



A RAPID RESPONSE TO FAITH WITHOUT BORDERS BY BABATUNDE ADEDIBU

Adedibu's stimulating paper has challenges for both the Black-Majority Churches (BMCs) and the indigenous white-majority churches. While the BMCs are challenged to develop 'transcultural mediators' who are able to contextualise the Gospel for the wider, largely secular postmodern culture, the indigenous white-majority churches are challenged to be energised by the 'gifts and insights' of the BMCs.

To the denominational diversity of the churches in the UK, and the diversity of traditions within these indigenous British denominations, has been added the even greater variety of churches serving minority ethnic communities. Especially from the 1950s, congregations meeting the spiritual, cultural and social needs of people from the Caribbean and sub-Saharan Africa - the BMCs - have indeed proliferated. It is

unremarkable, however, that these congregations are ‘repositories of migrant cultures, where inherent cultural ideologies are expressed through [the] worship and liturgy of their home countries’. That congregations serve the particular cultural as well as spiritual needs of their adherents is true of both indigenous and migrant churches. It was as normal in the New Testament era as it is today. The Jerusalem church, under the leadership of James, continued to address the distinctive needs of its culturally-Jewish members, while the gentile majority congregations demonstrated a wide diversity of practice that reflected their diverse host cultures.^[1] That BMCs continue to have an effective mission among people from the Caribbean and Africa should not be undervalued but affirmed. The miracle of Pentecost was that the polyglot crowd heard ‘about God’s deeds of power in our own languages’ (Acts 2:11). Hearing the gospel from within our own culture makes it less alien; more incarnate; and allows the hearer to transition more readily from fellowship to faith. However, all the speakers on the day of Pentecost were Galileans. The miracle was that other cultures and language groups were touched by God through the proclamation of this culturally-homogeneous group.

So Adedibu is correct, God’s mission crosses cultural boundaries and therefore BMCs need to develop transcultural mediators like the Apostle Paul, to bridge the mission gap between BMCs and the wider secular community. Of course such a mission gap also exists between many of the white-majority churches and the secular postmodern culture around them. I am reminded that the message (the kerygma) of the early church of the New Testament era was adapted to the cultures of the hearers. For example, when the audience was Jewish, Jesus was presented as the Messiah (the Christ) and ‘of Nazareth’; and this proclamation was supported with references to and quotations from the Jewish Scriptures (see Acts 2:22-39; 4:5-22; 17:1-7). However, for a gentile audience, Jesus was presented as ‘Lord’ or the man appointed by the ‘unknown god’ (Acts 16:25-34; 17:18-34). Support for these claims did not rely on Old Testament texts, which would have had no credibility with a gentile audience, but on allusions and quotations from pagan poets and philosophers such as Epimenides, Artus and Cleanthes. To cross the cultural divide, the proclamation of Jesus took various forms (kerygmata) with different christologies and even different approaches to textual authority! The Apostle Paul’s radical approach to contextualising the proclamation of Jesus is a challenge to all Christians engaging in mission. However, in communicating with a postmodern culture, this plurality of kerygmata with a common core may be a useful model to explore. All the kerygmata proclaimed Jesus and called the listeners to put their faith in him, but beyond this core message there was considerable and, often, culturally-specific diversity.^[2] Paul was indeed a transcultural person, and to engage in the breadth of God’s mission in our multi-cultural, postmodern society we need to be learning from each other and from the culture around us.

We also need to be aware of our own culturally or denominationally-specific baggage that can make the gospel sound so alien and inaccessible to others. Peer-to-peer dialogue within the Church; between BMC and white-majority church adherents; and, most importantly, with people in our secular postmodern culture would be a good place to start.

So what are the unique, and perhaps culturally-specific, ‘gifts and insights’ of BMCs that could be of value to the wider Church? Adedibu reminds us of the passionate, enthusiastic, experiential nature of BMC worship with its emphasis on freedom, equality, community and dignity. He also mentions but does not develop the much more integrated world view that underpins most BMC worship: a world view

that underpinned African primal religion but also lies much closer to the world views of the people of the New Testament. The African diaspora, including those who came via the Caribbean, have a more integrated perception of the spiritual and the material and of how they interact. The Holy Spirit is perceived as being at work in their lives and worship with mind, body and emotions open to encounter the divine.[3]

On the other hand, the indigenous white-majority churches are all, to a greater or lesser extent, children of the 17th and 18th Century European Enlightenment: drawing a fairly clear distinction between the material and the spiritual if not actually abolishing the latter altogether. Not surprisingly, reason rather than religious experience have tended to dominate worship, although there are a few notable exceptions to this. In a sense, the BMCs have already shared their gifts with the wider Church, not just in Britain, but across the world. I refer of course to the impact that the Azusa Street revival of 1906, under the leadership of the African-American William Joseph Seymour, has had on the world-wide Church of the 20th and 21st Centuries. The whole Church has been impacted by the Pentecostal movement and the charismatic and neocharismatic streams that have flowed from it.[4]

However, while the white-majority Pentecostal, charismatic and neocharismatic churches do have a greater sense of the integration of the spiritual and material, most of them are a pale shadow (pun intended) of most BMCs who continue to worship with body, mind and emotions fully engaged in a sense of encounter with the Holy Spirit. For most BMC adherents, religion and everyday life; the spiritual and the material; subjectivity and objectivity; divinity and humanity are much more integrated than in almost all white-majority churches. I suspect that there is something here to which a postmodern culture may relate in its rejection of the Church's claim to dogmatic or Biblical authority. Similarly, the BMCs' emphases on freedom, equality and human dignity will chime with many in secular society and may offer a starting point for dialogue about Jesus and faith in him.

[1] See, for example, James D G Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Enquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity*, (London: SCM Press, 1977).

[2] See Dunn op cit and C H Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1936).

[3] Iain MacRobert, *The Black Roots and White Racism of Early Pentecostalism in the USA*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1988).

[4] Ibid.



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