BOOKS I HAVE READ: MULTICULTURAL KINGDOM

Posted on December 9, 2020 by Eddie

Whatever we do, when we talk about Western Christianity in the twenty-first century, we need to bear in mind that it is not all white and it does not only speak a European language.
Category: Observations

I've already shared a few notes from Multicultural Kingdom: Ethnic Diversity, Mission and the Church (which inspired a Twitter conversation) by Harvey Kwyani and you will have picked up that I think that it is a very good book indeed. I will go further and say that it is an important book which catches the most essential issue facing evangelicalism in the UK today - an issue which is widely ignored. If you lead a church in a large town or city, you should read this book. Don't argue, just buy it!

The book is a paperback of just over 250 pages long. The style sits somewhere between academic and popular. Academic in that there is a fair sprinkling of footnotes and a good section of references, and popular in that it is a fairly easy read with not a lot of technical language or jargon. Unfortunately, the book will set you back around twenty pounds for a hard copy and slightly less for the electronic version. This pricing is unfortunate as it will discourage some buyers - but it shouldn't, it is worth the price!

The book consists of eleven chapters grouped around three broad themes. Following an introductory chapter which gives some of Dr. Kwyani's background and his reasons for writing this book (and an introduction to his mother, who I really want to meet!) the first broad section looks at the way the new era of mission in the UK, defined by cultural diversity has come about. Framed around the 1910 and 2010 missionary conferences, this section explores a range of social, political, economic and religious factors.

> *When they (The Redeemed Christian Church of God) have their Festival of Life overnight prayer services (twice every year, first around Easter and then in October), they bring together over 50,000 Christians from the south-east of England to the London Excel, and it is streamed to millions of people around the world.*

> *The world Christianity that we celebrate today has come about because of Careyâ€™s daring spirit. He is remembered for his bold statement: â€˜Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God.â€™*

> *Migrant Christians ought to be thankful for the British missionaries who went overseas for service. British Christians could also show gratitude for the fruit of their sacrifices that has come back to strengthen their own work in Britain today.*

The second section explores the implications of diversity for our understanding of the Church. "If Christ is Lord, how do we as Christ's followers engage one another in our different tribal and cultural groupings?"

This section explores, among other things, the benefits that diversity brings to church life (as well as it's theological rootedness) and the need for Western Christians to engage seriously with world Pentecostalism.

> *Let me add here something that I feel the West (or Western Christianity) needs to understand and appreciate (and yet so far seems unable to do so): the world Christianity that has emerged is decidedly spirit-oriented in nature and this is not going to change any time soon.*

> *As a matter of fact, in my view the cosmology of the Bible is closer to that of Africa or Asia than it is to that of Europe and the West.*

> *A great deal of what British Christians know about Pentecostalism comes through mainstream media and focuses on the troublesome aspects of Pentecostalism, such as poor contextualization, prosperity gospel, loud vigils, flamboyant pastors. However, there is a lot more to the movement than the often misinformed images in the tabloids.*

> *Europeans, however, live in a secular post-Enlightenment worldview where spirits (and God) are too far away to be of any relevance to human life. In the language of Charles Taylor, Westerners (including Europeans) live as buffered selves in a world devoid of spirits.*

> *Their presence in Britain brings with it gifts that in many ways invigorate both British culture and British Christianity. It is the argument of this book that a proper engagement between British and non-Western Christians resident in Britain will enrich British Christianity, and hopefully help it rediscover its missional impulses to re-evangelize Britain.*

> *On the one hand, we have Africans who have a zeal for evangelism, engaging in street or*

> *door-knocking evangelism, using strategies that worked in Africa but yield minimal results in Britain. On the other hand, we have British Christians who often cannot talk about their faith in public, let alone engage in evangelism, and yet they know about British culture. If these two groups could work together, we could possibly see a missionary movement that would effectively engage in evangelism in Britain.*

> *We can today find followers of Christ in every country in the world. Christians from around the world not only look different from each other, they also speak differently from one another. As a matter of fact, it is an advantage that they are different from one another in the ways they express their worship and do their theologies. Their Christianities are shaped in different cultural contexts, and they worship and theologize differently. Yet all Christians, regardless of where in the world they live, are brothers and sisters in Christ.*

The final section makes the argument that in a multicultural society, such as exists in most British towns and cities, the church and it's leadership should reflect the make up of the general population.

> *For us here in Britain, migrant Christians bring gifts that British churches need to receive, and British churches have gifts that migrant Christians need. For the body to be whole, it needs the gifts of all churches to be fully contributed.*

> *Instead of first focusing on how our differences should pull us apart, we might seek to discern how those differences (and our different gifts) can bring us together and help us both in our journey in Godâ€™s mission in our neighbourhoods and in the world at large. Difference is not the enemy; the fear of difference is.*

> *The Churchâ€™s very existence needs diversity. For it to exist as a global fellowship of disciples of Christ â€“ gathered and baptized into his one body by his Spirit â€“ there must be diversity, whether we are talking about one congregation or the universal body of Christ.*

> *The ekklesia of Christ needs to figure out how to stay united in diversity if it is to hold together. It cannot survive if groups of Christians isolate themselves from fellowship with other Christians. It would change our theology â€“ our ecclesiology â€“ if we behaved as if we believe that we need one another in order to survive.*

There is far more to this book than the section headings and a few quotes can illustrate. It engages at some length with the homogenous unit principle; a feature of some church growth strategies which tends to produce mono-cultural churches. It certainly challenges aspects of British church life, while not shying away from the problems of some of the diaspora churches. Truly multicultural churches will involve everyone compromising to some extent - though those with power will need to compromise the most.

I'd like to close in highlighting two important issues that are raised in the book. The first is the way in which Western Christians assume that their theology and approach to the Bible are normative - the right way and the only way to do it. While we dismiss other peoples' cultural viewpoint, we tend to forget that we approach our religion with a world view shaped by the Enlightenment (and it's suspicion of spirituality) and Western Individualism.

> *It has been said countless times, especially in academic theological and missiological discourse, that all theologies are contextual. I wish it was possible for us to actually behave as if we understood this to be true, and stop expecting European theologians to speak to the universal Church as if what they say is relevant in all parts of the world.*

> *Who are we? What culture shapes us? Why do we do what we do? And why do we do it the way we do it? On the British Christian landscape, a majority of the congregations will do well to notice that their ecclesiology is shaped more by general Western middle-class values than the gospel itself.*

> *To the dismay of many of my European Reformed friends and missionaries, John Calvin will not speak to twenty-first-century Malawian Presbyterians like he did to the nineteenth-century Church of Scotland that sent missionaries to Malawi, let alone to sixteenth-century Christians in Geneva who shaped a great deal of Calvinâ€™s theology.*

The second issue I'd like to highlight relates to the fact that many people will not see the problem that Dr. Kwyani is raising in his book. Why do we need to worry about what African (Asian, Latin...) Christians think in the UK?

> *In the marketplace and the workforce, racial discrimination is not tolerated. In sport and entertainment racism is banned. However, it is somewhat accepted as the norm for churches to be segregated even in multi-ethnic communities.*

> *When Christians from one part of the world come into contact with Christians from another part of the world, the differences begin to stand out. British Anglicans do not need to worry about what Nigerian Pentecostals believe until the latter show up in Britain and begin to influence the religious landscape.*

> *Whatever we do, when we talk about Western Christianity in the twenty-first century, we need to bear in mind that it is not all white and it does not only speak a European language.*

> *While many Christians reading this book may not think that the colour of their skin makes them superior or inferior to others, the truth (at least from the perspective of many African and Latin American pastors in Britain) is that race matters.*

> *Most African pastors in Europe and North America mention race as the most difficult issue facing their ministries, and yet most of my white British middle-aged middle-class Christian friends say that racism is a thing of the past.*

The fastest growing and most vibrant parts of the church in the UK are black majority churches in our major cities. If these Christians say that race is an issue in church life, then it is an issue. Those of us who belong to the majority community cannot afford to bury our heads in the sand and ignore this.

Two final quotes to finish. One because it amused me (and reflected my experience) and the other because it sums the book up.

> *What a Westerner may call a hospitable atmosphere may leave an African feeling entirely disconnected, and what an African may call hospitality may feel like a hostage situation to a Westerner.*

> *The cultural diversity we see in British Christianity is a gift from God.*