ACROSS TIME AND SPACE

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Some thoughts about how the long history of the church should impact the way that Evangelicals look at other traditions.
Category: Church: World

There has been a fair bit of hoo-ha on the Internet this weekend following the announcement that the new Dr is to be (shock, horror) a woman. However, despite the title of this post, that's not what I'm writing about.

In preparation for teaching at Redcliffe College this week, I've been rereading Andrew Walls' paper, The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture (I've said it before and I'll say it again, this should be essential reading for all Christians). Walls' starts his paper by imagining an interstellar anthropologist who visits the christian church at various times in history; one of the early church councils, some Celtic monks, a victorian mission meeting and contemporary Nigeria. The anthropologist has to try and work out what it is that connects these very different situations, all of which are described as Christian. I'll leave you to read the paper.

It is very easy for contemporary Evangelicals to think that they have got Christianity sewn up. We assume that the particular things that we focus on and the way that we do what we do are the best option. However, we have to face up to the fact that modern evangelicalism is a relatively new phenomenon. For most of the last 2,000 years, Christians have done things very differently to the way that we do them and they have focussed on different priorities.

Now either we have to say that for much of history there were no real Christians or we have to admit that God has been at work throughout history amongst people who don't have the same priorities and beliefs as we do today. Though I've heard some hardliners take the former position, I think most of us realise that this is really untenable. God has been at work throughout the last 2,000 and that means he has been at work in the Orthodox and Catholic churches as well as among groups like the Nestorians that many of us haven't even thought about.

So what about today? If over the last couple of millennia, God has been working through a variety of Christian traditions, why do we assume that he now is only at work in Evangelicalism? Shouldn't history teach us to be more generous to those of other traditions?

Don't get me wrong. I believe that evangelical Christianity is the expression of the Christian faith that sticks closest to Scripture and there are things about other traditions that I disagree strongly with. Thankfully, acceptance by God is on the basis of our faith in Christ, not on the quality of our theology (in which case we'd all be in trouble).

Those of us who are Evangelicals should hold on to our beliefs, but we should be generous to others and we should open our eyes to see God at work amongst other traditions in the present as well as in the past.