MISSION AND DIALOGUE

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Category: Observations

Dialogue, discussion and listening are a key part of any mission or evangelism. However, there are those who are very uncomfortable with this concept and who would insist that mission and evangelism are all about proclaiming the truth of the gospel and not about hearing the errors that other people espouse. I've heard it suggested that dialogue is ok in mission as long as it is obvious who is in charge!

I think that there are (at least) three reasons why this is mistaken and why open and honest dialogue is not just important but vital to any mission work.

Firstly, I'd suggest that an unwillingness to enter into real dialogue shows a massive lack of confidence in the message that we are supposed to be sharing. If you are certain of the ground on which you are standing and the gospel that you are proclaiming, you will have nothing to fear from hearing other people explain their beliefs.

Secondly, there is a question of respect. If we won't listen to other people, why should they listen to us? There is a broader question here about being willing to walk alongside people and share their lives as part of the process of mission. You may consider that your faith is far more important than anything that your friends have to talk about, but they almost certainly don't agree and they will want to share what is important to them, too.

Thirdly, if we don't listen to people, we will almost certainly misunderstand and misconstrue their beliefs and our presentation of the gospel is likely to go flying over their heads in a blaze of irrelevance. To illustrate this, dig out a secular account of what it is that evangelicals believe and then compare it to your own religious, political and social positions. In all likelihood, it will miss the mark substantially. We are so used to evangelical beliefs being misrepresented in the media that we hardly think about it anymore. Why then, do we assume that our beliefs about other people's views are any more accurate than theirs are about ours. Very few Muslims, Hindus, Atheists or what-have-yous believe exactly what the textbooks say they believe. There is nothing quite so embarrassing as telling someone what it is that their religion teaches only to find that they believe something very different. Been there, done that.

One last thought; if the only way to present the gospel is by proclamation and not by discussion, what on earth was Paul doing holding discussions in the debating hall of Tyrannus (Acts 19:9)?