

Post-modern Evangelism

A reflection presented by Stuart Buchanan on 16 February 2011 at the Anglican Communion Evangelism and Church Growth Initiative (ECGI) Core Group meeting in Kuala Lumpur, based upon Acts 11. 1 – 18 & John 13. 1 – 14

The first witness to the Roman world, by Peter to Cornelius and his household, told in Acts 10; is retold by Luke in Acts 11; broadening the context to include the impact upon the church.

His writing style suggests that Luke is an advocate of post-modernity; using narrative rather than expounding doctrine. Acts 11 is the narrative about the narratives! Post-modernity is about telling my story, and what it means for me. You may disagree with my conclusions, but you need to take seriously my understanding of my story.

Acts 11 begins with the clash between modernity and post-modernity; between doctrine and narrative. Peter is told that he got the doctrine wrong, so replies not with his doctrinal understanding 'I truly understand that God shows no partiality', but with his narrative. It is also a narrative of God's Holy Spirit taking the initiative.

This is a story of evangelism from one culture to another, from the majority host Hebrew culture to a group of migrants from a minority culture; but with an interesting twist within the narrative. We usually associate majority and host with power and minority and migrant with powerless. But this is the story of the politically powerless sharing faith with a high ranking officer of the occupying army. So the biblical model of mission to the world is from a position of being aware of our vulnerability. This sense of vulnerability is something that Christians in the West had lost and are just beginning to rediscover.

Stuart Murray, in his Post Christendom mission series (www.postchristendom.com), speaks of a move:

- From centre to margins;
- From majority to minority;
- From settlers to sojourners;
- From privilege to plurality;
- From control to witness;
- From maintenance to mission;
- From institution to movement.

God initiates the mission and Cornelius initiates the approach to Peter. Often, as in this story, conversion is a response to prayer and, as it involves a change of worldview, conversion occurs because people are challenged by how a different faith is lived out and want to know more; challenged by the lifestyle, actions and values of others. So, although we focus on evangelism and church growth we must never lose sight of holistic mission.

Cornelius shared his narrative and Peter responded with his, but it is not a well prepared story; Peter adjusted his words to what Cornelius had

shared and the Holy Spirit needed to work on both of them. Cornelius, making sense of Peter's story appears to have the easier conversion experience; in contrast Peter needed to realise that God and his purposes were bigger than he had previously assumed.

This is what happens when we allow ourselves to be vulnerable and, trusting in God, taking the other person's story seriously allow the Holy Spirit to interpret what it means for us. Post-modern evangelism isn't a matter of the new Christian taking on the faith of the one who witnesses; both are changed by the encounter.

In Acts 11, Peter is told he has been converting the wrong sort of people, or at least should have insisted that they conform to certain cultural norms before they are converted. Again he responds with his story and his accusers need to make sense of this narrative. The point that clinches it for him is often lost; the events had been witnessed by seven males so, within their legal and cultural context, his case was proven. Again the Holy Spirit had the situation under control.

Not only did Peter need to change in response to this evangelism, but the church needed to change and we know that it wasn't as straightforward as it sounds here; the debate rumbling on for a long time with even Peter backtracking at one point.

In his book *Transforming Mission* (Orbis 1991) David Bosch quotes Paul Knitter '*The early Christians did not simply express in Greek what they already knew; rather, they discovered, through Greek religious and philosophical insights, what had been revealed to them. The doctrines of the Trinity and of the divinity of Christ ... for example, would not be what they are today if the church had not reassessed itself and its doctrines in the light of the new historical, cultural situations during the third through the sixth centuries*'.

Bosch explains that '*That the message about God in human form, about salvific sacrifices, the victory of the resurrection, and new life, fell on ears that did not find it entirely unfamiliar.*' Over those early centuries there was increasing divergence between Christian and Jewish worldviews.

In a similar way to the engagement with Greek culture, theologians influenced by post-modernity would probably argue that post-modern philosophy has helped them not only to express to a post-modern world what they already know, but also what has been revealed to them about Christ through a post-modern worldview.

Based upon Peter's experience, post-modern mission looks as if it can be quite complex.

Cleaning my bicycle recently, after it had experienced many hours of winter roads, I found myself thinking about John's account of Peter having his feet washed. Getting the dirt, mud, grit and oil off of my bike left my bike spotless, but me covered in dirt. Jesus, of course, had hitched up his robe and put on a towel before cleaning the feet.

John's account of the last supper offers us a sacrament; a visible sign of an inward grace, but it is foot washing not bread and wine. In washing away our sin, Jesus takes our sin upon himself; he then tells us to follow his example. In washing away the sin of the world, we run the risk of getting some of that sin on us. (Some may feel more comfortable with the imagery of us bringing the sin of the world into Jesus' presence, so that he can take away the sin of the world, but in John 20.23 he empowers his disciples, with the Holy Spirit, to forgive sins; either way we can pick up some of the sin.) Post-modern evangelism, in particular, can be a bit like that. Is the sin Peter converting the wrong people in the wrong way, or the response of the brethren in Judea to his actions? By the end of Acts 11, we don't know the final outcome. Only time will tell, either way there is the risk of us picking up some of the sin.

A lady running a project in Hong Kong engaging deeply with Buddhism in a creative way by using some of the imagery of Buddhism told me, in a very humble way, 'I am sure that we have got it wrong at times, but I am sure that Jesus forgives us for that.'

If we let him, Jesus continues to wash away our sin. If we take that spirit of vulnerability, necessary in sharing our faith, into these discussions with other Christians, then I am sure that Jesus continues to forgive us. But it must be harder to find his forgiveness, if we don't engage with the sin of the world, or assume that we are always getting it right.

In Ephesians 2, Paul stresses that we need both the Gentile and Jewish perspectives to fully understand who Jesus is. I would suggest that we need to hold the modern and post-modern understandings in tension to fully see who Jesus is for us today, and understand evangelism. It is like looking at an object through two eyes, rather than one, or listening to music in stereo, rather than mono. We need the modern and the postmodern understandings to give us the full perspective.

In a discussion on this presentation at the ECGI core group meeting the following points emerged:

- *If we ask questions the scriptures can speak to us;*
- *If you take a step back to Acts 10, we see that God even responds to the prayer of Cornelius, the non-Christian; the story is a wonderful statement of grace;*
- *A personal example was shared of a story of mission in cross cultural setting where a Muslim lady came for counselling. She had a baby with her, and the baby vomited and the Christian counsellor's son washed the baby and changed it. The lady was so moved by this she said "I want the faith and love that this boy has". He prayed for her and led her to Christ and she is now evangelising;*
- *Peter, before the intervention of the Holy Spirit, was still finding it difficult to reach others – today we can still find that we judge others, rather than trying to reach them;*

- *A story was told of a Muslim asking a vicar if he could come to church. He attended and sat at the back and thanked the vicar and left the church. The vicar was bombarded by the congregation for letting the Muslim attend, because they were fearful of any political reaction.*
- *The bicycle analogy in the reflection is helpful as the bicycle can't wash itself, nor can we clean ourselves of sin;*
- *When God puts us in unfamiliar contexts sometimes there are certain things that are difficult, but we need to be in the place of the stranger and understand how the stranger feels;*
- *As a tanner deals with skins he would be considered as ritually unclean. There must have already been some movement in Peter's thinking for him to stay with a tanner;*
- *There is the challenge of being prepared to go to people 'where they are' –'Christianity Rediscovered' by Vincent Donovan SCM Press, has much to say about this;*
- *We have freedom of choice. Peter could have refused to go to Cornelius;*
- *Mission is God's initiative – even before Peter could do anything the Holy Spirit comes and 'does the business';*
- *It is the Holy Spirit who converts, not us;*
- *We can imagine Peter, after he has shared his story and seen Cornelius responding, thinking what on earth do I do next? Do I now need to convert them to Judaism? The Holy Spirit intervenes with baptism in the Spirit before Peter needs to make a decision;*
- *We learn from the other cultures and philosophies, but often we are dismissive of 'pre-conversion life'. Much of Paul's ministry draws upon the training and experience of his pre-conversion life. Although we have a Christian festival to mark the 'conversion of St Paul' we also need a festival to celebrate Paul's life before his conversion;*
- *The dragon is an important part of Chinese world views, often Chinese people coming to faith have a crisis of seeing the dragon as a symbol of blessing. English and Chinese speaking Chinese people can have different theological views on dragons, as to whether biblical references to dragons cause them difficulties. We need to consider the worldview carefully before we know where the barriers might lie;*
- *We may need to overcome some of the norms and rules of our own society to bring people to Christ. Coming from a 'high church' tradition, where rules abound, can be a challenge;*
- *An example was shared of a cathedral that was seen as a symbol of reconciliation during the HIV/Aids period there was an initiative to bring faiths together and they have inter-faith services for HIV/Aids day. A number of the congregation were unhappy with this initiative, complaining to the Dean about it. Some cathedrals are seen as "A safe place to do risky things" but this can make the cathedral congregation feel uncomfortable;*
- *Conservative reaction can stem deeper than that. The Christians in Jerusalem have a reason to question, given what they have been through. The passage raises questions about how you read scripture – protection for security and sanctity and transcending that and asking the question 'who is God?'*

- *There is the defence of the purity of faith and practice that is needed, but this might mean that we don't reach out. We must be aware of the breadth of people's Christian journey. For example, if churches are used for secular and multi-faith events then non-Christians should not be allowed to speak from the sanctuary in any inter-faith/state services.*
 - *Peter moved from Jerusalem to the Roman world – he moved from 'early modern' to 'post-modern'. Many of us are in that situation. We have to be flexible to allow God to work in his way and in his time.*
 - *Inter-denominational fighting has no role in the post-modern context. If we can learn to talk to one another as Christians, then we could talk to other faiths.*
 - *Most of the examples shared have been about crossing cultures.*
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The question was posed "what does the god-fearer look like in a post-modern world?"

In response, the presenter would suggest the following:

- **'god'** – all people, whether they are religious or not, have a worldview and so their beliefs, attitudes, behaviour and customs are shaped by 'gods'. As well as religious gods, these may be the 'gods' of wealth, fertility, success, fashion self-seeking, family, class, clan or nation or they may be the 'gods' of truth, equality, social justice, peace or care for the environment.
- **'god-fearer'** – the 'gods' of some worldviews have been created in our own image and help us serve our own ends, or the ends of those who are like us. By definition, I would suggest that a 'god-fearer' has 'gods' that take him or her outside of themselves, otherwise there would be no 'fear' or 'awe'. I would suggest that the 'god-fearer' has a worldview that challenges the 'god-fearer' to look beyond self and to seek truth or work for the benefit of other people or the planet; serving other people, transforming unjust structures to bring about social transformation, justice, peace, reconciliation or protecting the environment. As such they may be people that Christians can openly dialogue with to mutually seek truth or work with on common social concerns. They will be people that Christians should do mission *'with'*, rather than do mission *'to'*.
- **'post-modern god-fearer'** – will be a 'god-fearer' who is open to take seriously the narrative of the Christian and the worldview, based upon the God revealed through Jesus Christ, of the Christian. For the Christian worldview to be taken seriously, the Christian will probably have needed to earn the respect of the 'post-modern god-fearer'; this will have happened because the Christian has shown a similar concern for seeking truth, through dialogue, or similar concerns about people, justice and peace issues or the environment.

This will only happen when the Christian is prepared to take seriously the worldview of the other person, and meet from a position of openness and vulnerability rather than from a sense of superiority. Sadly, although the post-modern perspective should take all narratives seriously, the term can embrace an approach that won't take seriously the narratives that were once dominant as 'mega-narratives' and who dismiss those whose worldview is based upon faith and religion.

Finally, we are likely to be aware that we have engaged with a 'post-modern god-fearer' when we find that, like Peter, our own understanding of Christianity has been challenged and deepened. As with Peter, this may be through seeing God at work in new ways in new situations or it might be similar to the experience of Philip meeting with the Ethiopian official, in that the other person brings questions to our Scriptures that enable us to see new understandings and answers. Again, as with Peter, the process of engaging with 'post-modern god-fearer' is likely to raise new questions for the church that might take prayer, time, patience, vulnerability and understanding to work through.

*Many of the themes developed above are explored more fully in **Cross Cultural Christian** – Stuart Buchanan, published by St John's Extension Studies 2010 available from <http://www.stjohns-nottm.ac.uk/the-cross-cultural-christian/>*

*The foot washing analogy is explored in **On Call** – Stuart Buchanan, first published by BRF in 2001, now freely available at <http://www.stjohns-nottm.ac.uk/assets/PDFs-FORMS-for-download/EXT-Studies/Book-On-Call.pdf> p.82*