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Theme: “Hermeneutics for the heart...and mind”

Plenary Sessions: *A Contextualized Gospel that is True to the Faith–Theological Challenges*

Session One: (Wednesday 28 May2014)

What Do You Mean - Contextualize the Gospel?

by
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Introduction: A Hermeneutic for all: Penetrating hearts and minds globally.

Like many aspects of Christian experience, we cannot choose whether or not we shall contextualize. We can only choose whether we shall do so well or poorly. We are so much part of our culture and our world, and contextualization is so much part of living as Christians in our culture for the sake of our world, that we are constantly involved in the contextualization process. The word carries the same mixture of helpfulness and annoyance as many neologisms. But the activity is dear to the heart of every believer, whether we realise it or not.

What, then, is Contextualization & Why Bother about it?

What is it? In essence, contextualization is all that is involved in faithfully applying the Word of God in a modern setting. In contextualization we go, with all our culturally acquired assumptions, experience and agenda, to the scriptures, with their different cultural background, presuppositions and priorities. We hear for ourselves the same living message God intended for the first readers, so that we can then go to people in our own or another cultural setting who hold yet another list of expectations and action priorities, and explain the Biblical message so that they receive it with the same impact as it held for the first readers.

The task is often described as moving from within our cultural horizon to hear with authenticity the message God spoke within the cultural horizon of the biblical world, so we may go in turn to present the message with equal authenticity within the cultural horizon of another group of people.¹

¹ For standard evangelical discussions of the topic see, Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons : New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description*, Paternoster, 1980; Donald A. Carson, (ed), *Biblical Interpretation and the Church: The Problem of Contextualization*, Thomas Nelson, 1985; David J.Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization : Meanings, Methods, and Models*, Leicester: Apollos, 1989. For concise introductions see, C.Rene Padilla, 'The Interpreted Word : Reflections on Contextual Hermeneutics', *Themelios*, Vol 7(1) Sept 1981:18-23; Martin Goldsmith, 'Contextualization of Theology', *Themelios*, Vol 9(1) Sept 1983:18-23; D.J.Hesselgrave, *ad loc.*, in W. A. Elwood, (ed), *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984; Paul G. Hiebert, 'Critical Contextualization', in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 11(3)July 1987, pp104-112; republished in Hiebert's, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994, pp75-92. These two versions are an update of his earlier chapter with the same title in, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1985 pp 171-192; Dean Flemming, ,*Contextualization in the New*

Contextualization, then, is the task of re-presenting in a new cultural context the message of God so that it speaks the same message as originally given in the biblical context. It impinges on, and in part at least embraces, the tasks of biblical understanding (exegesis), interpretation (hermeneutics), translation and explanation (communication), and application (indigenisation and inculturation).²

This paper presents an explicitly Evangelical approach to contextualization. We see the task as primarily relating the authoritative message of the Christian Gospel and Scriptures into the thought forms and lifestyles of people within their own cultural settings, taking their culture seriously in the process. We take the authority of scripture as God's revelation to all humanity as the essential starting point for the contextualization process. Other approaches, notably Catholic and some mainline Protestant approaches, start with the cultural realities as more, or equally important as sources of truth. They give the scriptures only relative authority alongside culture, church tradition, human reason and experience and the social sciences, etc., which potentially carry equal authority as sources for the contextualization process.³ We are not presenting a "model" to be followed, but rather highlighting what we regard as key principles which should inform whatever approach we may take to the contextualization process.⁴

Culture, as we are using the term, is: "An integrated system of beliefs ... of values ... of customs ... and of institutions which express these beliefs, values and customs ... which binds a society together and gives it a sense of identity, dignity, security, and continuity."⁵

Why Bother About Contextualization? Our introductory answer to this question is simple. The nature of God's way of salvation demands it.

That the Gospel is available equally for women and men of all cultures was startling news for first century believers. We have lost this sense of surprise. Paul declares this is the unexpected "mystery" the Holy Spirit had forced upon the reluctant minds of the apostles (Eph 3:1-12). God had, of course, planned it all along. But, despite the many Old Testament allusions, hints and

Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission, Leicester, UK: Apollos, 2005; Charles Kraft, (Ed), *Appropriate Christianity*, Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2005; Gailyn Van Rheenen, (Ed), *Contextualization and Syncretism: Navigating Cultural Currents*. [Evangelical Missiology Series No. 13] Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2006; Vanhoozer, Kevin J., "One Rule to Rule them All?" Theological Method in an Era of World Christianity,' in Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland, (Eds), *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity*. Nottingham: Apollos, 2007:85-126; For an overview of more recent developments to 2010 see, A. Scott Moreau, *Contextualization in World Missions: Mapping and Assessing Evangelical Models*, Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2012.

² For discussion of initial evangelical fear of the term "contextualization", and its relationship to the task of developing local theologies, see chapters by Donald R. Jacobs and Tite Tienou, in, James M. Phillips & Robert T. Coote, (Eds), *Toward the Twenty-first Century in Christian Mission : Essays in Honor of Gerald H. Anderson*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993: 235-252.

³ See Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, Rev. Edn., Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002 for the major alternative approaches.

⁴ A. Scott Moreau, 'Evangelical Models of Contextualization,' in Matthew Cook, Rob Haskell, Ruth Juian and Natee Tanchanpongs (Eds), *Local Theology for the Global Church: Principles for an Evangelical Approach to Contextualization*, Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2010:165-193, identifies various categories, models and approaches to evangelical contextualization. This gives a more helpful introduction to the kinds of contextualization being undertaken, than his more methodologically restricted 2012 volume cited in note 1 above.

⁵ Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, *The Willowbank Report - Gospel and Culture*, Lausanne Occasional Papers, No 2, 1978: 7.

outright statements about it, this was a secret Jewish national aspirations gladly kept under wraps. For Paul, the "apostle to the peoples of other cultures," however, this was the most radical treasure of the new covenant (Col 1:20-29; Eph 2:11-22). Paul wondered deeply that he should be entrusted to declare this new reality openly. It powerfully motivated his whole ministry (Eph 3:7-11; 1Tim 2:3-7; 1 Thess 2:4-13; Rom 1:1-5). Central to the Gospel age, then, is this unexpected news that God's word can be received fully by peoples of every different ethnic background (1 Thess 2:13). To grapple with that reality means contextualizing.

As Paul concludes his great mission manifesto, this theme forms his climax (Romans 15:7-17). God's Christ came to serve one distinct cultural group - "the circumcision" or Jews. To serve God's truth this was essential. God's truth always operates in the real world of particular cultures - not in some virtual or Platonic "ideal" realm. Only thus could God's longstanding purposes and promises be fulfilled. These promises, likewise, were firmly earthed in the culture history of the "fathers" of this same ethnic group (15:8). And yet the whole purpose of this specific inculturation was to impact the whole world. This was the only way "the peoples of other cultures," the Gentiles, could discover and respond to God's mercy (15:9). The cultural particularity focussed on the needs and heritage of the Jews became God's means for blessing all other cultures. Every strand of Hebrew culture's literature - law, history, poetry and prophecy - testified that God had always intended to bless all nations by this means of choosing one of them (15:9-12). These are the classic foundations for contextualization. God chose to work out our salvation within the time-space realm of planet earth – therefore, commencing from the Jewish nation, we must exegete, interpret, translate, communicate and apply his word in all the diverse languages and cultures of our globe.⁶

God's purposes for our age culminate in penetrating hearts and minds globally, in all the world's diverse cultures. The biblical message, the Gospel, belongs to every culture. This Gospel is eminently translatable into every culture. In fact, as we shall see, this great News is incompletely grasped and lived without this inter-cultural dimension. Contextualization is an essential response to these realities of our faith.

Our paper is we shall consider *key principles or factors in evangelical contextualization* under three headings: *Grasping the cultural factors* in contextualization; *Upholding the biblical truth factors* in contextualization, and *Working for an appropriate interface between culture & biblical truth for contextualized evangelism and discipleship*.

I. GRASPING THE CULTURAL FACTORS IN CONTEXTUALIZATION

Human cultures, from their trivial outer forms to the attitudes underlying each worldview, are the first part of our contextualization formula. The Christian message takes cultural settings seriously. The following assumptions about culture should inform us as we contextualize:

1. ***Christians Accept and Respect Cultures as Part of God's original intention for Humanity, Because ...***
 - *The scriptures trace the source of human cultures back to God himself.* Genesis One and

⁶ We have used Rom 15:7ff to make this point. We could have equally well used the only slightly different language of Gal 3:7-14, 22-29.

Two lay two firm foundations for developing human cultures. First, our distinctive capacities as creatures made in the image of God are the basic source of human culture, Gen 1:26-27. Created like the Living God as his representatives within the created order, our distinctly human intellectual, communication, social, spiritual and moral competencies are all culture-producing abilities. Second, God's original commands to the first humans, Gen 1:28-31 and 2:15-20, are culture-producing commands, rightly referred to as our "Cultural Mandate." Encapsulated in these commands are responsibility for family and societal life (be fruitful and multiply ...); responsibility for exploring, understanding and mastering, developing, utilizing and conserving the resources of universe as a trust from God for the good of our fellow humans (fill the earth ... subdue it... rule over... I give it ... work it ... and take care of it... name...); and responsibility for accountable evaluation and choice in both the moral and spiritual realms (you are free ... but you must not...). These responsibilities are fulfilled in and through our culture producing behaviours. These cultural capacities and God's original intention for them ante-date the fall (Gen 2:15-25). They are at the heart of what God pronounced "very good" as he surveyed his original creation, Gen 1:31. We respect cultures as the expression of God's good intentions for humanity from the first.

- *God oversees the historical development of the cultures of the nations.* Not only as Creator, but also as Lord of history God himself supervises the destinies and affairs of every ethnic group (Acts 17:24-28; 1 Sam 2:2-10; Jer 12:14-17). Though not always in the foreground of the biblical story, God's intentions of blessing all the families of humanity are always at the foundation of the whole biblical narrative. The "God blessed them..." of Gen 1:28 becomes, "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you," in Gen 12:3 as the focus turns to the specific story of the descendants of Abraham (cf., the "so that" of Ps 67:1-2). The New Testament age bursts into life with a spectacular celebration of praise from all the accessible cultures of the day (Acts 2:1-12). This gospel interest in the diverse settings of ethnic groups sets Christianity apart from other world religions.⁷

- *God honours human cultures by the Incarnation of his Son.* When God chose to reveal himself in history, he confirmed the importance of human cultures for eternity. God did not shout his message from the distance by some inter-galactic sonic boom. He came in person into an ordinary human setting - born of woman, born under the law. Thereby he gave dignity and value to our human scene - to human cultures. Moreover, Jesus Christ tied proper understanding of his salvation to the particular culture into which he was born - that of a Jewish woman, living under Jewish law. This one culture is set apart from others, "for salvation is of the Jews". Its salvation-history is made normative and authoritative for defining all valid salvation experience (Jn 4:22; Acts 4:12). The Incarnation made Jewish biblical culture of distinctive importance for all time. But, as we have seen from Romans 15, that was not the end of the story.

- *God's purpose is to enable all cultures to be Transformed and flourish in Christ.* The historical particularity evident when Christ was born within "the circumcision," was "in order that the peoples of other cultures may glorify God for his mercy" (Rom 15:9). Through this "mystery of the Gospel," God exalts cultural plurality by way of historical particularity. Following the Old testament preparation, by showing so clearly in the home of Nazareth that one culture matters to him, God made a way to show, beyond the Cross and Pentecost, that every culture matters to him. Our task in contextualization is to give similar honour to all cultures:

➤ *In Christ each Gospel-receiving Culture's life and heritage is purified and fulfilled.*

⁷ Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, (American Society of Missiology Series, No.13) Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1990, makes this point in contrast with Islam.

"Christ among you" - you peoples of other cultures - this is the hope of glory for Christians of every culture (Col 1:27). Jesus alone is the "Messiah" – or answer to the deepest cultural longings - not just for the Jews, but for every people group (Jn 4:42; 12:32; 1 Jn 4:13-15). As "Son of Man," Christ Jesus offers fulfilment for all human aspirations. Renewed members of every tribe, linguistic group, people and culture will not only be present in the final glorious kingdom, they will each contribute something distinctive to its splendour (Rev 5:9-10; 7:9; 21:24).

Here and now, too, Christ transforms each culture he invades. He reproduces the pattern of the Incarnation:

When God became man, Christ took flesh in a particular family, members of a particular nation, with the tradition of customs associated with that nation. All that was not evil he sanctified. Wherever he is taken by men [sic] in any time and place he takes that nationality, that society, that 'culture', and sanctifies all that is capable of sanctification by his presence...⁸

Not that this process takes place easily:

...that society never existed, in East or West, ancient time or modern, which could absorb the word of Christ painlessly into its system. Jesus within Jewish culture, Paul within Hellenistic culture, take it for granted that there will be rubs and frictions - not from the adoption of a new culture, but from the transformation of the mind towards that of Christ.⁹

Developing this refined cultural "mind" is the focus of much of Paul's instruction. We suggest it is also the real testing ground of effective contextualization today (Rom 12:2ff; Phil 2:5ff; Eph 4:17-24).

- *In Christ, we receive and participate in a new "adoptive" cultural heritage.* Here is a distinctly new aspect to the impact of the Gospel upon a Christian's culture. God makes believers of all nations heirs of Hebrew salvation-history through Christ. Again, Andrew Walls puts it lucidly:

...The Christian is given an adoptive past. He is linked to the people of God in all generations (like him, members of the faith family), and most strangely of all, to the whole history of Israel, the curious continuity of the race of the faithful from Abraham... all Christians of whatever nationality, are landed by adoption with several millennia of someone else's history, with a whole set of ideas, concepts and assumptions which do not necessarily square with the rest of their cultural inheritance; and the Church in every land, of whatever race and type of society, has this same adoptive past by which it needs to interpret the fundamentals of the faith.¹⁰

Every cultural group involved in contextualization thus has in this biblical heritage, an abiding standard and "reference point" to continually inform and enrich the process of cultural transformation. But that does not make the Christian community merely backward looking or conservative.

- *In Christ, each culture is liberated for global impact and destiny.* The process Romans 15 described for the Jews is repeated in every culture invaded by the Gospel. Christ breaks in to fulfil the deepest longings of that particular culture, so that that culture, in its turn, can

⁸ Walls, 'Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator,' 44.

⁹ Walls, *Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator*, 45 [in *The Missionary Movement...8*]

¹⁰ Walls, *Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator*, 45.[in *The Missionary Movement... ,9*]

make its contribution to the "blessing" of all nations. Nothing less can satisfy the implications of Jesus' parting words: "As the Father has sent Me, so send I you..." (Jn 20:21). Every nation receives a share in the global responsibility. And even spirit powers look on to learn from this expression of the unconfined wisdom of God (Eph 3:10).

The New Testament, then, building on the universal expectations embedded in the Old Testament, calls us to grasp the high value God gives to the diverse cultures of our globe.

2. *Culture is an ever-present limiting factor in adequate contextualization, because*

- *All cultures have been spoiled by Human sin.* God's original intention has been damaged and spoiled. The Apostle Paul trenchantly analyses contemporary cultures in Romans 1:18-32. All human cultures are characterized by godlessness or secularity and lack of uprightness which results in God's truth being suppressed in their cultural habits and customs (Rom 1:18). This tragic reality is traced to a three-fold root which produces an inevitable regression in cultural lifestyles. The root causes of cultural degradation are, first, our basic human rejection or ignoring of truth about God accessible within the world around us. Second, our consequent refusal to acknowledge God or give him his due place in our human thought and value systems, and third, our proud ingratitude does not thank God for his abundant provisions for us his creatures (Rom 1:19-21a). These roots lead all cultures into the pattern of increasing secularism Paul traces through the inter-related and inevitable stages of: becoming *deluded in our minds and values* because we exclude the god-ward dimensions and leave human thought earth-bound, reductionist and lightweight (vv21b, 22, 25a); this leaves us with only *substitute gods*, favouring non-personal quests for material creatures or things rather than mature personal relationships with the Living Lord of the universe (vv23, 25b); which leads on to *perverted desires and improper use of our bodies*, with resulting exploitation of women and sexually distorted societies (vv24, 26-27). That, in turn, opens the flood-gates to *pervasive corrupt conduct* permeating our lifestyles, entertainments and leisure pursuits (vv28-30); resulting, finally, in *open rebellion against right behaviour*, with flagrant denial of moral absolutes and public acceptance of standards God condemns (v32). When cultures no longer know when to blush, they are in serious trouble indeed. Romans Chapter Two goes on to give a similarly devastating analysis of the way even the deeply religious Jewish culture pursued a similar regression when it allowed growing space for the same roots as they too rejected available further knowledge of God, refused to give proper place to the fuller revelation in Christ and allowed gratitude to give way to presumption. In the analyses of Romans One and Two, human cultures all fall short of God's requirements and are in need of a transforming salvation. Thus the Christian view of cultures gives both the highest, and the lowest assessment. Good contextualization attempts to be true to both the potentially great, but only partially realized, good, and to the awfully distorted and twisted characteristics present in every human culture.¹¹

- *Our cultural pre-suppositions are so all-pervasive they can determine all we do when Contextualizing.* It usually takes an extended cross-cultural exposure to reveal our own cultural

¹¹ We could continue to explore how this ambiguity about culture is evident in the terms used to refer to human cultures in the scriptures, such as "the world." God loved the world so much he sent his Son for its salvation; but we are not to love the world since its secularized ways so easily corrupt our motivation and values (John 3:16; 1 John 4:9, 14; and 1 Jn 2:15-17, etc.)

biases. Christian anthropologists have helpfully described how aspects of our own culture shape our perceptions of other cultures and influence the way we read the scriptures. Alan Tippett describes this cultural distortion of our perceptions by his "theory of parallax".¹² Our attitudes towards our own and the other culture; our historical perspective; our involvement in promotion of a cause; the role or function of our activities; our professional standing; and our own personal perceptions of ourselves, all skew the way we perceive and respond to other cultures. Tippett shows how these can have either negative or positive influences. As we seek to pass on Biblical truth across the cultural horizon of our own society, then, we are liable to distort both the original intention of the scriptures and the responses of those we serve because of the way these usually unconscious, culturally determined, attitudes govern our actions.¹³

- Given such all-pervasive cultural influences it is little wonder that when contextualizing the biblical message, *culture tends to narrow selectively where scripture broadens and diversifies*. For example, our culture pre-disposes us to particular modes of thought where scriptural revelation comes through many such modes. As Westerners we are assured about the vital importance of propositional teaching for a clear grasp of biblical truth. As heirs of Greek thought it could hardly be otherwise. But we are much less assured about the authoritative importance of allegory or parable. Historical narrative is acceptable to us, but with caution: we are not too happy about the way Paul or the writer to Hebrews used it in passages like Galatians 4:21-31, or Hebrews 4:1-11. Biography is permissible as revelation, for we quickly identify with David or Joseph and his brothers. But Koheleth's Wisdom, the Singer's Love Song and some of the Poetry - especially the imprecatory kind - leave us Westerners rather unhappy about the imprecision - to our minds - of their teachings.

But then I had no answer when our Melanesian students asked why we did not teach the Proverbs as tools for pre-evangelism in their proverb-rich, oral society. Well I remember being the only one in a Sepik congregation of sixty who needed an explanation of the Neo-Melanesian parable following the communion in a Sepik (North-West PNG) service. Only a dumb European would not realise that the dramatic exhortation to prune the coffee trees that week was a reminder that the special offering was due next Sunday.

Only an international breadth of theological input will keep our contextualization from the ever present tendency for our own culture to limit our perspective.¹⁴

¹² Alan R. Tippett, 'Parallax in Missiology: To use or Abuse', in, Darrell L. Whiteman (ed), 'Missionaries, Anthropologists and Cultural Change', *Studies in Third World Societies*, No25 (Sept 1983): 91-151.

¹³ David Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen broaden the list of cultural factors affecting contextualization in their "seven-dimension paradigm" which includes: Worldviews - ways of viewing the world; Cognitive processes - ways of thinking; Linguistic forms - ways of expressing ideas; Behavioural patterns - ways of acting; Communication media - ways of channelling the message; Social Structures - ways of interacting; and Motivational sources - ways of deciding. Hesselgrave and Rommen, *Contextualization*, 203-211. See my further exploration of how cultural pre-suppositions influence our missionary thinking in J. M. Hitchen, 'Cross-cultural Communication of the Gospel,' in K. W. Liddle (ed), *God at Work in New Guinea*, Palmerston North, NZ: Gospel Publishing House, 1969:25-37.

¹⁴ For just two African examples of pleas for such non-Western input to theology, see, Kwame Bediako, 'The Holy Spirit, the Christian Gospel and Religious Change : The African Evidence for a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism', in, James Thrower (Ed), *Essays in Religious Studies for Andrew Walls*, Aberdeen, Department of Religious Studies, University of Aberdeen, 1986, 45; and Tite Tienou, 'Christian Theology in an Era of World Christianity,' in Crag Ott and Harold A. Netland (Eds), *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an era of World Christianity*, Nottingham: Apollos/IVP, 2007:37-51.

3. *Cultures are always integral to experiencing and understanding truth*

God's way of honouring cultures makes them indispensable for our understanding of his message, despite their weaknesses and distortions.

- *We can never express truth in a purely "supra-cultural" form.* It is fruitless to attempt to state the "supra-cultural" aspects of the Gospel by isolating the divine kernel from the cultural husk. As soon as we express any aspect of God's truth we do so by cultural means - our thought patterns and language. As Martin Goldsmith puts it:

...all theology is contextual. It must be, for all of us interpret the Bible through the spectacles of our philosophical background. And we then express our beliefs within the framework of those terms.... All theology throughout history has been expressed within the context of current religious and philosophical movements. This contextualization inevitably adds to or subtracts from the biblical revelation.¹⁵

We Westerners need to accept that our theology is as much a 'local theology,' shaped and limited by our Western cultural background and context, as any theology coming from any other part of the world. The idea that any one cultural group writes *the* universal theology is simply wrong. God's message always comes to us in the wrappings of a particular cultural form. There is no such thing as "the biblical culture" which we simply announce in another culture. There are the abiding seeds of the Gospel message and the abiding revelation of God in Christ in the written scriptures, which always have to be planted and nurtured in and through the processes of translation and contextualization using the languages, thought-forms, habits, ideas and life-styles of each local culture.

- *Cross-cultural awareness and experience confirm and clarify truth.* Moving across a cultural barrier often opens our minds to fresh aspects of Biblical meaning previously unrealised. Take this list of "non-Western" cultural understandings and related aspects of scripture we discovered in Melanesia, of which we had been only dimly aware in our own culture :

- The involvement of the unseen forces in everyday life, and Christ's role as cosmic ruler and upholder of both nature and spirit powers (Col 1:16-18);
- The ancestors' continuing involvement in tribal life, and the continuity and interdependence between previous generations of believers and ourselves (Hebrews 11:39-40; 12:22-24);
- An understanding of time and the future quite different from Western ideas of history and lineal progress;
- The understanding of religion as the integrating factor for the whole of life - not a one day a week ritual;
- Understanding personal value and righteousness in terms of one's value to the tribe and in maintaining tribal obligations, and the communal nature and intent of virtually every ethical command in Paul's writings;
- Spirit forces intervening directly in the natural world so that you take no interest in secondary causes, and the interrelation of both the Word and the Spirit in a pre-literate society, etc, etc.

The cross-cultural journey also threw fresh light on various teachings we thought we knew well, and highlighted aspects of scripture which had seemed of little importance in Western society.¹⁶

¹⁵ Martin Goldsmith, 'Contextualization of Theology', *Themelios* Vol 9 (1) Sept 1983:20-21.

¹⁶ For instance: the present implications of our future hope; the importance of a doctrine of work and manual labour for human dignity; the creation ordinances governing economic development and ecological concerns; the implications of all humans being made in the image of God for racial and "payback" (retaliation) issues; and the

Thus, in Papua New Guinea aspects of biblical truths came alive in ways our previous New Zealand Bible College training had never noticed. We need cross-cultural insights to more fully, and more adequately, grasp God's word. As Rene Padilla puts it:

"...Every culture possesses positive elements, favourable to the understanding of the Gospel ... every culture makes possible a certain approach to the Gospel that brings to light certain salient aspects that in other cultures may have remained less visible or even hidden. Seen from this perspective ... cultural differences ... serve as channels of expression of aspects of the truth of the Gospel, aspects that a theology tied down to one particular culture can easily overlook".¹⁷

- *Contextualizing the Gospel across cultural boundaries causes a "boomerang effect" for the missionary-sending community.* The missionary almost inevitably returns to the sending church with uncomfortable questions about the adequacy of the home church's grasp of truth. When Paul returned to Antioch with his "lessons from the frontier" of mission in Galatia he had a newly focussed perception of the essence of the Gospel. This caused a public confrontation with the mono-cultural teachers dominating the Antioch church (Acts 14-15, Gal 2). The different roles of Antioch and Jerusalem from this point in Acts confirm that diverse cultural awareness is crucial for us to adequately transmit, or contextualize, the biblical message. Today, the churches of the West stand at a similar point. The focal centre of global Christianity has moved from its previous Western homelands to Africa, Asia, South America and the Pacific.¹⁸ If we Western Christians fail to heed the questions asked and criticisms made of us by those on the new frontiers - questions about our affluence, our individualism, our rationalism, the scepticism with which we approach the Bible, the unbiblical confidence we place in nuclear families, etc., - then our candle may be removed from its lamp-stand as happened to the Jerusalem church as it drew back from cross-cultural openness in the first century.

- *Cultural diversity enriches contextualization* because it is only "with all the saints" that we discover the "length, breadth, height and depth" of truth (Eph 3:17-19). Power to grasp the depths of biblical meaning is limited for isolated believers. We need each other to adequately understand scripture. And if we need the ministry of others for our spiritual perception in the local arena, it is equally true globally. As the Lausanne Covenant puts it, the Spirit: "... illumines the minds of God's people in every culture to perceive (the scripture's) truth fresh through their own eyes and thus discloses to the whole church ever more of the many coloured wisdom of God."¹⁹

Therefore we need both the "teaching and admonishing of one another" within our own cultural group, and the challenge, warning and correction of insights into truth from other cultural backgrounds, if we are to grasp the fullness of God's Word. Thankfully, we need not despair:

... since none of us can read the Scriptures without cultural blinkers of some sort, the great advantage, the crowning excitement which our own era of Church history has over all others is the possibility that we may be able to read them together. Never before has the Church looked so much like the great multitude whom no man can number out of every

importance of land and inheritance for God's people.

¹⁷ C. Rene Padilla, *The Contextualization of the Gospel - A Learning in Dialogue Experience with C. Rene Padilla* (Partnership in Mission, 1564 Edge Hill Road, Abington, PA.19001, U.S.A.), n.d., 4-5.

¹⁸ Andrew F. Walls has most consistently explained and developed the implications of this in his various articles published since the 1980s; e.g., 'Culture and Coherence in Christian History', *Evangelical Review of Theology*, 9(3) July 1985: 214-225; now collected in his , *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996, 16-25

¹⁹ The Lausanne Covenant, Paragraph 2, in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, J.D. Douglas (Ed). (Word, Waco, Texas 1974).

nation and tribe and people and tongue. Never before, therefore, has there been so much potentiality for mutual enrichment and self-criticism, as God causes yet more light and truth to break forth from His word.²⁰

Culture, then, looms large in making "fully known" God's Word (Col 1:25-29). So we must rightly appreciate culture to rightly contextualize biblical truth. We are entitled to utilise culture with enthusiasm, with humility, and with discernment as we approach the contextualization task. But there are other factors to keep in balance too.

II. UPHOLDING THE BIBLICAL TRUTH FACTOR IN CONTEXTUALIZING

Our understanding of the nature of God's Truth - as authoritative revelation through the scriptures by the Spirit - provides the other regulative and dynamic factor in adequate contextualization.

1. God's Truth is always greater than our best grasp of it:

God himself, his purposes in Creation, the human predicament and Christ's work for our redemption are all too great to be adequately expressed in any one formulation. Our human minds cannot hold together at one time any more than a very small part of the whole truth.

- *Since God is One and Infinite, this is inevitable.* By definition God is beyond human grasp. He is the sum of all his attributes. Yet we are obliged to consider only one aspect of his wholeness at a time. Human language, human experience, our restriction within the time/space continuum, let alone the impairment of our faculties by sin, all force us to take a piece-meal approach to knowing God. When contextualizing the danger is that we forget we are only human and assume greater competence than we can attain. Henry Robert Reynolds, Principal of the Congregationalist Cheshunt College, in Hertfordshire England through the latter part of the nineteenth century, highlighted the inherent danger:

We must admit that every element of the glory of Christ is so absolute, so perfect in itself, so absorbing, so engrossing, so beneficent, that if it beams or glances on the soul, it conveys the impression - which may turn out to be no other than an illusion - that it is the *whole* revelation, the fullness of Him that filleth all in all...[thus we need to ask ourselves]... whether the one colour of the million-hued bow of promise in which (we) find so much is the whole of the one living Christ, and whether (we) have not much to learn... from those who are analogously led to believe that they too have, alas! the entire glory of God beaming through another chink of the curtain which conceals the Holiest of all.²¹

- *When contextualizing, then, we must recognise God's Truth is always many-sided.* We too quickly grasp one aspect of truth which has impressed us as if it is the sum total of truth. The scriptures present every central doctrine in a range of ways.

At first glance "Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures", may seem self-evidently clear in its meaning. But the reality is so vast that the scriptures give a wide range of explanations of the inherent meaning of both Christ's death and our sin. Scriptures draw on a wide range of

²⁰ Andrew F. Walls, 'The Gospel as the Prisoner and Liberator of Culture', *Faith and Thought*, Vol 108(1-2) 1981: 51; Reprinted in Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History, Studies in the Transmission of Faith*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996: 15

²¹ Henry Robert Reynolds, 'A Study in Heno-Christianity', *The Expositor*, 5th Series Vol II 1895:321-341.

common human experience for terms to explain the *work of Christ* in his death at Calvary:

- The language and rituals of Temple worship and the common human experience of animal sacrifice provides the conceptual background to explain Christ's death as his work as High Priest and as our expiatory and propitiatory sacrifice;
- Human familial, emotional and social yearnings for understanding, acceptance, belonging and trustworthy friends provide the ideas contributing to the explanation of Christ's death as the ultimate expression of the Love of God;
- The commercial language and transactional experience of the market place informs the metaphor of Christ's death 'redeeming' us;
- Inter-personal relationships, international political relationships, battles and conflict, and our sense of shame and experience of lapses in loyalty lie behind the reconciliation terms employed to explain Christ's work at the Cross as mediator;
- We go to the law courts to appreciate the legal terminology explaining Christ's death as justifying the believer;
- Binding international treaties, human contracts and wills, and concepts of loyalty to formally enacted political commitments lie behind our descriptions of Christ's death initiating the New Covenant or inaugurating the New Age; and
- Our ubiquitous human awareness of sickness, danger and captivity comprise the conceptual background when we say Christ died as our Saviour to restore us to the wholeness of salvation.

No one of these explanations is adequate in itself, but each is true according to the scriptures. And this list is certainly not exhaustive! The reality is so deep, wide and extensive, a range of explanatory metaphors are essential to make clear what Christ Jesus achieved through his death and resurrection.²²

Likewise in the scriptures illustrative metaphors with at least the following nine meanings describe the nature of sin: missing the mark; iniquity or wrongdoing; lawlessness; transgression; evil or wickedness; desire, lust or passion; disobedience; ungodliness; and trespass. And, of course, each of the Ten Commandments gives further specific illustrations of the nature of sin.

So we could go on with each central doctrine of the faith. At least twenty different names or titles are used to describe Satan's nature in the pictorial language of metaphors.²³ Consider the wide-ranging terminology used for other aspects of the doctrine of evil.²⁴ Or, again, consider the various New Testament pictures of the Church as: the Body, the Bride, the Branches of the Vine, the Army of God, the Pilgrim people, the household or family of God, the living Temple of God, the Kingdom of Priests and so on.²⁵

The "many-sided wisdom of God" (Eph 3:10) keeps the contextualizer humble when offering

²² For further discussion of the terminology and metaphors used in scripture to convey the Gospel message, see, J.M. Hitchen, 'The Gospel for Today's New Zealanders,' in Bruce Patrick, (Ed), *The Vision New Zealand Congress*, Auckland, Vision New Zealand, 1993: 29-44. Reprinted as 'The Gospel for New Zealanders', in J Crawshaw and Alan Vink, (Eds), *New Zealand Made*, Wellington: Signposts, 1994:7-24.

²³ cf., C.L.T.C. Introductory Theology Notes pp 55-58.

²⁴ Note these terms for *spirit beings* e.g. angels, demons, evil spirits, elemental spirits of the universe, spiritual hosts of wickedness; for the wide range of *other powers which dominate humans*: e.g. principalities and powers, authorities, thrones, rules, world rulers of this present darkness; death etc.; for the *teachings which enslave*: e.g. doctrines of demons, the course of this world, philosophy and empty deceit; and for *evil people who become the tools of the Evil One*: e.g. sorcerers, magicians, diviners, soothsayers, mediums, false prophets.

²⁵ Cf., J.M. Hitchen, "The Church is God's Agent for Evangelism", Papua New Guinea National Seminar on Evangelism paper 1976, reprinted as *The Work of the Church*, (Christian Books Melanesia, 1980).

each necessarily partial explanation of such huge themes. Appreciating and utilizing this diversity of metaphors explaining all the key truths of the Gospel become crucial in contextualizing, as we shall illustrate.

- *The nature of truth as "seed" requires diverse "soils" in which to display its fullness.* Building on Christ's common use of the metaphor (Matt 13:1-23, 31-32, etc.), Paul uses this imagery to highlight the way the message of grace had been contextualized amongst the Colossians of Asia just as amongst other peoples around the then-known world (Col 1:5-6; 2:6. Cf., the related 'fruit-bearing' imagery of Galatians 5-6 and Ephesians 5).

- *This nature of truth also means the Spirit always has more light to break forth from the Word.* The living presence of the Author of scripture in the Person of the Spirit of God gives biblical truth a dynamic quality. The prophets, even in their heights of conscious inspiration, were aware of their own only partial grasp of the depths of the divine message birthed through their own frail experience (1 Pet 1:10-12). The Reformers, and their Stepchildren when they faltered in their consistency, were ready to give their lives for this insight about God's truth. Contextualization challenges us to apply it again at the cultural frontier. For evangelicals this confidence in the scriptures as Spirit-breathed, plus our conviction of the abiding presence of the same active Spirit, brings a creativity to our humility as we cross cultural divides holding forth the Word of life. We can never know what the Spirit may yet choose to bring out from this treasure store of his Word.

2. *God's Truth is universally applicable and can be known in truth in every culture:*

The wonder for the New Testament writers is that Christ belongs in every culture - his word is living and active within every culture.

- Lamin Sanneh highlighted one aspect of this truth by stressing *Christianity's "translatability"*:

Christianity is remarkable for the relative ease with which it enters living cultures. In becoming translatable it renders itself compatible with all cultures. It may be welcomed or resisted in its Western garb, but it is not uncongenial in other garb. Christianity broke free from its absolutized Judaic frame and, through a radical pluralism, adopted the Hellenic culture...²⁶

And that pattern has continued as the story of the Christian mission. Our Christian message rejoices in "a radical pluralism²⁷" in that every culture is equally acceptable to God as the setting in which his truth can be received and obeyed.

- *The Bible uses what we can call "trans-cultural metaphors or word pictures" to define almost all the central ideas of the faith.* This feature ensures the universal relevance of scripture in diverse cultures. For example, each word-picture Jesus uses in John's Gospel to describe himself is part of the ordinary experience of peoples world-wide.²⁸ This is also true of the key theological terms of the New Testament letters. As we have shown, "redemption" is a common

²⁶ Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Gospel*, 50. Andrew Walls develops this insight in his chapter, 'The Translation Principle in Christian History,' in, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996:26-42

²⁷ The terms 'pluralism,' 'pluralistic', etc., are used in a range of different, and sometimes conflicting ways.

Lesslie Newbigin has a helpful paragraph suggesting better ways to distinguish and use the word-group in his book, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, London: SPCK 1989: 14

²⁸ Think, e.g., of: "Bread", "Door", "Way", "Light", "Resurrection", "Vine", "Living Water", and even "Shepherd". These are either universal experiences or refer to particulars which have cultural equivalents around the world.

market place or commerce term; "justify" belongs to the world-wide experience of law-courts; "expiation and sacrifice" may not be universal, but the need for appeasement to which they speak, is a universal human need even when expressed in more sophisticated ways such as "our search for serenity"!

Some specific theological words or concepts may not be found in each culture. But the background of ideas, or life experiences, of the great majority of these theological metaphors are found universally. By using a range of trans-culturally meaningful metaphors to explain the many-sided truth of the facts of our salvation in the scriptures, God the Holy Spirit has opened ways for us to contextualize these truths into local cultures by means of the common human experiences to which the metaphors refer.

Every culture, then, offers a valid context for authentic experience of truth. The constrictions of our humanity - particularly our sinful humanity - mean our understanding is at best partial. But it is none-the-less valid. By his gift of speech and language, and by our creation in his own likeness, God has made us capable of personal, intimate and real experience of him, whatever our culture.

By God's gift of his self-revealing word in forms and language we can understand we can also distinguish truth and true experience of him from counterfeit and error. Ensuring local terms and illustrations correspond with the meaning and semantic range of the biblical metaphors is another safe-guard against syncretistic dilution of the Gospel message in a particular cultural setting.

3. *God's Truth has been definitively "incarnated" in Culture:*

This is another aspect of the fact that God exalts cultures. He links his truth inseparably to human settings. We are not left to grope in the dark or merely make "guesses about God".²⁹

• *The distinctive and authoritatively definitive features of human salvation and how to receive it have been set out in the scriptures.* In the prophets, in the apostles, and supremely in Jesus Christ, God's abiding truth has been distilled and spelled out in human terms for sinful, faltering women and men to see, read and receive in language and thought forms which are too clear for us ever to claim ignorance again (Heb 1:1; 2:1-4).

The ultimate expression of truth capable of comprehension by culture-bound humans comes in Jesus Christ. The very glory of God shines from the face of Jesus for those whose reason has been sufficiently healed by faith to recognise him (2 Cor 4:4-6). Thus this *uniqueness of Christ* is set forth in his relationship to every aspect of culture and reality in central New Testament Christological passages. He alone Lords it over the physical universe, the revelatory process, the needy realm of morally corrupt creatures, the new order of salvaged rejects in the church, the universal control centre of the Majesty, and even over the spirit-world of angelic beings, according to Hebrews 1:1-4 and Colossians 1:16-18. These declarations are non-negotiable. He alone is Lord in this culturally and religiously pluralistic world (1 Cor 8:5-7). The uniqueness of his Person leads necessarily into *the uniqueness of his Gospel*. Paul's clearest discourse on the issues at stake in contextualization - the Galatian letter (to which we shall return in a later study) begins defiantly and unashamedly with the declaration that there is one and only one Gospel - the Gospel preached and recorded definitively by the apostles.

²⁹ William Barclay's *Daily Study Bible* term for the confused ideas circulating at Colossae.

If that was the emphasis in one of Paul's earliest letters, the same conviction rings equally clearly in the last recorded writings of the apostles. Peter's authoritative provision for true understanding after his death is his, and his fellow apostle's, letters, not some human lineage (2 Pet 1:15; 3:1-2; 14-18). For John it is similar. Truth enlivened by the anointing of the Spirit is recognisable as we hear and heed the apostles' testimony (1 John 2:18-27; 4:1-6). For Paul, too, the standard of truth is still "the preaching entrusted to me," and now entrusted to the next generation as a "good deposit" to be guarded and "continued in" (Tit 1:1-3; 2 Tim 1:13-14). In fact, Paul has at least the next three generations in mind as he hands on this abiding reservoir of Spirit-protected teaching (2 Tim 1:14; 2:2). Here, then, in the scriptures is normative teaching for global contextualization. *Ours is the task of recognizing both the authoritative and the exemplary aspects of apostolic teaching.*

Truth deposited and experienced in this way brings the difficult duty of *discerning between the abiding principle and its cultural form* of expression as we relate it to modern contexts. There are no simple rules for such discernment. The point at which, if at all, the principle of unfeigned, joyous love for fellow members of our Father's family is fittingly retained as we move from "a holy kiss" to a "hearty hand-shake" or to a modern bear-hug, will continue to be hotly debated. We can only, in our final section, lay some basic foundations and illustrate their application for such contextualization.

III. WORKING FOR APPROPRIATE INTERFACE BETWEEN CULTURE & BIBLICAL TRUTH FOR CONTEXTUALIZED EVANGELISM & DISCIPLESHIP

The task of contextualization, then, involves bringing together these two factors - culture and biblical truth. The contextualization principles need to be applied both in our initial evangelistic contacts and in leading believers on to maturity in fruitful discipleship. We suggest the following inter-relationships as essential for faithful contextualization.

1. Culture identifies the most relevant Starting Points for Contextualizing Biblical Truth

As we saw above when noting the many-sidedness of God's truth, God has not limited himself to one "biblical analogy" (to use Wayne Dye's term),³⁰ or "redemptive analogy" (to use Richardson's term).³¹ Rather, by the use of a range of "trans-cultural metaphors" (our term) God declares the many-sided truth of our salvation.³²

Therefore, *different aspects of truth suit different people-groups and worldviews as relevant starting points for encounter with Christ and understanding truth.* The life values and basic assumptions of a people mean that different terminology explaining the Gospel will have varying appeal and challenge. Some Biblical terms will have immediate relevance to the values and attitudes of one culture, while others, at first, will appear strangely foreign.

³⁰ *The Bible Translation Strategy*, (S.I.L.1979) Chapter 9.

³¹ D. Richardson, *Peace Child*, (Regal 1974) p.329.

³² C.H. Kraft deals in part with the same kind of idea in his threefold division of Bible teachings into the three levels of "Basic Ideals", "General Principles", and "Specific Cultural Forms". What I am calling trans-cultural metaphors fit into the first two of Kraft's categories; *Christianity and Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), pp 139-143.

The metaphors or word pictures explaining the Cross as victory over spirit forces (the redemption word group) will provide an important point for initial evangelism and a focal point for growth amongst people who live in fear of spirit powers. Amongst a society such as our New Zealand Maori, who emphasise the extended family and its mutual obligations, the church as the family of God will provide a good starting point in discussing the people of God.

Wayne Dye shows the importance of this insight for focusing on relevant sins.³³ Don Richardson's *Peace Child* is a good example of how the trans-cultural word pictures of reconciliation and mediator were already a traditional religious focal point amongst the Sawi people of West Papua.³⁴

- Which of the trans-cultural metaphors for the Atonement in scripture, relate most appropriately to the worldview assumptions, values and current life-experience of the cultural group you are currently evangelizing? E.g., would 'reconciliation' be more appropriate than 'justification' in a "shame" society as in most Islamic nations? What about when approaching post-modern, tertiary educated Westerners who sensitively abhor any perceived 'violence' in their communities – which explanation of Christ's crucifixion is more appropriate to win their initial attention?

This contextualization process, of course, is not a new insight in mission circles. On Saturday 18 June 1910 at the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh, as Johannes Warneck, the great German mission administrator and theorist, concluded his comments during the discussion of the Report of Commission IV on 'The Missionary Message in relation to Non-Christian Religions,' he stated:

It is of great importance for all missionaries among the different animistic nations to observe carefully which part of the Gospel is the most needed there, and that should be emphasised first in our preaching. Therefore, we require a careful study of the heathen mind and of the effect of the Gospel on that mind. It is my conviction that Christ is not only the Saviour for all mankind, but that He has a special gift or blessing too for each nation according to its special wants and needs. And so, if we consider the effects of the Gospel on the different heathen peoples, we see with astonishment and joy that Christ grows greater and greater, and all kinds of men [sic] find in Him what they need and seek.³⁵

2. Culture will determine the Communication means and modes, the Conceptual Frameworks utilised, and Teaching/Learning styles adopted in the contextualization process

Effective contextualization, as we have indicated, involves planting seed in well-prepared soil, not transplanting full-grown samples grown in a foreign setting. Culture shapes the way the Gospel is grasped and lived. The thought-forms, worldview, and appropriate linguistic forms will determine how the Christian message is presented, heard, received and learned. The 'news' of the Gospel can only be grasped as the hearers relate it to their existing, culturally determined, religious ideas and concepts. This is why the skills of culturally relevant communication are so important for good contextualization.

³³ T.W.Dye, *op.cit.*

³⁴ D.Richardson, *op.cit.*

³⁵ World Missionary Conference, 1910, *Report of Commission IV: The Missionary Message in relation to Non-Christian Religions*, Edinburgh & London: Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier, 300-01.

Careful attention to the traditional beliefs, religious rituals, and explanatory ‘myths’ of the community will indicate how the local ‘elemental spiritual forces’ have acted as ‘guardians’ and ‘schoolmasters’ to control and prepare the community for the coming of Christ as the One who fulfils their culturally shaped desires and longings (cf., Galatians 3:19-4:9).³⁶ A good grasp of these religious customs will also indicate the deep-seated wrongs, the injustices, fears and ‘webs of lies’ which so often ensnare and hamper the community from finding the fullness of life the Gospel offers.³⁷ Not only so, those beliefs and customs will also provide the terms, values and longings, often expressed in local proverbs, parables, “redemptive analogies,” or “universally relevant metaphors,” through which the Gospel can be appropriated and applied in the local culture.

Moreover, the local culture will guide in choosing the appropriate communication language and media: which dialect, language level, idioms, figures of speech and illustrations to use; whether to use oral, literary or digital forms; which genre is more appropriate for each message – narrative story-telling, biography, proverbial sayings, parable, dialogical or lineal logical argument; and whether the culture prefers the message in prose, poetry, song, drama or audio-visual styles and forms. Combinations of these usually also enshrine and convey the cultural values, cherished ambitions and sense of identity and of hurt or shame the culture carries within its wider context.

Communication and educational technologies, learning processes and preferences, decision-making choices and speed of progress will all be guided by the desires and needs of the community, not the person bringing the message. Equally important, the patterns of response, means of confession and commitment, and particularly how to express contrition, repentance and faith will all need to be culturally appropriate, and guided and determined by local cultural priorities, not those of the person bringing the message.³⁸ Understanding such cultural patterns and preferences is vital for contextualization.

- In the group you are currently evangelizing, when would oral presentations of the Gospel be more (or less) appropriate than literary or digital ones? What cultural reasons have guided your comment?
- In which situations should you develop or use poetry or song as part of your evangelistic approach, and, again, for what cultural reasons?

3. From the culturally relevant starting point we must reach up to the biblical fullness in contextualizing truth for maturity in discipleship

Choosing the most relevant explanations of each aspect of truth is the essential starting point in contextualization. But for Christian maturity the contextualizing must continue filling out the initial response so as to grasp and apply a full range of biblical teaching for mature discipleship and Christian living.

³⁶ We explore these ideas more fully in our third presentation.

³⁷ For the concept of ‘web of lies’ see Bryant L. Myers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999: 75-79. Myers is summarising ideas developed by Jayakumar Christian, *God of the Empty-Handed: Poverty, Power and the Kingdom of God*, Monrovia, CA: MARC, 1999:157-161

³⁸ Paul Hiebert’s insightful, ‘Critical Contextualization’ process offers helpful guidelines for shaping the approach to these aspects of the contextualization task, especially highlighting the role of the local believers themselves in guiding and controlling the process. Hiebert, Paul G., ‘Critical Contextualization’, in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 11(3) July 1987:104-112; republished in Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994:75-92. These two versions update his earlier chapter with the same title in, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1985: 171-192.

To illustrate: in Western churches the neglect of the atonement as victory over spirit powers has left the churches open to the current inroads of the occult. A lack of emphasis on the Church as the pilgrim people of God encourages the complacent materialism of nominal Christianity in the West. So too, Papua New Guineans need to understand sin as rebellion and disobedience, not just broken relationships, if they are to have a firm faith in Christ, and address some of the issues of corruption in high places in their nation.

This broadening of understanding is essential to avoid unhealthy syncretism. When one aspect of biblical teaching is over-used, or treated as if it is all the Bible teaches on that topic, we can easily distort truth. The various metaphors given in Scripture to fill out the meaning of central theological concepts all need to be considered and applied for believers to come to mature Christian lifestyles. A limited grasp of the fullness of scripture leads to immaturity of faith and life. Covering the biblical range of explanation for each central doctrine is necessary to correct possible misunderstandings or distortions of our new life in Christ. Every culture favours their own ethno-centric readings of the scriptures. Good contextualization guards against such syncretizing readings by striving to make the Word of God fully known in the diversity of the full range of explanatory metaphors describing each aspect of truth.

- Can you identify neglected aspects of understanding of the Atonement that, if re-emphasised, would challenge the new syncretistic religious movements becoming popular in your region?

Effective contextualization recognises that at different stages of growth in the Church, different aspects of the one truth will need emphasis to ensure ongoing growth. Common problems such as legalism, seeking short-cuts to holiness, or unwillingness to face the cost of discipleship, continue to challenge groups of Christians in every culture at different times. Different aspects of biblical insight bring answers to each of these problems. Thus all are needed. Maturity in Christian behaviour and social involvement requires an in-depth grasp of a full range of biblical teachings on ethical issues; competence in discerning true and false spirit powers; in judging between justice and injustice in social and political life; in responsible management of human and environmental resources for the glory of God and the good of future generations; in fostering leadership patterns suited to the culture but free from the human lust for ambition, power, position and prestige that undermine true servant-leadership in any culture; and in motivating and mobilizing communities of believers for effective missional outreach; and so on. Too often our biblical teaching just repeats the few original evangelistic emphases which first brought our people to faith, and we wonder why they do not grow to maturity. We need to grasp this link between filling out the whole range of biblical explanations of each of our key teachings and the growth of believers to spiritual maturity. If the first part of the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20 requires cultural sensitivity to choose the culturally appropriate metaphors and cultural insights to bring people to initial faith and baptism, then the second part of the Commission – to teach disciples to live out all that Jesus has commanded – requires ongoing contextualization.

There is a balance, then, between choosing culturally relevant initial steps into truth and insisting that all God's Word is relevant for long term growth and maturity. And in both cases cultural sensitivity will guide in where to start and how to continue.

4. In-Depth Cultural Transformation is the goal of any adequate contextualization

We must contextualize to the point of transforming worldviews. Harold W. Turner, building on Lesslie Newbigin's work, suggested that the Christian mission has seldom gone deep enough. Mission to the person - seeking personal conversion and transformation as disciples of Christ - has long been the subject of study and practice. We probably all conduct courses emphasising aspects of contextualization aimed at personal growth. Recent decades have seen a resurgence of attention to mission at a second level - mission to society. This level of mission as social service, or as social reform, has also been the focus of much study and praxis. But the third level, mission to the cultural base, the worldview level, remains largely untouched.³⁹ The challenge in contextualizing is to transform worldviews in depth. To use the jargon - we aim to bring the limiting factors of the cultural horizon into conformity to the biblical horizon.

Harvie Conn, quoting Orlando Costas, sums it up well:

The ultimate test of any theological discourse, after all, is not only erudite precision but also transformative power. "It is a question of whether or not theology can articulate the faith in a way that is not only intellectually sound but spiritually energizing, and therefore, capable of leading the people of God to be transformed in their way of life and to commit themselves to God's mission in the world."⁴⁰

This is, of course the Bible's own standard. New Testament wisdom is a lifestyle (Jas 3:13-17). This kind of *biblical loyalty is the measure of validity and truth within every culture*. The goal is such a release from inadequate values, thought-forms and goals that the people of God work out in their own setting whatever the scriptures require of them. John Stott encapsulates it clearly in his definition of an Evangelical: "The real hallmark of the evangelical is not only a present submission to what he or she believes the scripture teaches, it is a prior commitment to be submissive to what we may subsequently learn to be the teaching of scripture, whatever scripture may be found to teach."⁴¹

With progressive personal and cultural transformation as its goal, it follows that *contextualization is an ongoing process*. It involves at least three generations of Christian leadership as the Gospel penetrates a new cultural group. The first generation of converts and Christian messengers, whether missionaries or local evangelists, face one set of issues and questions. They have to do with the initial confrontation between the Gospel and the traditional cultural values and beliefs. The children of those first converts face different issues and questions, usually focussing on matters concerning their identity as Christians within the still resistant surrounding culture. They do not need to make a drastic break with a non-Christian past, since they have grown up under the 'nurture and admonition' of the church community. But they need to express their cultural heritage in fresh, distinctively Christian ways. This demands another stage of contextualization of the scriptures. The third generation faces further new issues and questions often grappling with ways of impacting the social structures and worldview philosophies of their society. So contextualization is never a one-off, quickly completed task.⁴²

³⁹ Harold W. Turner, 'Three Levels of Mission in New Zealand' in Bruce Patrick, (Ed.) *New Vision New Zealand*, Auckland: Vision New Zealand, 1993:61-68

⁴⁰ Harvie M. Conn, 'Contextual Theologies: The Problem of Agendas', *Westminster Theological Journal* Vol 52(1990):63, citing Orlando Costas, 'Evangelical Theology in the Two Thirds World', *TSF Bulletin* Vol 9/1(Sept-Oct 1985):7-13.

⁴¹ John R.W. Stott, *EFAC Bulletin*, Issue 40 (Advent 1990), p3.

⁴² For development of these ideas, see Andrew F. Walls, 'Old Athens and New Jerusalem: Some Signposts for

Conclusion:

These, then, are essential foundations for the task of contextualization. Our illustrations have emphasised the cross-cultural aspect of the task. But wherever we cross the divide to another cultural sub-group the same principles apply. Often today the divides are as deep and wide between generations in the same ethnic group, or between the socio-economic extremes in the same city, as between any two racial groups. The paper has illustrated the principles referring to Westerners working in non-Western societies. But the same issues challenge the increasingly larger number of non-Western Christians moving across linguistic and cultural boundaries to spear-head new Christian witness in what, to them, are foreign nations, or at least significantly different cultures within their own nation. Moreover, the patterns of 'reverse' migration into Western nations from previous colonial dependencies of Western countries, make these cross-cultural contextualization principles essential tools for most Christian ministries in the post-Christian Western nations today. The increasingly cosmopolitan, religiously pluralist, and multi-cultural constituencies of our urban populations globally reinforce the need for contextualization competency.

Thus to effectively bring the living message to those on the other side of any of these divides we must:

- Discover the heart-beat of their cultural values so as to identify the most relevant aspects, metaphors and forms of scriptural instruction to commence the transformation;
- Adopt culturally appropriate communication processes; conceptual frameworks and learning styles to ensure the content and methods of contextualization confirm and ensure the message is being applied into the heart of the culture;
- Continue empathizing with the culture so as to grasp an ever-widening range of biblical truth for mature Christian living; and
- Work towards the goal of bringing their cultural worldview and experience into conformity with the biblical experience of wholeness of life in Christ with all its ramifications of a transformed worldview and daily life in our global village.

These principles also highlight the point of this paper: contextualization is at the heart of knowing and sharing Christ Jesus as Lord. We cannot avoid it. We can only choose whether to do it faithfully or poorly.