

When Evangelism Equals Authenticity

Author: Albert Bogle

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I spent an interesting time yesterday in Glasgow at an Alpha Training Day along with a number of Church leaders from throughout Scotland. It took place at the Renfield Street Church Centre. The guest speaker was Graham Tomlin. He is on the Alpha staff at Holy Trinity Brompton and an Oxford Don to boot. If I closed my eyes I thought I could have been listening to David Cameron. However there the resemblance ended, because there was real substance to his contribution. (For those not familiar with UK politics David Cameron is the leader of one of the UK opposition parties.)

The purpose of the day was to introduce a new constituency to Alpha and also to show that there was a sound theological ethos surrounding the whole course. The framework of Hospitality, Encounter, Catechesis and Community were all duly explored as key elements to the course. The philosophy behind Alpha is to seek to model Christianity in such a way that the inquirer is drawn to the place of belonging long before they reach the place of belief. Hence the four part structure to the course. It's a bit like modeling discipleship through evangelism. The presentation was actually well done. However one couldn't quite help thinking how a course that has been run for years now put in the hands of a theologian can be repacked in such a way that one would almost think that it had been designed that way in the first place? Don't get me wrong this comment is not meant to be a criticism it is more a revelation. Sometimes we do things and we don't see the shape or the structure that lies behind what we do. I guess it was this that I found helpful and yet left me asking the question, when, Nicky Gumbel and Sandy Miller designed the shape of the course did they think this structure? I also discovered that Graham Tomlin had recently written a book entitled 'Provocative Church?'. His presentation was spot on helping us all to think through how we can best engage with a generation that is very suspicious of people who want to evangelise them. The summary of his thesis in his book seemed to me to be saying, 'It's more how you live it? rather than saying why you believe it?'. Believing comes later. Belonging comes first. The how comes first, the why later.

I totally agreed with his analysis of our post modern or post Christian culture here in the UK. We are in a different place from where we were 50 years ago. The rise of pluralism has made it difficult for Christians to talk about world evangelisation in the way we once did. Religion in this new world order has been given a different place. When it is brought into the public arena it has to be branded in such a way that it speaks an inclusive language. How do we do this without compromising our belief in the exclusive flavour of the Christian gospel? This is a question we need to be wrestling with on a daily basis?

It will be interesting to see what comes out of the Edinburgh Missionary Conference 2010 this coming June. This will be an international gathering of Christian leaders and academics engaging with the current ethical and moral topics facing Christianity today in the light of Christian tradition and culture. One thing is for certain it will be a different conference from the one held in Edinburgh in 1910 exactly 100 years earlier. It was from this conference that the worldwide missionary movement of the 20th century has been attributed. Today we need to be continually asking the question, how do we share the gospel of Jesus Christ in this changing world where different cultures and faiths demand an equal respect and acceptance. It will also be of interest to see how the Lausanne Congress in Cape Town later this year engages with these very same topics surrounding pluralism and evangelisation.

This whole dialogue takes us into the area of philosophy and sociology, of signs and symbols. It also challenges the whole concept of truth. Indeed we are back to Pilate's famous question to Jesus.

In the conference last week, Tomlin introduced a quote from the famous 20th Century French thinker and commentator Jean Baudrillard. I think it went something like this, (if I've got it wrong someone will correct me)

? None of our societies know how to manage their mourning for real... as a result we try to reproduce an endless searching after the real.?

It was an interesting quote which he used to suggest that what people are in search of today is reality. To put it in my words they are asking of us the simple question " Does it work? " All this is a challenge to evangelicals to realise that there are many different ways to communicate the gospel. Christians who have a passion for world evangelisation need to realise that UK is in a post Christian pluralist culture. The fact is the prevailing "plausibility structures", have a profound aversion to evangelism. The political classes have no desire to see one religion promote itself above another. The rise of fundamentalism and the whole experience of 9/11 has caused a fear factor to be projected by commentators around the ideas and actions of over zealous religious people. Too many of our role models for evangelism have been rooted in the American Culture of the 1940s and 50s spiced up a little bit to look and feel more attractive for the 21st century. The tele- evangelists of the current God Channels in the UK are on the whole connecting with people who agree with them and many of the contributors on reflection may well be adding to what I call the commercialisation of the gospel.

There seems to me something quite indecent about the idea that Christian writers and teachers and artists produce material for worship and witness, then proceed to copyright the material and earn thousands on the back of a publication or from working the Christian circuit. Let me give you an example of this kind of material that is not only questionable but down right dangerous. I found myself conducting a funeral service today in the local crematorium. In my haste to be there on time I left my Bible at home. I was delighted to find a Bible in the chapel. The only thing was it was a Bible with additional notes added to the text, by the tele-evangelist Joyce Meyer. What a dangerous idea. I started to read my text only to discover integrated along side the words of Paul were the words of Joyce Meyer. It became really difficult to read in public. I had to look closely to see where Paul finished and Joyce started. There has to be a clear delineation between commentary and text. Anyway back to my point about commercialization. Whether this is a good thing or not can be debated. The facts remain, too many church leaders are talking to a narrow ghettoised audience. We need to be in the business of broad casting rather than narrow casting. I'd love to see more Christian artists and writers seeking to connect with the secular world. Writing plays and songs and subversively offering an alternative to the pluralism of today is rapidly becoming the calling of all believers. The truth is that there is much we can learn from other Christian cultures, especially those in the east, who have lived with pluralism and know well very the challenges that pluralism brings to Christian witness. I for one am indebted to the insights of Bishop Newbign who spend a huge part of his ministry in India living our gospel principles in a society that has over 33 million gods. Newbign was of course a Church of Scotland missionary before becoming the first Bishop of the Church of South India in Madras. All this means that the authenticity of the gospel will only prevail when Christian men and woman earn the right to talk about faith because they have been living the reality of the gospel in their communities. We must become people who live out the reality of kindness, grace, forgiveness, service and integrity. This also means that our lifestyles need to shape up to Gospel values.

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