THE INCARNATION, LISTENING, LANGUAGE LEARNING & THEOLOGY

Posted on September 23, 2014 by Eddie

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Category: Observations

> *One of the most challenging aspects of being a missionary is learning to see the world through the eyes of those we are seeking to reach with the gospel. This is why language learning and cultural adaption is such an important and indispensable Â feature in the life of a missionary. One of the abiding values of language acquisition is developing the capacity to listen well. Most missionary training programs focus almost entirely on teaching missionaries what toÂ say with very little emphasis on learning to listen well. However as anyone who has been a missionary knows, learning to listen well is one of the important components of effective communication. Â Before we can share the gospel with people effectively, we must understand them and their worldview.*
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> *There are two important lessons we can draw from the Incarnation in respect to the role of listening. First, Jesus spent thirty years growing up and living in the culture of His birth before He began to teach and proclaim the kingdom of God. Even though Jesus was the Son of God, there was no replacement for growing up in the culture and becoming a cultural insider. Second, the only glimpse we have of Jesus between His birth and His baptism, which inaugurates His public ministry, is as a twelve-year-old boy in the temple. In that brief glimpse into Jesus as a young person, we do not find Him preaching or teaching the elders. Rather, we find HimÂ listening and asking questions.*
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> *When we arrive in a new culture, we are tempted to move quickly to share the gospel and in the process make the assumption that the target culture has all the same questions we had, questions to which we can provide "answers," based on our understanding of the gospel. However whenever the gospel crosses new cultural frontiers, new questions are raised in the encounter for which we may have no ready answer. What we call theology is the result of all our most important questions being posed to the text of Scripture and reflecting on how the Bible addresses or answers those questions. An examination of any systematic theology textbook will quickly reveal that it is not a systematic summary of all that the Bible teaches about everything. Rather, it is a summary of those questions we have posed and that were important in our own reception of the gospel. For example, despite the fact that the Bible addresses issues like demonic bondage and food sacrificed to idols, the many questions that might naturally arise from such texts are generally not found in theology textbooks in the West, because they were not at the forefront of Western experience or perceived concerns. One of the by-products of the long sojourn of the gospel in Western culture is the false assumption that all potential questions have been canvassed and answered and that there are fundamentally no new questions to be answered. Thus, Christian theology becomes static within certain fixed categories.*

FromÂ Invitation to World Missions (Invitation to Theological Studies)Â by Timothy Tennent p.337-8

I should mention in passing that the language and culture acquisition course taught at Redcliffe College in association with Wycliffe does give a good deal of time to the issue of listening. You can see more of my thoughts on this specific question here.