WHO GETS TO SPEAK?

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Categories: Church: UK, Church: World

I've always wondered how people get invited to speak at Christian conferences. Talent and gifting is obviously part of the story. But judging by some of the people who don't get invited to these events (and some of those who do), talent isn't the only criterion which is used. A few years ago, I heard a big name speaker give exactly the same talk at two high profile events a week apart. The talk was engaging, funny and inspiring; a joy to listen to. The problem was that on each of the two occasions he was speaking from completely different Bible passages, but the talk didn't vary. Things like that don't help my cynicism.

There are those who take a much more serious interest in monitoring who speaks at conferences than I do. Project 3:28 are a group who are concerned at the under representation of women on Christian platforms in the UK. You can find a list of articles from them here.Â There is a lot of fascinating stuff to be read, but perhaps the best introduction to the issue to someone who hasn't followed it comes from Baptist theologian Steve Holmes.

From my perspective, it seems that there are two broad arguments for increasing the representation of women speaking at major conferences. The first is the issue of natural justice; why discriminate against one section of society in choosing speakers? And the other is that we need to hear teaching that emerges from the life experience of women and not just from a man's perspective. I believe that the second of these two rationales is much the stronger, but together, I find they make a convincing case for addressing this issue.

However...

The church in the West has some serious problems; it is highly individualistic where Scripture is more community orientated, it is essentially syncretistic - buyingÂ into the last vestiges of Christendom and society's view of progress, materialism and the physical/spiritual dichotomy. We don't see these weaknesses, because we live in them and don't know another world.

What then of the gender divide at conferences?

The thing is, both men and women in the UK (and the West in general) are products of the same world-view and system. Men and women may have different perspectives and experiences, but they are equallyÂ coloured by the background against which their faith is formed. There are arguments for increasing the number of woman speakers, but that will not help address some of the fundamental problems of the church n the UK which go deeper than the gender divide.

Above everything else, the UK church needs to hear loving, but critical voices from outside of its own perspective and we need to listen to these voices with humility and respect. We need Bible teachers who can open up the Scriptures and address them to the problems that we don't even know thatÂ we have; people who can look at the philosophical basis of Western life and who can show us a better way to think and live, people with generations of experience of Christianity as a minority religion.

Recently Krish Kandiah wrote:

> *Perhaps it is time that our conference organisers, publishers and missionary organisations help the Church in the West to reorient its place in the global Church, ensuring that we approach our brothers and sisters in the two-thirds world with greater humility and a willingness to learn.*

He is more or less right; but there is no "perhaps" here; this is an urgent need if the church in the UK is to thrive.

Of course there is a problem. If one of the big conferences announced that their main speaker was a preacher from India or Ghana, say, rather than one of the usual roster of big names, then bookings would drop. You need the famous speakers to get the bums on seats -Â the cult of celebrity is as alive in the Church as in the pages of the tabloids (which more or less illustrates the whole problem).

Just a few thoughts in closing.

- I am fully aware that there are those who are opposed to women having any role in speaking or teaching. There are other blogs which deal with this issue in minute detail if you want to argue the issue - please don't bother to post comments on that subject here, that isn't the purpose of this post.
- I also realise the difficulties involved in finding speakers for conferences. I've helped organise the last few Global Connections' conferences and finding a mix of male and female speakers isn't easy - it becomes more difficult when you also have to include mission agency and church based people. However, at the last conference we did have a Chadian man and a Brazilian woman as the keynote speakers, so we got the balance right (and they were excellent).
- Take time to read books and listen to talks by people from outside of your comfort zone. I've quoted from Vinoth Ramchandra's blog on a number of occasions, why not sign up to read it regularly? Or why not give a listen to the talks from the last GC conference?