

The gospel and the UK's cultural context

Session 1 – The gospel and the UK's cultural context

by

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Preface

It's said that church planters need to be scavengers! Much of what follows has been begged and borrowed from others. I'm thankful to everyone who's ever said or done anything worthwhile on evangelism and church planting.

Introduction

I had the privilege of being born and brought up in East Africa. I was proud of my Kenyan citizenship which, sadly, I had to relinquish on my 21st birthday. I'd love to work on the 'continent of my heart' but find myself ministering in the 'place of my origin' - the UK. Some of us are from parts of the world that are experiencing big church growth and evangelistic success (Africa and America). We thank God for it. Others of us, however, work in cultures that are indifferent or hostile to the gospel. For some it's religious opposition. For others it's Western secularism. The philosophy which says religion is ok as long as you keep it to yourself - private.

While preparing these workshops I had regular contact with an Australian church leader and I was visited by an American church leader. He came to the UK to ask us about church planting in Canada! I asked him why he didn't just cross the border to the States for help. He reckoned it's easier to gain a hearing for the gospel in the States than in Canada so thought he'd come to the UK instead. As far as I can see, and it'll be hard for the Ozzies, Kiwis and Canadians to take, accept it, you're like the Brits ... when it comes to secularism!

If you're African or American our (British, Canadian, Australian and New Zealand) 'advanced' secularist cultures may be what you become. So our experience may be of interest to you. What's more your comments may help us see things more clearly and help us in our evangelism and church planting. We'd certainly value your prayers.

1.1 The Biblical imperative for church planting

Comparing the numerical growth of the church in the Global South with the decline in the secular West could lead us to think that church planting is a pragmatic issue. In the Global South it's a method for 'channelling' the floods of growth. In the West it's a 'catalyst' to kick-start growth. It is, however, a Biblical imperative. It's good to remember this. As someone said, 'If it goes without saying it needs saying otherwise we forget!'

The goal of redemption is the church

Some think the Day of Pentecost was the church's birthday. But we find the church throughout the Bible. There's a pattern of church in Exodus 24:8-11 (READ). We see here

that one of main goals of redemption from slavery in Egypt was fellowship between God and his people. Lunch with God as the host! Mankind was the pinnacle creature in creation (Genesis 1:31) and yet the pinnacle of creation was the seventh day that God blessed. God at rest with his people! This was lost at the fall. In Exodus redemption restores what was lost - God's people, in God's presence enjoying his blessing. We see it again in Exodus 29:46 (READ).

The goal of redemption is God dwelling among his people. The theme runs through the Bible. And so the gospel of redemption brings us into the loving fellowship of God's family, as Peter puts it, 1 Peter 1:22 (READ). The result of redemption is God's people gathered in his presence, under his rule and in fellowship with one another - church!

The agent of redemption is the church

By 'church' I don't mean an institution or organisation but God's people on earth. They - we are God's messengers. Throughout the Bible, God's redeemed people take God's message of reconciliation to the world. To paraphrase God's word to his people, 'I will be your God, you will be my people and together we will show the world how good it is to have God as your God,' Deuteronomy 4:6-8 (READ). This was the sentiment of the Queen of Sheba when she visited Solomon in 1 Kings 10. It's there in 1 Peter 2:9 (READ). No Christian should be tempted to 'leave evangelism to the church' as if it has nothing to do with them. 'Leaving it to the church' actually means it is their responsibility!

Evangelism and church planting is not a case of pragmatics! If the goal of redemption is the church and the church is the agent of redemption in the world then churches will be evangelistic and will plant more churches! More could be said, but I'll limit it to three more reasons for evangelism and church planting (or word planting!):

- It honours Jesus' name: Calling men and women to obedience and faith in the Lord Jesus brings glory to Jesus (Romans 1:5)
- It obeys Jesus' command: The Lord Jesus has all authority; we either disobey or obey his command to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19, note Jesus also commanded baptism, which of course is into the body of Christ. So the great commission entails planting churches, 1 Corinthians 12:13.)
- It demonstrates a godly love for the lost: God loves the lost people of a lost world. Out of love he reached out in rescue (John 3:16) and he calls us to be like him - godly.

1.2 Biblical principle - 'each of us in our own language' (Acts 2:8)

The Bible gives us a clear command to plant churches but it also gives us some clear principles. Genesis 11 tells us how it was God himself who divided mankind into nations. Why? Well it turns out we're less dangerous that way! So when it came to the Day of Pentecost God could have reversed his Babel decree. He could have enabled the crowds in Jerusalem to understand his message in one language. But he didn't. Luke carefully tells us

that each one heard the gospel in their own dialect, Acts 2:8 (READ). It was a pointer towards what was to come. The Holy Spirit empowered gospel was going to break down social barriers and create a new, worldwide, multicultural, multilingual people. His people! (Galatians 3:28-29) God 'bridged cultures' without eroding their differences. This biblical principle has significantly shaped cross-cultural missionary endeavour and Bible translation work. But it has a huge relevance to evangelism and church planting in the UK.

1.3 The church planting and the UK's cultural context

Church planting has been good for me. For ten years I served in traditional Anglican parishes. From there I observed British culture, as it were, from an armchair. But then I was asked to go and start something new. There were no other church members, no building, no traditions, no history. A blank sheet of paper, which is what most church leaders long for...until we start filling it in! Then we realise there's no one else to blame if it goes wrong! No previous vicar, no wardens, PCC or choir!

I'm no specialist in western secular culture but church planting has forced me to engage with it. Taking the Biblical principle seriously, how can we bridge the chasm between 'church culture' and, in our case, 'British culture'? There is a chasm.

Figure 1 – cultural chasm

I read some statistics in the late 90s. I think it was in an OMF magazine: 91% of missionaries who cross national boundaries work in countries where over 60% of the population already go to church. 8% work in countries where between 20% and 60% go to church. Only 1% work in largely unevangelised countries. Sheffield is typical of many cities in the North of England where under 3% of the population go to church!

What's more, the majority aren't de-churched. Neither they, nor their parents, nor their grandparents went to church. They're third generation completely non-churched! As one English clergyman said at a training course I attended, 'I was trained for ministry in a world that no longer exists!' (Eddie Gibbs, Billy Graham, English Institute of Evangelists)

British culture has changed and continues to change rapidly. By far the majority of people living in the UK speak English. But for the average Brit going to church is like going to Italian opera. You know something good is happening but you haven't got a clue what! So what do we do?

Figure 2 – invitational evangelism, bridge the gap, fly, parachute in with the gospel and your Bible and as little cultural baggage as possible (think and act like 'missionaries' in our own city!)

As a result of thinking this way we've found that we have to do church differently. Here are the kinds of questions we asked in the UK context:

- Why have church services on Sunday morning? People go away for the weekend, go shopping at the DIY store, play Sunday morning sport or read the Sunday papers. We meet late Sunday afternoon.

- Why have refreshments at the end of the service? I think its only church that has 'coffee at the end' in our culture. Why not enjoy hospitality before the service?

- Is there a need for sacred buildings? Actually we meet in a night club – not out of choice, it's simply the only suitable space available in our locality. (Some think its 'cool' 'till they've got involved cleaning the place!)

- Why wear 'sacred clothes'? Our clothing sends out a message. What does it say to the people we're trying to reach?

- Good liturgy is important but how can our services be theologically robust and yet culturally sensitive? We've simplified our meetings to three sections: 'talking to God', 'listening to God' and 'communicating with one another'.

- How can the idea of prayer be made 'outsider understandable' whilst maintaining the spiritual reality – that we are praying? We sometimes introduce the Lord's Prayer from its gospel context, 'Here's a prayer for people who don't know how to pray.' (Luke 11:1)

- Singing is a significant aspect of gathered Christian worship but more often than not peppered with Christian jargon and/or a sentimentality that makes the outsider uncomfortable. We need to be wary of some modern songs which one young leader called, 'Jesus is my girlfriend songs'.

- Liturgy is important but standing and saying the creed is 'culturally weird'. Creeds matter but there must be other ways of being both culturally sensitive and at the same time teaching a congregation to think doctrinally. Instead of the creed why not have a three-minute 'What do Christians believe?' slot in which a normal member of the church engages with an apologetic question, the differences between religions or explains a section of a creed? We encourage people to text questions to a panel of ordinary church members during the Sunday service.

- Post moderns are pragmatic. They want to know if it works. I think it was Ravi Zacharias who said post-moderns 'think with their eyes and make decisions with their hearts.' Why not run a regular three-minute 'Christian story slot'? The possibilities are endless - conversion stories, things learned during devotions, workplace interviews and Christian experiences (spiritually dry, depression, guidance, guilt). In the UK people are 'historically illiterate' so we tell stories from Christian history too - Tyndale, Cranmer, Calvin, Newton.

- Hearing God's word is the focus of our meetings. In our Bible Talks we aim to reach Christians and interested enquirers at the same time. We assume the latter are there! The

danger with splitting into 'seeker services' and 'teaching services' is that we assume that the gospel is only for non-Christians, which is wrong! In aiming to reach both (as with the Christian belief and Christian story slots) the content aimed at believers puts flesh on being a Christian to non-believers. The content aimed at interested inquirers helps Christians learn how to do gracious and intelligent apologetics.

- What other things can we do to ensure the gospel is heard in our culture? What about a regular 'Culture Explored' series of Bible Talks or having a 'culture watch' team which helps equip the church (via a website, and three-minute slots on Sundays) to talk 'Christianly' about issues that are there.

- If we're going to be 'outsider friendly' we asked how appropriate is it to have the Lord's Supper on Sundays? We decided to have communion at our monthly church family prayer meeting.

- What about the offering? Many people in the UK have the idea that the 'church only wants their money'. Does taking an offering on Sunday confuse the message we proclaim – grace? We don't take an offering.

Our aim is reproduce Biblical Christianity in a new cultural setting rather than replicate a particular Christian sub-culture in another context. We need to work hard at being both theologically strong and yet culturally sensitive - 'Each of us in his own language!' Church for people who don't go to church (Christ Church Central Sheffield). My own experience is that the end result is remarkable for one reason – how unremarkable it ends up being. It's all quite simple and straightforward.

Is all this authentically Anglican? I think so. As the preface to the 1662 Book of Common Prayer says, 'And moreover, whereas St Paul would have such language spoken to the people in the church, as they might understand, and have profit by hearing the same; the service in the church of England these many years hath been read in Latin to the people, which they understand not; so that they have heard with their ears only, and their heart, spirit and mind, have not been edified thereby ... it be appointed, that all things shall be read and sung in the English tongue, to the end that the congregation may be thereby edified.'

1.4 Specific difficulties faced in the UK

Evangelism and church planting in a western secular context is not easy! Why is the UK spiritually hard ground? I contacted a number of friends across England and asked for their thoughts. Here are three areas of difficulty. You may recognise and relate to them if you work in an advanced secular culture.

a. Secularism and Post-modernism

'The attitude people have towards "truth and meaning". This makes it harder to gain a hearing for the Bible as people don't so much think it's not true (although they do think that)

but think it is irrelevant as truth is not a relevant category. It makes it seem more important to clearly present Christ from his word, so that we are introducing people to a person rather than convincing them of the propositional truth of Christianity.' (John Hindley, Church Planter, Manchester)

'An African friend told me that he'd never heard of an African atheist. He observed how I have to prove God exists before getting a hearing for the gospel ...The ethical presumptions of our culture are so different. Our culture views Christian norms on say abortion and sexuality as immoral! Christ is immoral. God is immoral.'

(Hugo Charteris, Church Planter, Newcastle)

'Hostile secularist attitudes - especially because of the stand we made on homosexuality which led directly to our birth as Christ Church. There was some negative publicity in the press, opposition by local politicians and suspicion on the part of schools and the local authority as we were looking for Sunday meeting places. Secularism also of course feeds apathy because it is a mindset which pushes religion to the periphery.

(Charles Raven, Church Planter, Worcestershire)

'There is a latent hostility and suspicion about church. Many people have no Bible background. People are so busy they are less focused on spiritual things.' (Al Gooderham, Church Planter, Doncaster)

b. Materialism, Consumerism and Hedonism

'Money and materialism have brought contentment, or people strive for contentment which they think is attainable through hard work - promotion.' (Al Gooderham, Church Planter, Doncaster)

'Apathy - people seem to just not care about anything important, as our culture is so superficial and banal.' (John Hindley, Church Planter, Manchester)

'Most people especially white men think religion and Christianity is completely irrelevant. This has historical factors, perceived weakness of the church, belief that money and experience are where life is at. We have found reaching men almost impossible ... I guess the gospel principles are to keep seeking to save the lost, patience, prayer, preach the gospel'. (David Gibbs, Church Planter, London)

'Consumerism - in society, this is a problem all churches face in that it dulls sensitivity to questions of truth, morality and sin. However, the more insidious form is that which gets carried into the church and we suffered from a number who joined when the church was new and exciting, but then melted away when difficulties came.'

(Charles Raven, Church Planter, Worcestershire)

We think contentment is attainable through materialism but the UK is marked by, 'Depression, discontentment and high levels of sheer unhappiness, family breakdown and old people are isolated! (Hugo Charteris, Church Planter, Newcastle)

Secularism, materialism and consumerism can really only result in hedonism. The other Sunday a Californian exchange student came to our church for the first time. I asked him what he thought was the main difference between British and American culture. His answer, 'American students might go out once or twice at the weekend. British students go out partying every night!' He hit the nail on the head for our evangelism of students. How do we reach people who are either drunk or hung over? The BBC headlines a few days before I met Ryan stated that alcohol related injuries, recorded at the A&E departments in the UK, has doubled in the past decade!

c. Christianity!

The issue we face in the UK is that there is already a network of "established" churches across the country. This makes our situation, ironically, closer to the New Testament than perhaps in other parts of the world, as there are two groups in most places: "Jews" (established confessing YHWHists, synagogue in the 1st Century, Anglican church in the 21st Century) and Gentiles (people who aren't religious in any real way, but are vaguely aware of these other religious types who've been a fact of life for a very long time. In lots of places that means opposition from the religious people and indifference from the Gentiles.

Again, interestingly, the argument Paul and the 1st Century Christians found themselves making over and over again in Acts was, "we're the true Israel". Which is what we'd say about us church planters. What drives us is the loss of the gospel in these other "churches", and therefore we're the real Christians just trying to put it back.'

(Peter Myers, Church Planter, Cambridgeshire)

There are a dozen or so new Anglican churches in the UK outside, or on the edge of formal structures, but in partnership with the Anglican mission agency Crosslinks, formerly Bible Churchman's Missionary Society. This has happened in the last five years. The Crosslinks' partnership is hugely encouraging particularly when opposition to church planting comes from evangelical friends. The feeling from some brothers and sisters is, 'How about reviving old churches before we plant new ones?' My own view is that there is a desperate need for both reviving the old and planting the new.

Things are hard in the UK but we have to be careful that we don't wallow in these difficulties; as one Arthur Murray said, 'The English are never so happy as when you tell them they are ruined!' (The Upholsterer, 1758). Having said that the felt lack of 'success' does tempt us to 'lose heart' (2 Corinthians 4:17) and this in turn leads to the temptation to change the message - to 'tamper with God's word' (2 Corinthians 4:2).

There is an increasing variety of types – tribes of church planters in the UK. I don't understand them in great detail. Much of what's being done is laudable - a desire to be relevant, to be mission-orientated, to engage with the community and to be creative. But there seems to be other sad traits – a suspicion of evangelism and traditional Bible teaching as well as a pluralistic openness to other religions and spiritualities.

The call of the Bible is not to lose heart and not to tamper with the message (2 Corinthians 4). In the UK we need to remember that it's neither our strategies nor our hard work that produces life but God's word by God's Spirit (1 Thessalonians 1:4-5). We must never change the message but always be willing to change our language.

1.5 Discussion questions

1. What are the sub-cultures or communities in your context that you currently struggle to reach through your existing church and evangelistic endeavours? How could a church plant reach them?
2. What would a church service designed to make things understandable to these sub-cultures look like? How do we hold onto the gospel whilst contextualising it?
3. If you're not about to plant, how could you implement some 'missionary thinking' into your existing set-up? What would it look like to move an existing church towards being more missionary-minded?
4. Reflecting on the challenges faced how do you think we could do a better job of evangelizing and church planting in a secularised Western context?

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