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Editorial

Expository Preaching is an art. It has to be relearned by every generation. The masters of the past inspire us but one cannot blindly copy any of them. The true art of preaching comes from the pressures of the divine and the human on the soul. As with Jeremiah caught in the humiliation of the stocks at the Upper Gate, we, cry out, 'His word is in my heart like a burning fire, shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot.'

Expository Preaching is at the heart of this struggle to understand God's burning Word in its own context and tell it forth to real people living in real situations with the same passions and conviction with which it was first given to its hearers. But without the direct revelation of the illuminating Spirit this is not possible. Only then is such preaching authentic, convincing and life changing. Without the fusion of the horizons of the truth of the Word, the encultured personality of the preacher and the felt need of the hearer immersed in his or her own worlds it is not expository preaching at all.

Good preaching is more than performing a one act play; rather it is the upward dialogical spiral of revelation and response, of question and answer, of speaking and listening, circling towards the goal of knowing God which is life eternal. It is a divine human encounter which is both personal and communal. Good expository preaching produces good churches which in turn produce good preachers.

Alas, our age has lost this art. Few theological schools and few churches are producing creative, faithful and relevant preachers for the pulpits and for the market-places of our societies. Making the invisible visible is our task. This series of articles and reviews is but a window into God's storehouse available to all who will pay the price that Jeremiah did.
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Biblical Precedence for Contextualisation

John R. Davies

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In this wide ranging article, the author traces the process of contextualisation in the Old Testament and then in the New Testament highlighting the cultural context of each. With numerous examples, he discusses the continuity and the discontinuity between salvation, history and the religious practices of the surrounding cultures. Following Barth, we may say the challenge is to relate the Bible on one hand to the newspaper on the other. He outlines a number of principles and calls for reactive experimentation in cross-cultural context with special reference to Thailand where the author has served as a missionary.
Editor

I OLD TESTAMENT AND CONTEXTUALISATION

Many Old Testament scholars try to find evolutionary patterns in the development of primitive religions into the more sophisticated Judaeo-Christian monotheism. Oesterly and Robinson's book, *Hebrew Religion: Its Origin and Development*, uses 121 out of 417 pages attempting to highlight the relationship of the Hebrew religion to animism, polytheism, and other aspects of primitive religion.

Norman H. Snaith runs counter to the findings of many of these scholars. He questions the supposition that all religions have the same origins and defends the 'distinctivehess' of especially the Hebrew religion. Snaith states:

> Our concern is with elements of OT religion which distinguish it from other religions. We recognize the importance of realizing that the Hebrews had many items of belief and practice in common with other peoples of antiquity, but our interest in these common features, is for our present purposes, definitely secondary. We are concerned with them only in so far as the study of them throws into greater and clearer relief the essential differences. Our aim here is p. 198 … to isolate and emphasize the distinctive elements of OT religion.[1]

An illustration of unacceptable elements in pagan religion excluded from (because they would have been unacceptable) the Hebrew religion would be for instance, the Egyptian and Babylonian preoccupation with death and the after-life. They had a sophisticated belief system involving ancestor worship, child sacrifice, preparations for the 'other world', with numerous rites, rituals and ceremonies enacted to bolster their beliefs.

Moses discriminately and deliberately avoids any mention of the after-life, as do most of the writers of the Old Testament.[2]

The Old Testament reflects an interaction between the surrounding nations. Hebrew culture and the revealed 'Word of God'. When, Yahweh chose Israel (Ex. 19:6–7) in a special way to be 'My people', he at the same time transformed many extant rituals and cultural forms and utilized them for perpetual implementation by his people. Of course these cultural forms were 'reinterpreted', but there is no doubt that they were already 'there' before Yahweh chose the people of Israel. Few scholars deny now, that many of the rituals Israel adopted had pagan origins. The annual feasts and even circumcision had pagan antecedents or counterparts. Even concepts which conflicted with divine self-disclosure, such as Canaanite concepts of El,[3] were p. 199 progressively transformed in meaning as the patriarchal story developed. Bruce Nicholls states that:

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[1] N.H. Snaith, *The Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament* (London: Epworth, 1962), p. 11.

[2] Oesterly and Robinson cannot conceal their biased presuppositions when wrestling with the issue of the afterlife in Babylonian and Assyrian religions vis-a-vis the Old Testament. They suggest that 'the religion of Babylon was little concerned with the hereafter' and then proceed to prove the opposite by writing ten pages on evidences for the firm belief in the afterlife! They then state concerning the numerous rites, rituals and ceremonies in these religions, that 'there is no indication of the things referred to in the Old Testament', but then without objective evidence proved to posit the reason, i.e., that 'The Old Testament has been edited, worked over by the priestly scribes of later times: and from their point of view much which originally stood in the text has been rightly eliminated' (see p. 79–97). Goldinghay also makes some valuable observations, stating that there are a variety of responses to death in the Old Testament, depending on the time and circumstances. All of the responses are to some extent historically and culturally conditioned and therefore any one of 'these should not be perceived as superior to others in the Canon, *Theological Diversity and the Authority of the Old Testament*. (p. 34–35). See also Gottwald's important observations, *The Tribes of Yahweh*, p. 694.

[3] Glasser points out that the basic word for deity *per se* in the ancient Semitic world of the Near East, was *El*. This he says, 'was also the proper name for the supreme god of the Canaanite pantheon, and frequently

> During the pilgrimage of the Israelites as nomads in the Promised Land, followed by their captivity in Egypt, and then during the wilderness journey, undesirable elements of the surrounding culture were progressively weakened and eliminated. Idolatry, pagan sexual immorality, corrupt economic and political practices, came under the judgement of God.[4]

He also states:

> In the formation of a covenanted people, God transformed some of these cultural forms such as circumcision to his purposes and rejected others such as idolatry.[5]

Here we see clearly the principle of continuity and discontinuity operating hand-in-hand. The stow of the patriarchs is, on the one hand, a progressive de-culturalisation of undesirable elements, such as idolatry, sexual immorality, corrupt economic and political practices and, on the other hand, it is an 'extension' of other elements from the previous cultural norms or religious forms. The basis of this selection process will be investigated later. It has been said that the Old Testament is largely the record of the ongoing struggle against the syncretistic tendency of the Baalization of Yahweh worship which continued from the Patriarchs until the Exile.

At times of faith and dependence on God, the people of God acknowledged his lordship over their total behaviour and the degree of false cultural conditioning by the neighbouring cultures became minimal and the rebuke of the prophets effective. This acknowledging of God's lordship over history by the covenant people, transformed cultural conditioning from a problem and a curse, to a channel of revelation and grace. The transformed function of circumcision is a case in point, but largely degeneration turned it into a stumbling block to true faith.[6]

H. Wheeler Robinson indicates the principle of both continuity and discontinuity in Israel when he states:

> It is this moral intensity, then, which more than anything else, lifted the religion of Israel above that of all its contemporaries, and gave it the power to assimilate foreign contributions without loss of its native strength and continuity. Israel's history is remarkable for the number of influences operating upon it from without. Had it not been for this moral intensity, the nature of worship of Canaan might easily have permanently degraded the religion of Israel to its own low level of sensuality. But the moral instinct of the nation was guided by its leaders to 'take the precious from the vile'; the necessary FORMS OF WORSHIP WERE BORROWED, whilst the immoral features of the Baal-cult, such as religious prostitution, were, at least ultimately rejected. The same selective moral sense worked on the legislation and mythology derived from Babylon, and gave them a NEW VALUE AND MEANING. No better proof of the inherent vitality and moral strength

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appears as such in fourteenth century BC Ugarit religious literature. The Israelites appropriated it and gave it new meaning, in much the same way that the Jewish translators of the Old Testament into Greek (the Septuagint) later appropriated the word Theos from the Greek pantheon and transformed it (not as having shape and form as the pagans conceived god, but as pure spirit to conform God's unique elevation of himself). The Israelite use of El in the plural form (Elohim), but with singular meaning, was not unique in Israel. Abraham identified Melchizedek's "Elohim Most High" with "The Lord" (Gert. 14:18–22). This implied a plurality of powers, of attributes and the personhood, and did not imply a deity that was intrinsically monistic' *The World Among Us*, p. 36. A further valuable contributor to the debate is Shorter, in his *Towards a Theology of Inculturation*, esp. p. 107–112.

[4] B. Nicholls, *Theology of Gospel and Culture* (Illinois: IVP, 1979), p. 46.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 46.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 47.

> of the faith of Israel could be given, than this p. 200 power it possessed to assimilate and transform the various elements due to its historical environment[7] (my capitals).

Robinson may give us some clues here as to the *modus operandi* for the correct application of the principle of 'continuity and discontinuity' within a given culture.

Some scholars, such as H. H. Rowley, interpret the covenant ritual of walking between divided sacrifices in Genesis 15 as a willingness to be dismembered (as the sacrifices) if either party broke the covenant. In the incident recorded in Genesis, however, Abraham stands on one side, and it is Yahweh alone who passes between the pieces. The reason appears to be that Yahweh again takes a familiar ritual belonging to the culture and re-interprets it in a way that must be acceptable to him, and yet still maintain significant resemblances to its former meaning. Dr. Arthur Glasser states in his 'Theology of Mission' lectures:

> This ritual was widely used in those days when two contractual parties sealed their covenant commitment to one another by passing between the divided carcasses of sacrificed beasts and thus invoked upon themselves a similar fate should they break their covenanted promise, each to the other. But the covenant God made touching Abraham and his seed was altogether within the Godhead. Abraham was off to the side. A spectator, completely passive, while God in Shekinah presence moved alone between the slaughtered animals. God and God alone was the covenant's initiator. He alone made the promises and he alone would be the guarantor of their being kept.[8]

The sign of the covenant, circumcision, no doubt had pagan precedents. The original rite was probably a transition rite of puberty but it was 'reloaded' with divine content by its use on infants. In an exhaustive study on the subject De Vaux states:

> It seems, then, that the Israelites were not distinguished from the Semitic population which they displaced, or with whom they mingled in Palestine, by the fact of circumcision. On the contrary they seemed to have adopted this custom when they settled in Canaan (cf. Ge. 17:9–14, 23–27; Jos. 45:2–9). But with them the practice took on a particular religious significance. Originally, and as a general rule, circumcision seems to have been an initiation-rite before marriage; consequently, it also initiated a man into the common life of the clan … The custom must originally have had the same purpose in Israel: the story of the Shechemites expressly connects it with marriage (Ge. 34); the obscure episode of Ex. 4:25–26 seems to refer to marriage also, for the pretence of circumcising Moses makes him a 'bridegroom of blood'. We may add that the Hebrew words for bridegroom, son-in-law and father-in-law are all derived from the same root, HATAN, which means in Arabic 'to circumcise'. Circumcision, therefore, is regarded as that which makes a man fit for normal sexual life: it is an initiation to marriage. This significance must have died out when the operation was performed soon p. 201 after birth. Above all, religion gave the rite a more lofty significance.[9]

Circumcision, therefore, substantiates the principle of 'continuity vis-a-vis discontinuity'. Parts of the ritual were 'deinvested' of their original meaning (discontinuity) while some parts were a continuation, having similarities to their original purpose and meaning, and re-investing other aspects with new meaning. There would have been no misunderstanding that they were still being used in exactly the same manner and for exactly the same purpose as their previous pagan usage.

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[7] H. Wheeler Robinson, *Religious Ideas of the Old Testament* (London: Duckworth, 1964), p. 45.

[8] Arthur Glasser, 'Theology of Mission', Unpublished class notes, Fuller Seminary.

[9] R. De Vaux, *Ancient Israel, Its Life and Institutions*, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1961). p. 47–48.

From its inception infant circumcision was the distinctive Israelite custom, not derived from Egyptian or other practice and contrasting sharply with the puberty rites of other nations: the latter point to social acknowledgement of adult status, the former to a status before God and a prevenience of divine grace.[10]

There is unlimited evidence to substantiate these findings from theologians across the board. Four outstanding books that offer extensive and thorough scholarship regarding this matter are: *Israel* by Martin Noth, *A Survey of Israel's History* by Leon Wood, and *The Tribes of Yahweh* by N. K. Gottwald.

Although such findings may disturb Evangelicals, there should be an acceptance of the fact that in this act, God is validating many important cultural forms which we in a monocultural environment may write off as 'pagan', or even 'demonic'. In conclusion, it is 'out of the blue'—ex-nihilo.

Rev. Alex Moyter, a highly acclaimed Old Testament scholar, admits that there is a difference between the concept of 'borrowing' (from surrounding nations), and 'revelation' where God gives direct instructions to the prophets, yet, even the 'borrowing' by Israel from its pagan surroundings was directly under the control of Yahweh and certainly was not indiscriminate. 'Israel was not born in a vacuum, there were already 8.500 years of history before Moses', so stated K. A. Kitchen in a lecture, 'The Old Testament and Pagan Cultures.[11]

If we accept that the God of the Old Testament is portrayed as exercising care and control over not only Israel, but also of Israel's environs, then we ought also to accept that God is the God of all cultures and that there is nothing inherently wrong in cultural borrowing or transfer. Different people groups p. 202 who live in close proximity will always have a certain amount of assimilation and borrowing. Yet amid this cultural mix Israel was not only chosen, but was prepared in a unique way to fulfil God's purposes. It was through Israel that 'all the families of the earth were to be blessed'. We see, therefore, a unique shaping, both of what was essentially Israel's own culture, and also of those aspects borrowed from other cultures.

It is worthy of note that even Israel's main festivals probably had pagan origins. Rowley intimates that aspects of the Passover feast were known among the Arabian tribes and that it was originally a nomadic springtime festival to ward off evil from flock and home.[12] The IVP Bible Commentary suggests that 'Moses quite possibly adapted more ancient ceremonials, Unleavened Bread being an agricultural festival'.[13] And yet in respect of the Passover, we are told clearly that, 'The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron … saying this month shall be the beginning of months for you; it is to be the first month of the year to you …' (Ex. 12:1). In the instructions that follow there are changes in time, function and meaning, but the pagan roots remain.

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[10] *Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (London: IVP, 1980), p. 1137.

[11] It is also interesting to note the striking parallels in forms between the Sinai covenant (which is the heart of Israel's religion) and the international covenants of the second millennium. Kitchen illustrates this in his book *Ancient Orient and Old Testament*, p. 92. Further study concerning the sacrificial system of Israel and its parallels among surrounding cultures would be most interesting. This would be beyond the parameters of the present book. Any good theological library would provide adequate resources for such study. See extensive bibliography in Goldinghay's *Theological Diversity and the Authority of the Old Testament*.

[12] Rowley, *Worship in ancient Israel*, p. 37. W. F. Albright also mentions nomadic Arabs having portable 'Tabernacles' parallels to both the OT Tabernacle and the Ark of the covenant. See *From the Stone Age to Christianity*, p. 266.

[13] *Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, p. 1137.

It is also highly probable that the other feasts of Israel were 'reloaded' with new meanings, labelled 'historicised' by Edmond:

> It is in the significance of the great feasts that the process of historicisation is most apparent; the Passover, originally the feast of offering of the first-born of the flock, became at a very early date by reference to the Exodus, the commemoration of that event. The New Year Feast, the annual feast *par excellence*, became through the theme of the kingship of Yahweh revealing himself in history, much more the time of renewal of the nation's destiny than the renewal of nature.[14]

Edmond again states:

> Although much indebted to Canaan, whose ritual and cultic practices it adopted to a large extent, Israel succeeded, through the substitution of history for myth, in breathing a *new spirit into identical forms. Israel's originality in the cultic field is shown by the priority of history over myth and of time over space*[15] (italics mine).

Another remarkable observation concerns the architecture and design of both the tabernacle and the temple. It is generally assumed that these places of worship were unique, since the pattern was given directly to Moses and David by God (see Exodus 25:8; 1 Chr. 28:11, 19ff). Yet K. A. Kitchen speaks of 'portable pavilions, employing practically the same constructional techniques as the tabernacle to have been in actual use in Egypt long p. 203 before the time of Moses'.[16] This did not mean that the whole structure was exactly the same. The layout, for instance, of the 'holy of holies', was different.

Yahweh's temple had no seating arrangements, but pagan temples did. The layout of some temples, including the entrance to the holy of holies, compares with the Jerusalem temple. That the actual activities within these structures were notably different, is of course self-evident.

Such observations must have far-reaching implications. Whatever else one may deduce, one must accept the fact that Yahweh is in the business of validating all cultures by using what is there and transforming it for his usage. If Yahweh did it, why are his servants (missionaries) so reluctant to follow suit?

It is widely held, even by evangelical scholars, that much of the Biblical Wisdom literature was 'common knowledge' to all cultures. Since Israel lived in such close proximity to their neighbours, it was inevitable that Canaanite stylistic devices with regard to poetic forms would influence Hebrew literature. For instance, Proverbs 31:1–9 is written by a non-Israelite woman. King Lemuel's mother was the Queen Mother of the Arab Kingdom of Masseh (Gen. 25:14). This advice was passed on to her son and considered important enough to include in the Hebrew canon. Wisdom literature as seen in Proverbs has a distinctly international character. Bauckmann observes:

> The sages of Israel belonged to a world of international learning, Because their wisdom was not like the law and the prophets, based on the special salvation history of God's covenant people, but that which was based on common human experience, they readily borrowed from foreign wisdom literature.[17]

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[14] J. Edmonds, *Theology of the Old Testament* (London: Hodder, 1958), p. 199–200.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 200.

[16] *Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, p. 1151. Kitchen also writes extensively on the Architectural origins of Solomon's Temple in his book *The Bible in its World*, p. 54.

[17] R. Bauckham, *Using the Bible to Do Politics* (London: SPCK, 1986).

This example suggests four clear points:

1. The Bible itself incorporates common wisdom of mankind irrespective of the cultural context.
2. The material is taken into the Bible when and if it correlates with other biblical material:

> The content of the advice correlates very closely with the concerns of their law and the prophets concern for the rights of the weakest members of society, who cannot protect themselves (Prov. 31:8–9), is required of Israel's political and judicial authorities, both by the law (Exodus 23:6) and by the Prophets (Jeremiah 22:2–3). Lemuel's mother expresses a common ideal of kingship in the ancient Near East which was also Israel's ideal (Psalm 72:12–14) and became the Messianic ideal (Isaiah 11:4).[18]

3. The material is contextualised into salvation history. The kind of concern that Lemuel was to show for this people gains new motivation and there is new p. 204 insight given for their importance, because this is the way Israel's Covenant King behaves towards his people. King Lemuel's concern for the needy, reflects God's concern for the poor, the needy, and the rights of those who are destitute. The Messianic King will come to show solidarity with the poor.
4. The incorporation of this material is important not only for what it reveals concerning God himserf, but also concerning his activity within history. History is not an unending cycle, but will push ahead until God's ultimate goals are achieved. When the king behaves in this way, he is not only being wise,[19] but he becomes a model of God's activity which will continue to its climactic *eschaton*.

Israel understood the risk of syncretism but continued to adopt, adapt, transform and re-invest anything from the surrounding cultures, and make it uniquely its own. They knew they could not live in sterile, vacuum-sealed isolation and unashamedly borrowed whatever might further their own purposes. Ringgren observes:

> We may ask what elements are part of a common heritage, what elements are really imported in the course of Israelite history, and what elements of tradition are a protest against foreign ideas … it is important that foreign influence is given its right place: it should neither be flatly denied, nor be exaggerated. Above all, it should be stressed that foreign ideas were never taken over unchanged but were adapted to suit their new Israelite context. The important task of research in this area, therefore, is to assess the Israelite use of the foreign material and the reinterpretation it underwent in the framework of Yahwistic religion.[20]

If Israel could borrow from OTHER SURROUNDING CULTURES which were familiar to them, why is it wrong for Thai Christians to borrow from THEIR OWN CULTURE? How would the gospel have impacted Thai society from the start had the early missionaries adopted the principles that God seems to have used in the Old Testament? What would have happened to Christian mission in Africa? Why are there now more than six thousand New Emerging Religious Movements (NERMS) in Africa today? Surely the heart cry of the African is to express his worship to God, not in unfamiliar foreign forms and meanings,

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[18] *Ibid.*

[19] I am indebted to Rev. Tim Marks (Moorlands College) for these insights from an unpublished article, 'Contextualising Taoism Today'.

[20] H. Ringrren, 'The impact of the Ancient Near East on Israelite Tradition', D. Knight (ed.). *Tradition and Theology in the Old Testament*, p. 36.

but in local forms that are vital to him because they belong to his own culture; not an imported package which shouts 'foreignhess', and includes foreign buildings and architecture with medieval European-style stainedglass windows, foreign music, foreign liturgy, foreign dress, foreign presentation, and worse than anything else, foreign theology! Deep down in the heart of the Thai Christian there undoubtedly must also be this same yearning to be free to p. 205 worship God in his own cultural forms.

II CONTEXTUALISATION IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Undoubtedly contextualisation took place in New Testament times. The apostles were continually involved in contextualising the Christian message. The message came to them in a Semitic language and culture, and they communicated it to those who spoke and thought in Greek patterns. They took indigenous words and concepts, sometimes even transforming their meaning, and used them to communicate in culturally acceptable ways. The Incarnation is a classic case in point. There God 'contextualised' himself in Jesus Christ. He became Emmanuel, God with us—in concepts and language that we understand. The Incarnation had nothing essentially 'foreign' about it. Of course, he was different and yet he was one of us.

The New Testament is not a definitive, systematic theological textbook, although systematic theology may be derived from it. The New Testament says much concerning sociology and anthropology but it was not written as a textbook in these disciplines. What can be stated is that all the events recorded in the New Testament are earthed in real-life situations. Teaching emerges from 'context'. Miracles did not just happen for the sake of it. They were responses to evident needs in real situations. Water was not turned into wine just to show how clever Jesus could be, but to meet a need—'a sign' pointing to the messianic nature of Jesus ministry. Even the few credal statements that may be found in the New Testament (Philp. 2:1; 1 Tim. 2:16) were not intended as 'blanket statements', nor were they comprehensive summaries of the life and ministry of Christ. They were apologetic responses to the need of the hour in that historic context. The Gospels and the Epistles, were written not just as doctrinal statements, but as responses to audiences who had specific needs or questions. The synoptic Gospels were written to different audiences with different literary techniques. Matthew's Gospel was written to a Jewish audience and thus forgoes the traditional chronological treatment in favour of a more Jewish method. The Gospel is broken up into sections of threes and fives and sevens and forms blocks of narrative followed by teaching. Mark most probably wrote for the Romans. His readers were totally unfamiliar with Jerusalem, the Mount of Olives has to be located (13:3); Jewish customs are explained (7:2ff; 15:42). Certain words needed to be interpreted (from their Aramaic original form) into Greek. Latin words occur which are not in the other records (eg. 6:27; 7:4; 12:42 etc.); his very 'racy' journalistic style, which is simple and direct, all appeal to the Roman mind-set.

Luke's cosmopolitan, universal appeal, with its emphasis on women, and the poor, and John's 'spiritual' approach are not accidental, they reflect a desire to be culturally relevant. One may legitimately state that each gospel reflects 'different Christologies'. Not that these Christologies contradicted each p. 206 other, Like a diamond they merely reflect differing colours as observed from varying angles. John does not trace a genealogy from Abraham like Matthew, or from Adam, like Luke but 'out of the blue' introduces a 'precosmic Logos'. John made this emphasis with his audiences in mind and 'reflected' on

what would be most significant about the Christ for them, in terms of their assumptions and world-view.[21]

Although Paul's letter to the Corinthians teaches aspects of universal truth (for instance the resurrection), he nevertheless applies his theology to given contexts.[22] His teaching on holiness[23] is due to the danger of sexual immorality in Corinth. The teaching in Galatians arose from a number of issues concerning the problem with Judaisers. This was totally different from the problem at Colossae which was Gnosticism.[24]

Erickson states concerning the nature of the New Testament:

> The dynamic of the New Testament literature consists of its life orientation. Rather than being an abstraction of principles, ideas or dogmatics, it is a treasury of the experiences of the early church. It includes material from the preaching of the apostles, directions from travelling evangelists, and samples of the homilies of the early church ministers. In addition to this there are special types of literature which reflect the ideological and literary customs of the day.[25]

III SOME EXAMPLES OF CONTEXTUALISATION WITHIN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The prime example of contextualisation in the Christian church centres around the council of Jerusalem. It has been said that, had a wrong decision been made at this council, Christianity would have remained an insignificant, obscure Jewish sect. In fact, if the church had failed to contextualise in this instance, there would never have been a church. The leaders confirmed that they had been led by the Holy Spirit, thus affirming the principle that God P. 207 himself is in the business of contextualising the Christian faith. The consensus of the church at Jerusalem is simply recorded; 'it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us' (15:28).[26] Two vital issues were at stake. The first was HOW could the

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[21] For a discussion concerning the use of 'redaction criticism', and the use of *midrash* as genre and hermeneutical tool, see Craig Biotaberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Leicester: IVOP, 1987).

[22] Hollenweger earths the message of Corinth into its social and cultural matrix by developing what he calls 'narrative exegesis'. He states, 'It is well known that the writings of Paul are not merely theological documents, if in fact such a thing exists at all. His theological ideas are inseparable from the so-called non-theological traditions and concepts of his culture. That in fact is the case in all theological struggles from Marcion to the Reformation and Northern Ireland. They always have been at one and the same time theological, political and cultural struggles. See *Old Testament Conflict in Corinth* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), p. 66.

[23] For a discussion concerning the nature of 'holiness' (*hagitotes, haglasmos* and *hagiosyne*) and its usage by Paul in the Corinthian epistle, see Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (London: SPCK, 1977) p. 263. The cultic significance has little relation to Paul's usage, where the concept carries with it more the sense of being morally clean, pure, innocent chaste, etc.

[24] There is now debate whether or not Paul really was writing to refute Gnosticism, but this does not alter the fact, that he *was* writing into a context that was essentially different from the Galatians context. See H. Berkhof, *De Katholiciteit der Kerk*, 1962, pp. 61ff, I. J. Du Plesis, *Christus as Hoof*, pp. 116ff, from Berkhof *op. cit.*, 391.

[25] Erickson, *Theology and Mission*, p. 71.

[26] Hesselgrave observes 'the four categories mentioned in Acts 15:20 correspond to regulations in the Old Testament law against the pollution of idols (Lev. 19:4 cf. 1 Co. 10:20–21), fornication (Lev. 18:6–18), eating that which has been strangled, and eating blood (Lev. 17:10–14). These are obviously issues of dietary or ritual cleanness and not primarily ethical matters. That omission seems to have been considered by some early interpreters. Accordingly variant readings (most in the 'D' or 'Western Group' of texts) of the

Gentiles receive salvation, and the second, WHAT were the conditions of fellowship between Jewish believers in Messiah?

In regard to the 'HOW', it seems that the Jewish faction was attempting to impose two Jewish requirements on the Gentiles; the rite of circumcision, and keeping the Law of Moses (v.5).

In regard to 'WHAT'—what were the conditions of fellowship? Acceptance of Christ was not sufficient in the mind of many Jews. They must also meet certain regulations before the right hand of fellowship could be offered. (There seems to be a familiar ring about this!) There was also the conviction that since all truth had 'once and for all' been delivered to the Jew' IT MUST BE, AS FAR AS THEY COULD UNDERSTAND, SUPRACULTURAL AND THEREFORE BINDING ON THE GENTILES. So how could the Gentiles possibly be accepted, except by total conformity to their prerequisite? There are, of course, all sorts of modern counterparts to this position, the most scandalous being the concept of apartheid, taken supposedly from the book of Genesis. F. F. Bruce states:

> Centuries of devotion to the laws governing food and purity bred (in many Jewish Christians) an instinctive revulsion from eating with Gentiles which could not be immediately overcome. Gentiles quite happily ate certain kinds of food which Jews had bene taught to abominate, and the laxity of Gentile morals, especially where relations between the sexes were concerned, made the idea of reciprocal hospitality between them and the Jewish Christians distasteful.[27]

The conclusions reached by the council were far-reaching. *First*, the Gentiles were not compelled to observe circumcision or the Law of Moses; *second*, the Jewish Christians were not compelled to STOP circumcision, nor to stop observing the law; *third*, the acceptance and fellowship with Gentiles was ratified. In the practical sense, the 'middle wall of partition' had now been taken down in a practical sense and the way was open for true cross-cultural fellowship.

In I Corinthians 8:1–10:22, Paul is again dealing with the problem of food offered to idols, which had already been addressed in the letter from the Jerusalem Council. Since, p. 208 however, the audience was different, Paul in his wisdom does not even mention the letter from Jerusalem, fearing perhaps that the Corinthians may rebel against some new law, imposed at a distance by a Jewish church upon Gentiles. His argument is far more relevant than some remote letter from a distant council, although the conclusion is the same. Here Paul reasons with the Corinthians in a way that would be acceptable to them. *First*, that an idol has no real existence in the world (8:4). He qualifies this later by saying that what a person really worships when he worships an idol, are demons, and that food has no intrinsic religious value (8:8). *Second*, that the table of the Lord is authentically what the idol banquet purports to be (10:16) and that worshipping anything but God himself is in effect again worshipping demons (10:19). The conclusion is that you 'cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of the demons at the same time' (10:21). Here is a clear sense of 'discontinuity' or, what Luzbetak calls 'cultural surgery'.

Paul does differentiate in these chapters between 'form' and 'meaning'. If the meaning is intrinsically contrary to Christian perception of truth, no Christian may participate. If, however, a practice is wrong only in the view of some people, then the Christians must abstain only in their presence, in order not to be a stumbling block. One person's 'liberty' must not be another person's stumbling (8:7–13). Is there some inconsistency in Paul's

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admonition in 15:20 include the prohibitions against idolatry, fornication and murder, and a negative formulation of the Golden Rule (see Didache 1; 2). D. Hesselgrave and E. Roman, *Contextualisation, Meaning, Models and Methods* (Leicester: Apollos, 1989), p. 11.

[27] Erickson, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

arguments here? The answer could be in the affirmative. This is because Paul saw no incongruity or inconsistency between writing to the Galatians about circumcision saying 'those who want to make a good impression outwardly are trying to compel you to be circumcised … circumcision is nothing' (Gal. 6:11–14) and then taking Timothy and having him circumcised (Acts 16:3)! He saw no inconsistency between enjoining others not to keep the Law, and then undertaking a vow—'to show that you yourself keep the law' (Acts 21:21–24). He even saw no inconsistency theologically (it seemed) between the once-for-all, sufficient sacrifice if Christ upon the cross and his paying expenses for sacrifices for him and others in the Temple!

> Take these men, join in their purification rites and pay their expenses so that they can have their heads shaved … the next day Paul took the men and purified himself along with them. Then he went to the temple to give notice of the date when the days of purification would end and the sacrifice would be made for each of them (Acts 21:23–26).

The overriding principle was that of 'contextuality'. Erickson states:

> The pinnacle of Paul's enculturation is expressed in I Corinthians 9:19–21. He accepts—for the sale of evangelisation—the life-style (enslaved), ideological mold (Judaistic or lawless), and personal deficiencies (weak conscience) of the people to whom he ministers.[28]

Erickson also points out a further illustration of contextualisation by Paul from the various epistles he wrote. The frequent occurrence of *haustafel* (a Roman-type household structure which included master and p. 209 slaves) shows that Paul addresses an immediate situation in a local church, quite unlike the Jewish context. In fact Paul's whole teaching on slavery is 'situational'. To the Corinthians he indicates that they should not bother about being slaves (7:21). He encourages Philemon to treat a slave as a brother in the Lord (v. 16). On the other hand he warns slaves in his letter to the Colossians to serve their masters 'as to the Lord' (3:23–25).

It has been noted that even baptism as a form, previously used in Judaism, pagan religions, and by John the Baptist, is taken by Jesus and given another meaning. He did not create some new type of ritual, but transformed what was there into something distinctively Christian. There were resemblances to other forms, but Christian baptism maintains a unique meaning.

The 'principle of continuity' is further illustrated by the use of the word 'LOGOS' in John's Gospel and Epistles. John does not take a 'foreign' word to express the nature of Christ or his pre-existence. He takes a word, long used in Greek philosophy, to express his meaning. Not all agree on this controversial word and some maintain it was Hebrew in origin. Even if that were the case, John 'reloads' the word and builds into it a unique concept of who Christ is. The context of the usage of the word is the loading apparatus for its new meaning. It must be added that John's use of the term is not to engage in deliberate syncretism, as some may suppose or propose. Dr. Christopher Wright contributes to the debate in an article in *Themelios*:

> John (and even more obviously Paul, in Colossians) is resisting the syncretistic tendency by deliberate assimilation of current vocabulary into a thoroughly Christian (OT based and Jesus-centred) theology. In this he differed greatly from what the Apologists were trying to do. If A=the revealed truth of the gospel and B=the 'target' culture (in this case Greek popular philosophy and religion), it is one thing to say, with John, 'I will use vocabulary from B because it can be used to make A intelligible to people in culture B, but

[28] *Ibid.*, p. 73.

> A remains the unique distinctive and governing truth which will give the vocabulary fresh shades of meaning'. It is quite another to say 'I will use vocabulary B because B (or the best in it) is in reality the same as A, such that people unconsciously believe A any way'. Secondly, talk of the logos as the 'non-incarnate Christ' easily becomes abstract and divorced from the unique particularity of the incarnation. The historical Jesus becomes 'The Christ principle'; the once-for-all atoning death of Jesus becomes 'the pattern of the cross' etc. Such worthy-sounding concepts fit easily into the syncrestic soup and nicely avoid the 'sandal of particularity'. However, it can easily be seen that though this process may use the Johannine logos as a tag, it is fundamentally incompatible with John's intention in his Prologue, which is to lead relentlessly up to the climax: 'The Logos became flesh'. Whatever you may do with the concept of logos, you cannot syncretise or abstractify the flesh of the man Jesus.[29]

Perhaps the most significant evidence for the principle of contextualisation comes from the Acts of the p. 210 Apostles. A comparison between Peter's message on Pentecost (to Jews: Acts 2:134–26) and in the house of Cornelius (to Romans: 10:34–43) reveals a completely different emphasis. The same thing happens in Paul's messages to monotheistic Jews and Gentile God-fearers in the synagogue of Antioch (13:16–41), and polytheistic devotees on Mars' hill. In Paul's two messages to polytheistic audiences he clearly contextualised his message according to his receptors' categories, not his own. For instance, why does Paul mention the fact that it is God who gives rain from heaven and crops in season in chapter 14 and not in 177 And why does Paul exhort them 'to turn from these worthless things to the living God' in chapter 14 but in chapter 17 says 'The God whom you ignorantly worship, Him I declare to you'? If we hope to be sensitive to our audience's needs we must be sensitive to these questions.

Joslin examines the content and structure of three of Paul's sermons recorded in Acts noting various differences.[30]

Don Richardson also helpfully illustrates the background to Paul's preaching on Mars' hill. Apparenfiy about 600 BC there had been a devastating plague in the city of Athens. The people of Athens offered sacrifices to their 30,000 gods asking them to intervene and halt the plague but the plague raged on. Epimenedes was summoned to help resolve the problem. Since the gods were silent he felt there must be another God who would be great enough to help. He called for a flock of sheep to be let loose on a sacred spot on Mars' hill. He commanded the men to follow the sheep, and call upon this 'unknown god' to cause the sheep to lie down on the spot where the 'god' wanted a lamb to be sacrificed. On that spot the Athenians built an altar and inscribed on it 'To an unknown god'. Subsequently the plague lifted and the city was delivered. Six centuries later, Paul takes the story of this 'pagan' altar, and states 'Him who you worship I declare unto you'. Richardson adds:

> Others remarked 'He seems to be advocating foreign gods'. In other words, Paul, whoever you are, we already have 30,000 gods here in Athens, and you are bringing us the message of still another god? We need another god like we need a hole in our heads! We've got so many gods here in Athens we can't keep track of them all! Who would have the audacity to proclaim another god in that context? How does he respond to the charge that he is advocating some superfluous or nuisance god in the city already afflicted with 30,000 or more of them? … Paul was in effect saying: 'Foreign God? No! The God I proclaim is that God who did not consider himself represented by any of the idols in the city so many hundreds of years ago, but who delivered your city from the plague when you simply acknowledged your ignorance of him. But why be ignorant of him any longer, if you can

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[29] Chris Wright, 'The Christian and Other Religions, The Evidence', *Themelios* 9:2 (Jan. 94).

[30] Roy Joslin, *Urban Harvest* (Welwyn Evangelical Press, 1982), pp. 160–161.

know him'. In this way Paul used that familiar Athenian altar as an eye-opener to get to first base. Then he went on to try to turn his listeners from the darkness of idolatry to the light of God's truth. And this God has left himself a p. 211 witness in hundreds of other cultures around the world.[31]

Wright correctly points out that Paul is not congratulating the Athenians on their polytheism; rather he is saying, 'despite your religiosity, you don't know the true God at all, though you could and should do, for the knowledge of him is available before your eyes, but you have obscured it with your "very religious" temples and idols':

> Taken thus, it fits perfectly with what Paul writes concerning the availability but suppression of the knowledge of God in Romans 1. God is not, in fact an 'unknown God' it is the Athenians who are ignorant of Him.[32]

There remains a fear for those of us committed to contextualisation that in applying these principles we may fall short of communicating distinctive Good News and instead leave a hotchpotch of diluted Christianity with a large dose of paganism as the principal ingredient. We should take courage on three accounts. *First*, it has been clearly proven that God initiated and inspired this principle of contextualisation in Scripture. *Second*, the result was not a mixed up 'soup' of religion, but a unique revelation of Person and purposes applied to the historical context. *Third*, that both the Word of God and the Spirit of God have been given to guide and ensure what the appropriate parameters of contextualisation will be. Contextualisation is as great a risk for the servant of God as exercising faith and trust in him.

In conclusion, there will always be the danger of syncretism; in fact all expressions of Christianity are in some ways culture-bound and therefore by definition syncretistic to some degree. The key is to discern between 'legitimate, critically-determined syncretism', and 'uncritical syncretism'. The former will be authentic, resulting in an unambiguous application of the Good News. The latter will be confusing, destructive both to Scripture and culture, leaving no scriptural Good News. With the assurances already indicated, our task must be to contextualise for the sake of Christ and the gospel.

CONCLUSION

Before a new product is launched, feasibility studies and market research must be done. The same must be done with some of the proposals in this article. Experimentation and investigation may reveal some of what has been proposed as impractical or ineffective. On the other hand, the writer feels that the church has nothing to lose by testing some of the radical innovations suggested. Only the results can determine whether they will be effective or not.

This article is not a final answer but merely an introduction to the task of contextualisation. The general principles suggested must be beaten out on the anvil of creative experimentation by the hands of those more qualified for the task—Thai Christian leaders. This subject needs much more research both in p. 212 detail and depth. One important area that needs further investigation is the relationship of biblical studies to contextualisation. The following are some areas that require further research.

The Development of 'Local Theologies'

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[31] D. Richardson, 'Finding the Eye Opener', in *Perspectives of the World Christian Movement*, p. 424.

[32] Wright, *op. clt.*, p. 8.

At one end there is 'Traditional Theology' which Tissa Balasuriya defines as 'culture-bound, church-cantered, male-and-age dominated, pro-capitalist, anti-communist, over-theoretical and unrelated to the social contexts in which it is developed'.[33] At the other end there is 'Planetary Theology', where the planet Earth in its entirety is the context. In the middle are 'Local Theologies'. The problem arises, how 'local' should they become? To develop a contextualised theology for the church in Thailand, further research should be done in Laotian, Cambodian, Burmese and Vietnamese contexts. Such experimentation will help in the development of an authentic Thai theology, since each of these countries has similar folk Buddhist belief systems. Schreiter's *Constructing Local Theologies* is definitive, and gives invaluable guidelines in this whole area.

An in-depth analysis of Thai rites, rituals and ceremonies

A problem arises in that Thai national leaders are generally not prepared to engage upon this delicate operation themselves, but neither the writer nor any other expatriate is qualified either. The alarm warning that SOMETHING MUST BE DONE has been sounded. The type of Christianity introduced by the early missionaries created a 'black hole' leading to social alienation and loss of cultural identity for those who became Christians. It is easy to see that unless something is done soon, Thailand will be added to the list of countries with New Emerging Religious Movements, because the climate is now ripe for this phenomenon to occur. It is therefore imperative that Thai leaders address the issue at a national level immediately. Certain rites and ceremonies should be adapted and new methods of communication developed. There is nothing to be lost, and Thailand to be gained!

Cognitive processes of communication

Systematic theology is a distinctively western approach to theology and is derived in its cognitive process and forms from the ancient Greek philosophers and is a distinctively western approach to theology.[34] p. 213 Alternative methods of communication have been discussed here, but the 'content' of local theologies needs to be packaged in local 'forms'. One must address the question, does Thailand have a nonlinear 'oral' culture? If it does, then our present methods of communication need major changes. Hollenweger points out:

> Oral theology operates through the medium of story, not statement. It does not use definitions, but descriptions. It operates with songs, not systematic statements. It is not based on an Aristotelian framework of logic but on the cohesion of the tradition in a community.[35]

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[33] Tissa Balasuriya, *Planetary Theology*, (London: SCM, 1984), pp. 3–10.

[34] Hesselgrave, Kraft, Hollenweger, and others have raised serious doubts about the superiority of the western way of thinking, especially from the biblical point of view. See Hesselgrave, *op. cit.*, p. 228. Although some of the New Testament is couched in more western thought patterns, dearly the Old Testament and the Synoptic Gospels bear the stamp of non-western ways of thinking. 'It seems quite clear that the Hebrews can be classified as concrete relational thinkers. The Hebrews never developed a systematic theology, and it was not until the time of Moses Miaminides in the 12th century AD that any doctrinal statement was drawn up, and it never gained universal acceptance'. See H. D. Leuner, 'Judaism in the Worlds Religions'. J. N. D. Anderson (ed.), *Christianity and World Religions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), p.59

[35] Hollenweger, *The Future of Mission and the Mission of the Future*, Selly Oak Occasional Paper No. 2 Birmingham: (Selly Oaks College, 1989), p. 9.

Suffice it to say the communication process in Thailand needs to be predominantly oral. This would mean that local theologies should be developed and communicated within Thai oral traditions. Thai song styles, such as the '*joi*' and the '*so*', together with Thai 'pop' and folk music, should be used as effective media of a communication. It would be profitable to research what Stroup terms 'Narrative Theology'.[36] This of course does not necessarily mean we adopt an 'either or' philosophy, for, 'Christian theology' has always been oral AND literary. The Gospels belong to the oral genre. The Epistles to the literary genre. Academic theology so far has not developed sophisticated oral theologies.[37]

Culturally appropriate expression of Christian Spirituality

There is always the danger of analyzing belief systems and worldviews in a detached academic fashion, emphasizing what people believe while overlooking how they behave. When one observes both the dedication and the devotion of a sincere Buddhist, one must ask, what has the Christian to offer? Sad to say, many Christians live below the standard set by many Buddhists. Wan says,

> If we live simply as those who have given themselves to the service of God, I believe people will receive us gladly because Thai people already have faith in, and admiration for, this kind of life, that is, the life of sacrifice. All those in Buddhism whom they admire, whether abbots or priests or Buddha himself, are people of sacrificial lives. If Christians present themselves like Jesus, it will certainly reinforce what they say.[38]

What is needed is a spirituality which has a 'mystical' dimension as well as the practical. Such a 'prophetic-type-spirituality' is appealing since it addresses BOTH man's inward condition AND his outward p. 214 environment. This would reflect the balance of inward and outward spirituality portrayed in the nature and role of the 'Servant' in the Old Testament, and perfected in Christ's own life and ministry. The practical application of a culturally-attractive Christian spirituality still needs to be seriously addressed. The idea of 'Christian Community' also needs consideration. Since the temple (*wat*) is a place of Buddhist community, ought there to be some Christian 'functional equivalents' for these life-styles and structures?

The issue of 'Power Encounter'

'Power Encounter' is an effective means of communicaiton of the 'Good News' to Thai people. This should not reflect the importance of the subject. Although controversial, the subject of *stoicheia*, and 'principalities and powers' must be addressed. The responsibility of developing suitable 'local theology' in this area falls mainly to Thai Christian leaders since the tendency of the western observer is to oversimplify and theorize.

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[36] George W. Stroup, *The Promise of Narrative Theology* (London: SCM, 1984).

[37] Hollenweger, *The Future of Mission*, p. 10.

[38] Wan Phetsongkhram, *Talks in the Shade of the Bo Tree* (Bangkok: Thai Gospel Press, 1975), p. 141.