IMAGINATION NEEDED

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Mission is a biblical universal, the modern missionary movement was a specific, culturally conditioned initiative which, while amazingly successful in its time, is likely to become increasingly dysfunctional if the attempt is made to preserve it as it is.
Category: Observations

I recall hearing NT Wright speaking at a conference, where he spoke about having been on a phone-in radio show, where he had (quite rightly) questioned the validity of "the rapture" as an aspect of Christian teaching. One caller, incensed by this idea said that they didn't see how the good Bishop could expect to get to heaven if he wasn't carried up in the rapture. For this person, the whole Christian hope for eternity had somehow become dependant on one disputed area of theology. There are people for whom the whole of the present and future, religion and politics are viewed through the spectacles of rapture theology. everything becomes shaped by this one idea.

The thing is, I think that we can all be guilty of doing something similar. I believe that this is a particular temptation for mission agencies; we define mission in terms of our own activities and structures.

In practice, it is far from easy to define what Christian mission is. Some writers say that mission is just about everything that the church does, while others restrict it to evangelism and others pick every possible point in between. Then there is the question of location; for some mission is what we do when we cross language and culture barriers, but for others, mission can happen anywhere. However, there are also those who would say that we shouldn't describe mission in terms of human activities in the first place; mission should actually be defined in terms of the character and activities of the triune God.

However, in practical terms, many mission agencies never dig into these questions; they leave them to the academics and the Bibel college. Effectively, these agencies define mission in terms of the things that they do. In otherwise they start with their own activities and say that this is what mission is.

A similar thing happens with structures; we have become so accustomed to a particular model of mission society/agency that we find it hard to envisage mission happening without those structures being in place. This leads mission societies to spend time reproducing their own structures, or something similar to them around the world - including in places with a very different church history and tradition to the western world in which mission societies first emerged.

At first, it might appear that this is a rather picky point and one which doesn't matter too much, but I think that there are two significant, related issues which emerge from this.

- **Control**: in many situations, whether they want to or not, western mission agencies operate from a position of power. In particular, they control the flow of personnel and (most importantly) money from the west. This means that they can determine what it is that local partners do in many parts of the world. When their view of mission is controlled by their own activities and structures, they are likely to invest resources in partners who are effectively clones of themselves. However, in different contexts, different aspects of mission might be more relevant and it is almost certain that new organisational structures will be appropriate

outside of the west.

- **Relevance**: the previous comment notwithstanding, the church in the rest of the world is growing far faster than the church in the west. It is Christians in Asia, Africa and Latin America who will determine the parameters and structures for mission in the future. A number of authors talk about an emerging paradigm for mission. If western agencies are to continue to be relevant in the future, they will need to take a step back from their own activities and structures and to engage with partners from across the globe on an equal footing. If they continue as they are, they will eventually become irrelevant. I've quoted this line phrase from David Smith more than once and will undoubtedly do so again:

> *Any serious study of the history of the Christian mission leads to the conclusion that, while the cross-cultural transmission of the faith constitutes the very lifeblood of the church and is one of the most vital religious characteristics, the means and methods by which this has been done are various and many. Thus, while mission is a biblical universal, the modern missionary movement was a specific, culturally conditioned initiative which, while amazingly successful in its time, is likely to become increasingly dysfunctional if the attempt is made to preserve it in the new context we have described.*

I've blogged on this sort of theme more than once (see here and here) and will undoubtedly do so more in the future.