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I cannot end this paper without calling attention to the practical implications of what I have learned in the course of this research. First is the necessity for all of us to listen to one another. No one has the infallible method of just letting the Bible speak for itself. Secondly the resources wasted in teaching the traditional attributes of God (say) in African theological institutions could be better utilized in teaching our students to reflect on the Bible. Thirdly, I have anew understood why the Old Testament is the Word of God: it is not because it Contains interesting (and sometimes boring) stories; it is because it teaches me that the supreme heresy is to remove God p.101 from history. This moves me, more than ever before, to communicate as best as I can the historical dimension of faith in Christ!

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Biblical Foundations: An East Asian Study

Wilson W. Chow

FACING THE CONTEXT

Evangelicals today are facing a challenge to evaluate and to rethink the nature, the task of theology and the methodologies of theological construction in their own contexts. Much has already been said on the doing of theology, or theological reflection. Evangelicals in some parts of the world are already engaged in this endeavour, whereas in Asia various factors have discouraged the launching of theological contextualization. These include uncritical adherence to tradition, fear of syncretism, lack of creativity, etc. Many remain content in making critique of existing theologies with negative attitudes and apprehension, but make no serious effort to go one step further in offering evangelical contribution. However, an evangelical theological awakening is now in progress in Asia. We need to be more open-minded, more bold and willing to learn from others, but with no less evangelical commitment.

Evangelicals are sometimes criticized for having only the gospel, but no theology. Of course, a theology that is void of the gospel content is theologically bankrupt. But the comment points to our evangelical tendency to make theology simply a systematic formulation of doctrines, or a statement of the Christian beliefs, and thus stopping on a confessional level. It fails to take into account the dynamic, vital aspect of theology, that is, to relate the Christian faith to the present context. If the doing of theology involves “the activity of reflecting on the contemporary human life situation in the light of one’s faith”,¹ then we must build a much closer relationship between the biblical text and the context than most evangelicals have so far been able to establish.

Theology cannot but be indigenous or “contextualized”. What we have inherited, as a result of missionary activities and theological training in the West, are western theological traditions. In the past, Christianity has played such an important role in western civilization that “the marriage between theology and western norms of thought and life inevitably becomes the implicit assumption of doing theology in the West.”² But in the Third World, we need not be bound or frozen by western theological traditions. Rather, we have to create our own. That means we have to decontextualize much of our present p. 103 available theologies before we can actually contextualize, and avoid the temptation of contextualizing a secondhand expression of the Christian faith. That is not to deny the values of western theological traditions or to downgrade their efforts doing theology. We need to study them as part of our Christian heritage. But our study of theology does not replace the need and responsibility of our own doing of theology. It also means that the way evangelicals do theology in the Third World is equally valid compared to what theologians did or are doing in the West.

The context places a demand on us that we cannot ignore. In the West, we have heard of the “post-Christian era”. Yet in the Third World, we are still looking forward to a Christian era. In Asia, which has more than half of the world’s population, only about 3% of the people are Christians. Hence the number one item on the agenda of the church is mission and evangelization. The “Christian” West looks at this world situation with great emphasis on cross-cultural mission and a strategy on unreached people groups. But what does this have to say to the task of theology in the Third World? It has also been pointed

¹ Carlos H. Abesamis, “Doing Theological Reflection in a Philippine Context”, *Asian Christian Theology*. Phila.: Westminster Press, 1980, p.89.

² Choan-Seng Song, *Third-Eye Theology*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1979, p.4.

out that “Christian theology, within western theological traditions, has to a large extent limited itself to the explication of the Christian faith handed down from the early church. The subject matter of theology is ‘Christian’ spirituality. It is the traditions of the church that constitute the contents of theological endeavours.”³ We must not divorce missiology from theology. This should be the direction of Third World theology. The greatest theologian in the Bible, the apostle Paul, was a missionary. “Theology is essentially missiology. The task of theology is to so undergird the deep concerns in mission that the church moves forward in her task in the twentieth century. It is the theologian’s task to help the church to break out of her enslavement to the context in which she lives, so that she can be obedient to her Lord.”⁴

Both the doing of theology and evangelization do not occur in a vacuum, but in a concrete life situation affected by social, political, economic, cultural and religious factors. How to bring the gospel of universal relevance and application down-to-earth to the needs of a given context is the task of theology. As Dr. Athyal put it, “If the Christian gospel is the answer, one should know what are the real p. 104 questions, and this is the task of indigenous theology.”⁵ So theology interacts with the contemporary situation, seeking to understand the problems and issues, at the same time being aware of the answers and solutions put forth by other religions or ideologies, and speaking out firmly with conviction from the Christian viewpoint. The making of theology is carried out in the fellowship of the Christian community, and at the same time with participation in the larger community of society. The theologian is not a loner, nor can he afford to be isolated from active participation in Christian fellowship and in the world.

If the doing of theology is such an urgent, challenging and exciting task, what are the guidelines for a relevant theology that is both biblically oriented and contextually related? Are there boundaries to be drawn so that evangelical commitment will not yield to compromise? How do we respond to the basic issues in theological contextualization?

BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

The first question is about the source or sources of Christian theology. This may sound unnecessary or routine, but we cannot take the question lightly or take the answer for granted. For example, in his ten theological proposals for new frontiers of theology in Asia, C. S. Song suggested that “the totality of life is the raw material of theology.”⁶ If, as he puts it, it is not the business of theology to ask how human beings deal with God, but that theology should be concerned about the question of how God deals with human beings, it is important that we know the source of such understanding. In contrast, evangelicals accept only the Bible as the source of theology, because it is the written Word of God. God has revealed Himself in history and the Christ event, and this divine revelation forms the foundation of our theology. There are no other avenues today of knowing God’s will for the world, and His redemptive work for sinners except through what He has revealed in the Bible. The Christian faith is not a philosophical system, but it has an historical basis and character of which the Bible is the only written witness to God’s redemptive activities.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 3–4.

⁴ Peter F. Savage, “The ‘Doing of Theology’ in a Latin American Context”, *TSF Bulletin*, March–April, 1982, p.3.

⁵ Saphir P. Athyal, “Toward an Asian Christian Theology”, *Asian Christian Theology* p.68.

⁶ C. S. Song, “New Frontiers of Theology in Asia”, *Varieties of Witness*. Singapore: Christian Conference of Asia, 1980, p.43.

“The historical character of the Christian faith demands that the Bible, as it is the unique witness to and the **P. 105** record of this history, be the source and provide the content of any Christian theology.”⁷

Recognizing that the Bible is necessary and essential as our source of theology, we need to go one step further and ask: Is the Bible alone sufficient for the task of doing theology? If the answer is no, what else are needed?

Some theologians speak of “formative factors” in theology instead of sources. These factors are not on the same level or of equal importance, and they usually include: experience, revelation, scripture, tradition, culture, and reason.⁸ While revelation is regarded as “the primary source of theology”, this approach makes no clear commitment to the Bible as the normative source. Others point out that in doing theological reflection, the theologian needs experience, analysis and the Bible. These are called tools for doing theology.⁹ It can readily be seen that theology as a subject matter cannot be separated from the theologian who does this task, or from the process of doing theology, of which theology is the product. In view of the lip-service rendered to the Bible in many theological circles today as a primary source of theology, yet there being no use of it in actual practice, we must stress the word of God as indispensable and essential. But besides the question of the source, there are at least three factors fundamental to the doing of theology:

- a. The illumination and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, whose presence in the individual believer and in the Christian community must be experienced as a reality. The Holy Spirit is a life-giving Spirit, and the Spirit of truth.
- b. Obedience to the Word of God. It is important that theology flows out from a life filled with worship, devotion, love and obedience to God. Otherwise, theology is reduced to an academic exercise which can be done by brilliant, learned scholars even when faith, love and obedience to God may be lacking.
- c. The life situation in which we find ourselves. Problems and issues in the Christian faith are not only the results of thinking and contemplation, but often are encountered in ordinary life situations or in crisis. The debate on circumcision, whether a Gentile believer needed to be circumcized in order to be saved, taught by the Judaizers but rejected by Paul and Barnabas ([Acts 15:1–2](#)), arose as **p. 106** the Early Church engaged in missionary expansion. It was a concrete matter, not abstract philosophical argument. We cannot do theology without taking the context into consideration.

A second issue involves the whole matter of text and context. We have already given much emphasis on the importance of context. But how do we relate the text to the context? Does the context affect or even determine our understanding of the text, or should we let the text speak to our time? Where do we begin?

Evangelicals have rightly insisted that we must start with the text. Scripture forms the basis of our Christian faith, and provides the “givenness” for our theological content. It is the normative nature, the authority of Scripture that compels us to listen and obey what it has to say to us today. The Christian message remains unchanged; it was “once for all entrusted to the saints.” ([Jude 3](#)) The task of theology is first to understand the text, the meaning of God’s redemptive activities in the course of biblical history, culminated in the

⁷ Athyal, p.69.

⁸ For example, John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*. London: SCM Press, rev. ed., 1977, pp.4–18.

⁹ Abesamis, pp.92–93.

person and work of the God-man Jesus Christ. The text in its own context is the very starting point of any theological pursuit. The essence and uniqueness of the Christian faith lies in the fact that it is historically-based and yet not historically-bound. The Bible speaks to every age and every situation, directly or indirectly. It is the form or framework that must be carefully constructed to express relevantly what the Bible says to the issues of a particular situation. Only when we stand on the ground of the text can we embrace a biblical view on a certain subject. The text helps us to understand the context.

It has been argued that everybody approaches Scripture with his own presuppositions. These may be religious, cultural or ideological conceptions as well as inclination based on experiences. The question then is whether that person recognizes this fact, or to what extent he is aware of it. Hence it is difficult to speak of understanding the text as it is, rather one always understands the text from one's context. We must admit that there is a tendency for us to place the context above the text, so that relevance becomes a greater concern than truth itself. It is exactly because of this danger that we have to reaffirm the value and absolute necessity of biblical exegesis. Our freedom of theological contextualization must be set within the boundaries of sound exegesis. Our concrete life situations cause us to be more sensitive to the whole counsel of God, and our involvement in life makes us more alert to the overall teachings of the Bible. If we begin with the context, we may be able to set a theological agenda, but very often the Scripture is used, if not manipulated, to give [p.107](#) support to one's viewpoints or conclusions which are shaped by sociological, psychological, political and cultural tendencies. We do reflect on the contemporary life situation, but in the light of our Christian faith. We must ask: what does the text say on this matter? Sometimes we may ask the wrong questions from the context. We must let the Word of God ask questions and address itself to our issues. When confronted by the text in the context, we may be able to discover some forgotten, neglected or hidden themes in the Bible.

In recent years, much attention and discussion have been drawn to the issues of poverty, oppression and injustice in the world. Along with these concerns comes the theology of liberation, a call to preach the gospel to the poor and the oppressed, and a campaign to seek social justice and human rights. We cannot be blind to the present realities that surround us, especially in many parts of the Third World. But how can we be sure that our interest, our enthusiasm is not a mere passing fad? Is our activist outlook and social involvement prompted only by humanitarian concern as a response to social pressure, or is it motivated by a deep conviction that comes from an understanding of the gospel message and the biblical mandate? One way is to quote Scripture as examples to support and to justify one's viewpoints and action. The other way is first to understand what the Bible as a whole says and in particular on certain subjects, then obey and apply this to the present context. What does the Bible teach about poverty? Is God truly concerned with the poor? If so, how? How did Jesus identify Himself with the poor and the oppressed? Our theological reflection starts from here and builds on this foundation. The context plays the role of sensitizing us to the mandates of Scripture. Sometimes we are slow in obeying or even understanding God's Word. One may wonder why it took so long for the Reformers to "re-discover" the biblical doctrine of justification by faith. Why so many social reforms did not occur earlier. Why so many practices contrary to the teachings of Scripture still exist today among Christians.

The task of interpreting the text must be taken seriously. While "liberation" becomes a common, even popular word today, widely accepted in some theological circles, we must seek its basic theological meaning in Scripture. The deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt, from the land of bondage, is often seen as an example of liberation, where the afflicted and the oppressed were rescued by God from the power of enslavement and

exploitation. Hence it warrants a liberation until self-identity, freedom and independence. This understanding of the exodus in the Old Testament is p. 108 conveniently adopted to advocate, support or justify certain reactionary movements in the present political and sociological scenes based on certain socio-economic, political ideology. But to start with, this biblical event is understood in a socio-political perspective; in other words, it is interpreted from the context. The student of the Bible today can reject the historicity and the meaning given of the exodus event, but he has no right to change its meaning or say what it means in the way he understands it, even to the extent of contradicting Scripture itself. The above approach fails to recognize the meaning and significance of the exodus in the light of the history of Israel's experience, or as a redemptive act of God in His plan of salvation. Yahweh called a people unto Himself and established a covenant with them. (Exodus 19:1-6) The exodus from Egypt is the Old Testament redemption. It is portrayed as a deliverance from an objective realm of sin and evil. At the same time, "the Hebrews were delivered not merely from outside foreign bondage, they were likewise rescued from inward spiritual degradation and sin."¹⁰ It is more than a liberation, independence, or revolutionary movement; it is a becoming of God's covenant people, confessing Yahweh as Lord, and obeying His commands. A theology of liberation should first seek to bring out that theology described and contained in the Bible, with its content exegetically controlled. This is the basis for theological reflection.

A third issue deals with the nature of the text in context. On the one hand, we indicate that every form of theological production is to some extent contextualized and culturally conditioned. We make mention of western theological traditions, and propose to do our own indigenous theology. On the other hand, we insist going back to the Bible as our source, and accept what it says as our norm. Now the question is put in this way: "Isn't the theological production in the Bible equally culture-bound?"¹¹

There are those who feel they are forced to choose one of the culture-bound theological expressions of the Christian faith, because after all we must find the message somewhere, otherwise we would be in a dead end. The Semitic stage is chosen for a number of reasons.¹²

- a. The Semitic stage (Abraham, Moses, Jesus, early church) represents p. 109 the primitive years of the founding of the Christian faith. In God's providence, Christianity first took root in a Semitic culture.
- b. It depicted the history of redemption in its integrity and in its fulness. It means this stage speaks of a salvation that is at work from creation onwards to the final saving deed of Christ, finally to the full completion at the parousia, and a total salvation for humanity and the creation, for both this world and the world to come.
- c. This stage is more concerned with history and human events and divine activities, but less interested in metaphysical descriptions.
- d. It is more akin to the oriental spirit and to the Third World aspirations.¹³

We appreciate these insights into the nature of the "theological production" in the Semitic culture. But we cannot accept the premise that the theology or theologies in the

¹⁰ Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948, p.126.

¹¹ Abesamis, p.97.

¹² *Idem*.

¹³ Note also Dr. Athyal's remark that "the context and backgrounds in which God's word came to man during the biblical times are very similar to the life situations in Asia today", p.69.

Bible belong to a group of theological expressions that is now available to us, notwithstanding that it is regarded as the best one. We must go beyond, for example, the notion of “providence”. The Bible in its own cultural context should not be taken on the same level as any theological production in a certain context in terms of meaning, value and significance.

Students of ancient civilization know that it is difficult, if not impossible, to speak of the Hebrew culture as being unique. The Hebrew culture shared common elements with the neighbouring nations to the point of borrowing or adapting some cultural forms. Circumcision, which was the sign of God’s covenant with the people of Israel, was commonly practised among many peoples in the ancient Near East. The covenant that Yahweh made with Israel on Sinai took a form that was patterned after the international suzerainty treaty. In the areas of poetry, art, architecture, administrative structure, there are indisputable examples of cultural affinity and borrowing in the life of the Israel nation and people. However, we must also take note of the fact that there was a conscious rejection on the part of Israel of pagan practices in Canaanite culture. So while we cannot speak of a unique, biblical culture in the Bible, the faith of the Israelites in obedience to Yahweh’s law and commandments, which He revealed to them, resulted in the rejection of abominable p. 110 elements in the culture of the land where the people lived, but also in the adoption of certain forms which even became the vehicle of divine revelation.

God’s redemptive revelation in acts and in words came in the course of history in the biblical period. This time-space dimension, expressed in concrete, real, historical life situations, gives unique meaning and significance to the Semitic culture as the medium of God’s revelation. The biblical text and the biblical context go together hand in hand. It was a chosen context in the plan and purpose of God. Incarnation necessitated God’s intervention into human history in a particular time-space cultural context. It took place in the “fullness of time”, preceded by promises and prophecies of which Christ is the fulfilment. The essence of the Christian gospel is concretized and embedded in the context of the Christ event. It was a demonstrating of the Absolute in the relative. We cannot extract supra-cultural elements from the gospel message and re-dress them in other cultural forms. For example, the centrality of the cross, the suffering and atonement form the irreducible core of the Christian faith. So even if the givenness in Scripture is regarded as something “contextualized”, there is no reason to place it on the same level as a theology in any other context because of its uniqueness in the redemptive history and of its normativeness in the purpose-plan of God.

This is not to say that we identify completely the form and the content in the Bible. It is not easy to separate the two, but we can detect cultural forms such as social customs or institutions which illustrate precept, principle or truth, in distinction from others which are divinely appointed vehicles of truth. It is the ongoing task of hermeneutics to deal with this complicated subject.

The relationship between the Bible and its own context also forms a basis for us today to engage in doing theology in our context with the givenness in Scripture, because the Bible itself provides a pattern for indigenous expression of thought. With the conviction and confidence that the Bible speaks to our time as to every time, where does the context come in? If we do not start with the context in our theological task, if the context does not determine the meaning of the text, what is the place of context in theology?

The context is not simply an objective realm of value, things, people or situation. Rather it is concretized and encountered in the life experience of a person. It is reflected in his feeling, thinking and perception. So the key lies in the theologian himself. In a way, it is not even accurate to say that the theologian stands between the text p. 111 and

context, for he himself is an in-context person, and should embody the questions and issues of his time.

The theologian does not do theology in abstraction. His theology is not built in a cognitive system dealing only with concepts of being and nature. Rather he should be a cultural man, a frontier man. What he sees, how he feels, and the way he thinks are all integrated in his theologization which is a whole-person involvement. As a result, the theologian inevitably finds a tension within himself which is latent yet very real. It calls for caution. The text speaks to him, and he must listen. But the context draws his vision, and he cannot be blind. Yet he knows he must begin with the Word of God through which the Holy Spirit speaks to him.

The theology (or theologies) in the Bible is not topically arranged or systematically organized. The familiar structure in systematic theology, with divisions on the doctrines of God, man, sin, Christ, salvation, church and last things, follows a certain logical sequence of presentation. Even biblical theology (theologies) makes use of dominant biblical themes or categories as organizing principles. The theologian's cultural background and contextual concerns function like a lighthouse as he is confronted by the text. Seeking to understand the biblical text in its own context, he also exercises his perceptive power to choose certain biblical themes or categories as the focus for his theological expression. For example, he may choose the theme of the covenant, not necessarily as a centre to explain all other materials in the Bible, but because of its emphasis on the relational aspect, the solidarity of the community, and in view of the present-day tendency toward individualism, alienation and the breakdown of relationship, this biblical theme can be chosen among others as a relevant one for a contextualized biblical theology. Preaching the gospel to the poor is not an idea that comes from our present social context, but is a dominant theme throughout the Bible. Yet it is only in a context of poverty that this theme stands out prominently, and the theologian must be sensitive and creative enough to bring out such a theology. Other central themes in the Bible may receive special attention in different contexts, and there is a wealth of theological raw material in the Bible that the Asian mind finds particularly attractive and relevant. A theology of wisdom would be very appealing to the Chinese, for example. Theologies of the Kingdom of God, the love of God, the new creation, etc., can be constructed based on these categories.

The context drives the theologian to the text constantly. The beam of the lighthouse shines through him to the text. What about issues [p. 112](#) that may not be self-evident in the Bible but have become vitally important today? The theologian must search the Scripture, find out what it does say about, for example, money, power, suffering, cultures, modernization, totalitarian government, and then give theological expressions on such matters. Theologies in these areas must also be biblical in the sense that they bring out biblical teachings in these areas, and deal with the contemporary situation from a biblical perspective.

CONCLUSION

This paper seeks to deal with some basic issues concerning the relationship between the Bible, theology and the context. It breaks no new ground, but it presents an evangelical position for the foundation of the evangelical theological task. It formulates no rules or guidelines, but it points out the objective, unchangeable nature and priority of the Bible, at the same time allowing freedom to the theologian in his theological reflection.