THINGS WESTERN CHRISTIANS NEED TO KNOW: THE CHURCH IS A WORLD CHURCH

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Our call is to humbly serve our brothers and sisters, not simply to tell them what it is they need to know based on our own experience and history.
Category: Observations

This is the second in a short series of posts that looks at how Western Christians may need to refine their view of the church. The first post looked at the fact that the church has always been an international body, this one considers the current situation of the church and I'll let you guess what the third post will say.

The first thing that I want to highlight is my use of the term "world" in the title of this piece. The Gambian theologian Lamin Sanneh suggested that we need to distinguish between global Christianity and world Christianity. Global Christianity refers to an understanding of the faith as a North-Atlantic phenomenon and which concentrates on reproducing European and North American forms and understandings of Christianity in other parts of the world. World Christianity, on the other hand, refers to the development of authentic expressions of the Gospel within the different cultures and situations around the world.

The thing is, many (most?) Westerners assume that global Christianity is the norm and that it is our role to export our views to the rest of the church. In a comment on my first post, Timothy Halls wrote this:

> *We are living through the globalisation of Western Christianity. Thatâ€™s the problem. And that is why the quote at the end about Syrian Christianity is so important. But it comes across as a joke, not as a reminder that we need to pay attention to the Christianities that have been around for a while, and made it through the fire. Rather we are exporting our books and missiologies and theologies to new Christians and churches in the global south to help them become â€œmatureâ€ â€¦â€ like usâ€ â€¦Itâ€™s a real problem.*
>
> *https://www.kouya.net/?p=13136*

The way in which we export our forms of Christianity vary. There are the extreme examples of African choirs sweating in heavy robes as though they were singing in a freezing cathedral in the depths of an English winter. Westerners are quick to condemn the church in Africa and elsewhere for the growth of the prosperity gospel; all the while forgetting that it is an export from the West in the first place

Let's take an example which may bemuse or even annoy some of my readers: the Reformation. Within the circles I move in, the Protestant Reformation is seen as one of the most important (perhaps *the* most important) events in church history since the apostolic age, and because it is so

important, Christians all around the world need to know about it. Do they?

Let me be controversial here. The Reformation was a response to the religious and cultural situation in Europe in the late middle-ages. It has had a profound effect in shaping political and religious life in Europe and among the European diaspora. However, it is of limited relevance to churches who have grown up outside of the European religious and cultural framework. They have their own issues to face and they will undoubtedly need their own reformations, their own Luthers and Calvins, at some point in the future, but the things they deal with will not be European ones.

At this point, I can imagine some of my friends responding that understanding the Reformation is vital for all Christians because it teaches us the difference between works and grace religions. I've often heard it said that all religious (or human) experience can be boiled down to the difference between trying to earn our salvation (all religions around the world) or being granted salvation freely by grace (authentic Christianity).

The problem is this just isn't true. Hear me out on this one. Yes, the Bible does teach that salvation is by grace and not by works. However, not all cultures or indeed all religions think in these terms. Not only that, but the Bible has a bit more than this to say, too.

To say that all religions teach that you can earn your salvation by works, is to misunderstand those religions Many don't have a concept of salvation and those that do have a much more nuanced view of how it is achieved. An insistence that the world should be viewed essentially through a works-grace perspective is actually a Western viewpoint, not a universal one.

In some settings, shame and honour are far bigger drivers of understanding and religion than works and grace, while fear and victory are highly important in other settings. The thing is, the Bible speaks into all of these issues, but we Westerners tend not to notice them because we read the Bible through our own cultural spectacles. (I strongly recommend The 3D Gospel if you want a short introduction to this sort of thing.)

The church around the world is growing in situations very different to our own. We simply cannot assume that the issues which are important in the West are ones that should be exported to the rest of the Church. We are a part of the body and the rest of the body needs us and we need them. However, our call is to humbly serve our brothers and sisters, not simply to tell them what it is they need to know based on our own experience and history.