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

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

Plenary 4.1 When the Gospel Confronts and Crosses Cultural Frontiers?

Sub-Theme: A Hermeneutic key: Reaching hearts and minds across cultures

**GALATIANS - A MODEL OUTLINING PRINCIPLES INVOLVED IN ADEQUATE
CONTEXTUALIZATION ¹**

By John M. Hitchen

Galatians is one letter in the New Testament specifically dealing with the issue of contextualization in a situation where the Gospel had been introduced by representatives from a culture with its own strong [Jewish] religious heritage, into a setting where some [Jewish, Proselyte, and ‘God-fearing’] converts had previously adopted much of that same [Jewish] religious heritage, but many [Gentile] converts had not. The letter addresses the basic issue raised for the early church by Paul and Barnabas’ first missionary journey which had effectively established new churches in the Roman province of Galatia. This unexpected influx of believers in Christ Jesus from other cultures – Gentiles, or ‘the uncircumcision’ as the Jews called them – posed a fundamental dilemma. As these new believers repented of their sin and rebellion towards God and turned to Christ, how were they to express their new loyalty to Christ in their own cultural setting? They faced a choice: the classic choice at the heart of contextualization. Should they follow the well-established pathway of *proselytism* and accept the Jewish cultural/religious sign of circumcision and conform to Jewish religious and cultural customs to show they now belonged to the covenant people of God? The Jewish Christian teachers who had gone from Jerusalem to supplement Paul’s teaching in the Galatian churches took for granted that this way of proselytism was the only right way for people of any culture to show they now belonged to Christ, The Messiah. Or, alternatively: Does the Gospel of faith in Christ Jesus bring a *conversion* which is sufficient in itself because it makes Christ Lord of the new believers’ own culture and context, so that taking on the customs of another cultural tradition – like Jewish circumcision - is not only not necessary, but contradicts the heart of the Gospel itself? ²

Or, re-stating the question: Is one cultural expression of the Gospel - as distinct from the truths of the Gospel itself - to be absolutised as the universal norm for all believers, regardless of their cultural setting? Paul writes the letter to the Galatians to address this issue. His answer is unequivocal: each culture has direct access to salvation on the same basis of faith alone, without having to adopt any one set of cultural forms to enjoy and fully express their new life.

The parallels are manifest between the Galatian situation and many, if not most, present-day church

¹ This paper is an adaptation of part of the author’s chapter, ‘Mission to Primal Religious Groups in a Postmodern Context,’ in Rolv Olsen (Ed.) *Mission and Postmodernities* [Regnum Edinburgh 2010 Series] Oxford: Regnum, 2011:139-171; an earlier version of the outline of this paper formed the concluding section of ‘Culture and the Bible - The Question of Contextualization’, a paper presented at the South Pacific Association of Bible Colleges’ Bi-ennial Conference, Sydney, 1-5 July 1991; and published in *Melanesian Journal of Theology*, 8(2) Oct 1992: 30-52.

² On the contrast between becoming proselytes or converts, See, Andrew F. Walls, ‘Converts or Proselytes? The Crisis over Conversion in the Early Church,’ *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Vol 28(1) Jan 2004:1-7

situations globally. Many churches in the varied cultures of our contemporary world face a comparable choice. They are often indebted to representatives of Western forms of Christianity for introducing them to the Gospel, and their own cultures have often already absorbed key aspects of the globalised patterns of Western culture. The question is: must these churches adhere to the outward forms and patterns of Christianity expected and taken for granted in the West? Or are believers in these diverse cultures free to apply the Gospel message within their own cultures and expect the Gospel to be at home in, to enrich, and to transform the socio-cultural forms of their own locality and heritage?

The contextualized answer to these questions for the Galatians is given in the combined message of all the themes covered in the whole letter, not just in a few proof-texts taken from the letter. Paul outlines the issues at stake in all similar contextualization situations. As we work through the letter's carefully developed argument, the apostolic answer offers us a series of principles we need to grasp and re-apply as a series of evaluative standards in all our contextualizing:

I. Keeping Loyal to the Apostolic Gospel as Universally Applicable for All Cultures. Gal 1:1-2:10.

Introduction: Basis of the Christian Mission, 1:1-5

- Paul's divine authorisation; cross-cultural Partners; his Greetings and introduction to the message and purpose under-girding the letter.

What's The Problem? 1:6-9

Paul's shock and worry:

- *Double danger*, v6: Deserting God
- Turning to another, culturally based, Gospel
- *How it develops*, v7: People - Troublers - Message Twisters
- *Its Seriousness*, vv8-9: The subtle sources - The unchanging standard
- The proper judgement

Grasping One Message to Trust – Apostolic Gospel's Source & Authority, 1:10-2:10

- Paul Denies charges & Presents his case, 1:10-24:
- His Good News came by revelation at Conversion, 1:10-17
- Paul's 1st & 2nd Contacts with Jerusalem confirmed this Authority, 1:18-2:10

1. **Keeping Loyal to the Apostolic Gospel as Universally Applicable for All Cultures.** Gal 1:1-2:10. The apostolic teaching of the Gospel is upheld in the first section of the letter as the unique and unchanging standard for every cultural setting. Adequate contextualization needs to address the issues relating to authority in matters of faith. Right at the outset Galatians declares that apostolic authority is the foundation for contextualization in all cultures. Apostolic authority must be upheld and expressed in the contextualization task. There is a "given-ness" about the New Testament statement of the Good News which gives it a definite shape and content which is not simply open to adaptation or alteration at the whim of the contextualizing agent. This section of Galatians warns against turning to "a different Gospel – which is really no gospel at all."

The *danger* the Apostle addresses is that heeding a distortion of the Gospel too quickly becomes turning away from God's free grace given to us in Christ. To put some other religious formality, such as circumcision, above gratitude for the love and forgiveness offered in Christ is culpable betrayal of Christ's love, and turns a vital personal relationship into a merely formal ritual. Such confusion easily becomes distortion of the Christian message and is not the Good News Christ offers. Paul warned that the danger can come from various *sources*, Gal 1:8-9. Those who once taught faithfully may change the message and thereby deny its essence. Paul is not reacting against alternative teachings out of envy or fear of losing his influence. He warns that if even he himself, in v8, or 'anyone', in v9, distorts the message as originally preached and received in the apostolic churches, then that person comes under the judgement of God against such false teachers. Another potential source of distortion claims angelic origins for

its distinctive features. Visions, dreams, séances, or special spiritual experiences are often claimed as the authority for teachings which are, in fact, distortions of the simple Gospel of faith in Christ. The *seriousness* of any such perversion of the Gospel as authoritatively stated in the apostolic writings of the New Testament is evident when Paul, a devout Jew, pronounces a ban on such false teachers, handing them over to the judgement of God. Nothing could be more serious. This comes as a real challenge to our age when tolerance of religious diversity has been exalted to prime importance in Western post-modern and post-Christian societies. As Paul defends his own apostolic loyalty against those who were challenging his authority, he stresses the integrity of his motives as a Gospel preacher, the divine provenance of his message, God's initiative in revealing it to him, and the confirmation of the Jerusalem apostles of the universal truth of the message he preached, Gal 1:10-2:10.

This biographical reflection in the first section of Galatians reminds us that in any contextualization of the Christian message, faithfulness to the apostolic Gospel as set out in the New Testament scriptures is essential. Distortion of the Christian message can arise through wilfully or unconsciously adding requirements to the message that was first received, often on the basis of apparently significant new spiritual experiences. Distortion also easily develops from either neglect or over-emphasis of aspects of the message. Upholding the apostolic Gospel as the one and only standard for teaching in every culture directly challenges postmodern assumptions that meta-narratives are necessarily exploitative. The Apostle insists that imposing a single culture's religious rituals is hegemonic and exploitative, not the Gospel meta-narrative. By insisting on the global applicability of the one and only Gospel message, Paul claims that this particular meta-narrative, far from being exploitative, is actually liberating and enriching for every culture, as the themes of the letter will explain progressively.³

These dangers are occupational hazards in all serious contextualization. We usually call failures in these areas *syncretism* – mixing incompatible aspects of another religious system with the true teachings or practices of the Gospel message. Syncretism that distorts the truth of the Gospel must be recognized as a threat, and be guarded against in all contextualization. The tendency towards syncretism is common to all cultures. As we relate the Good News meaningfully and relevantly to the worldview assumptions, value systems and beliefs of any cultural context we are forced to make decisions about the extent to which aspects of the local cultural heritage can faithfully express or incorporate the Gospel.⁴ This is never straightforward, since cultures are dynamic, developing realities. Appropriate contextualization in one setting at one time may be seen as serious syncretism from another perspective at another time. Western theology regularly syncretises the Gospel with the West's individualistic, materialistic and rationalistic re-readings of biblical texts. We should not be surprised, then, to find other cultural traits favoured in other cultural contexts. Moreover, human nature proves us all more able and ready to see syncretistic tendencies in other peoples' adaptations of scripture to their cultural values than we see them in our own. Kevin Vanhoozer suggests there are good and bad ways to approach the issues around syncretism, and calls for a "critical syncretism" which discerns between them, and which always upholds the "final primacy" of scripture in contextualizing the Gospel.⁵

³ See, Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World*, [Easney Lectures] Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Paternoster Press, 2003:88-90

⁴ See Paragraph 10, 'Evangelism and Culture' of the *Lausanne Covenant*, 1974.

⁵ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "'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, 2007:102-4 and 110

Local believers themselves need to be taught and trusted to make the judgements about what is, and what is not, faithful adherence to the once-for-all Gospel in their cultural setting. Expatriate missionaries or fraternal partners can ask questions about customs and proposed interpretations and practices, but the local believers alone can decide whether or not the truth of the scriptures is being appropriately upheld in a local situation. Expatriates can also model a self-critical awareness and willingness to learn from peoples of other cultures about their own ethnocentric, syncretistic tendencies.⁶

Expressing this first principle as a question - *Is the contextualizing loyal to the one and only apostolic message?* - highlights the importance of teaching Christians to study and understand the apostolic scriptures in active dependence upon the Holy Spirit as their teacher and guide in the task of relating the Gospel to their cultural context.

II. Welcoming the Justified of all cultures as equally accepted by God & socially welcome in Cross-Cultural Hospitality, Gal 2:11-21

Heart and Implications of the Gospel Message:

- *The Social & Theological Tests: Confrontation at Antioch vv 11-16*
- Validity of grasp of Gospel shown by willingness to welcome others cross-culturally
- Only way to Pardon & Acceptance with God [Justification] is by Faith:
- This way is contradicted if cultural customs are demanded as well
- *Objections Answered & Vital Experience Explained, vv17-21*

2. *Welcoming the Justified of all cultures as equally accepted by God & socially welcome in Cross-Cultural Hospitality*, Gal 2:11-21. The Judaizing delegation from Jerusalem polarized the Syrian Antioch church ethnically. Even Peter and Barnabas had opted to keep the peace with the Jewish Christians who had come from Jerusalem, saying Antioch Christians must be circumcised. So, Peter and Barnabas withdrew from fellowshiping with the non-Jews, even though they had previously gladly shared hospitality with them (2:11-13). By their actions they sided with the views of the dominant religious culture. It's so much easier to do that. No Christian likes a fight over issues like this. And it's not hard to rationalise it with chapter and verse, too.

Andrew Walls sets out the issue succinctly:

One of the features of life in the Jesus community in Jerusalem had been that the followers of Jesus took every opportunity to eat together.... What was to happen when there were also Gentile followers of Jesus, uncircumcised, following Hellenistic eating patterns? Would it still be the mark of the followers of Jesus that they ate together? The test was the meal table, and clearly many old believers found it difficult to break the tradition of centuries and sit at table with fellow servants of the Messiah who still bore all the marks of their alien

background. What could be defended on grounds of theological principle sometimes demanded great resolution in the face of peer pressure. Thus, Peter can argue from traditional premises for the liberty of Gentile believers (Acts 15:7-11), but find it more convenient not to share a table with them when there was a chance of being observed by his home constituency (Gal 2:11-14). The shared table was the acid test. It stood for diverse humanity redeemed by Christ and sharing in him.⁷

⁶ See Gailyn Van Rheenen's opening Chapter, 'Syncretism and Contextualization: The Church on a Journey defining Itself,' and Paul Hiebert's development of his previous articles in the chapter, 'Syncretism and Social Paradigms,' in Gailyn Van Rheenen, (Ed), *Contextualization and Syncretism: Navigating Cultural Currents* [EMS Series # 13] Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2006: 1-46

⁷ Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission and Appropriation of*

For the Apostle Paul Gospel truth was at stake here. His verdict on Peter and Barnabas separating from non-Jewish Christians was devastating: "...they were not acting in line with the truth of the Gospel" (2:14). Refusing to sit at table with another believer because of culturally-based religious rules totally contradicts the message and work of Christ.

Our shared life in Christ makes us one. Not to express that unity around our meal tables is to deny the death which has made us new creatures. Our social behaviour is a clear test of the adequacy of the way we have contextualized the Gospel. As long as peoples of other cultures are not welcome in our homes and at our meals, we have failed to properly apply what the cross of Christ has done in and for believers. None of us won our own acceptance before God on the basis of our religious rule-keeping. Each of us needed Christ's death to deal with our failure before God. Only faith in Christ Jesus justifies us before God (2:15-16). Religious (or any other kind of) rule-keeping is irrelevant for our acceptability to God. Therefore it must be the same for acceptability with each other. We will welcome anyone Christ welcomes. Whom we invite to our homes as guests indicates whether or not we have contextualized the essence of the Gospel. Adequate contextualizing does not just agree with the dominant culture's religious rules. The Gospel takes up the cause of those who are pushed to the side. The well-contextualized Gospel respects and upholds the perspective of the minority culture when it comes to sharing in social fellowship in the church. In this way the Gospel also provides a unique basis for respecting cultural diversity without hegemonic domination. This is Good News indeed for both the global resurgences of indigenous identity and the longings of postmodernity for integrity in communal relationships.

So, valid contextualizing leads to life-style consistency across cultural barriers. Contextualization's aim is that our hearers will "act in line with the Gospel" (2:14). This practical goal offers an important test for all suggested contextualization. Do the suggested meanings or principles apply bi-culturally and multi-culturally, particularly in the area of social relations and hospitality? If not, the contextualization is not yet adequate. In the very process of particularising the message we must always reflect its universal scope.

3. *Maintaining through faith both ongoing dependence on the Spirit and sharing in our "adoptive" heritage of faith*, Gal 3:1-18. Having clarified the way justification works through faith and results in the believers' dynamic union with the Living Christ (2:20), Paul goes straight into a strong rebuke lest the Galatians forget or underestimate the role of the Holy Spirit in bringing them to faith and equipping them in every aspect of life and service as Christ's followers (3:1-5). Moreover, one purpose of justification through Christ's redemptive work is that we enjoy the reality of the Holy Spirit sharing in our daily lives (3:10-14). The Galatians' from a primal religious background had previously depended on capricious and unpredictable spirit powers. But now, in Christ, that old way had been transformed so they no longer relied on a ritualistic or legalistic self-competence. Rather, they now had an ongoing relationship with the Holy Spirit of God actively working in response to vital faith in the message of the Gospel (3:1-5). This rich spirituality also answers the postmodern yearning for something more than rational self-competence. Christian spirituality focused on personal experience of the indwelling Holy Spirit is also deeply rooted in human history.

The Gospel not only opens us to new present-day cultural richness, it also gives us a rich new cultural inheritance. Every believer in Christ becomes a "descendant" of Abraham. He becomes our "father" when we join the family of believers. In Christ we receive roots and rights which make us heirs of a large part of the Hebrew-Jewish past. Faith alone brings us to Christ. Faith alone keeps us going on with Christ. But this principle of faith does not cut us off from all the preparatory history of the times before Christ. Realizing that no one else's culture is necessary as a pre-requisite for life in Christ does not mean our own culture is all we need as we grow in him. Rather, our experience of Christ's rescue through faith unites us with all those who have lived by faith in previous ages. Those who have faith are sharing in the blessing given to the great pro-genitor of faith - Abraham. By following the same principle by which Abraham lived, namely, trusting the word of God, we, too, have come to enjoy the rescue operation of Christ. That same experience has freely given us a share in the heritage and the promises God gave to Abraham - regardless of our human lineage or traditional culture, 3:6-9.⁸

This can be a bit of an embarrassment. We now have to integrate our own history, with its culture heroes, and even its mythology, with the biblical history and the biblical heroes. Our Western heritage has found this biblical heritage difficult to reconcile with the Enlightenment and Scientific ideas permeating our schooling. Our New Zealand Maori have an equally challenging task to re-consider their traditional stories and teachings in the light of this "adoptive" heritage from the scriptures. But adequate contextualization of the Gospel means becoming bi-cultural in the new sense of being people both with a biological cultural heritage, and also this biblical cultural heritage. One aspect of the Holy Spirit's ministry is to initiate us into this continuing participation in the heritage of faith (v14).

This biblical adoptive heritage changes the stance from which we approach different cultural perspectives as we work at contextualization. Instead of having a conflict between the dominant and the minority cultures, we have a common ground together as believers in our shared adoptive past. This means we can listen to each other as we both struggle to relate the demands of our biblical faith into our own culture. Both cultures sit under biblical scrutiny in the contextualization process. As Andrew Walls sums it up: "[S]ince 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..."⁹

We should test the adequacy of our proposed contextualization then, by asking: "Is the meaning or application we are suggesting true to the already received truth in our Abraham-Moses-Christ-Pentecost deposit of faith?" Contextualization takes place within the family of the faithful, guided by the Holy Spirit. It must therefore reflect the family heritage even as it embraces the new family

III. Maintaining through faith both ongoing dependence on the Spirit & sharing in our "adoptive" heritage of faith, Gal 3:1-18.

There is only One Way to full acceptance with God – It is the same for All: Faith alone:

- Confirmed by Corporate Experience of the Holy Spirit, vv1-5
- Proven by Faith-History & Heritage of Faith like Abraham's, vv6-9
- Clarified by Redemption at Cross, vv10-14
- Implemented by Receiving Spirit, v14
- Illustrated by Will and Promise, vv15-18

⁸ See Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of the Faith*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996:9ff on this concept of the "adoptive heritage" of Christians.

⁹ Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement...*, 15

members and all the disruption any addition brings to the family.

4. Respecting the proper role of the local cultural & religious heritage, Gal 3:19 - 4:7. The next item on the Galatian contextualization agenda raises another basic question: What about the local cultural heritage and particularly its religious aspects? How should we handle these in the contextualization process?

For Paul's Jewish readers the Gospel created a major problem by offering a way to be true children of Abraham that was not based on the Mosaic Law which they were observing meticulously. Little wonder, then, they asked: "What, then, was the purpose of the Law?" (v19). How should they regard this central aspect of their cultural heritage?

The law was given, Paul explains, "because of transgressions..." Human nature needs to be shown what is right and wrong. Without rules and warnings we go way off track, we transgress. Like a Roman slave appointed to guard and ensure the owner's children turned up for instruction, the Law constantly watched over the Jews, defining the depth and seriousness of their sin-problem. The law also prepared God's people for their Messiah. The Law's continuing reminders of their short-comings, and of God's good purposes for them, kept alive the yearning for a better way. The Law acted as a protection from the excesses of sin until the full solution became available in the Christ. These instructing and protecting roles of the Law were vital, though limited. We respect teachers and policemen and appreciate their work, giving it due honour, but never expecting too much of them. Likewise with the Law. Its corrective and formative roles were to be highly valued, but the Law could not, in itself, give new life. The Messiah was desperately needed for that - as the Law confirms (3:20-22).

In this way Paul answered the Jewish question about the place of the Law and their whole Hebrew Mosaic religious heritage. But what about those of other cultures in the Galatian churches? Their heritage focused on elemental spirit beliefs about unseen forces active in every realm of daily life. Their traditional religions feared these "powers." What about these elemental spirits or basic religious principles as they were called? In 4:1- 3 Paul takes his

argument further. As F. F. Bruce summarizes it, "The Law has been compared to a prison-warden and a slave attendant; now its role is compared to that of guardians and trustees appointed to take

IV. Respecting the proper role of the local cultural & religious heritage, Gal 3:19-4:7.

If by Faith, then, for Jews the issue is: Why, then, the Law ? 3:19-24

- The Why, When & How of Law, vv19-20
For human failure; Till promised Seed arrives; Through intermediary
- What Law Can & Cannot Do, vv21-24
Can't give life or make right with God;
Consigns to sin; Confines, Restrains/
Instructs & Prepares

Cultural Longings of All, both Jews and Other Cultures, are Answered & Fulfilled in Christ, 3:24-29

- All believers are made Right & at Home in God's Family, vv24b-26
- All believers' Unity with Christ shown in Baptism, vv27-28
- All believers have a Heritage & a Future in Christ, v29
- All is by Faith as Promised for All, vv22, 29

All cultures share a common slavery and need God's Rescue Mission into intimate family life & future: 4:1-7

- All people, like minors, are enslaved to elemental powers, vv1-3
 - For Jews, the Law
 - For other cultures, their traditional religious powers
- God's mission Initiative, v4 - Timely Sending of the Son
- God's mission Purpose, v5 - Rescued us for a place in the Family
- God's mission Follow-up, v6 – Equally appropriate Sending of Spirit
- God's mission Outcome, v7 - Freed for Family and Future

care of a minor and his property.”¹⁰ Paul says, “So also when we were children, we were in slavery under the basic principles of the world,” v3. The law not only prepared and protected, it also enslaved its adherents. To make his point, Paul the converted Jew, makes quite remarkable claims. To describe the extent and nature of this Jewish bondage to the Law, Paul seems deliberately to choose a phrase - “elements, or basic principles, of the world” - “stoicheia tou kosmou” in the Greek - which was understood in different ways in different cultures. The “basic principles” for a Jew would mean the ABC of the Mosaic Law.¹¹ But the Apostle well knew, and (whether or not he intended the “we” of v3 to include Jews and Gentiles, which is debated) in 4:8-9 he will make explicit, that for most of his non-Jewish readers the same phrase referred to those elemental spirits they believed controlled the forces of wind, fire, earth and water which regulate the whole universe. Putting together 4:1-3 and 4:8-9, then, Paul says these traditional religious beliefs in spirit powers filled for non-Jews the same kind of protecting, preparatory, but restricting role as the Law had done for the Jews. Factually that is almost self-evident. For their followers, primal religions restrain evil, confirm human sinfulness and show how much a divine initiative is needed for ultimate human welfare. These functions directly parallel the policing and instructing functions of the Hebrew Law. F.F. Bruce summarises the teaching of this passage:

[Stoicheia], it is now made plain, not only regulated the Jewish way of life under the law; they also regulated the pagan way of life in the service of the gods that were no gods ... For all the basic differences between Judaism and paganism, both involved subjection to the same elemental forces. This is an amazing statement for a former Pharisee to make; yet Paul makes it – not as an exaggeration in the heat of argument but as the deliberate expression of a carefully thought out position.¹²

Paul has defined limits to the value of Jewish traditional religion. But in doing so, he has retained a proper respect for its role in regulating society and in preparing for the Gospel (3:19-25). He has then attributed the same roles to the traditional belief systems of other, non-Jewish cultures (4:1-3). In these respects at least, the Apostle recognises a positive role for pre-Christian cultural values. This suggests that in the contextualization process we should have a healthy respect for the way local or traditional religions can reveal to their adherents their need as humans and thus point towards Christ. We can expect to gain real insight into the thought-world of others, and into the diverse ways in which human sin and human hopes operate in different cultures, by a proper study of their religious ideas. This is vital for effective contextualization. This aspect of the teaching of Galatians offers a way for us to move beyond mis-judging another culture's religions. It challenges us to listen and learn rather than criticize and blame.

All contextualization should do the same, as we present Christ as the Fulfiller of the “desires of the nations.” There is an important sense in which new converts in every culture need to “redeem” their religious history as they respond to Christ. The cultural heritage is not replaced by some other religion – not even another ethnic version of Christianity. Rather the whole heritage is renewed as aspects that are incompatible with Christ are discarded, and compatible aspects find a new centre and significance as members of the culture themselves re-orient their cultural traditions to serve the living Christ. Their values, art forms, architecture, communication processes and spiritual insights find new integrating and creative development potential with Christ as their Lord.¹³

¹⁰ F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, [NIGTC], Exeter: Paternoster, 1982: 192.

¹¹ For the Jew, being ‘under the basic principles of the world,’ v3, is the same as being ‘under the law,’ in v4. See F. F. Bruce, *Galatians*, 193-4.

¹² F.F. Bruce, *Galatians*, 202-3.

¹³ See Andrew F. Walls, ‘Old Athens and New Jerusalem: Some signposts for Christian Scholarship in the Early

Appropriate contextualization, then, will address this key issue: “How should we understand and relate to the local cultural traditions and religious heritage?” This section of Galatians has offered constructive guidelines for grappling with these global concerns (and the next section of the Letter will say more to keep this emphasis in balance).

But the time of protection and preparation would, and has come to an end, for both the Jews and those from primal religious backgrounds. “At the right time,” or “In the fullness of time,” God brought his great salvation purposes to their climax in two “sendings”. God sent his Son...,”4:4; and “God sent his Spirit...,” 4:6. In this way the waiting was over, and the full and complete way of redemption was opened. At last, those of both Jewish and other cultures can in the one same way, by faith, find a welcome as fully adopted children into the family life and inheritance of God himself, 4:4-7.

5. Living up to our dignity as Christ’s family & not reverting to previous cultural norms, Gal 3:25-29; 4:4-11; 4:12-31. Paul stresses next what Christ offers which no other religion can achieve. Christ puts us right with God as we trust in him. He frees us from a fearful slave-like condition before God’s Law, or other religious powers, and adopts us as full members of his intimate family circle. Christ does all that the protective and preparatory Law and elemental spirits could not do: He rescues us from our own estrangement and condemnation before God and comes to share God’s life with us through the indwelling of the Spirit. Through Christ God redeems believers from the just judgement of the Law and welcomes us, through adoption into his intimate family circle. He showers upon us the privileges of mature children. This includes direct access to the Father through prayer and a guaranteed share in the family inheritance (4:4-7). And as Christ offers all this he transcends all the social and cultural barriers which normally keep us apart. On the basis of the Father’s double mission (sending) of the Son, 4:4, and the Spirit, 4:6, every Christian has equal access to these family entitlements regardless of race, socio-economic standing, and gender. Clothed in Christ and his own life-qualities we become joint-heirs in his new, united, multiethnic family. We are, in the deepest sense, “All one in Christ.” (3:26-29).

These faith realities provide the Galatian believers with a new identity as the family of God. As the Gospel challenges any people group to make Christ Lord of their culture, questions of

V. Living up to our dignity as Christ’s family & not reverting to previous cultural norms, Gal; 4:8-31.

Only Right response & double appeal, 4:8-20

- Don’t return to religious slavery, vv8-11

- Rather return to First Love for Message & Messenger, vv12-20

Note the inadequacies of alternative religious systems, vv8-20

See the Post Script at the end of the Outline, for a summary of the Functions and Limitations Paul mentions regarding Christ-less religions.

- An allegory explaining the alternatives 4:21-31

History of Mission Studies’ *IBMR* Vol 21(4) Oct 1997:146-53, with his conclusion, p153: “The Christian consciousness of Africa and Asia is likely to reflect the pre-Christian cultural processes, including the pre-Christian religious processes, of these continents. On all past showing, these processes are not replaced – that would be the way of the proselyte. They are redirected, for that is the way of the convert. Christian Theology – active, *working* Christian theology – is constructed under the Spirit’s guidance from pre-Christian materials. The vessels and hangings of the tabernacle, while divinely directed in the making, consist of Egyptian gold and Egyptian cloth. The most urgent reason for the study of the religious traditions of Africa and Asia, of the Amerindian and the Pacific peoples, is their significance for Christian theology; they are the substratum of the Christian faith and life of the greater number of the Christians of the world.”

identity always come to the fore. In sacral, wholistic societies, personal and communal identity are closely related to the shared religious beliefs of the community. To convert to Christ calls the convert's identity into question. Adequate contextualization reinforces the believers' new identity established in Christ – we have become the children, or family of God. With all the joy of new-born babes we learn our new identity, calling to God as, “Abba, Father.”

Valid contextualization also means the global family of God will discover more and more of Christ's greatness as those of diverse cultural backgrounds express how Christ Jesus fulfils their cultural expectations. As fellow family members we will gladly make allowances as some of our brothers and sisters show they are more noisy, more exuberant, more contemplative or more demonstrative about Christ than our own culture expects us to be. We will rejoice to find in the way other brothers and sisters use our common biblical language about the cross (and most other areas of theology) new depths of insight our own culture had not yet discovered.

Through contextualization each other's cultural insights will also challenge and keep us from forgetting our family dignity and slipping back under the oppression of the pressures and assumptions of our old cultural ways. In every culture we run the risk that contextualization may lead back into the bondage or religious legalism of either the Gospel-sending or the receiving culture. So Paul pleads with Christians not to revert to a merely traditional religious level of interaction with God. The old cultural customs and fears can easily ensnare us again. Our rights and privileges as Christ's family make us responsible not to slip back into a slave-like relationship again with either the law or spirit powers. Rather, we are to live up to our position as children of God (4:8-11). Or, with Paul, to change the metaphor, we let Christ be formed in us, with all that means for a process of ongoing growth into him (4:12-20).

Respect for the proper role of traditional religion does not mean we encourage reversion to it. But effective contextualization discerns this difference and builds believers up to grasp and enjoy their new dignity and identity as the children of God. Here is the balance to the last section. Proper relationships across cultural boundaries will foster both a proper respect for cultural traditions, and an exclusive loyalty to Christ.

6. *Sustaining our vital, cruciform, redemptive encounter with Christ through the Spirit*, Gal 1:4; 2:15-3:5; 3:10-14,26-29; 4:4-7,9,19. Running through Galatians chapters 1-4 is a series of Trinitarian, Christological, theological statements which we have only mentioned in passing. These form both the substance and heart of the theological and experiential thrust of the contextual message. They refer to a dynamic life-transforming encounter and ongoing relationship between the believer and God in Christ through the Holy Spirit. Adequate contextualization will ensure this personal relational encounter grows and develops for every believer.

VI. Sustaining our vital, cruciform redemptive encounter with Christ through the Spirit, Gal 1:4; 2:15-3:5; 3:10-14,26-29; 4:4-7, 9, 19.

An interlude to confirm the necessity of the Christ-centred, cruciform and Holy Spirit dependent, personal encounter with Christ by faith, which has been reiterated through the letter to this point.

The metaphors of rescue (1:4), justification (2:15-16, 21; 3:6, 8, 11, 21, 24), redemption (3:13,14; 4:4) and Union /Crucifixion with Christ (2:19-20; 2:21; 3:1, 26, 27, 28, 29), explaining Christ's work at the Cross have been central to the whole argument so far. As have the Holy Spirit's role in applying the results of the achievements of the Cross (3:2, 5, 14; 4:6), and the place of faith as the only necessary human response.

In Galatians the believers' relationship with Christ is redemptive. From the announcement in the opening greeting of Christ's self-giving to rescue us from the present corrupt age to fulfil God's will, Paul uses both forensic "justification," and commercial "redemption," explanatory metaphors to unpack the impact of Christ's death for us. Both the objective, historical realities of pardon, restored relationship with God, and release from servitude, on the one hand, and, on the other, the richly subjective, personal and communal union with and incorporation into Christ Jesus the Risen living Lord receive due emphasis (2:15-16, 20-21; 3:10-13, 26-29; 4:4-7). The vital reality of this encounter and continuing faith relationship forms the evangelical heart of the message to be contextualized.

For the Galatian letter both the objective and subjective aspects of this redemptive experience also relate directly to the work of the Holy Spirit. After carefully clarifying the way justification works through faith and results in the believers' dynamic union with the Living Christ, 2:20-21, as we have shown above, Paul in the next verses, 3:1-5, reminds them of their experience of the Holy Spirit working amongst them to confirm the reality of their faith. The Galatians were not to forget or underestimate the role of the Holy Spirit in giving and sustaining their new life of faith and in equipping them for service as Christ's followers. In 3:10-14, Paul shows the close inter-

relationship of Christ's justifying and redemptive work for the believer, and the Holy Spirit's work enabling us to enjoy what the Father intends we shall know in a richly experiential way.

These same verses use the language of promises fulfilled and long awaited expectations purposefully accomplished, to describe this encounter between believers and Christ. Christ Jesus not only fulfils the Jewish national hopes and desires for their long-promised Messiah. He also deeply and fully satisfies the yearnings of peoples of every culture who "know" God, or who discover God has found and known them. This awareness that in finding Christ we find fulfilment for personal and communal yearnings – and at the same time discover our place within those ongoing purposes - is one aspect of the "goodness" of the Gospel (3:8, 14, 18-29; 4:1-7). Knowing who we are and where we fit in the ongoing mission of God is a strong motivating foundation for daily living. Good contextualization brings these empowering forces into the reach of ordinary believers.

Galatians particularly stresses being crucified with Christ to share a cruciform (cross-shaped) self-denial of the patterns and values of self and the world (2:20-21; 5:13-18, 24; 6:14, 17). The vital reality of this encounter and continuing faith relationship forms the evangelical heart of the message for people whose previous lives have been dominated by other spirit powers, and who, in a postmodern context seek wholeness of life.

I DIED WITH JESUS

Galatians 2:20 *Tune : Ellers*
Keswick, 549; HOF 280

**1. I died with Jesus when He died for me;
Self has been conquered, nailed upon the tree;
Buried and risen, united with Him;
He gives the vict'ry over law and sin.**

**2. No longer I, but Christ is living now,
Sharing His fulness within me each hour,
Thinking and speaking all yielded to Him;
Christ indwells now as Master and as King.**

**3. Moment by moment by faith now to live,
For He so loved me Himself he did give;
Crucified with Him : filled by His own power;
Trusting Him daily, I walk with Him now.**

**4. Bearing His marks, & by your burdens bent,
Till Christ be formed in you I now am sent;
Bearing your birth pangs, hard tho' be the cost,
Dead to the world, His cross my only boast.**

J.M.H. 14.5.74 & 16.11.96

Chapters 1-4, the Apostle now turns to address Christian freedom in the rest of the letter. But Paul does so in a way that the postmodern mindset rejects *a priori* – Paul claims that the metanarrative he proclaims can be universally applicable and at the same time genuinely liberating. Galatians declares the one universal Gospel frees people of every culture in the fullest possible sense. Believers find release from bondage to other hegemonic cultural expectations (5:1-6). In fact, Christ frees us particularly from the bondage of inappropriate cultural expectations. No matter how important they may appear from within their own cultural tradition, there is no single universal cultural requirement or experience which other cultures must adopt to live as true Christians. Circumcision, or any other such cultural particular, is no longer necessary. In Christ, all we need to enjoy God's acceptance and pleasure is freely available through faith alone. And effective contextualization shows it is available directly from each of our own cultural backgrounds. No matter what the pressures to conform to another dominant religious culture's customs or expectations, in Christ we can be ourselves and know Christ accepts us just as we are. Paul put it plainly, "...in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself in love" (5:6).

Contextualization, then, needs to sustain this evangelical, redemptive, purposeful encounter with Christ through the Holy Spirit for each new generation of believers.

7. *Finding and Expressing our freedom in Christ to enjoy our own cultural integrity and freely serve others*, Gal 5:1-15. Kevin Vanhoozer pointedly notes: "Thanks to their new appreciation for context, theologians now see their task in terms of not only theoretical deliberation but also practical liberation."¹⁴ We are tempted to ask how theologians could ever have not seen this if they used New Testament letters as their model for theologizing. For, having laid and applied such a well balanced theoretical and practical foundation in

VII. *Finding and Expressing our freedom in Christ to enjoy our own cultural integrity and freely serve others*, Gal 5:1-15.

Embrace Christ's freedom with cultural integrity, 5:1-12

The Fact - Avail yourself of the freedom available, 5: 1

The Differences – Again: 5:2-6

- *The Burden of being under Law*, vv2-4

- *The Blessing of being in Christ*, in our own culture vv5-6

The Plea - Let Troublemakers be troubled - You must go on, vv7-12

Free - *to live selfishly or serve lovingly*, 5:13-15

The Options, v13: Each of You, is a Released Prisoner: You are called to be free: But what are you doing with your freedom? Discharged prisoners have choices to make

The Reasons, v14-15: Love fulfils all requirements, but Self devours & consumes.

¹⁴ Kevin J, Vanhoozer, "'One Rule to Rule them All?'" ..., 2007: 93

Today, as at Galatia, some are still adept at tripping up their fellow runners by wrongly imposing their cherished cultural religious expectations on believers of other cultures. The call of the Galatian letter is to pick each other up, enable each one to stand tall in their own cultural integrity, and get back into the race (5:7ff).

Gospel freedom is also distinctive in explaining freedom, not as license to indulge self-centred desires, but being freed from them to serve others. Knowing who we are culturally and how fully we are accepted in Christ sets us free to live beyond the petty confines of cultural bigotry. We are free to serve each other instead of back-biting and destroying each other. This is God's intention for each of us and for us all in our multi-cultural church communities. It is easy to serve our own tribal or ethnic group. We have no trouble noticing the way we can help those who share our educational background and work or business goals. But God looks for Christ-like love. This kind of love breaks out beyond our cultural norms to serve those who don't think or act like us. Once we know who we are ethnically in Christ, he frees us for this kind of service (5:13-15).

Careful contextualization guards against anyone else's culture, even the dominant culture of the bringer of the Gospel, being imposed on top of the new Christians' own faith in Christ. They are to be free to express their faith in their own responsive love and service.

VIII. Allowing the Spirit to transform the personal, social and communal life-styles, Gal 5:16-6:10.

Free - for spiritual warfare - for self or the Spirit ? 5:16-24

- *Two Opposing Camps - Self vv Spirit, vv16-18*
- *Two Opposing Life-Styles - Acts of the Self or Fruit of the Spirit, vv19-23*
- *One Decisive Victory - In Christ : Free from Law & Self is Slain, vv23b-24*
- Alive - to keep in step with the Spirit, 5:25-6:10*
- *In the Spirit – Living in Him, Keeping in Step with Him, v25*
- *Refusing the Old ways – Of Pride, Provoking & Envy, v26*
- *Fulfilling the New Law of Love, 6:1-6*
 - Restoring the fallen, humbly
 - Sharing each other's burden, lovingly
 - Shouldering our own load, responsibly
 - Supporting spiritual teachers, appreciatively

Observing the Harvest Principles, 6:7-10

- Choosing to sow to the Spirit not self
- Not growing weary - Grasping the opportunities

8. ***Allowing the Spirit to transform the personal, social and communal life-styles, Gal 5:16-6:10.*** Gospel freedom and inter-cultural relationships in the church develop within a wider spiritual context of conflict between the ways of the Holy Spirit of God and the ways of selfish humanity (5:19-26). The church is called in each culture to live by the Spirit, not by the attitudes, values and life-styles of the "flesh" – our personal, ingrained, self-centred choices and habits. Here is a worldview-transforming understanding, enabling us to admit the awful depths of evil and depravity in our societies, without attributing them to the work of external spirit powers or non-personal beings. Instead, we can honestly face the evil and acknowledge that along with any real external factors, and more basically, accountable human agency is at the root of our social and personal dysfunction. Because these evils are properly named 'works of the flesh.' In a primal society, as well as in the postmodern intellectual climate, this is a radically new analysis and prescription. Our desires, thoughts and choices are the root cause of sexual indiscipline which dehumanizes. Human jealousies and actions distort worship. Our human attitudes and actions, not spirits of ancestors or place, continue and renew subservience to sorcery and idolatry, even where the Gospel has done away with them at earlier stages of

Christian growth in those same societies. The ethnocentric and narrow, proud attitudes which divide and disrupt attempts at inter-cultural partnership arise in the hearts of humans. To blame other spirit powers, or neuroses, or peer pressure, or other societally imposed deprivations for these ‘works of the flesh,’ contradicts this biblical description of their nature.

Only the overflow of the fruit of the Holy Spirit in our lives is sufficient to transform these basically self-centred attitudes ingrained within each of us personally from our own ethnic backgrounds. Christ's love, his joy, and his self-control are unnatural to the basic bias of every human society and culture. The productive activity of the Holy Spirit, sourced through dynamic dependence on him through faith, is essential for this depth of life-style liberation. This choice between ‘works of the flesh’ and bearing “fruit of the Spirit” places moral responsibility firmly on us as human beings. The Gospel calls us to freedom in the Spirit, whereby we “keep in step with the Spirit” within our own cultural context. God's own life released through our redeemed personalities as we unite across our ethnic divisions is the pattern (5:22-25).

As he concludes the main teaching of the letter, Paul emphasizes further particulars he knows are essential, both negatively, for a community threatened by cultural conflict, and positively, for healthy multiethnic cooperation in a congregation. Conceit, provocation and grasping after what rightly belongs to others are excluded. There is no place for a naïve romanticism about each other. We have to face squarely the reality of each other’s sin and faults. But when doing so we start with non-judgmental humility. We are also responsible to become involved in lightening the other person's burden, while not shirking our own load. Here is a real call to depth in contextualization that will ensure such a balanced approach to relational and inter-cultural issues in church or community. And proper pride in our personal and cultural achievements need not be marred by empty comparisons with others (5:26-6:5). Recognizing and providing for bible teachers who are skilled in making these contextual applications in each Christian community is a vital ingredient in dealing with tensions between cultures (6:6). Transforming personal and cultural values and attitudes is long-term work. Seeds sown inevitably bear fruit (6:7-10).

These very practical evidences of spiritual maturity remind us the real proof of the contextualization is the depth of its transforming effect within the new culture. Life in the Spirit seen in its social outworking, not some imposed shibboleth or external ritual, is the test.

IX. Summary: Exalting in our new, but crucified, life as the people of God, not trusting any dominant culture’s religious rituals, Gal 6:11-18.

Paul's personal conclusion:

Christ-centred renewal, not cultural colonialism, vv11-18

Motives & mistakes of false teachers, vv12-13

Meaning of the Cross - three aspects, vv12, 14

Message Summarised - in two sentences, v15-16

9. Summary: Exalting in our new, but crucified life as the people of God, not trusting the dominant culture’s religious rituals, Gal 6:11-18. Paul takes up the pen from his secretary to sign the letter. He can't resist a summary paragraph

He pointedly labels the colonizing intention of the circumcision party as cowardice. They attempt to impose their own cultural norms upon others because they cannot face the costly demands of making Christ's crucifixion the pattern for their own life-styles. To really grasp what Christ did for us in his death means dying to our own pride of person, of possessions and of culture and laying down all our boasting at the

foot of the cross. Then, as the undeserved grace of God overwhelms and re-creates us, we rise as full members of our own culture, to take our place alongside every other new creature within the true “Israel of God” – a title no longer restricted to one ethnic or cultural group, but now rightly attributed to the “one new humanity” God is creating from both Jews and peoples of other cultures, v16.¹⁵ The climax of the letter comes in his two sentence summary of the overall message, v15-16:

“Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything: what counts is a new creation. Peace and mercy on all who follow this rule – The Israel of God”

To glorify Christ crucified and to share with others as the multiethnic people of God - these are the true goals of appropriate contextualization in our multi-ethnic and multi-cultural societies of today.

Galatians, I suggest, as a unified whole offers an integrated set of principles for contextualization. Paul’s presentation of them also offers a set of vital tests: Effective contextualization will:

- Foster Apostolic loyalty;
- Promote justification that brings equity in social relationships and hospitality;
- Uphold a living relationship with the Holy Spirit and continuity with the adoptive heritage of faith;
- Respect cultural and religious heritage;
- Ensure daily life in Christ’s family, not reversion to old bondages;
- Sustain the evangelical, redemptive, purposeful encounter with Christ through the Holy Spirit;
- Facilitate freedom to serve others with love within diverse cultures;
- Guide towards transformational response to the Holy Spirit within each culture, and
- Enable new life in Christ as God’s unified people.

This is no simplistic formula for answering every difficulty in the contextualizing task. But it offers guiding principles and an overall framework of assessment for the process. In these Galatian themes the Holy Spirit directs our attention to aspects of the contextualization task we may not have included on our own agenda. We could restate these nine areas as a list of issues or areas of concern contextualization must address:

- Biblical authority and orthodoxy-syncretism issues;
- Social and communal implications of salvation in Christ;
- Historical, inter-ethnic and inter-generational continuity of the people of God;
- Continuity and discontinuity with local cultural and religious worldviews;
- Christian and cultural identity and the dangers of reversion and nominalism;
- Personal integrity and vitality of evangelical faith-relationships and experience with the indwelling Holy Spirit, in contrast to formalism in religious adherence;
- Personal, social and cultural dimensions of spiritual liberation;
- Holy-Spirit directed lifestyle choices and character and value formation; and
- Christo-centric motives and priorities in Christian leadership and ministry.

By thus tabulating the tests and concerns Galatians suggests for contextualization, hopefully, we have also confirmed the centrality of contextualization for Christian discipleship and involvement in God’s mission today.

¹⁵ As explained most fully in Ephesians 2:14-18, and expounded eloquently by Andrew Walls, ‘The Ephesian Moment,’ in, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History ...*, 2002:72-81