ACTS AND MISSION: THE GREAT COMISSION

Posted on March 28, 2019 by Eddie

Just before his ascension, Jesus explained to his disciples what mission is and where it happens.
Category: Bible & Mission

> *But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.â€™ (Acts 1:8)*

I've written at length about the "great commission" narratives in Matthew and Acts and you can find those posts here. I don't intend to repeat everything I've ever written on the subject in this post, but I would like to highlight two issues.

What Mission Is All About

MissionÂ can be a complicated business; Iâ€™ve just spent four years researching and writing a thesis discussing some of the complexities. What exactly is the relationship between proclamation and social action? How do you define unreached peoples (and should you be defining them anyway)? What is the best strategy for short-term mission? The questions go on and on. Books are written, sermons are preached and strategy papers are carefully developed then filed away and forgotten.

Now donâ€™t get me wrong, this stuff is importantâ€¦ well, important-ish.

It might seem obvious, but when we want to discuss what mission is, what it isnâ€™t and what it should be, the best place to turn is the Bible. This short statement by Jesus shortly before his ascension is particularly key.

True to form, we tend to get hung up on the strategic details; what exactly are the modern equivalents of Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth. You donâ€™t have to dig very deep into mission books and sermons to find various schemes that will explain where these places are for you, today. However, we tend to spend less time thinking about what we should do when we get to those places; **witnessing to Jesus in the power of the Spirit.**

If you want a good, short definition of mission, you canâ€™t do much better than this. If you feel this is insufficiently Trinitarian, you could add a little phrase which isnâ€™t in the original, but which is consistent with the whole of Scripture.

Mission is witnessing to Jesus in the power of the Spirit to the glory of God the Father.

Everything else, all the discussions about strategy and such like are secondary to this simple reality. Mission is about bearing witness to Jesus; telling his story and pointing people to him. Everything else is just details.

Mission must involve some sort of verbal proclamation; you canâ€™t witness to Jesus without telling people about him. This might happen in church, in the classroom, in quiet discussions in a coffee shop, over the airwaves or internet or in print â€“ but words have to be involved. In almost all situations, mission must also involve some sort of actions; these might be planned and organised

such as running a clinic in Jesusâ€™ name, or they might be spontaneous, helping a friend in need. Our actions either reinforce or completely undermine our words â€“ by their fruits,Â you will know them.

Our mission might be translating the Bible in Central Africa, planting a church in an Asian megacity or supporting refugees in Southern Europe; our real job is to witness to Jesus in the power of the Spirit. Our day to day words and actions are every bit as important as the planned, organised activities. We can preach the best sermon, or give the most accurate translation of a verse, but this is undermined if our lives and actions do not consistently point people to Jesus.

When we lose sight of this, we lose the whole point of mission.

Where Does Mission Happen?

Generally, Jesus words â€œJerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earthâ€ are taken to imply that mission should be local (Jerusalem), regional (Judea and Samaria) and international (ends of the earth). Iâ€™m not entirely convinced that we can take this quite so definitively; It seems to me that Jesus could equally be using a figure of speech to mean â€œeverywhereâ€ . In the end, the impact is the same, itâ€™s just that by my reading mission is seen as a whole, rather than fragmented into three aspects.

Quite often the term â€œends of the earthâ€ is used in an almost pejorative manner to describe places which are a long way from us physically and metaphorically; deserts, jungles and exotic places. However, the thing with â€œthe ends of the earthâ€ is that it all depends where you are starting from. The rainforests of Papua New Guinea may seem like the ends of the earth if you are starting off from Barnsley, but less so if you live in West Papua. For people living in the Pacific, South Yorkshire may well seem like the â€œends of the earthâ€ . The thing is, when there are believers all around the world, the â€œends of the earthâ€ is also all around the globe. Mission is from everywhere to everywhere because there are believers (just about) everywhere and there is certainly a need absolutely everywhere. Which brings us back to why I prefer reading Acts 1:8 the way I do.

Another way that people read this passage is to say that the â€œends of the earthâ€ consist of those places where people havenâ€™t heard about Jesus; where people are â€œunreachedâ€ as the jargon goes. I think there is some value in this approach, but I donâ€™t think we can take it as an absolute. One of the problems is defining exactly what the word â€œunreachedâ€ means. There are a number of competing definitions which shows that this isnâ€™t as straightforward as it might appear at first glance. A second problem is that people keep having babies and there is a need to â€œmake disciplesâ€ in every generation. One of the ways that people deal with this is to say that a group are reached when there is a church who are capable of making disciples locally. This is usually calculated by saying that when there is a certain population of Evangelical Christians the people group are reached (Iâ€™ll ignore the difficulty of measuring how many Evangelicals

there are anywhere for the moment).

The problem is, that just because there is a church in an area it does not mean that it is capable of reaching out and making disciples amongst its own people. Letâ€™s be blunt, the church in Europe (including the UK) has not been doing this effectively for a number of generations now. This part of the world might be considered â€œreachedâ€ , but for all sorts of reasons the church is struggling to maintain itself, much less reach out to its own people. The â€œends of the earthâ€ are here!

When we say that mission is from everywhere to everywhere, we are making a statement about the interdependency of the church worldwide. We need each other. The church in the UK has a long history of sending people out to our â€œends of the earthâ€ which is a good thing. However, we also need people to come here, to their â€œends of the earthâ€ .

Where are the â€œends of the earthâ€ ?

You are sitting in them.

If this post sounds familiar, it is because it is essentially a reposting of two articles from earlier in the year; this one and that one.