DRISCOLL, KANDIAH AND CULTURAL ASSUMPTIONS

Posted on January 13, 2012 by Eddie

Categories: Church: UK, Church: World

One little corner of the Internet has been all of a flutter over the last day or so, following on from some rather unwise remarks regarding the British Church by an American celebrity pastor. I normally avoid this sort of thing like the plague, but I reckon that the root of this issue is actually a cross-cultural one, so I thought I'd throw my pennyworth in.

I don't know much about Mark Driscoll (apart from some comments on Bible translation) but it turns out that he made some rather strong comments regarding British preachers in a recent radio interview:

> *â€œLetâ€™s just say this: right now, name for me the one young, good Bible teacher that is known across Great Britain. You donâ€™t have one â€“ thatâ€™s the problem. There are a bunch of cowards who arenâ€™t telling the truth.â€*

Krish Kandiah made a rather spirited response to this on his blog, which was what drew my attention to the whole affair. You can also see Driscoll's reaction to the furore here. For the sake of completeness, you can also listen to the interviewÂ and follow the twitter feed of the journalist involved. I've got no intention of joining in the "who said what's?" and apparent discrepancies in the various reports - feel free to dig into that for yourself. I want to stick to the cross-cultural aspects of the issue and make a couple of remarks, one based on Mark Driscoll's blog post and the other, on Krish Kandiah's.

Thinking Cross Culturally is Really Difficult: Driscoll starts his article very helpfully, by listing some of the significant differences between the religious scene in the US and the United Kingdom. It is hard to argue when he says that the UK is more a more secular country than the US with a media which is generally more anti-Christian. That being said, a more balanced view would also have mentioned the huge dangers of syncretism and compromise that is involved in the commercialisation of the US church. However, as I say, Driscoll correctly identifies some of the contrasts between the two countries. The problem is that having recognised that there are differences, he refuses to take this into account when he addresses some of the issues in the UK.

> *Please ask why there is a lack of courageous young Christian preachers heralding the word of God across Britain and beyond and why, when there are big events for evangelicals, a speaker often has to be brought in from another country to preach. Please pray for the next Spurgeon, and if you are a Christian leader, do all you can to, by the grace of God, provide opportunities to see those kind of preachers and leaders raised up to lead the cause of the gospel in your country!*

Of course this is nonsense. There are many Godly, courageous preachers in the UK. However, the fact that they are working in a more secular setting with a hostile media (as Driscoll identifies) means

that they don't get the national prominence that they might get in the US, even if they wanted it. I know a number of preachers who have deliberately stepped off the 'Christian celebrity' treadmill in order to concentrate on working with their local community. They will never get the prominence of a mega-church pastor in the US, but this doesn't mean that they are not faithful or courageous - perhaps exactly the opposite.

Regarding the 'big events'. It is true that all too-often we call in people from outside; but this is far more to do with marketing than it is to do with the lack of good Bible teachers in the UK. Big events look to bring in big names to assure the crowds. The small Evangelical church in the UK has far fewer big names than the much larger church in the US, so yes they often call in people from the outside. This is, of course, a mistake. What the conferences should do is invest in people in this country - but that probably wouldn't bring in the punters - so they go for celebrities.

Mark Driscoll did a good job of identifying some of the symptoms of the British church, but sadly, he failed completely to diagnose the disease. This isn't a surprise, identifying what is going on in another culture, is really difficult. Even someone with a good deal more cultural sensitivity and understanding than Driscoll would struggle to do so. This is why missionaries need to invest a huge amount of time an effort in studying culture and gaining an understanding of what is really going on, before they open their mouths.

We Need to Get Over Ourselves: Krish Kandiah responded to Driscoll's post both by naming a list of promising young preachers and then pointing out some of the issues related to the cult of celebrity preacher. It's hard to argue with what Krish says, he makes some good points, but it does raise a couple of issues.

- *Should we be so quick to defend ourselves?* Yes, Driscoll's comments were not particularly accurate or encouraging. However, anyone looking at the changes in the British scene over the last fifty years would have to admit that something has changed dramatically in the life of the church and nation and very little of it is positive. There is no doubt that the Church in the UK has declined in numbers, influence and credibility during my lifetime. I don't think, for one moment, that you can attribute this to the lack of celebrity preachers. However the clergy do have to take some degree of responsibility for this decline (listen to this talk for some background), then then again, does the average Christian in the pew. Rather than leap to our own defence when criticised by people like Mark Driscoll, perhaps we need to use their critique to help us get a more accurate picture of what is going on. At the same time, Mr Driscoll should remember the old adage about four fingers pointing back at you when you point at someone else. The evangelical church in the US shows signs of being on the same trajectory as her sister in the UK.
- *It doesn't feel very nice*. Reading Mark Driscoll's comments about the church in the UK wasn't very pleasant. Even when I agreed with him, I found the whole process of being criticised by an outsider rather unpleasant. I'm sure this is why Krish responded while 'incensed'. However, as

someone who works with Christians from all over the world, I often hear British Christians make the same sort of blanket condemnation that Driscoll made about the British (I may even be guilty of the same thing myself). If we don't like an American saying that British preachers lack courage, how do we think African Christians feel when Brits say that their whole continent is theologically naive?

My last comment is important and puts this ~~argument~~ discussion about preaching into context. The church is growing faster than ever before in Latin America, Asia and Africa, while in Europe and North America it is doing well if it maintains its position. Rather than having transatlantic arguments about where the good preachers are, we need to be turning our eyes southwards and asking what we can learn. Mark Driscoll and Krish Kandiah both make some interesting points, but from where I'm sitting, they are looking in the wrong direction.