THE GOSPEL AS A SWISS ARMY KNIFE

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People are more complex than we think they are, and the Christian message is much richer than we give it credit for.
Category: Observations

They say that if the only tool you have is a hammer, every problem turns out to be a nail.

I sometimes think that the same thing can sometimes be said about Christian evangelism. The Gospel is about God forgiving our sins through the death and resurrection of Jesus and so that's what we preach. if people don't realise that they have sins that need forgiving, then we have to convince them that they are sinners so that we can then present them with the solution.

However, I think that people are more complex than this and the Gospel is certainly richer.

For example, in many parts of the world, people are much more concerned by issues of public honour and shame than they are by individual guilt. To try and get such people to shift their whole world-view, so that their personal sinfulness becomes more important than their standing within their community before offering a solution is placing a massive obstacle in front of the Gospel. Especially when we are told that Jesus deals with guilt and shame. It makes far more sense to address the shame issue first of all.

> *Western gospel presentations emphasizing forgiveness of guilt have little impact on people affected by shame. The gospel announces that all people stand ashamed before God, but Jesus Christ offers an honorable status via adoption into Godâ€™s family. People must abandon their pursuit of worldly honors and get their â€˜faceâ€™ from God. Biblical faith means honoring Jesus with undivided loyalty. (Read the whole article here.)*

Working among the Kouya, it became obvious to us, that people's first concern was how to find protection in a hostile material and spiritual world. People would wear charms to ward off witchcraft and bush spirits, but they weren't particularly aware of issues of individual guilt.

A presentation of the Gospel which pointed to Jesus as the one who had defeated evil and who rolling out his rule across the earth was much more appropriate in that context than trying to convince people they were sinners and then offering them forgiveness. From the Kouya point of view, abandoning their traditional fetishes, idols and charms and trusting Jesus to protect them was a far bigger step of faith than simply praying a "sinner's prayer" would have been.

I realise that some people might be getting upset now and accusing me of watering down the Gospel. Yes, all people are sinners and yes, they have to turn to Christ for forgiveness - there are no exceptions. I don't deny that for one second. However, I'm not convinced that this is always the best starting point for evangelism. I believe that for many people an awareness of these issues grows after they have put their trust in Christ and they start to understand both how short they fall of his standards and the wonder of his grace. None of us are converted with a fully formed theology.

Our world is becoming increasing diverse. Migration and travel mean that we are all exposed to people from very different cultural backgrounds. Even within British culture, the shift from

modernism to post-modernism is being reflected in changing world views. Honour and shame (or respect and disrespect) are far more evident in parts of British youth culture than an understanding of individual guilt.

If we are going to present the Gospel in this diverse world, we need to have a grasp on the whole breadth of the Christian message and we need to understand how to reach out to people who think differently to ourselves. Thankfully, the Gospel is a Swiss Army Knife, a tool which can be used in different situations, rather than a hammer, which turns everything into a nail.

This sort of thinking has long been a part of the cross-cultural training that missionaries receive. However, I wonder to what extent it is in the curriculum for church ministers in the UK. If people are not getting orientated to honour/shame cultures in their pastoral training, then they simply aren't being equipped to work in large British cities. It seems to me that pastoral training institutions should be banging on the doors of mission agencies and mission training colleges asking for advice, I wonder if they are.