A STEP IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION?

Posted on March 11, 2019 by Eddie

"While the Western mission enterprise has played a significant role in the more recent spread of the gospel, changes in its assumptions and practices are long overdue and absolutely necessary." But...
Category: Observations

A few days ago, a group involved in mission work posted what they called A Confession and an Invitation online. The preamble states:

> *The message of Jesus has spread around the world, and yet, the gospel of the kingdom has yet to reach everyone, everywhere. While the Western mission enterprise has played a significant role in the more recent spread of the gospel, changes in its assumptions and practices are long overdue and absolutely necessary.*
>
> *With humility and an attitude of sincere repentance, we acknowledge the need to shift from aggressive, consumerist, and even denigrating language, assumptions, and actions that have become norms in the life and mission of the Western church. We know that to participate in the coming kingdom of God, we must be continually transformed in our words and actions. To this end, we confess our need for deep change and invite, even plead, for others to join us.*

This is good stuff and it should have whetted your appetite to read the whole thing - go ahead and do that now, before reading on.

I should say that I have good friends who were involved in the process which led to drawing up this document and that I was interviewed at one stage as it was being developed. I should also make it clear that I agree with every word. However, as you might expect, I have some significant reservations about the statement.

Who Are These Individuals?

As I mentioned, I know some of the people who drew up this document and I admire and respect them. But my problem is that they are individuals, though they belong to churches and/or agencies, they were not acting in any particular official capacity. They were speaking for themselves. One of the big problems of the Western Mission Movement (see below) is that it is highly individualistic. Most of the rest of the world which does not share the European Enlightenment tradition operates from a more communal basis. Not only that, but Scripture generally works from a communal basis, too (though this is often hidden to English readers because of the way that the word "you" works). One of the roots of the issues that the document seeks to address lies in the individualistic nature of Western missions. I'm not sure that the best way to address these issues is via a self-selected group of people. Though well-motivated, it seems to be perpetuating the issues of the past.

What Western Mission Movement?

The document refers to the Western Mission Movement, but I'm not entirely convinced that there is any such monolith. I think there are a number of Western movements which are intertwined and which share common roots. The British experience of the end of empire, the decline of national prestige and the recession of the church is very different to the experience in the United States and

leads to a different approach to mission and interactions across cultures. Other European nations have different understandings again. In his book Transcending Mission, Michael Stroope highlights some of the features of the Western Mission Movement - in my PhD research, I found that a significant number of these were not relevant in the UK. There are historic and organisational ties across the different expressions of mission, but these do not eliminate the differences. There were times when I am extremely uneasy about some of the ways that my American Wycliffe colleagues speak about missionÂ - and I've no doubt that they are just as concerned about me. Western missions certainly have issues to address, but I'm not convinced that they can all be lumped together in the way that this document suggests.

Who Cares?

One of the features of evangelicalism is that groups of people get together for a meeting and then write a statement (or declaration, open letter, manifesto or what-have-you) which the rest of us are supposed to react to. I was at a WEA Missions Commission meeting which came up with the Letter from Smyrna to the Global Church. I'm not sure how many people in the Global Church have read it; I've certainly never heard it referred to in the five years since it was produced. In my research, I discovered that even key documents such as the Lausanne Covenant and the Cape Town Commitment were not particularly studied or referred to within the British agencies that I looked at. If we aren't taking on board substantive documents such as these, which emerge from truly global gatherings, who is going to look at yet another letter?

BUT...

If you've endured this torrent of negativity so far, let me try and redress the balance somewhat.

There is an old joke about a motorist asking directions from a farmer way out in the countryside who was told: "If I was going there, sir, I wouldn't start from here".

I think this sums up the problem that this document faces. Mission from the West is diverse, it is highly individualised, fragmented and poorly integrated into broader church structures. There is no one who speaks for world mission (though there are a few who claim that they do). Any response to the weaknesses of the way we do mission will emerge from this context and will reflect the situation that we are in and this is what has happened here. We have an excellent document, which shows some real weaknesses in its origins and presentation - but they reflect the messy reality that we are living with.

This document gives a sketch of a road map for a way forward. In an ideal world, if we wanted to get to where it is pointing, we wouldn't start from here - but we have no choice because this is where we are.

So with my reservations in place (and I think it is important to honestly admit these if the document is to be of any use), I commend the Confession and an InvitationÂ to you. If you didn't read it the first

time, go and do it now.

I would encourage church and agency leadership teams and boards to spend some time thinking through this document. It is only short, less than one side of A4, so there is no excuse not to (one of the issues I discovered in my research was that people consider the Cape Town Commitment to be too long to work with). Think and pray through the points raised and consider honestly which ones apply to you (not everything applies to everyone) and then consider ways in which you can change and do things differently. Confession is all very well, but what we really need is repentance.