THE MODERN MISSION MOVEMENT: COHERENCE AND EXCLUSION

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Category: Observations

This is the seventh in my series of posts on the features of the modern missionary movement mentioned by Michael Stroope in his excellent bookÂ Transcending Mission: The Eclipse Of A Modern Tradition.

According to Stroope, one of the features of the modern mission movement is "creating coherence through exclusion".

> *â€œThe modern mission movement is read by most as â€œmodern Protestant missions.â€ The narrative of modern mission tradition highlights the expansion of Protestantism in the modern era, and thereby the modern mission movement is glossed as a Protestant movement over against that of Catholics and Orthodoxâ€*
> *(p. 326)*

I think that the situation in the UK is a little more complex than Stroope describes for this issue. Firstly, I would suggest that creating coherence through exclusion is a feature of evangelicalism in general and not something which is specific to the mission movement. Part of the reason for the proliferation of statements/declarations of faith is to create borders so that we know who is in the camp and who isn't. Evangelicals are very good at drawing boundaries and separating themselves from others who believe many of the same things.

However, I would suggest that the mission movement is one area that bucks this trend to some extent. In my experience, missionaries and mission agencies are liable to be fairly open to interaction with people from other traditions. I think that there are a couple of key reasons for this.

- By force of circumstances, missionaries end up working with people from across the evangelical spectrum as well as with Christians from other traditions. It is entirely possible for someone to be very involved in the life of a church and yet have nothing to do with people from other backgrounds or denominations. In mission life, this just isn't possible. Presbyterians work alongside Pentecostals and Reformed and Free Will Baptists have to find ways of getting along without arguing. In these circumstances, issues of churchmanship become less important to the individuals and the organisations concerned.
- Secondly, tightly defined theological and church systems rarely survive an encounter with other cultures and with Christians who have a very different perspective on the world.

It would seem to me, that openness to others may well be a feature of the mission movement. This is one reason why returning missionaries often find it difficult to settle into a church in the UK, they are used to a much broader engagement with other Christians than they would typically find at home. Extrapolating from this, it is no surprise that the World Council of Churches eventually

emerged from the 1910 missionary conference in Edinburgh. However, while there is this ecumenical tendency within the mission movement, I think that the situation is actually more complex than I have painted so far. Without wishing to be too cynical, I believe that mission agencies, consciously or unconsciously, find places in the market where they can attract prayer, financial support and recruits. This is a multi-dimensional issue, but in the context of today's discussions, I see three broad strands that missions adopt.

- Broadly Ecumenical: there are agencies who work right across the whole Christian spectrum. They may have evangelical roots and an evangelical declaration of faith but in practice these count for little as they will accept staff members who do not share these convictions and will accept support from right across the board.
- Evangelical Ecumenical: the majority of mission agencies are happy to work with anyone who fits within a broad definition of evangelical.
- Non-Ecumenical: a number of agencies focus their efforts on one segment of evangelicalism. Those who do this, tend to focus on the more conservative end of the spectrum. Stroope's convergence through exclusion narrative fits best for these groups.

However, I should point out that what is true of mission agencies, is broadly true of churches, conferences, publishing houses and other expressions of evangelicalism. I think mission agencies have an inbuilt tendency to be more ecumenical than others, but they still reflect the broader trends of the church.

I realise that people will want me to identify some agencies which fall into each of the three groups above. However, I've got no interest in getting into arguments with supporters and staff from groups who think I'm being unfair on them!