THINGS HOME MISSION CAN LEARN: DON'T LOOK DOWN

Posted on November 24, 2017 by Eddie

Looking down on a class of people, and holding them in contempt for their reading habits, has far more to do with liberal, middle-class prejudice than it has to do with Christianity.Â

Category: Church: UK

One of the best bits of advice that I received in my early days in Africa was that I had to learn to be "blessed by Africans". At first, that didn't seem to make sense; I was the person trained to be a Bible translator. It was my job to bless Africans, not the other way round. I soon learned my mistake. I had a huge amount to learn from my African friends, Christian and non-Christian alike.

The old colonial stereotype of the missionary looking down on the "natives" dies hard. Whatever the accuracy of this old image, cross-cultural missionaries have had to learn to become students of culture, to understand the underlying issues that make people act the way they do and to present Christ gently and winsomely, not from a position of arrogance and power. They have had to step down off their pedestals and meet with people on level ground - at the foot of the cross.

This is a lesson which people working in mission in the UK need to take to heart. There is a tendency in nice middle-class Christianity to look down on popular British culture in a way that would have made the average Victorian missionary blush.

My social media timelines are chock full of Christians, often clergy, railing against Daily Mail readers and Sun readers. People who watch soap operas or reality TV are stupid and those who voted for Brexit (or, more rarely, remain) are absolute idiots. No, I am not exaggerating. Why would people go to church when they see that Christian leaders hold them in contempt?

Now, before people start complaining, I am not defending the Mail and the Sun as newspapers. However, looking down on a class of people, and holding them in contempt for their reading habits, viewing habits or political views is not a tenable position for someone trying to reach out with the gospel to those same people. It has far more to do with liberal, middle-class prejudice than it has to do with Christianity.

Basically, when we condemn Mail readers, or whatever, we are saying that they are worse than us, or that we are better than them. Doing this not only shows a massive lack of self-awareness, it also shows a complete lack of understanding of the gospel itself.

The only safe ground for a missionary, to Africa or the UK, is to recognise that we are sinners in need of God's grace just as much as the next person. We may not read the same papers of have the same political views, but we still need Jesus just as much as they do. If we have an accurate view of ourselves, we will find it impossible to look down on others.

One final remark, it is right and proper that Christians speak out against the sexism, materialism and other isms that are represented by the popular press. We might even want to suggest that people don't spend their money or waste their time on things which reinforce these values.

Posts In This Series

- Introduction:Â I believe that the skills and experience of cross-cultural missionaries are crucial to the future of the church in the UK: the start of a blog series....

- Go:Â When push comes to shove, there is one basic difference between long-term, cross-cultural missionaries and the average church member. ...
- Study:Â How well do we understand the culture that surrounds us?...
- Contextualise:Â When Paul spoke to a Jewish audience, he started off with the story of the Jewish nation, when speaking to Greeks, he worked from inscriptions on statues and Greek poetry. ...
- Serve:Â If you just preach the word but donâ€™t do the deeds then you are not credible, if you just do the deeds without preaching the word then you are not audible....
- Don't Look Down: Looking down on a class of people, and holding them in contempt for their reading habits, has far more to do with liberal, middle-class prejudice than it has to do with Christianity.Â ...
- Speak:Â To a newcomer, a phrase such as "we will now enter into a time of worship" conveys far more background information about the person using it than it does about what is going to happen next in the service. ...
- Religion:Â Learn from people who have been there and done that....
- Stories:Â Taking one of Jesus' amazingly creative parables and turning it into an alliterated, three-point, logical sermon has to be the ultimate in literate processing. ...
- Pray:Â It would be easy - very easy - for a Western rationalist to dismiss all of this. I'm a biologist, I know what causes diseases! ...