the past into its own story. Patrick, Francis, Boniface and the Nestorians in Asia are all cited as examples of missionary zeal and endeavour.

I think there are a couple of reasons (at least) why mission writers look to these figures from the past. The first is that their stories can be truly inspirational. While details may have been lost in the mists of time, the stories that surround, say, Patrick, are enough to motivate anyone to an interest in mission. Secondly, going back into history in this way gives historic precedent and depth to what is, after all, a modern tradition. Evangelicalism itself is a relatively modern phenomenon, and the evangelical mission's movement is not much over 200 years old (that's 10% of the life of the church, to put it in context). By drawing Boniface and Patrick into the story, it can be extended for well over a millennium.

However, there are a couple of problems with this concept, too.

The first is that, with the best will in the world, Patrick and co. were not evangelicals. I am not decrying their piety or their faith in the slightest. However, one of the features of evangelicalism is that it tends to distinguish itself off from other forms of Christianity (I'll return to this in a few days, in this series). If these heroes of the past were around today, I have no doubt that evangelical websites and blogs would be full of their shortcomings and doctrinal lapses. Personally, I feel uncomfortable when we coopt people from the past into our tradition, when we would be unlikely to accept them in the present. The second issue is that people like Patrick, Boniface *et al.* were not missionaries in the modern sense of the word. This is one of the central theses of Stroope's book. We make a mistake when we read our modern conceptions of the word mission back into the past.

I realise that this is a somewhat arcane discussion and is unlikely to interest many people. However, I do think that there is an important issue hidden in here that we need to get to grips with. Rather than trying to demonstrate that the modern mission movement has a long past, I think we would do far better to acknowledge that it is, in fact, a recent phenomenon. Not only that, but it is the latest in a long series of movements which have spread the Christian message around the world. One of the implications of this is that the modern mission movement will one day be replaced by something else in the economy of God (or has it already?). Rather than trying to hold on desperately to our current structures and movements, we need to be aware of what God is doing around the world and we must shape our efforts to fit what he is doing rather than trying to make things fit into our conception of what mission should be.