

188 First-century explosion?

Nothing concentrates my mind more about ‘What is the gospel?’ than a good healthy discussion with a pair of NYBs (not-yet-believers). Yesterday it was two good friends, from Anglican and Catholic backgrounds, respectively, but both adamantly not believers.

They know I’m a happy bunny in my faith these days, and wanted to know why. I told them how I’d totally lost my faith, tried to rebuild it on the old lines, but still not happy, then moved church. In explaining how a not-unintelligent chap like me ended up in a sect, I mentioned my friend’s healing and prophetic gifts, but the immediate reaction I got made it clear that ‘supernatural’ simply doesn’t happen. OK, so not an area of contact there, then.

Two areas I touched on did get a very positive reaction: my apology for the church’s appalling attitude to gay people, and (they are both into history) my question about what caused the original explosion of Christianity. OK, communication was better than it otherwise would have been (“What did the Romans do for us?!”), but that explosion was very remarkable; we left that historic fact hanging as we parted. I can imagine them back at home now, debating it!

OK, so come on, you historians. Can you tell me how I’m going to explain it? Yes, it was the Good News of Jesus that spread like wildfire, but what *is* that Good News? Let me offer you two back-of-a-fag-packet sketches (please forgive the caricature):

Good News A:

God is holy, we’re sinful, but because God loves us, he sent Jesus to die for our sins, to accept the punishment we deserve, so we can have new life now and go to heaven when we die. Life now is transformed by God’s power at work in us.

Good News B:

God created the world; God created humans; we tried to run it our way and it all went wrong. But God’s love pursued us down the centuries, through the nation of Israel (who also got it wrong!). Then God came himself, to sort out the mess once and for all; we killed Jesus; he rose from the dead – so death is now not ‘the end’. God’s power is at work in us to transform people’s lives.

Can you see the huge difference?

Good News A is mainly about me and my salvation, and once I’ve got it, I can then help to make the world a better place.

Good News B is much more about God and the amazing plan that started in Adam, was fulfilled in Christ, and is now about how we can enter into God’s Story.

As important as personal salvation – through faith alone – undoubtedly is, if it’s extracted **out** of The Great Story, it becomes: ‘That’s nice for you, dear, if you like that sort of thing.’ It wouldn’t have turned the world upside down in the first century, and it won’t now. We sing the song, ‘It’s not about **me**, Jesus’, but it is, I’m afraid – that’s half the problem!

A realisation that God is in charge, God has a Great Plan, Jesus is the Centre of that Plan and Christ is the Lord of the Universe, really is Major Good News!

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