THE GOSPEL AND CULTURE

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There is a fascinating blog discussion going on between Andrew Jones of Tall Skinny Kiwi and Phil Johnson of Pyromaniacs on the subject of the *contextualisation* of the Gospel. As is the case with Internet conversations the whole thing becomes a mishmash of links and comments and it's hard to step into it half way through. However, if you read this post by Andrew and this one by Phil, you will be able to catch up with what has been said. If you think of yourself as a bit of a missional Chrisitian, then you should at least follow this discussion - it is a very important one. In the meantime: here is my own view on the subject in a few easy bullet points.

- The original language and culture of the Gospel are not sacred. We do not need to learn the Aramaic of Jesus Christ in order to pray or read the Gospel. In Acts 2 the Spirit made it possible for people to understand the Scriptures in their own language - this underlies a fundamental principle of the Christian faith which is that it can be lived and experienced in any language and culture.
- However, and this is vital, the Gospel challenges every culture and demands that certain things in that culture should change. Individuals and communities must be transformed by the Gospel. You can be an English Christian, a Chinese Christian or a Kouya Christian, but your cultural background must be conformed to the Scriptures, not the other way round.
- Christian communities very rapidly confuse their own cultural expression of Christianity with the Biblical pattern. This leads to the many, many stories of Missionaries imposing a western lifestyle on converts to Christianity because they had confused European ways of life with the Gospel. I fear that much of the current debate about post-modernism falls into the same camp. People see post-modern culture and values as being opposed to the Gospel and preach against them. And this is right - but what they have failed to see is that their own modernist values are equally opposed to the Gospel, but they have become comfortable with them.
- Different cultures come to the Bible in different ways and read different things into it. People in rural Africa with a much more family orientated and communal life read different things into the stories of the Old Testament than individualistic Westerners. We tend to see all the stuff about genealogies as boring - they can see stuff there that we miss. This means that presenting the Gospel in different cultures calls for different approaches and different emphases.
- However, in any culture, we must take the Bible as a whole and read and teach in the context of the full message of Scripture. Each culture has its favourite stories and metaphors from the Bible, but they must be kept in the full context of God's mission of revelation and reconciliation through Jesus Christ.

I can't resist closing with this picture from TSK.