Taking risks for the kingdom of God

Matt Kottman, an American who has ministered a church in London for the past decade, reflects on the British aversion to risk and calls for greater bravery in mission

As an import into Britain, I received a strong dose of culture shock a few years back. We had been planning a big event with the church that was ambitious and required an element of risk. I had thought my British leadership team was with me, and so we moved forward.

At one particular point I felt like Uriah who in the heat of the battle was left alone at the front. I couldn't figure out why those who were behind this initiative suddenly stepped back at the last minute. We had discussed the plan of action, and their response was very positive – *so I thought*. They had affirmed that this was a *brave* move which from my cultural background meant, 'Go for it!' Only when it was too late did I learn that it meant 'Don't do it!'

We all minister within cultural contexts that we often fail to identify. This is partly because we are so busy breathing the culture's air, we find it hard to observe objectively and evaluate what drives our activity. CS Lewis, in his introduction to *On the Incarnation* by Athanasius, reminds us 'to keep the clean sea breeze of the centuries blowing through our minds.'

I am American. I was born in Huntington Beach, California. I am British. I swore allegiance to the Crown in Kingston upon Thames. I have ministered in the Greater London area for the past 11 years. Having swum in two streams, I have learned the value of observing the same object from different perspectives.

According to John Frame, this 'removes from us the temptation of idolizing some element of human experience, whether traditional or contemporary, and it frees us to judge our experiences by God's Word alone, *sola Scriptura*.'

That is, objectively allowing other angles of perspective to enable us to see what we might miss, with God's word as our foundation.

There is a degree to which the British church dismisses American Christianity. The grounds for this are often something along the lines of 'that's quite American'. But what if we evaluate things based on their merit and biblical weight rather than dismissing something as un-British?

Certainly there is much that comes out of the American church that is shameful. America has exported the health and wealth heresy and televangelists like a *venti latte* in a paper cup. Just as I would say we ought not embrace such cancers, because they do not stand the test of scripture, so we should evaluate all mindsets and approaches in the church by the same rubric.

One of the things we pastors are to do is help create a gospel culture. The church I pastor is multinational. In fact, our three elders in training make a great build-up for a joke, as none are British. The joke would go something like this: 'A church had three elders, an Irishman, a Mexican, and a Portuguese...'

All joking aside, here's what that does for us. We are enabled to view things through different lenses and can appreciate gospel principles existing by common grace in other cultures.

I have been asked to comment on what the British church might learn from the American church; so don't lynch me. We have much to learn from each other. But I humbly submit this for consideration.

As a nation, America was founded on risk. It began with a tea party, a (civil) war, a risky purchase by two Americans from Napoleon (the Louisiana Purchase, doubling the US land mass), as well as westward expansion, founding new cities and new world techniques. Taking risk was part of America's DNA from inception. Many would emigrate to 'the Land of Opportunity' with entrepreneurial

How can you take some God-glorifying risks?

Risk your relationships Bring the gospel into your relationships, willing to risk rejection.

Risk your family Saturate your family with stories of men and women who impacted the world for Jesus. Be willing for your kids to grow up and move to the mission field, being separated by thousands of miles.

Risk your reputation Be willing to fail. You are not going to succeed at everything. Don't be afraid to make mistakes and be human. Be willing to live in anonymity.

Risk your health Be willing to bring the gospel into dangerous places.

Risk your wealth Give generously to God-honouring, gospel-advancing work.

Risk your comfort Seek the Lord about the things you could give up which keep you in a state of ease.

Risk your church Lovingly but firmly call your church to follow you in risk. Don't settle for an ecclesiastical social club.

spirit. This willingness to risk was fuelled by a profound optimism, and risk resulting from optimism became a national virtue. It goes without saying that not all risk is right. It is true that some risk is nothing more than self-aggrandisement, but certainly there are many worthy risks to take.

Britain currently suffers from a risk-averse culture. However, this hasn't been the case historically. In fact, William Carey, who pioneered modern missions, said this during a sermon in Northampton in 1792: 'Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God.' Whether British risk-aversion is a result of a loss of status (post-Empire or postwar) I do not know, but sadly the church has breathed this cultural air.

Let us build an optimistic church culture sold on the glory and purpose of God, willing to take risks for his name. Imagine if our churches had such a high view of the mission and movement of God that when a venture of faith was proposed, an electricity of excitement and vision would fill the room. Imagine the heart of the church being ready to run with vision as in the book of Habakkuk:

Then the Lord replied:
'Write down the revelation
and make it plain on tablets
so that a herald may run with it.'

Sadly, instead of energy there is often anxiety which fuels apathy. We must apply wisdom, but optimistically. A cold, calculating response insists on knowing how every detail will play out. Vision and optimism in such an environment is a fire without oxygen. People hold back with a 'watch this space' attitude. Such approaches are killing the church that Christ seeks to build. Vision becomes stillborn. Intention doesn't morph into mission. In the end, the church stays domesticated and people recede from action.

Consider with me Matthew 16:18. Jesus says, 'On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.' When was the last time you saw gates moving down the road? Gates don't move. So where is the movement happening in this verse? The church Jesus is building is storming the gates of hell! The gates of hell do not pursue the church. The church is moving, expanding, taking territory... Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

Actually, we are always risking something. Being a risk-averse culture in the church is another way of saying we are willing to risk what really matters to maintain what really doesn't. The question isn't actually will we take risks, but rather what are we willing to risk? Are we willing to risk our comforts? Or are we willing to risk the mission of God?

A growing, risk-taking resurgence within the British church is occurring through gospel partnerships, as well as FIEC's growing commitment to church planting in connection with Acts 29.

These are some noteworthy initiatives, which I find encouraging.

As a pastor, I have two jobs here. First, my heart must be captivated with an optimistic risk-taking vision for God's kingdom. Has Christ not disarmed principalities and powers, triumphing over them? This means I must take personal risks for the gospel. What am I willing to risk for Christ? My heart needs to be counselled with the gospel truth that Christ is worth expending every breath.

My second job is to call my congregation to a greater vision of God: A vision of God as an activist. I don't mean that in some green sense, but in the sense that God is active. I am to help my congregation dream high with deep biblical moorings. We need to dispel the myth of safety. We must learn to re-evaluate the question: Should we take risks? It's not an issue of if but of what.

What am I willing to risk for the glory of God and the fame of his name? Am I going to risk turning ministry over to people and inspire them to dream about how that ministry can grow for God's glory? Am I willing to give people a chance to grow as leaders although they have had no formal training? Am I willing to go without professionalism for authenticity? In the end, being optimistic and willing to take risks is gospel.

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