Communicating the Gospel and the New Zealand Story

By Mark Grace

In 2014 we will celebrate the 200th year since the Christian gospel arrived in New Zealand. As we approach this momentous occasion we need to consider how to communicate the good news of Jesus Christ to kiwis in a way they will hear it.

Three ingredients are important:

- An understanding of the biblical story
- An appreciation of the bicultural journey the good news took throughout New Zealand
- The ability to weave the biblical story and the New Zealand story together

Let’s start with the biblical story. We need to grasp the gospel—Christ’s redemption of humanity by dying on a cross and coming to life again. We also need to grasp the breadth of the biblical narrative. From creation, the fall of humanity into sin right through to the cross—finishing with Jesus’ triumphant return and the new heaven and new earth.

The second ingredient is an appreciation of the history of the gospel’s bicultural development throughout New Zealand. In getting to grips with this we will need to avoid embellished accounts of events and interpretations of history which judge earlier generations by today’s standards and values. It will mean grappling with the gospels first proclamation by Samuel Marsden to an audience of Maori and Pakeha at Oihi Bay in the Bay of Islands in 1814 to its animating influence in the development and signing of the treaty between Maori and Pakeha.

We will also need to come to grips with the gospel’s arrival in our own town, village, region or district. The story of Tarore tells us how the gospel came to the wider Wellington region. Tarore was a young Maori girl who attended the mission station school in Matamata and learned to read. Tragically, on 19 October 1836, at the age of 12, she was killed during a raid. Her father, Ngakuku, preached forgiveness at her tangi. The Gospel of Luke she used as a pillow on the night she died was taken by one of the raiding party, who was subsequently converted and made peace with Ngakuku. Later it was taken to Otaki, where its message led to the conversion of Tamihana Te Rauparaha, son of the paramount chief Te Rauparaha.

Tamihana realised there was much his people needed to learn about Christianity and so he travelled north to ask for a missionary. Octavius Hadfield was welcomed at Waikanae by 1000 Maori and discovered that among them were Christian groups who worshipped using fragments of the Anglican Prayer Book. In time churches were planted throughout the greater Wellington Horowhenua region.

The third core ingredient is the ability to weave these two strands together. Uncover and use the stories of the spread of the gospel in New Zealand to re-tell the gospel. For example, you could explain the gospels call to a new way of living by using the story of Te Whiti O Rongomai at Parihaka. Out of a wide-ranging and deep knowledge of the bible Te Whiti committed himself to a life of non-violence. At a time of massive confiscation of Maori land their Spirit-led convictions caused Te Whiti and Tohu Kakahi to lead the people of Parihaka to resist confiscation peacefully.
Another example of weaving the gospel and Maori culture together in a way that increases the opportunity of Jesus’ message being heard today is by using redemptive stories. These are the legends, images and metaphors within Maoridom which can open up for contemporary hearers the truths of scripture.

Why is it so important to be using the bicultural history of the gospel’s arrival, spread and growth in contemporary evangelism and mission?

The kiwi identity is increasingly multicultural. Pacific and Maori influences are being woven into the fabric of what it means to be ‘kiwi’. From the performance of the Haka, to body art, to Maori language, the tapestry of the kiwi identity is proudly being broadened by an appreciation and appropriation of aspects of Maori culture. Ancient and current Maori stewardship of the land is finding resonance with many young Pakeha as a growing awareness of the global ecological crisis confronts us.

Maori aspirations and worldview animate and inform a lot of urban music. While Pakeha religious heritage embodied by institutional Christianity has a decreasing influence on them Maori spirituality with its care of the earth, strength of identity in sport and music and connection with a living past has a growing one. In these ways and many more a new generation is emerging with a ‘kiwi’ identity that’s absorbed elements of both Maori and Pakeha cultures and reshaped and reinterpreted them in light of contemporary thought.

Younger kiwis are more open to Maori spirituality and our bicultural history. In telling the big story of the gospels bicultural arrival, early spread and growth and the hundreds of stories within it, we are telling our story to kiwis who are ripe to hear it. In a generation passionately seeking an identity these stories locate us, define us, ground us and link us with our heritage. In a generation unable to ground their identities in a grand narrative they give us a story. Why? The gospel is earthed in the soil of our nation’s history and we hear it through the ears of our people. Whether we are a permanent resident, urban Maori or fifth generation farmer these stories are part of the fabric of us. They are inescapably and unavoidably ours.

In secular New Zealand there is a growing prominence and preference given to Maori spirituality. Within the health sector, education and criminal justice systems we see legislation, principles and protocols which take Maori spirituality seriously. Peek under the hood of our education and environmental systems and you will meet an increasing number of Maori leaders who pray at ceremonies, speak at opening events and carry out any number of spiritual duties. There is a respect, an openness to Maori spirituality which is not given to institutional Christianity. I believe far from grieving the loss of Christianity’s influence we need to be asking what is God doing now and how do we join him.

Lastly, if we don’t use it we’ll lose it. As we lead up to 2014 I believe our grasp as churches of the historical record will become increasingly important. We need to tell our history humbly, acknowledging the many failures of our ancestors and at the same time celebrate God’s grace to us as Maori and Pakeha. If we do not make the most of our history two things will happen: it will be told for us and it will be told in a way which diminishes and distorts the gospel and the impact it has had in New Zealand.
How can churches be growing their understanding of the bicultural history of the gospels arrival, spread and growth in New Zealand?

Here are some ideas:

- Invite New Zealand Church historians like Stuart Lange or Laurie Guy to speak on the issue
- Invite Maori and Pakeha leaders to share about the gospels arrival in your region
- Ask to visit the local Marae, as a home group, ministry team or church
- Identify historical stories which embody aspects of the gospel and use them in worship and teaching
- Just as the simple stone Marsden cross (on the site of the first sermon) will become a significant place of pilgrimage in the years ahead, identify the key sites of the gospels arrival in your region and consider prayerfully walking them, asking God to continue his gospel work
- Invite the local Bible College to run a 'the history of the gospel in this region' course
- Begin thinking now about how your church could celebrate 200 years of the gospel in New Zealand in 2014

The pivotal role of Maori in evangelism

Pakeha were pivotal in the gospel's arrival and early spread. Maori are now equally pivotal to its proclamation and penetration into our secular multicultural society. Younger generations are open to Maori; our culture gives Maori spirituality a larger voice. Maori leaders have a greater freedom to speak of spiritual realities. Therefore we need to urgently engage Maori men and women who will both know and tell the gospel to this urban, westernised, multicultural society of ours.

We need churches and church leaders who know the gospel. We need fellowships and pastors who know the history of New Zealand (and their region) and the gospels integral part in it. We need congregations and leadership weaving these stories together in a way which can be heard by the emerging multicultural generations.