

Article of the Month – November 2008

Double Conversion

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When I first heard the term ‘double conversion’ many years ago, I was somewhat amused and thought the colleague who mentioned it was joking. Not so. As I found out over time, the issue of double conversion is a danger to world missions, ever since it made its entry on the list of topics to be discussed during the Council of Jerusalem in about AD 49.¹ Throughout church history double conversion had – and still has – many different expressions. It’s almost as if we never really understood the ruling of Acts 15 – or failed to act upon it for that matter.

The question was whether Gentiles needed to convert to Christ *and* to Judaism. The answer was clear: conversion to Christ was sufficient and nothing external or traditional had to be added in order to be saved. The early Church did not need the pure Gospel of Christ to be wrapped in an old and worn-out Judaist garment. Had the Church in later ages abided by the principle behind this decision, much damage to God’s Kingdom – and loss of souls – could have been avoided.

The *Church of Rome* became the norm, presenting a form of Christianity with uniform teaching, liturgy, habits and language, even when it was foreign to the world outside the Roman Empire where it was preached. It never moved away from this habit and attempts at indigenization of worship met with much opposition. Until far into the 20th century Latin has been maintained as main language of the clergy and the Scriptures in the Roman Catholic Church worldwide.

The *Protestants* in later centuries continued such practices: the Gospel was preached in many parts of the world, but almost exclusively dressed in western-cultural garments. Their church buildings, organs, liturgy, hymnals, hierarchical structures and clerical robes look the same in Europe and in many parts of the non-western world.

Many *Evangelicals* also express the Gospel by teaching their styles of worship, democracy, leadership and ministerial ethos as forms, foreign to the mission fields they serve. They wrap the Gospel in forms which tend to become just as much ‘Gospel’ as the Gospel itself. It is for that reason, that the so-called prosperity gospel I spoke about in my last article, tends to imply double conversion: conversion to Christ *as well as to the atmosphere of wealth in which it is presented*.

Throughout church history, double conversion as discussed and *disagreed* with in Acts 15, was the rule rather than the exception. It was only in the 2nd half of the 20th century – basically after the Second World War – that the beginning of indigenous forms of worship and theology became visible in parts of the Church in the non-western world.

The result of long centuries with double conversion outreach practiced as the norm produced a syncretistic church. *The Roman Church* accepted much of local pagan practice, not in the last place because it largely failed to present the Word of God to its mission fields.

¹ Acts 15:1-35

In later centuries large parts of *the Protestant Church* let its original biblical theology be defiled by the Age of Enlightenment, which resulted in a liberal, secularized and ‘de-mythologized’ theology and so failed to address the same local pagan practices with Biblical principles.

Foreign and local world-views were mixed; problems like demon-oppression, sickness and polygamy were addressed on a secular rather than a biblical basis, with the result that Christianity became an optional extra, a thin veneer over traditional pagan beliefs.

Churches planted on the mission fields of the world were thus weakened by conflicting worldviews, that prevented them from making Jesus Lord of all, so that converts remained converts at best or became apostates at worst, instead of being transformed into disciples. The result was that such churches largely failed in cross-cultural missionary outreach.

In places where Christianity became biblically indigenous through revival and spiritual renewal however, the Church regained her biblical fervor to reach the nations. Indigenous mission movements in Africa, e.g. in Nigeria and Ethiopia – initiated in the early seventies of the 20th century – prove this.

Primary issues need to be separated from secondary issues. What the primary and the secondary issues are will differ from place to place and from era to era. Unnecessary to say, that the Word of God must always be the norm because it supersedes culture.

Yet, even Paul wrote within a certain cultural context, where we need to distinguish between his eternal non-negotiable principles and his culturally dictated values; the former to be kept intact, the latter to be reviewed within temporary local norms of culture.

This may sound as a dangerous ‘doctrine’ but it is not. God is not rigid, for He wants representatives of ‘every nation, tribe, people and language’² to be in His Kingdom. He loves diversity of people, culture, style, color, dress and habit, otherwise, why would He have made the mono-cultural people of Babylon to spread over the earth?³ Not only because of their capacity to sin, but because He had already said so before sin entered the human race.⁴ God is not rigid, nor is His Word and any rigid interpretation should be avoided. The Word embraces the whole world, just mind 9 references in 4 short Psalm verses.⁵

A very hard example of interpretation has proven to be the issue of women in ministry, especially in the letters of Paul, the missionary. Did he really, literally mean what he said? If so, why don’t we follow him more consistently? Or should we evaluate some issues in the light of our own culture? If we do that, are we compromising the Word of God? Let’s look into that issue of Bible and Culture a bit more thoroughly next time, when we consider the role of women in ministry. After all, that is a topic of great missiological importance, since more than half of our missionary task force in the world consists of women!

² Rev. 5:9 & 7:9

³ Gen. 11

⁴ Gen. 1:28

⁵ Ps. 67:2-5 ‘on earth ... all nations ... the peoples ... all the peoples’ etc.