STANDING UP FOR OUR RIGHTS

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Category: Observations

There has been an interesting little cross-cultural struggle in the media this week. Air France are about to restart flights to Teheran and they will be requiring that female flight crew wear head scarves while they are in the city. However, true to their French secular standards, the union representing the flight crew have said this is unacceptable and for a while there was a stand-off between management and union which threatened the potentially lucrative new route. However, a compromise has been reached and the story is likely to fade from our front pages pretty soon.

However, while this story has appeared and then disappeared from the world of aviation inside a week, it is has a long history in Christian mission. Paul addressed the very same issue in 1 Corinthians 9:

> *21Â To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from Godâ€™s law but am under Christâ€™s law), so as to win those not having the law.*
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> *22Â To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. 23Â I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.*

While it might be appropriate for Air France employees to avoid observing local customs, the options for Christian missionaries are much rather more clear cut. If we are to win people for Christ, then we need to cross over into their world so that we can get a hearing. This means that in some parts of the world, female missionaries will need to wear headscarves. Now, to some people (including a lot of Air France flight crew) this might seem as an intrusion into personal freedom.

At this point, I ask what does personal freedom and choice have to do with mission work? We are servants of a crucified saviour and we are called to take up our cross and follow him.Â In practical terms this can mean different things to different people, but it always means that our personal freedom is not a top priority. After all, if TimothyÂ was prepared to be circumcised as an adult so as not to offend people, then we can expect a degree of personal discomfort, too. If your right to make choices about your dress and other habits is a high priority for you, then you probably shouldn't consider a career in cross-cultural mission.

To which you might reply thatÂ forcing women to wear a head scarf is unjust and prejudicial to half of the human race and that Christians should stand against this sort of injustice.

Yes, I would agree, sort of. Christians should protest against injustice and they should work for a more equitable and fair world. There are times when it is important to take symbolic, prophetic acts which reveal the underlying issues and corruption and which point to a better future. However, I'm not convinced that a female missionary refusing to wear a headscarf would fit into that category. It's more likely just to be seen as a lack of respect.

In the end, the best way to deal with injustice is to address the issue of sin and alienation from God that underpins the corrupt societies that we all live in. This means taking steps to make sure that people can hear God's Word in a way that speaks to them and it may meanÂ that we have to park our own preferences and comfort on one side for a while.