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Gospel Contextualisation Revisited

Haslev 1997 Consultation Statement

Introduction

From 17-21 June 1997, fifty two evangelical missiologists, theologians and mission practitioners from twenty countries met in Haslev, Denmark to consider the issue, "Gospel Contextualisation Revisited." This meeting was sponsored by the Theology and Strategy Working Group of the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelisation and the Institute for the Study of Islam and Christianity.

We began by looking back to the 1978 Lausanne meeting on Gospel and Culture which was held in Willowbank. The resulting Lausanne Occasional Paper, "The Willowbank Report - Gospel and Culture," brought the challenge to accept contextualisation and to become more adept in the use of its principles. We are grateful for this pioneering work and hope that our work adds value to this prior work.

The purpose of our meeting was to review nineteen years experience of thought and practise and to identify issues that have emerged during this time.

The interaction of people from different churches and cultures produced a new creativity and confidence about how the Gospel might be more adequately expressed today. We offer the following as a result of our reflections.

Looking Back To Willowbank. . .

We celebrate efforts to apply the ideas of Willowbank . . .

- Churches in the Andes, including Indian pastors, have used the Willowbank report to help them in responding to the often violent challenges of their context.
- Churches in Pakistan have used the report as a focus of conversation among theologians and church leaders as local mission strategies were being developed.
- Contextualisation has become part of missiology curriculum in some places, training has taken place and people have struggled, often against institutional resistance, to apply its principles.
- Places have sought to become living models of a contextualised and living gospel such as the Reformed Church Bali Church, the Truth and Liberation Concern Church in Australia, The Hope Factory in Brasil, In Contact Ministries in London.

We also note with disappointment and penitence that, in the nineteen years since Willowbank, its good news has not been as widely known and used as we had hoped. We believe that there are a variety of reasons for this.

First, contextualisation is very hard work, requiring a demanding set of knowledge and skills, patience and a supporting and enabling community. Few have all of this available to them. Furthermore, ethnocentrism dies hard in every culture.

Second, fear is a continuing debilitating factor. People and institutions are concerned - and rightly so - that, in the name of sensitive contextualisation, the center of the gospel will be eroded or lost altogether. The lure of existing methods or reverting to "our way" is very strong. Furthermore, in the face of an apparently irresistible Western-Enlightenment paradigm, non-Western cultures have been discouraged in believing that their Christian experience and culture has anything to offer.

Third, there are strong institutional and denominational resistances. Ecclesial and mission traditions have strong emotional power that resists change. Many institutions were founded because they saw a new and better or more authentic way, and see contextualisation as a means by which their organization strategy may be diluted or lost. Others have felt their efforts have been successful and did not see the relevance or need for contextualisation.

Fourth, the continuing struggle with the cultural captivity of Christian mission in the West has limited its response to Willowbank both on the part of centers of Western mission training as well as by mission funding sources. There are many who still fuse the meaning and the forms of the gospel. Also, contextualisation has sometimes been reduced to a communication methodology thus limiting its significance and potential impact, often resulting in resentment.

Fifth, while Willowbank addressed the theological and missiological principles of contextualisation, it did not contextualise the message of their meeting for the mission agencies, churches and seminaries they hoped to change. Having done the critical work of presenting the challenge of contextualisation to evangelicals, time and energy was not so much invested in getting this important work into seminaries, libraries and pastoral and mission training in the five continents.

Finally, the world has changed and is changing faster and faster. Political, cultural and economic globalisation is being carried to the corners of the world by

the information and technology revolution with two effects. First, this is creating the deceptive perception that “one message fits all.” Second, this globalisation is creating a global culture that is resting on what is often a multiplicity of local cultures that make up every local context. Thus, no place is a single culture any more, and this local family of cultures is changing and adapting. This demands a contextualisation that is far more complex and fluid. Contextualisation may now need to be a verb, rather than the noun of the past.

The Goal of Contextualisation and the Tests of Authentic Contextualisation

As followers of Jesus, every Christian is called to live a life of truth and righteousness within his or her community in a contextualised way.

The vision of contextualisation is that Jesus Christ and his Kingdom find fuller expression in the whole life of people in every culture.

Authentic contextualisation is ...

- Honouring to God the Father
- Uplifting of Christ, His incarnation, cross and resurrection
- Led and made possible by the Holy Spirit
- True to the whole of the Bible
- A way of life lived for others
- Love that finds its expression in solidarity
- Addressing the deepest life issues of the people
- Affirming of the dignity of all
- Reconciling toward all others
- Prophetic without fear
- Transformational and empowering
- Effective against spiritual powers
- Strengthening of the family
- Enabling of the church
- Listening, sharing and learning
- Adding to the wisdom of the worldwide church
- Risky, but hopeful
- Working for and anticipating the Kingdom of God

Contextualisation is not ...

- An event
- Simply marketing
- Simply popularizing

- Uncritical of culture
- Simply transferring a church structure or doctrine
- Accommodation or adaption that compromises the gospel
- Selective use of the Bible

Frontier Issues In Contextualisation

During the course of this consultation, we identified several key issues on the frontier of our thinking and experience for which additional research, thinking and Biblical reflection are needed.

Globalisation

Life in many cultures involves a tension between the global, the regional/national and the local. The rapid development of globalisation has complicated the task of understanding cultures.

Globalisation has three interlocking dimensions. The Economic - a global market economy encouraging a consumerist mind set. The Political - a reduction of the sovereignty of the national state. The Cultural - a global network of communication and entertainment media.

Globalisation is not identical with Westernisation. In particular other civilisations often embrace Western technology without accepting their values.

As the world is globalised, nationalism, tribalism and fundamentalism develop in reaction as a protection of identity. "The more universal we get, the more tribal we act." (John Naisbett) The extent of the impact of globalisation, and the mix of global, regional/national and local varies, but these issues raise complex ethical dilemmas for the strategy and methodology of mission.

The people group concept and major civilizations

As a result of the introduction of the people group concept, its applications has tended toward the micro level of ethnicity, local customs and local dialects. While this is a helpful way of targeting mission work and contextualising micro mission strategy, it has also resulted in our losing sight of the major religions and ideologies that form the core of world civilisations such as Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, secularism and the post-modern West. These macro expressions of culture need equal attention in terms of contextualisation strategies in order to meet the challenges of what some see as the struggle among major civilisations that will characterise the world as we enter the next century.

Ethics and contextualisation

Mission and Christian living must be done with faithfulness and integrity. This raises the dual questions of the ethics of contextualisation and the contextualisation of ethics. The first means that our lifestyle and methods must always be justifiable ethically. For example, are some contextual methods of evangelism open to charges of deception? The second requires that, whilst our allegiance to Christ demands that we take seriously the un-changing ethical principles in the Bible, the mode and timing of their application must be contextually sensitive. For example, how are ethical principles to be applied in a society where relationships take precedence over principles?

Power relations and contextualisation

In the current global context, not all cultures enjoy a position of equality. The Western church and culture stand on a mountain while the others stand in the hollow. North American popular culture, civil religion and globalisation are the current custodians of this power which can be traced back to the constantinian era in the West.

All of this has created a situation of cultural dominance of one part of the church. Politics, the power money, history and racism have all combined to place churches in the Two Thirds World and minority churches in the West in a position of cultural disadvantage.

These factors have distorted and hindered attempts at contextualisation. True contextualisation requires that these iniquities be removed. Repentance, reconciliation, respect and the sharing of gifts and resources of the church in a spirit of humility will create the kind of relationships and community that will have the power to facilitate the genuine incarnation of the gospel. This kind of contextualisation will empower those on the margins, the poor, the remote and the less well known.

What are the boundaries to the contextualisation of central christian beliefs?

The risk involved in contextualisation is particularly sharp when it comes to the contextualisation of central doctrinal themes, particularly concerning the person and work of Christ. The Son of God was incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth, a Jew. The biblical history of salvation provides the norm for the interpretation of any doctrinal term, and is the authoritative starting point in any search for an appropriate dynamic equivalence (Willowbank 8b). The history and traditions of other cultures cannot be given equal status to the biblical history in terms of revelation, but can and must provide key points of contact and convergence if contextualisation is to occur.

Those involved in contextual mission need to recognise that they can only begin with the doctrinal interpretations learned from their own culture and church tradition. Alert to this they begin a dialogue between the mission culture (its people, history and symbols) and Scripture. This continues in order to ensure that the result is both true to Scripture and meaningful in the culture. In particular we need to see that we have not so interpreted one part of Christian truth so as to deny another. In practice this process is much harder than when described in theory. Much more work and comparative study still needs to be done. This includes the question of whether there can be transcultural statements of foundational Christian beliefs and if so how can they be determined.

Islam - Why has contextualisation been so hard?

- There are essential differences
- Head on conflict
- religion and state - jurisprudence
- form and content
- denial of each other's beliefs
- muslim way of life - no spiritual/secular

In Islam, form and content cannot be separated. Thus, using Muslim-forms by Christians in an Islamic context can be interpreted by Muslims as "being Muslim."

When a Muslim, who has become a Christian, continues to go to the mosque on Fridays, he or she could be said to be exhibiting the freedom in Christ to separate the form and content of religious worship. For a Muslim, this is impossible; only Muslims go to the Mosque. Christians need to understand that a Muslim can and will not accept such a separation between form and content.

Therefore, this places two constraints on contextualising the gospel for Muslims. First, the missionary must work in a way that accepts this unwillingness to separate form and content. Second, Muslim converts will have to leave some aspects of Islamic culture, particularly those associated with Islam as a religion.

The nature of the spiritual world, power encounters and contextualisation

In the ministry of Jesus we see his encounter with spiritual forces. The presence and activity of demonic powers is a reality in the world. The work of the Holy Spirit in spiritual conflict is an important Biblical reality. Christian ministry sometimes has tended to ignore this facet of Biblical teaching and social concern. We need Biblically legitimate and culturally appropriate approaches to such issues

as prayer; deliverance from demons, healing, blessing and cursing, the nature of principalities and powers, etc..

A Call to the Church and Mission Community

We encourage the Christian community in mission to move forward, building on Willowbank,

seeking a deeper understanding of contextualization by moving ...

FROM ...

TOWARD ...

Contextualisation as a method. Contextualisation as a way of life and learning, and a way of being more fully human.

Contextualisation as something we do to others. Contextualisation as an expression of self-giving love.

Fear that the gospel may be lost or truncated by our efforts to be contextual. Faith that God will protect the good news and that the Holy Spirit will lead us into a deeper understanding of the truth of the gospel.

An attitude of over-protecting our own doctrinal formulations An attitude of risk taking based on our recognition that Jesus chose to entrust the good news of the gospel to flawed human beings.

An attitude of independence that unwittingly assumes that God is not able to preserve the fullness of the good news in a rapidly changing world in which Christianity is no longer dominant anywhere. An attitude of dependency on God that celebrates the fact that a Mongolian shamanist today can hear the gospel story from a Korean Bible, derived from a Scottish Presbyterian English Bible of Greek and Hebrew origins and, by God's power and grace, experiences the same gospel we have received

An temptation toward cultural dominance that assumes the superiority of our faith expression. An attitude of interdependence, believing that no culture can see its own blind spots and that every culture has something to offer to all other cultures.

Reducing contextualisation to a method of communicating the gospel as a prescription for the saving of souls. Practicing contextualisation as a way of discovering the fullness of the gospel through a living, growing encounter between

the gospel, proclaimed and lived; the Bible and the personal, social, political, economic, religious worlds in which we live.

Contextualisation as a noun: the articulation of the gospel to a one-way presentation of propositions. Contextualising as a verb: a community of believers listening, sharing, learning and reproving one another for the sake of discovering a deeper understanding of the gospel of the Kingdom.

Seeing culture as a problem or a barrier to communicating the gospel Celebrating culture as the God-given context of our identity and as the fertile ground for the ongoing incarnation of the gospel and the Kingdom.

Understanding the multiplicity of cultures as a problem complicating the sharing of the gospel. Celebrating the diversity of cultures as God's gift to the church and means by which the true fullness of his good news and the reality of his Kingdom may be discerned.

From contextualization as merely a strategy for cross cultural mission.

Contextualization as a necessary and conscious practise of all churches in mission within their own cultures.

An anxious concern to protect our church and mission structures at the expense of our work for Christ's kingdom

A commitment to subject our institutional concerns and policies to the their effect on Christ's mission.

Conclusion

We recognize that

mission is God's activity for the salvation of his world,
the church shares in the mission of the Son of God;
this mission can only be carried out in the power of the Holy Spirit.