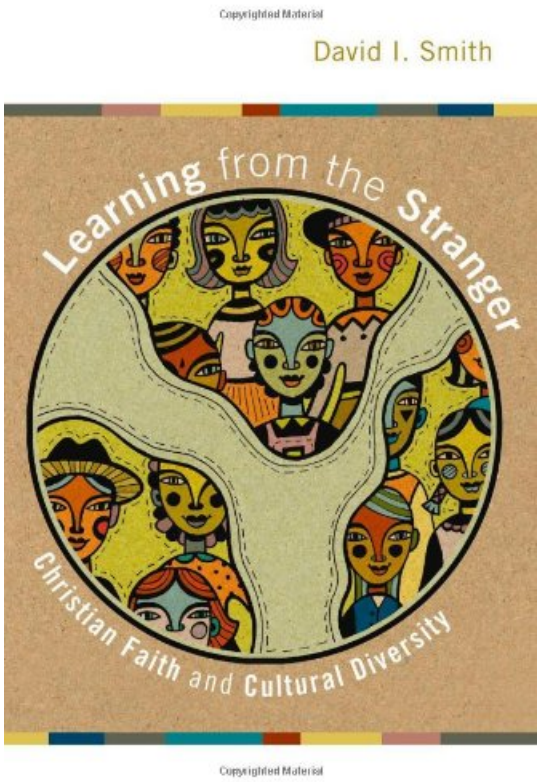
LEARNING FROM THE STRANGER

Posted on July 17, 2010 by Eddie

Category: Language Learning

There is a disturbing tendency within Christian mission circles to organise activities purely on a pragmatic basis. We do things because they can be demonstrated to produce certain results. In and of itself, pragmatism isn't necessarily a bad thing, we don't want to waste our time in ineffective and futile action. However, I would identify two basic problems with doing things purely on a pragmatic basis.



Firstly, if you organise your activities in order to achieve certain outcomes, you will inevitably go astray if you aim at the wrong results. It is all too easy in mission work to be led astray by aiming for cultural values such as large numbers, influence and power, whereas these values may well run counter to the Gospel injunction to self-sacrifice and the notion of the Kingdom being like a mustard seed. We have to have a Biblical/theological strand to our objectives if we are to stay on track with what God wants for us. We can be productive without being obedient.

The second issue that I have with pragmatism is that it can lead us to have wrong motives. If we become fixated on a goal, then we are in danger of no longer serving God out of love for him and for his people. Production, getting things done, can be a real distraction from building life changing relationships and the temptation to put our goals and achievements ahead of our relationship with the One we are supposed to be serving.

Let's take the issue of language learning. Why do missionaries need to learn languages? The pragmatic answer is that they need to learn languages so that they can tell people about Jesus - or words to that effect. This sounds fine, but there are at least three distinct problems with this sort of response:

1. Back in the days when I was a language-learning consultant, I read that people who learned a language in order to acheive a task rarely learned as well as those who were learning in order

to build relationships. Sorry, but I can't remember the references - I'm getting old.
2. There is an underlying assumption that the missionary is the only one who has something interesting or worthwhile to communicate.
3. If you are learning a language in order to complete a task, you will tend to plateau out in your learning when you are more or less able to do what you want to do. Higher levels of language use will probably stay beyond you.

The alternative to simple pragmatism is to seek to develop a thought-through, Biblical basis for our mission praxis.Â Learning from the Stranger: Christian Faith and Cultural Diversity by David I Smith gives an absolutely excellent introduction on to how this can be done in the area of language and culture learning. The Bible is not a text book on language learning (go to language impact, if you want one of those) but the Bible does have a great deal to say about relationships between people, racial issues, power, humility and so on - the issues which lie absolutely at the heart of language learning. Using three extended readings from Genesis, Luke and Acts; Smith explores a biblical basis for language and culture learning in a very engaging way, scattering anecdotes from his own experience through the text. Though the book is aimed at undergraduate students in the US, I would strongly recommend it to anyone who has any involvement in recruiting or training missionaries. Indeed, I would say that it should be viewed as essential reading in these contexts. (Warning to my staff: you heard it here first.)

In a world which is changing as quickly as ours is, we need to take time to build a thoroughly biblical understanding of why we do what we do in the mission world. We have spent too long discussing what we should do, rather than discussing principles.

This quote gives a good picture of where the book goes:

> *The power that is given at Pentecost is not the power to conquer foreigners, but the power to speak to others in the way that they here, the power to hear anew across lines of difference, the power to love one's neighbour as oneself. (p.136)*

Buy it!