THE ENLIGHTENMENT AND EVANGELISM

Posted on April 27, 2018 by Eddie

Some thoughts on evangelism in an Enlightenment and a post-Enlightenment paradigm. Or why convincing someone about the facts of Christianity may not be enough.
Category: Observations

Yesterday, I wrote about the impact that the Enlightenment has on Evangelicalism. Today, I'd like to get a bit more specific and think about the impact it has on our evangelism.

One of the effects of the Enlightenment has been to create a world view which is divided into two completely separate domains. There is the domain of provable fact; things that can be measured and assessed by the tools of science and the domain of opinion, ideas, religion - things that you can't prove by measuring with scientific instruments. Let's call these "World One"; the measurable, physical world and "World Two" the (increasingly marginalised) world of religion and opinion.

There is a fundamental conflict for Christianity here. The Christian faith makes claims to be universal truth; truth that extends from before time to beyond it and which encompasses everything that happens in the universe. However, the Enlightenment has shunted it off into a corner, where it is regarded as little more than a quaint opinion, so that people can say that it is fine for you to believe, but it's not for them.

In this situation, a great deal of evangelistic effort has been dedicated to trying to move Christianity out of World Two and into World One. We see this in books that set out to prove that the resurrection is factual - the message is that Christianity can be proved by science and must be taken seriously. The whole creation-science movement is built on the same premise: Christianity is a World One phenomenon and should not be shunted off to the margins in World Two.

In a world that is dominated by the Enlightenment worldview, it is important to demonstrate that Christianity is rational and fits with the facts as we know them. This sort of defence of the faith is important. However, I think that this sort of approach raises a few problems;

- Arguments about creation or the resurrection are a bit too comfortable. It's relatively easy to get into these sorts of discussions and to impress people with how much you know. However, you can demonstrate the reliability of the Gospel accounts of the resurrection without ever getting round to the messy bit of suggesting that people need to turn to Jesus in repentance and faith. The intellectual arguments allow us to feel we are witnessing without ever really getting uncomfortable.
- People don't come to faith because they have been convinced by eloquent arguments about the resurrection or creation (OK, there are some exceptions, but not many). Even if people are convinced by what we say, it doesn't mean they will have faith. After all, Satan believes in the *facts* of the Christian religion. At some point, we need to talk about Jesus; who he is and why that matters.
- If we rely onÂ *scientificÂ* arguments, we can very easily end up reinforcing the whole Enlightenment dualism which caused so many problems in the first place. In the end, the Incarnation of Jesus challenges the notion that we can neatly separate existence into sacred and secular worlds. Ultimately, Christianity must challenge the Enlightenment worldview - as it must challenge every worldview, everywhere.

Ironically, I believe that the way in which we have focussed on addressing the Enlightenment issues means that we have missed some things which are happening in the Western World. Over the past few decades, the cosy Enlightenment view of reality has started to break down and people are seeking solace in "alternative spiritualities". This goes back to the "new age movement" of the 1990s and into an ever broadening array of spiritual approaches to life, today. The unfortunate thing is that a great deal of Christian response to these new movements has been rather hostile. We've set out to show that these ideas don't make sense, they are irrational and shouldn't be taken seriously. Exactly the same things that the Enlightenment says about the Christian faith. Rather than seeing the new spiritualities as a sign of hope; of people rejecting the materialistic, mechanistic worldview and looking for something that gives life more meaning, we've seen it as a threat and reacted with the tools of our prevailing society.

If people are looking for ancient wisdom; we have ancient writings (that's what Scripture means) that give meaning to life. If they want to be close to the environment and nature, we have a story about a God who placed us in harmony with nature and who is working to reconcile all things, despite humanity's determination to mess things up. If people are looking for angels and spirit guides, we have a story about angels who announced the future to a young unmarried, pregnant girl and shook the world. The problem is, that we have sometimes become so fixated on logical, argued presentations of the Gospel that we have forgotten how to tell our stories.

In a post-modern, post-enlightenment, post-Christian, post-everything world, we need to learn how to evangelise all over again.