

Current Thoughts

from Dwight's corner

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e-Current 060125

This started out as a report on my recent trip to Costa Rica, but quickly got out of hand. At this point I plan to break it into several segments.

Friday afternoon during the GRR Mission Conference I spoke briefly about the history and changing context of missions. Five characteristics of our changing mission context were identified: Post-Colonialism, Post-Denominationalism, Immigration, Secular USA, and Beyond Geography. All of these present a challenge to churches in America, and are reflected in the mission commitment of the Region in general, and in our covenant relationship with the Federation in particular.

Post-Colonialism. The modern missionary movement emerged in an era of great empires. Countries and peoples around the world were dominated (culturally if not politically) by monarchs and governments centered in Western Europe. Whether we want to admit it or not, the U.S.A. was also deeply involved in its own variety of colonialism by the close of the 19th Century.

In addition, this was an era of great exploration and fascination with “uncivilized” cultures. The National Geographic Society (1888), and similar organizations, brought photographs and stories from remote lands and exotic cultures right into our living rooms.

Conscious or not, these two realities left a deep imprint on missions in its formative stages. The superiority of Western culture, civilization, and thought was a given. At times there were even open claims of the intellectual and moral superiority of Western European “races.” Too often Carey’s high call to missions (“For there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek: for the same Lord over all is rich unto all that call upon Him.”) was tainted or even lost as mission “compelled by the love of Christ” became the unwitting tool of cultural conquest. The resulting oppression ranged from overt arrogance and control to well-intended (but no less debilitating) parentalism. [As an aside, I will simply say that the humanitarian infatuation with “the oppressed” and “the marginalized” has within in it the same seeds for oppression.]

Consequently, many worldwide Christians are embittered toward and suspicious of missions and missionaries based in North America or Europe. Worse than that, we have become blind to our own motives, the impact of our methods, the hidden content of our message, as well as our own moral and cultural failings.

In today’s mission context it is extremely problematic for any people to claim an unexamined moral superiority over another (I am not saying all morals are equal). It is even more problematic to presume cultural superiority (I am not saying that we have nothing to teach—I am saying that we must also become learners). Would-be missionaries (and missionary-sending churches) need to thoughtfully and prayerfully examine their motives, methods, and message.

Post-Denominationalism. In other places I have talked about changes in American denominationalism. Here I will limit my comments to how the changing context of denominationalism impacts missions. In its heyday, “denominational missions” meant that churches and individuals sent their money to a denominational agency (or society). That denominational agency selected, appointed and supported missionaries. From time to time, those “real live missionaries” would return home and mesmerize their supporters with tales of living in mud huts, bringing truth and modernity (these were hard to separate) to uncivilized tribes. [Yes, I know this is an unflattering caricature—but I use it to make the point.]

While I still advocate for cooperative missions (I believe it is part of the genius of Baptist life), there were several unintended consequences. First, only those who went “across the sea” to live and work were real missionaries. Second, the missionary imperative of “average” Christians was satisfied by sending money to someone else who hired a “professional” missionary.

Not only are both of these consequences poor theology, they are a poor fit with our missiological context today.

There is a growing passion for hands-on (even if short-term) mission work in our churches. Something else has also changed. Almost without exception, persons who have gone on a mission trip speak of how they themselves have been changed and renewed by the experience. In a sense, the mission experience is becoming an extended “retreat” in which the power of God is poured out on the people of God in a setting of work. The result is renewal.

Consequently, mission work trips are exploding. In addition to the nine “official” mission trips from GRR to Costa Rica in the last four years, I can easily name trips by individuals and churches from GRR to Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Puerto Rico, Mexico, Thailand, and the Philippines. (Not to mention all the “home mission” trips.) I am confident that is only the tip of the iceberg. Such mission involvement was rare fifty years ago. Christians today increasingly understand that they are called to be missionaries—even if that is not their daytime job. They are not satisfied to send their money to someone else and claim to be a mission people.

This presents us with at least two challenges. It challenges denominations to carefully re-think their mission strategies which are based on 19th Century ideas of placing full-time, professional missionaries on the field. Secondly, it challenges all of us to adequately prepare “volunteer” missionaries. Well-intended, faithful volunteers can easily fall into the same traps as colonial era missionaries. Further, if direct mission involvement is to have meaningful, lasting impact, there must be a time of intentional, theological reflection upon return.

There is one final challenge to denominational missions: Money. In addition to the fact that more and more Christians are not satisfied just to send money, they are also seeking giving opportunities that are more personal.

The genius of cooperative missions that evolved into denominational missions was rooted in a pattern of common financial support. In this pattern, participants threw their mission money into a pot, and then the denomination used that generous financial support to recruit, train, send, and maintain professional missionaries on the field. The strategy was revolutionary, and worked great in its time. However, the pot is beginning to crack. (For American Baptists, that pot is United Mission).

For at least twenty-five years, those who study philanthropy of all kinds have noted major changes. Donors like to see a direct connection between their contributions and the impact on individuals.

Beyond that, there has been a growing distrust of institutions in America, and that is reflected in financial support.

Both are problems when our financial base is a common funding strategy. While there has been faithful stewardship, where every penny counts, and there are wonderful stories of missionary work that we can all claim, it remains unsatisfying. Everybody's story has a way of becoming nobody's story.

Much of this is generational. Younger folks will read this and tend to say, "Yes, of course. I want a personal relationship with Missionary Jones and I want to know that my contribution is having an impact." Older folks will tend to read this, shake their heads and say, "What are you talking about? We do this together because we are the People of God together. This is why we have a denomination."

The challenge for us during this time of "living between the ages," is to provide faithful ways for good stewards with both inclinations to connect with missions through their financial support. That also involves educating potential givers of the importance of essential, but less-glamorous needs.

This challenge impacts all denominations, agencies, and institutions. The financial crisis in the Great Rivers Region is, to a large extent, reflective of this. Changes in funding strategies by the Board of International Ministries (I think primarily of the Mission Partnership Teams) are not motivated by a malicious intent to destroy United Mission, but by the desire to adapt to a new era of mission support.

In short order I will continue this discussion with Post-Denominationalism, Immigration, Secular USA, Beyond Geography, and, finally, my report from Costa Rica. The topics do integrate. Please read them all before you react.

