MISSION: BALANCING THE BIBLE

Posted on November 12, 2018 by Eddie

A biblical approach to mission avoids both simply trying to apply Paul's methods in an ahistorical fashion and also adopting the latest insights from anthropology and sociology without any biblical reflection.
Category: Observations

It will surprise no one when I say that I am absolutely convinced that the Bible is central to the work of mission. We find the reasons for mission in the Bible's overarching narrative of God's involvement with humanity down through the ages and we find examples of mission practice throughout both the Old and New Testaments. However, when it comes to actually looking at how the Bible should shape our mission practice today, things are slightly more complex.

We can't simply copy Biblical examples:Â perhaps the most obvious examples of mission in the Bible are found in the book of Acts. However, we cannot simply take what Paul and the others did in Acts and repeat it today. There are a few reasons for this; the most obvious is that we don't live in the first-century Roman empire. Our world is different and the challenges and opportunities that we face are not the same as those that Paul and his companions confronted. Different issues require different solutions. Not only that, but we actually know more than Paul and his friends did. We have the benefits of 2,000 years of mission history, not to mention the insights of social sciences, linguistics and anthropology, all of which can inform the way in which we go about our mission.

We can't ignore the Bible, either:Â it is tempting in our modern, technologically savvy age to build mission strategies on the basis of available technologies, anthropological insights and other products of our society. The latest, greatest thing will allow us to reach and impact more people than ever before. We can do things faster and more efficiently than ever before. However, if we don't think through the use of these technologies and insights in a Biblical fashion we can end up sacrificing the deep, life-changing, impact of Christian mission on the altar of efficiency. If we are not careful the way in which we do things can, if we are not careful, profoundly change the message that we are seeking to convey.

If we wish to be truly Biblical in our approach to mission, we will need to do the hard work of reading and meditating on Scripture in our context and then evaluating new approaches and methodologies in the light of that meditation. There is no simple checkbox form that allows us to evaluate whether something is Biblical or not. It is not for nothing that Scripture continually exhorts us to meditate on our reading - this is as important in corporate mission life as it is in our personal devotional life. In my experience, mission practitioners are much better at applying strategies and methodologies than they are at meditating Biblically on these things. (The way in which devotional talks are used in business meetings is a reflection of this.)

This whole theme is reflected in a more thorough fashion in this excellent quote fromÂ The J. H. Bavinck Reader:

> *Bavick repeatedly emphasized that one must avoid the pretense of simply deriving misisonary practice directly from the Bible. It would short sighted to reflexively apply Paull's method to the present for example, since so ahistorical a move could actually lead to anÂ unbiblical approach. Mthodological principles must be discenred in Scripture very cautiously, functioning only as guidelines and boundary markers for our own work. In this*

> *sense, missoins method was to be grounded in theological reflection and not merely biblicistic.*
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> *At the same time, Bavinck protested against the secularized missions method that only took anthropology, ethnology, sociology, and psychology into consideration. The content and the method of mission are inextricably linked, he insisted. Since mission involved the voice of Christ himself, the work of mission is in principle an encouter between the living Christ and people who are imprisioned in all manner of foolish thoughts. Christ mus recognize himself in any missionary approach.*
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> *The incarnation provided Bavinck with the cardinal argument for a personal and intensive approach to mission: "The revelation of God has never kept floating somewhere at a distance, has never come down to us as Â a general truth, but has entered into our history, has taken on bodily form and dwelt among us. Because the incarnation of the Word is the heart of revelatory history, revelation has the character of a living, concrete encounter." How then does theology relate to anthropology, ethnology, sociology and psychology? On the one hand, theology leaves room for these disciplines because there are no "abstract incorporeal and ahistorical sinners but only concrete sinners, whose sinful life is, among other factors, determined by various cultural and historical factors, by poverty, hunger, superstition, tradition, chronic illness, tribal customs, and a thousand other things." On the other hand, theology limits the use and appication of these disciplines.*

The J. H. Bavinck ReaderÂ was available at a very reduced price recently (which is why I bought it). It might be worth looking around to see if it is available cheaply.