WHAT DOES AUTHENTIC CHRISTIANITY LOOK LIKE?

Posted on May 18, 2015 by Eddie

Some vague musings on what, exactly, constitutes authentic Christian faith.
Category: Observations

In his paper, The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture, Andrew Walls performs a fascinating thought experiment (in passing, if you are interested in the cross-cultural dimension of Christianity, you *must*Â read this paper).

Walls imagines an extraterrestrial scholar who is interested in earth religions and who makes a series of visits to study Christianity. His first visit is to one of the great Church councils, where extremely learned men debate fine points of doctrine. Our interplanetary visitor returns a few hundred years later, to see Irish monks who seem to have very little interest in doctrine, but who go to great lengths to master their own behaviour. A millennium later, he visits an earnest group of Victorian gentlemen discussing the best way to spread their beliefs to Africa. Finally, in our own time, he returns to see the fruits of those Victorian endeavours, believers dressed in white, processing through the streets of a Nigerian city, singing and dancing as they go.

The scholar would have seen four very different groups, but each is a fairly typical expression of Christianity in its particular time and place. So what is it that holds them together? To get Wall's answer, you will need to read his paper!

I explored this question with a group of MA students at Redcliffe College this weekend. It was a fascinating session and, as is often the case, I think I learned more than they did.



Missiology lecturer and students looking thrilled as I lead discussions in a coffee shop.

I was left with a few thoughts from the session, which may be of interest.

- In my particular Christian circles, we tend to define authentic Christianity in terms of doctrinal statements; bullet point lists of correct beliefs. The problem with this is that the very lists themselves are culturally bound. Whatever the validity of the theological positions in the lists, not everyone in the world thinks in those terms. The ability to sign up to a doctrinal statement depends on a degree of modern, Western theological sophistication which would rule out a large slice of the historic church, not to mention the

contemporary one.
- Orthodox doctrine and belief are no guarantee of consistent Christian behaviour, but the New Testament is strongly insistent that one proof of our faith is the way in which we act.
- The problem is that altruistic acts and self-sacrifice are no proof of authentic Christian faith, either. People can be moved by all sorts of reasons to do good - and often non-believers show the church up.
- In the end, I think any attempt to define what Authentic Christianity is will be fraught with frustration. I has to involve what we believe and it has to have something to do with how we behave, but I'm not brave enough to say exactly what that looks like. Thankfully, we aren't the ones who make those decisions!

This doesn't mean that I don't see a place for formal declarations of faith. There is a place for them in organisations and churches. It is good to set out what we believe and to have agreed standards for belief and behaviour. However, if we ever get to the point of saying that only those people who agree with us and behave like us are real Christians, we are undoubtedly mistaken and need to get out more! Doctrinal rigour needs to be matchedÂ a generous and humble spirit.