CARTS AND HORSES

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Some thoughts about the West's involvement in mission. Why things are the way they are and what we might do to change.
Category: Observations

Yesterday, my friend Peter Rowan posted the following tweet as a part of an ongoing discussion about the Western mission movement:

> *Authentic witness & the structures that enable it in any context, understands that...*
> ** Being precedes doing*
> ** Formation precedes mobilisation*
> ** Relationship precedes task*
> ** Theology precedes strategy*
> ** Listening precedes action*
> ** Humility precedes everything*
> *Hav we revrsd these?*
>
> *â€" Peter Rowan (@ptrrowan) November 19, 2018*

I found this to be a fascinating and personally challenging set of oppositions. What's more, I think that Peter is correct in implying that these things have often been reversed in the Western mission movement. However, what fascinates me is the reasons why these things happen. One of the traps that we fall into is that we identify a problem and then immediately rush to a solution without seeking to understand why the problem occurred in the first place. This is actually, another symptom of the issues that Peter raised in his tweet.

The problem is that each of these issues arises from a complex set of values and circumstances. Not only that, we are dealing with the behaviour of both individuals and organisations. It is not enough to try and change, we have to identify both the issues that lie behind the problem and any barriers to change and address those before any meaningful transformation can occur. In this post, I won't look at the organisational issues, but I worked through a hypothetical question a couple of years ago which might help.

So what are the underlying issues which lie behind the reversal of the values that Peter set out?

Individualism: Putting it simply, life in the West is based on the premise that the individual is more important than the group. It is the role of society to provide satisfaction and actualisation to the individual. This way of thinking has long roots and is deeply entrenched in the way that we see the world. As a result, Western Christianity tends to be highly individualistic. An illustration of this is found in the way that we treat the "armour of God" in Ephesians 6 as being addressed to individual "soldiers", in defiance of both Greek grammar and any knowledge of the way that Roman armour and legions worked. One of the keys to this passage is mutual dependence, but that tends to be missed out entirely when we talk about it.

Sacred-Secular Divide: In our thinking, we tend to make a clear distinction between the sacred and secular or the physical and spiritual realms rather than taking an approach which integrates the two.

This is worked out in all sorts of different ways in mission including the ongoing discussions about the place of proclamation and social action. Even the way that we organise our business meetings reflects this division.

The Value of Action: We like to do stuff. It is a value in our society to work, to be seen to work and to achieve things. We have a deep-seatedÂ value in cause and effect and this means that if we want to see change, we believe we have to be doing something to make it happen. In his description of evangelicals, the historian David Bebbington says that one of our defining characteristics is "activism". We are doers.

The Superiority of the West: this actually flows out of the previous points. Western society has developed in a way which has allowed it to develop technologically and economically. This is partly due to the philosophical climate which allowed experimentation and innovation, but also partly due to the resources available in the western world. This has led to a belief that Westerners are innately superior to the rest of the world. Even if we avoid the excesses of this position, we still have to deal with the baggage that we believe that we can organise and fund things better than others.

In different ways, these values (and others I could add) are related to Enlightenment philosophy, which has been the dominant world-view in our world for the last 200 years or so. However, there are other factors which play into this, too.

Supporter Expectations: mission agencies can only exist as long as they can motivate people to pray for and financially support their work. Because of this, they have (or at least they believe they have?) to keep producing good news stories that demonstrate that they are accomplishing things. It's crude, but I've been in meetings where agency leaders have said that they need to show that supporters are getting "bang for their bucks".

Hammers: it is said that if the only tool you have is a hammer then every problem looks like a nail. Western mission agencies evolved at a time and place to address the issues that faced them. We are no longer in that time and place and today's issues are different - but our structures are the same.

I could go on, but this gives an idea of some of the underlying issues that I believe need to be addressed as we look at western involvement in mission in the future.

How can we address them? The bottom line is that we can't do it on our own. Agency leadership and boards need to spend serious time reflecting on these issues with Christians from other parts of the world and exploring what the role of the Western church should be in the future.