PARTNERSHIP AND ASSUMPTIONS

Posted on March 2, 2022 by Eddie

Category: Observations

In Christian work and life, we generally try to base our actions on the Bible. However, we are often unaware of the extent to which our reading of the Bible is shaped by our culture and underlying world view. An example of this comes from a book that I read recently, Apostolic Imagination. Towards the end of the book, the author writes the following when talking about partnerships between westerners and Christians from the majority world.

> *Everyone involved must understand the duration and purpose of the partnership, agree on the non-negotiables, develop clear communication, and deliver proper accountability.*

The author develops this approach on the basis of what he sees as Scriptural priorities. I suspect that many, if not most of my readers won't see a problem with what he says. But take a read of this quote on the basis for partnerships from a paper by Jay Matenga which contrasts two approaches to the question.

> *Let me try and concretise the difference between Indigenous and Industrial for you. In the Industrial epistemic ecology, relational expectations develop contractually, are transactional and usually productivity or outcome oriented. Thatâ€™s why the Western Church and her missions speak in terms of â€œpart-nershipâ€ and â€œteamâ€ and â€œworking togetherâ€ . They are word pictures that assume autonomous agents in collaboration within an atomised or disconnected world. Groups formed and dominated by the individualist perspective hold together because of a common aim or objective. They are dependent on outcome. The relationship is one of applying oneâ€™s resources (which are owned by the individual contributor) toward the achievement of a task, and the reward is individually meritous.*
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> *The Indigenous knowledge ecology is a counterpoint to this. It is a spiritually connected collective understanding of reality where the social agreement is covenantal, mutual, reciprocal, and familial. The outcome is less important than the relationship building process undertaken along the way. Sharing is more important than acquisition. Very little is individually possessed, and nothing is autonomous. Everything is interconnected and affected by human agency. There is a conscious responsibility to nurture and foster growth in creation and each other, not to consume and manipulate. The Indigenous seek to honour and value and give toward the common good.*

Now imagine if someone who comes from an indigenous worldview were to develop a scripturally based statement on partnership; what would it look like? It would have much more to say about fellowship and relationships (which are far higher values in the Bible than the pragmatism which dominates the first quote).

Western missionaries and mission agencies have some serious thinking and reimagining to do if they are to work alongside their brothers and sisters from the majority church. We cannot simply assume that they will fit in with the way that we see the world and go along with our priorities. If we can't this reimagining, we will simply become irrelevant to what God is doing in the world. We'll have a lot of effort, activities, plans and strategies, but they won't matter if we can't learn to work together without forcing others to think in our terms. This is not to say that a Western approach is wrong or has no value; but we have to learn to hold it lightly alongside other ways of seeing the world in the light of Scripture.