THE GOSPEL AND CULTURE: DIFFERENT PEOPLE SEE DIFFERENT THINGS

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This is my fourth post in a series expanding the ideas originally contained in a short blog post on the way in which the Gospel interacts with different cultures. So far, I've set out that the Christian message does not belong to any one cultural setting, but can in fact make itself at home in any culture and that as a result of this, people find it hard to distinguish between their cultural values and the core of the Gospel. I'd like to take this a stage further now and suggest that the culture that we bring to the Christian message affects the way that we understand the message.

> *Different cultures come to the Bible in different ways and read different things into it. ... This means that presenting the Gospel in different cultures calls for different approaches and different emphases.*

David Smith in his wonderful book Mission After Christendom (which you should buy if you have not done so) talks about his experiences teaching the story of Joseph to a group of theology students in Nigeria. At the end of the session he asked them what lessons you could learn from the story. David coming from a good, Western individualistic tradition expected the students to say something about how God would look after you if you stayed faithful to Him. The students, coming from a very different culture, took away the lesson that it is good to look after your family. Both, of course, are right and both are useful lessons to take away from this passage - but the point is that people from different cultural backgrounds are unlikely to see exactly the same things in a given passage of Scripture.

A note of caution here. This does not mean that any reading of the Bible or any view of the Gospel is legitimate just because it is 'cultural'. There are limits beyond which we can't go - the last post in this series will try to unpack that idea.

However, we must also avoid the temptation of thinking that any one of us or any one tradition has a complete grasp of the meaning of the Gospel. The Western tradition of Christian scholarship has a rich history and has a great deal to contribute to our understanding of God and his work in the world - but ours is not the only way to look at Scripture and theology. Kwame Bediako the Ghanaian theologian encourages African Christians to look to the early church fathers rather than Reformation or modern western theologians. For Bediako the patristic writers' struggling with the Gospel in a multi-faith environment has far more to say to modern Africa than later theologians who were dealing with issues relating to a well established faith.

In Britain today, the post-modern approach to Scripture is very different from the modern readings that I grew up with. Modernism tends towards binary thinking; something is either right or it is wrong and that's the end of the story. Post-modernism can be much more fuzzy with lots and lots of gray areas between right and wrong. Clearly there is a weakness here in the post-modern viewpoint because there are issues where we have to be very clear that their is a right answer and a wrong answer - the divinity of Christ for instance. But equally, there is a strength. So much writing and

Christian thought of the modernist variety is about setting up fault lines between Christians and the rest of the world or even between Christians and others: creation versus evolution, views on the millennium, adult baptism or infant baptism... The list of issues which Christians of my generation argued over is endless - and more or less incomprehensible to my children's generation.

Another difference in the way that the generations experience the Gospel revolves around the issue of individualism and community. Modern culture is highly individualistic: Jesus is *my* personal Saviour, I have *my* quiet time and I learn the Scriptures from an expert who stands at the front of teaches me what he has learned. Post-modernism (along with many majority world cultures) is much more likely to have a communal aspect to it with people seeing themselves being brought into a Christian community rather than being saved as an individual and wanting to read the Bible and understand it through discussion as a group, not as passive recipients. You can see a very clear example of this in Chris' comment to this post.

So, when we come to present the Gospel across cultures, be those cultures be geographically or generationally distinct, we need to understand that people will not understand things or practice the faith in the way we might have expected (or wanted) them too.