

Culture and the Bible

The Question of Contextualisation

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John M. Hitchen

Introduction

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

What, Then, is Contextualisation?

In essence, contextualisation is all that is involved in faithfully applying the word of God, in a modern setting. In contextualisation, we go, with all our culturally-acquired assumptions, experience, and agenda, to the scriptures, with their different cultural backgrounds, presuppositions, and priorities. We hear for ourselves the same living message God intended for the first readers, so that we can then go to people, in yet another cultural setting, with yet another list of action priorities, and explain the biblical message, so that they receive it with the same impact as it held for the first readers.

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

¹ For standard evangelical discussions of the topic, see Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description*, Exeter UK: Paternoster Press, 1980; Donald A. Carson, ed., *Biblical Interpretation and the Church: the Problem of Contextualisation*, Exeter UK: Paternoster Press, 1984; David J. Hesselgrave, and Edward Rommen, *Contextualisation: Meanings, Methods, and Models*, Leicester UK: Apollos, 1989. For concise introductions, see C. Rene Padilla, "The Interpreted Word: Reflections on Contextual Hermeneutics", in *Themelios* 7-1 (September 1981), pp. 18-23; Martin Goldsmith, "Contextualisation of Theology", in *Themelios* 9-1 (September 1983), pp. 18-23; David J. Hesselgrave, "Contextualisation of Theology", in W. A. Elwood, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Grand Rapids MI: Baker Book House, 1984.

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

Culture, as we are using it, is:

An integrated system of beliefs . . . of values . . . of customs . . . and of institutions, which express these beliefs, values, and customs . . . which binds a society together, and gives it a sense of identity, dignity, security, and continuity.²

To appreciate the biblical scope of this subject, we also need to redefine two words, with modern meanings, different from their biblical meaning. “Gentiles”, in common parlance, often means “non-Christian” or “pagan”. We must reclaim its basic biblical meaning of “peoples of other (i.e., non-Jewish) cultures”. To read the New Testament with “peoples of other cultures” in place of “Gentiles” gives new urgency to the contextualisation task. The word “nations”, in the New Testament, is usually the same word as for “Gentiles”, in Greek, *ἔθνη* (*ethnē*). Again, we need to recapture the “peoples” meaning of “nations”, rather than assume the word has the modern political overtones.

I. Why Bother About Contextualisation?

Our introductory answer to this question is simple. The nature of God’s way of salvation demands it.

That the gospel is available equally for women and men of all cultures was startling news for first-century believers. We have lost this sense of surprise. Paul declares this is the unexpected “mystery” the Holy Spirit had forced upon the reluctant minds of the apostles (Eph 3:1-12). God had, of course, planned it all along. But, despite the many Old Testament allusions, hints, and outright statements, about it, this was a secret Jewish national aspirations gladly kept under wraps. For the “apostle to the peoples of other cultures”, however, this was the most radical treasure of the new covenant (Col 1:20-29; Eph 2:11-22). Paul wondered deeply that he should be entrusted to declare this new reality openly. It powerfully motivated his whole ministry (Eph 3:7-11; 1 Tim 2:3-7; 1 Thess 2:4-13; Rom 1:1-5). Central to the gospel age, then, is this unexpected news that

² Lausanne Committee for World Evangelisation, *The Willowbank Report: Gospel and Culture*, Lausanne Occasional Papers 2, Wheaton IL: Lausanne Committee, 1980, p. 7.

God's word can be received fully by peoples of every different ethnic background (1 Thess 2:13). To grapple with that reality means contextualising.

As Paul concludes his great mission manifesto, this theme forms his climax (Rom 15:7.17). God's Christ locked Himself into serving one distinct cultural group – “the circumcision”. To serve God's truth, this is essential. God's truth always operates in the real world of particular cultures – not in some Platonic “ideal” realm. Only thus, could God's long-standing purposes and promises be fulfilled. These promises, likewise, were firmly earthed in the culture history of the “fathers” of this same ethnic group (15:8). And yet, the whole purpose of this specific enculturation was to influence the universe. Only thus, could “the peoples of other cultures” discover, and respond, to God's mercy (15:9). The cultural particularity, focused on the needs and heritage of the Jews, became God's means of blessing all other cultures. Every strand of that culture's literature – law, history, poetry, and prophecy – is called on testify that this had always been God's intention (15:9-12). These are the classic ingredients of contextualisation. God chose to work out our salvation within the time-space realm of planet earth – therefore, we must exegete, interpret, communicate, and apply His word in the diverse languages of our globe.³

God's purposes for our age culminate in penetrating diverse cultures. The biblical message, the gospel, belongs to every culture. This gospel is eminently translatable into every culture. In fact, as we shall see, this great news is incompletely grasped, and lived, without this inter-cultural dimension. Contextualisation is an essential response to these realities of our faith. We shall consider:

- How to appreciate the *cultural factor* in contextualisation,
- How to appreciate the *biblical truth factor*,
- How to utilise the *interplay of these two factors*, in the task of contextualisation, and
- A model outlining *essential ingredients of adequate contextualisation* – the Letter to the Galatians.

II. The Cultural Factor in Contextualising

Our culture, from its trivial outer forms, to the attitudes underlying our worldview, is the first part of our contextualisation formula. The Christian

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

message takes cultural settings seriously. The following assumptions about culture should inform us, as we contextualise.

1. Christianity Accepts and Exalts Cultures

The scriptures trace the source of human cultures back to God Himself. Our distinctive capacities, as creatures made in the image of God, are the basic source of human culture. These cultural capacities, and God's original intention for them, antedate the fall (Gen 1:26-31; 2:15-25). As Lord of history, God Himself supervises the destinies and affairs of every ethnic group (Acts 17:24-28; 1 Sam 2:2-10; Jer 12:14-17). The New Testament age bursts into life with a spectacular celebration of praise from all the accessible cultures of the day (Acts 2:1-12). This gospel interest in the diverse settings of ethnic groups sets Christianity apart from other world religions.⁴

When God chose to reveal Himself in history. He gave human cultures an importance for eternity. God did not shout His message from the distance by some inter-galactic sonic boom. He came in person into an ordinary human setting – born of woman, born under the Law. Thereby, He gave dignity, and value, to our human scene – to human cultures.

Moreover, Jesus Christ tied proper understanding of His salvation to the particular culture into which He was born – that of a Jewish woman, living under Jewish law. Jesus told the Samaritan woman that she worshipped ignorantly, “for salvation is of the Jews”. This one culture is set apart from others. Its salvation-history is made normative, and authoritative, for defining all valid salvation experience (John 4:22; Acts 4:12). The incarnation made Jewish biblical culture of distinctive importance for all time.

But, as we have seen from Romans 15, that is not the end of the story. God's purpose is to exalt all cultures. The historical particularity, evident when Christ is born of a Jewish woman, is “in order that the peoples of other cultures may glorify God for His mercy” (Rom 15:9). Through this “mystery of the gospel”, God exalts cultural plurality *by way of* historical particularity. By showing so clearly, in the home of Nazareth, that one culture matters to Him, God makes a way to show, beyond the Cross and Pentecost, that every culture matters to Him. Our task in contextualisation is to give similar honour to all cultures.

⁴ Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, American Society of Missiology 13, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1990, makes this point in contrast with Islam.

2. Cultures are Always Integral to Experiencing and Understanding Truth

By honouring cultures in this way, God makes them indispensable for our understanding of His message.

We can never express truth in a purely “supra-cultural” form. It is fruitless to attempt to state the “supra-cultural” aspects of the gospel by isolating the divine kernel from the cultural husk. As soon as we express any aspect of God’s truth, we do so by cultural means – our thought patterns and language.

As Martin Goldsmith puts it:

All theology is contextual. It must be, for all of us interpret the Bible through the spectacles of our philosophical background. And we, then, express our beliefs within the framework of those terms. . . . All theology, throughout history, had been expressed within the context of current religious and philosophical movements. This contextualisation inevitably adds to, or subtracts from, the biblical revelation.⁵

God’s message always comes to us in the wrappings of a particular form.

Cross-cultural awareness and experience confirms and clarifies truth. Moving across a cultural barrier often opens our minds to fresh aspects of biblical meaning, previously unrealised. Take this list of “non-Western” cultural understandings we discovered in Melanesia:

- The involvement of the unseen forces in everyday life;
- The ancestors’ continuing involvement in tribal life;
- An understanding of time, and the future, quite different from Western ideas of history and lineal progress;
- The understanding of religion as the integrating factor for the whole of life – not a one-day-a-week ritual;
- Understanding personal value and righteousness, in terms of your value to the tribe, and of maintaining tribal obligations; and
- Spirit forces intervening directly in the natural world, so that you take no interest in secondary causes.

⁵ Goldsmith, “Contextualisation of Theology”, pp. 20-21.

These different views made us reread the scriptures, and find there, similar emphases, of which we had been only dimly aware in our own culture. The cultural journey also threw fresh light on various teachings we thought we knew well. For instance, look at this further list:

- Powers (Col 1:16-18);
- The continuity and interdependence between previous generations of believers and ourselves (Heb 11:39-40; 12:22-24);
- The present implications of our future hope;
- The communal nature, and intent, of virtually every ethical command in Paul's writings;
- The importance of a doctrine of work and manual labour for human dignity;
- The creation ordinances governing economic development and ecological concerns;
- The implications of all humans being made in the image of God for racial and "payback" (retaliation) issues;
- The interrelation of both the Word and the Spirit in a pre-literate society; and
- The importance of land and inheritance for God's people.

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

Every culture possesses positive elements, favourable to the understanding of the gospel. . . . Every culture makes possible a certain approach to the gospel that brings to light certain salient aspects that, in other cultures, may have remained less visible or even hidden. Seen from this perspective . . . cultural differences . . . serve as channels of expression of aspects of the truth of the gospel, aspects that a theology, tied down to the one particular culture can easily overlook.⁶

⁶ C. Rene Padilla, *The Contextualisation of the Gospel: a Learning in Dialogue Experience with C. Rene Padilla*, Abingto PA: Partnership in Mission, nd, pp. 4-5.

Then, too, sending messengers out *to cross cultural barriers in mission causes a “boomerang effect” for the sending community.* The missionary almost inevitably returns to the sending church with uncomfortable questions about the adequacy of that church’s grasp of truth. When Paul returned to Antioch with his “lessons from the frontier” of mission in Galatia, he had a newly-focused perception of the essence of the gospel. This caused a public confrontation with the monocultural teachers dominating the Antiochean church (Acts 14-15; Gal 2). The different roles of Antioch and Jerusalem, from this point in Acts, confirm that diverse cultural awareness is crucial for us to adequately transmit, or contextualise, the biblical message. Today, the churches of the West stand at a similar point. The focal centre of global Christianity is moving from its previous Western homelands to Africa, Asia, South America, and the Pacific.⁷ If we Western Christians fail to heed the questions asked, and criticisms made of us, by those on the new frontiers – questions about our affluence, our individualism, our rationalism, the unbiblical confidence we place in unclear families, etc. – then our candle may be removed from its lampstand, as happened in Jerusalem.

Cultural diversity is also essential in contextualisation, because it is only “with all the saints” that we discover the “length, breadth, height, and depth” of truth (Eph 3:17-19). Power to grasp the depths of biblical meaning is not available to isolated believers. We need each other to adequately understand scripture. And, if we need the ministry of others, for our spiritual perception in the local arena, it is equally true globally. As the Lausanne Covenant puts it, the Spirit:

illuminates the minds of God’s people in every culture to perceive (the scripture’s) truth, fresh through their own eyes, and thus discloses to the whole church ever more of the many-coloured wisdom of God. (paragraph 2)⁸

Therefore, we need both the “teaching and admonishing of one another” within our own cultural group, and the challenge, warning, and correction of insights into truth from other cultural backgrounds, if we are to grasp the fullness of God’s word. We need not despair.

since none of us can read the scriptures without cultural blinkers of some sort, the great advantage, the crowning excitement, which our own era of

⁷ Andrew Walls has most consistently explained and developed the implications of this in his various articles published in the 1980s.

⁸ The Lausanne Covenant, in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, J. D. Douglas, ed., Waco TX: Word Books, 1974.

church history has over all others, is the possibility that we may be able to read them together. Never before, has the church looked so much like the great multitude, whom no man can number, out of every nation, and tribe, and people, and tongue. Never before, therefore, had there been so much potentiality for mutual enrichment and self-criticism, as God causes yet more light and truth to break forth from His word.⁹

3. Culture is an Ever-present Limiting Factor in Adequate Contextualisation, Because:

Our cultural pre-suppositions are so all-pervasive, we seldom realise how much they determine all we do. It usually takes an extended cross-cultural exposure to reveal our own cultural biases. Recent analyses describe aspects of culture, which skew our perceptions of other cultures, and influence the way we read the scriptures.

Alan Tippett describes this cultural distortion of our perceptions by his “theory of parallax”.¹⁰ Our attitudes towards culture; our historical perspective; our involvement in promotion of a cause; the function of our activities; our professional standing; and our own personal perceptions of ourselves, all influence the way we perceive and respond to other cultures. Tippett shows how these can have either negative or positive influences. As we seek to pass on biblical truth, across the cultural horizon of our own society, then, we are liable to distort both the original intention of the scriptures, and the responses of those we serve, because of these usually unconscious attitudes, which govern our actions.

David Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen broaden the list of cultural factors affecting contextualisation in their “seven-dimension paradigm”.¹¹ For them, the influential aspects of culture include:

- Worldviews – ways of viewing the world.
- Cognitive processes – ways of thinking.
- Linguistic forms – ways of expressing ideas.
- Behavioural patterns – ways of acting.

⁹ Andrew F. Walls, “The Gospel as the Prisoner and Liberator of Culture”, in *Faith and Thought* 108-1/2 (1981), p. 51.

¹⁰ Alan R. Tippett, “Parallax in Missiology: to Use or Abuse”, in Darrell L. Whiteman, ed., *Missionaries, Anthropologists, and Cultural Change: Studies in Third World Societies* 25 (September 1983), pp. 91-151.

¹¹ Hesselgrave, and Rommen, *Contextualisation*, pp. 203-211.

- Communication media – ways of channelling the message.
- Social Structures – way of interacting.
- Motivational sources – ways of deciding.

Given such all-pervasive cultural influences, it is little wonder that *culture tends to narrow selectively, where scripture broadens and diversifies*.

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

But then, I had no answer when our Melanesian students asked why we did not teach Proverbs as tools for pre-evangelism *in their proverb-rich orally-literate society*. Well I remember being the only one in a Sepik congregation of 60, who needed an explanation of the Neo-Melanesian parable, following the communion in a Sepik service. Only a dumb European would not realise that the dramatic exhortation to prune the coffee trees that week was a reminder that the special offering was due next Sunday.

Only an international breadth of theological input will keep our contextualisation from the ever-present tendency for our culture to limit our perspective.¹²

¹² For an African comment on one of the many recent pleas for such non-Western input to theology, see Kwame Bediako, "The Holy Spirit, the Christian Gospel, and Religious Change: The African Evidence for a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism", in James Thrower, ed., *Essays in Religious Studies of Andrew Walls*, Aberdeen UK: Department of Religious Studies, University of Aberdeen, 1986, p. 45. Bediako is citing Charles Taber in the opening article, "Is There More than One Way to do Theology?" in Taber's sadly, short-lived journal, *Gospel in Context* 1-1 (January 1978), pp. 4-10.

4. Culture is Always Transformed by Proper Contextualisation

But, if culture inevitably influences our grasp of scripture, it is equally inevitable that scripture influences our cultures.

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

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

When God became man, Christ took flesh in a particular family, members of a particular nation, with the tradition of customs associated with that nation. All that was not evil, He sanctified. Wherever He is taken by men in any time and place, He takes that nationally, that society, that “culture”, and sanctifies all that is capable of sanctification by His presence.¹³

Not that this process takes place easily:

that society never existed, in East or West, ancient time, or modern, which could absorb the word of Christ painlessly into its system. Jesus, within Jewish culture, Paul, within Hellenistic culture, takes it for granted that there will be rubs and friction – not from the adoption of a new culture, but from the transformation of the mind towards that of Christ.¹⁴

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

There is also a distinctly-new aspect to the impact of the gospel upon a Christian’s culture. *In Christ, we receive, and participate, in a new “adoptive” cultural heritage.* God makes us heirs of Hebrew salvation-history through Christ. Again, Andrew Walls puts it lucidly:

¹³ Walls, “The Gospel as the Prisoner and Liberator of Culture”, p. 44.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

The Christian is given an adoptive past. He is linked to the people of God in all generations (like him, members of the faith family), and most strangely of all, to the whole history of Israel, the curious continuity of the race of the faithful from Abraham. . . . All Christians, of whatever nationality, are landed, by adoption with several millennia of someone else's history, with a whole set of ideas, concepts, and assumptions which do not necessarily square with the rest of their cultural inheritance; and the church in every land, of whatever race, and type of society, has this same adoptive past, by which it needs to interpret the fundamentals of the faith.¹⁵

Every cultural group, involved in contextualisation, thus has, in this biblical heritage, an abiding standard, and "reference point", to continually inform, and enrich, the process of cultural transformation.

But that does not make the Christian community merely backward looking or conservative. No. *In Christ, each culture is liberated, for global impact and destiny.* The process, Romans 15 described for the Jews, is repeated in every culture invaded by the gospel. Christ breaks in to fulfil the deepest longings of that particular culture, so that that culture, in turn, can make its contribution to the "blessing" of all nations. Nothing less can satisfy the implications of Jesus' parting words: "As the Father has sent Me, so send I you" (John 20:21). Every nation, in turn, receives a share in the global responsibility. And even spirit powers look on to learn from this expression of the unconfined wisdom of God (Eph 3:10).

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

III. The Biblical Truth Factor in Contextualising

Our understanding of the nature of God's truth – as authoritative revelation, through the scriptures, by the Spirit – provides the other regulative, and dynamic, factor in adequate contextualisation.

1. God's Truth is Always Greater Than our Best Grasp of it

God Himself, His purposes in Creation, the human predicament, and Christ's work for our redemption, are all too great to be adequately expressed in

¹⁵ Ibid.

any one formulation. Our human minds cannot hold together, at one time, any more than a very small part of the whole truth.

Since God is One and Infinite, this is inevitable. By definition, God is beyond human grasp. He is the sum of all His attributes. Yet, we are obliged to consider only one aspect of His wholeness at a time. Human language, human experience, our restriction within the time/space continuum, let alone the impairment of our faculties by sin, all force us to take a piece-meal approach to knowing God. When contextualising, the danger is that we forget we are only human, and assume greater competence than we can attain. Henry Robert Reynolds, Principal of the Congregationalist Cheshunt College through the latter part of the 19th century, highlighted the inherent danger:

We must admit that every element of the glory of Christ is so absolute, so perfect in itself, so absorbing, so engrossing, so beneficent, that, if it beams of glances on the soul, it conveys the impression – which may turn out to be no other than an illusion – that it is the *whole* revelation, the fullness of Him that filleth all in all . . . [thus, we need to ask ourselves] . . . whether the one colour of the million-hued bow, or promise, in which (we) find so much, is the whole of the one, living Christ, and whether (we) have not much to learn . . . from those who are analogously led to believe that they, too, have, alas! The entire glory of God, beaming through another chink of the curtain, which conceals the Holiest of all.¹⁶

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

At first glance, “Christ died for our sins, according to the scriptures”, may seem self-evidently clear in its meaning. But the reality is so vast, that the scriptures give a wide range of explanations of the inherent meaning of both Christ's death and our sin. Scriptures offer at least the following explanations of the *work of Christ* in His death at Calvary: Christ's death shows His work as High Priest; reveals the love of God; gives an example for Christians to follow; redeems us; brings reconciliation, through His work as mediator; was a sacrifice for sin; justifies the believer; commences the new age of the new covenant; and gives us salvation.

¹⁶ Henry Robert Reynolds, “A Study in Heno-Christianity”, in *The Expositor*, 5th series, II (1895), pp. 321-341.

No one of these explanations is adequate in itself, but each is true, according to the scriptures. And this list is certainly not exhaustive!

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

So we could go on with each central doctrine of the faith. At least 20 different names or titles are used to describe Satan's nature, in pictorial language.¹⁷ Consider the wide-ranging terminology used for other aspects of the doctrine of evil.¹⁸ Or, again, consider the various New Testament pictures of the church as the body, the bride, the branches of the vine, the army of God, the pilgrim people, the household or family of God, the living temple of God, the kingdom of priests, and so on.¹⁹

The "many-sided wisdom of God" (Eph 3:10) keeps the contextualiser humble, when offering each necessarily partial explanation of such huge themes.

A parallel impact comes from grasping the nature of *truth as "seed", which requires diverse "soils"*, in which to display its fullness. Building on Christ's common use of the metaphor (Matt 13:1-23, 31-32, etc.), Paul uses this imagery to highlight the way the message of grace had been contextualised among the Colossians of Asia, just as among other peoples around the then-known world (Col 1:5-6; 2:6).

This largesse in the nature of truth also means *the Spirit always had more light to break forth from the Word*. The living presence of the author of scripture, in the person of the Spirit of God, gives biblical truth a dynamic quality. The prophets, even in their heights of conscious inspiration, were aware of their own only-partial grasp of the depths of the divine message, birthed through their own

¹⁷ Cf. "Introductory Theology Notes", Banz PNG: CLTC, nd, pp 55-58.

¹⁸ Note these terms for "spirit beings", e.g., angels, demons, evil spirits, elemental spirits of the universe, spiritual hosts of wickedness; for the wide range of "other powers, which dominate humans": e.g., principalities and powers, authorities, thrones, rulers, world rulers of this present darkness; death, etc.; for the "teaching, which enslaves": e.g., doctrines of demons, the course of this world, philosophy, and empty deceit; and for "evil people who become the tools of the evil one": e.g., sorcerers, magicians, diviners, soothsayers, mediums, false prophets.

¹⁹ Cf. John M. Hitchen, "The Church is God's Agent for Evangelism", Papua New Guinea National Seminar on Evangelism paper, 1976, reprinted as *The Work of the Church*, Wewak PNG: Christian Books Melanesia, 1980.

frail experience (1 Pet 1:10-12). The Reformers, and their stepchildren, when they faltered in their consistency, were ready to give their lives for this insight about God's truth. Contextualisation challenges us to apply it again at the cultural frontier. For evangelicals, this aspect of the scriptures, as Spirit-breathed, plus our conviction of the abiding presence of the same active Spirit, brings a creativity to our humility, as we cross cultural divides, holding forth the word of life. We can never know what the Spirit may yet choose to bring out from this treasure store of His Word.

2. God's Truth is Universally Applicable, and can be Known in Truth in Every Culture

The wonder, for the New Testament writers, is that Christ belongs in every culture – His word is living and active within every culture. Lamin Sanneh highlighted one aspect of this truth, by stressing Christianity's "translatability":

Christianity is remarkable for the relative ease with which it enters living cultures. In becoming translatable it renders itself compatible with all cultures. It may be welcomed, or resisted, in its Western garb, but it is not itself uncongenial in other garb. Christianity broke free from its absolutised Judaic frame, and, through a radical pluralism, adopted the Hellenic culture.²⁰

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

Another feature of the relevance of scripture, is the way its central ideas are explained. The bible uses what we can call "*trans-cultural word pictures*" to define almost all the central ideas of the faith. Each word-picture, Jesus uses in John's gospel to describe Himself, is part of the ordinary experience of peoples worldwide.²¹

This is also true of the key theological terms of the New Testament letters. "Redemption" is a common market place, or commerce, term; "justify" belongs to the worldwide experience of law-courts; "expiation and sacrifice" may not be universal, but the need for appeasement, to which they speak, is a universal human

²⁰ Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, p. 50.

²¹ Think, e.g., of: "bread", "door", "way", "light", "resurrection", "living water", and even "shepherd". These are either universal experiences, or refer to particulars, which have cultural equivalents around the world.

need, even when expressed in more sophisticated ways, such as “our search for serenity”!

Some specific theological words, or concepts, may not be found in each culture. But the background of ideas, or life experiences, of the great majority, are found universally. By using a range of “trans-cultural word pictures”, God has gathered together the many-sided truth of the facts of our salvation.

Every culture, then, offers a valid context for the authentic experience of truth. The constrictions of our humanity – particularly our sinful humanity – mean our understanding is, at best, partial. But it is nonetheless valid. By His gift of speech, and by our creation in His own likeness, God has made us capable of personal, intimate, and real, experience of Him.

By God’s gift of His self-revealing word, in forms and language we can understand, we can also distinguish truth, and true experience of Him, from counterfeit and error.

3. God’s Truth has been Definitively “Incarnated” in Culture

This is the other side of the fact that God exalts cultures. He links His truth, inseparably, to such human settings. We are not left to grope in the dark, or merely make “guesses about God”.²² *The distinctive, and authoritatively definitive, features of human salvation, and how to receive it, have been set out in the scriptures.* In the prophets, in the apostles, and, supremely, in Jesus Christ, God’s abiding truth has been distilled, and spelled out, in human terms for sinful, faltering women and men to see, read, and receive, in language and thought forms, which are too clear for us ever to claim ignorance again (Heb 1:1; 2:1-4).

The ultimate expression of truth, capable of comprehension by culture-bound humans, comes in Jesus Christ. The very glory of God shines from the face of Jesus for those, whose reason had been sufficiently healed by faith, to recognise Him (2 Cor 4:4-6). Thus, this *uniqueness of Christ* is set forth in His relationship to every aspect of culture, and reality, in central New Testament Christological passages. He, alone, lords it over the physical universe, the revelatory process, the needy realm of morally-corrupt creatures, the new order of salvaged rejects in the church, the universal control centre of the Majesty, and even over the spirit world of angelic beings, according to Heb 1:1-4 and Col 1:16-18. These declarations are non-negotiable. He, alone, is Lord, in this culturally and religiously pluralistic world (1 Cor 8:5-7). The uniqueness of His Person leads, necessarily, into the

²² William Barclay, *Daily Study Bible*, term for the confused ideas circulating at Colossae.

uniqueness of His gospel. Paul's clearest discourse on the issues at stake in contextualisation – the Galatian letter, to which we shall return – begins defiantly, and unashamedly, with the declaration that there is one, and only one, gospel – the gospel preached, and recorded, definitively by the apostles.

If that was the emphasis in one of Paul's earliest letters, the same conviction rings equally clearly in the last recorded writings of the apostle. Peter's authoritative provision for true understanding, after his death is his, and his fellow apostle's, testimony (1 John 2:18-27; 4:1-6). For Paul, too, the standard of truth is still "the preaching entrusted to me", and now entrusted to the next generation as a "good deposit", to be guarded and "continued in" (Tit 1:1-3; 2 Tim 1:13-14). In fact, Paul has at least the next three generations in mind, as he hands on this abiding reservoir of Spirit-protected teaching (2 Tim 1:14; 2:2). Here, then, is normative teaching for global contextualisation. *Ours is the task of recognising both the authoritative, and the exemplary, aspects of apostolic teaching.*

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

IV. The Interplay of Culture and biblical Truth in Contextualising

The task of contextualisation, then, involves bringing together these two factors – culture and biblical truth. We suggest the following interrelationships, as inherent in faithful contextualisation.

1. Culture Identifies the Most-relevant Starting Points for Contextualising Biblical Truth

As we saw, above, when noting the many-sidedness of God's truth, God has not limited Himself to one "biblical analogy" (to use Wayne Dye's term),²³ or "redemptive analogy" (to use Richardson's term).²⁴ Rather, by the use of a range of "trans-cultural word-pictures" (my term) God declares the many-sided truth of

²³ Wayne Dye, *The Bible Translation Strategy*, chapter 9, Ukarumpa PNG: SIL, 1979.

²⁴ Don Richardson, *Peace Child*, Glendale CA: Regal Books, 1974, p. 329.

our salvation.²⁵ Therefore, *different aspects of truth suit different people-groups, and worldviews, as relevant starting points for an encounter with Christ and understanding truth.*

The life values, and basic assumptions, of a people mean that different terminology, explaining the gospel, will have varying appeal and challenge. Some biblical terms will have immediate relevance to the values and attitudes of one culture, while others, at first, will appear strangely foreign.

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

Wayne Dye shows the importance of his insight, for focusing on relevant sins.²⁶ Don Richardson's *Peace Child* is a good example of how the trans-cultural word-pictures of reconciliation, and mediator, were already a traditional religious focal point among the Sawi people of Irian Jaya.²⁷

2. We Must Reach up to Biblical Fullness from the Culturally-relevant Starting Point in Contextualising Truth

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

In Western churches, the neglect of the atonement, as a victory over spirit powers, had left the churches open to the current inroads of the occult. A lack of emphasis on the church, as the pilgrim people of God, encourages the complacent materialism of nominal Christianity in the West.

²⁵ Charles H. Kraft deals, in part, with the same kind of idea in his threefold division of Bible teachings into the three levels of "Basic Ideals", "General Principles", and "Specific Cultural Forms". What I am calling trans-cultural word pictures fit into the first two of Kraft's categories, *Christianity and Culture: a Study in Dynamic biblical Theologising in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1979, pp. 139-143.

²⁶ Dye, *Bible Translation Strategy*.

²⁷ Richardson, *Peace Child*.

So, too, Papua New Guineans need to understand sin as rebellion and disobedience, not just broken relationships, if they are to have a firm faith in Christ.

This broadening of understanding is essential to avoid syncretism. When one aspect of biblical teaching is used predominantly, we can easily distort truth. The various word-pictures, explaining the atonement, listed above, are all necessary to correct possible misunderstandings, or distortions, of Christ's work on the Cross.

Effective contextualisation recognises that at different stages of growth in the church, different aspects of the one truth will need emphasis, to ensure ongoing growth. Common problems, such as legalism, seeking short cuts to holiness, or unwillingness to face the cost of discipleship, continue to challenge groups of Christians in every culture, at different times. Different aspects of biblical insight bring answers to each of these problems. Thus all are needed.

There is a balance, then, between choosing culturally-relevant initial steps into truth and insisting that all God's word is relevant for long-term growth.

3. In-depth Cultural Transformation is the Goal of any Adequate Contextualisation

We must contextualise, to the point of transforming worldviews. Harold W. Turner, building on Lesslie Newbigin's recent work, suggests that the Christian mission has seldom gone deep enough. Mission to the person – seeking personal conversion, and transformation, as disciples of Christ – has long been the subject of study and practice. We probably all conduct courses, emphasising aspects of contextualisation, aimed at personal growth. Recent decades have seen a resurgence of attention to mission at a second level – mission to society. This level of mission, as social service, or as social reform, has also been the focus of much study and praxis. But the third level, mission to the cultural base, the worldview level, remains largely untouched.²⁸ The challenge, in contextualising, is to transform worldviews in depth. To use the jargon – we aim to bring the limiting factors of the cultural horizon into conformity to the biblical horizon.

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

²⁸ Harold W. Turner, *Gospel and Cultures Trust Lecture Notes from 1990 Seminars*. Available from Gospel and Cultures Trust, 8a Peart View, Remuera, Auckland 5, New Zealand.

The ultimate test of any theological discourse, after all, is not only erudite precision, but also transformative power. “It is a question of whether or not theology can articulate the faith, in a way that is not only intellectually sound, but spiritually energising, and, therefore, capable of leading the people of God to be transformed in their way of life, and to commit themselves to God’s mission in the world.”²⁹

This is, of course, the Bible’s own standard. New Testament wisdom is a lifestyle (James 3:13-17). This kind of *biblical loyalty is the measure of validity and truth within every culture*. The goal is such a release from inadequate values, thought-forms, and goals, that the people of God work out, in their own setting, whatever the scriptures require of them. John Stott encapsulates it clearly in his recent definition of an evangelical:

The real hallmark of the evangelical is not only a present submission to what he or she believes the scripture teaches, it is a prior commitment to be submissive to what we may subsequently learn to be the teaching of scripture, whatever scripture may be found to teach.³⁰

This, then, is the basic task of contextualisation. Our illustrations have emphasised the cross-cultural aspect of the task. But, wherever we cross the divide to another cultural sub-group, the principles apply. Often, today, the divides are as deep and wide between generations in the same ethnic group, or between the socio-economic extremes in the same city, as between any two racial groups. Thus, to effectively bring the living message to those on the other side of any of these divides, we must:

- Discover the heart-beat of their cultural values, so as to identify the most-relevant aspects, word-pictures, and forms of scriptural instruction, to commence the transformation;
- Continue empathising with their culture, so as to lead them on to grasp an ever-widening range of biblical truth for themselves; and
- Work towards the goal of bringing their cultural worldview, and experience, into conformity with the biblical experience of wholeness of life in Christ, with all its ramifications of a transformed worldview, and daily life, in our global village.

²⁹ Harvie M. Conn, “Contextual Theologies: the Problem of Agendas”, in *Westminster Theological Journal* 52 (1990), p. 63; citing Orlando Costas, “Evangelical Theology in the Two-Thirds World”, in *TSF Bulletin* 9-1 (September-October 1985), pp. 7-13.

³⁰ John R. W. Stott, *EFAC Bulletin* 40 (Advent 1990), p. 3.

In conclusion, we turn to a series of New Testament checks to keep us on track in the process:

V. Galatians – a Model Outlining the Factors Involved in Adequate Contextualisation

Galatians is the letter in the New Testament, specifically dealing with the issue of contextualisation. The letter grapples with the classic contextualisation question: Is accepting the Jewish cultural/religious sign of circumcision essential, in addition to faith, as the basis for salvation? In other words, is one cultural expression of the gospel – as distinct from the truths of the gospel, itself – to be absolutised, as the universal norm? Paul's answer is unequivocal, each culture has direct access to salvation on the same basis of faith alone, without having to adopt any one set of cultural forms to enjoy it.

The contextualised answer to this question, for the Galatians, covers the whole letter. Paul outlines the issues at stake in all contextualisation. As we work through the letter's carefully-developed argument, the apostolic answer offers us a series of questions, to help us assess all our contextualising:

1. *Does the contextualising cling to the one-and-only apostolic message?* (Gal 1:1-2:11). The apostolic teaching of the gospel is upheld, as the unique and unchanging standard for every cultural setting. Apostolic authority must be upheld, and expressed in the contextualisation task.

2. *Does the contextualising pass the cultural-equity test?* (Gal 2:11-21). Valid contextualising leads to life-style consistency across cultural barriers. The aim is that our hearers will “act in the line with the gospel” (2:14). This practical goal offers an important test for all contextualisation: Do the suggested meanings, or principals, apply bi-culturally and multi-culturally, particularly in the area of social relations? If not, the contextualisation is not yet adequate. In the very process of particularising the message, we must always reflect its universal scope.

3. *Does the contextualisation uphold the continuity with the “adoptive heritage of faith?”* (Gal 3:1-18). Is the meaning, we are suggesting, as we contextualise, true to the already-received truth in our Abraham/Moses/Christ/Pentecost deposit of faith? Contextualisation takes place within the family of the faithful. It must, therefore, reflect the family heritage, even as it embraces the new family members, and all the disruption, any addition brings to the family.

4. *Does the contextualising give proper respect to the previous cultural heritage?* (Gal 3:19-4:7). In this section, Paul not only defines the limits of the

value of Jewish traditional religion. He does so, in such a way, as to retain a proper respect for its regulative role in society, and its preparatory role for the gospel (3:19-25). He, then, amazingly for a Jew, attributes the same two roles to the “*stoicheia*”, the “elemental spirits of the universe” (4:1-3). In these respects, at least, the apostle recognises the positive role of pre-Christian cultural values. All contextualisation should do the same. We are to understand, appreciate, and respect the preparatory role of, and recognise the quest, inherent within traditional religion, even as we present Christ as the Fulfiller of the “desires of the nations”. Kenneth Cragg highlights the importance of this, in these words, quoted by Bediako:

Christianity cannot address men, and ignore their gods: it may not act in the present, and disown the past. . . . In seeking men, for Christ’s sake, it is committed to the significance of all they are, in their birth, and tradition, both for good or ill. To obey a world-relevance is to incur a multi-religious world.³¹

5. *Does the contextualisation lead to reversion to previous cultural norms, or on onto life in Christ – as children not servants?* (Gal 3:25-29; 4:4-11; 4:21-31). In every culture, we run the risk of the contextualisation leading back into the bondage, or religious legalism, of either the sending, or the receiving, culture. Respect for the proper role of traditional religion is not the same as encouraging reversion to it. Effective contextualisation discerns this difference.

6. *Does the contextualisation enable freedom in Christ to permeate the new culture?* (Gal 5:1-15). The culture, even the dominant culture, of the bringer of the gospel, is not to be imposed on top of the new Christians’ own faith, in their own responsive love and service. This is the distinctively-Christian freedom.

7. *Does the contextualising allow the Spirit to transform the personal, social, and communal life of the new culture?* (Gal 5:16-6:10). Again, the real proof of the contextualisation is the depth of its transforming effect within the new culture. Life in the Spirit, seen in its social outworking, not some imposed shibboleth, or external ritual, is the test.

8. *Does the contextualisation glorify Christ crucified, and incorporate the hearer into the people of God – or does it focus on merely cultural religious rituals?* (Gal 6:11-18). Paul sharpens the focus, and the contextualisation issue, in his closing autograph. The issues of loyalty to the cross, and demonstrating the

³¹ Bediako, “The Holy Spirit”, citing Kenneth Cragg, *Christianity in World Perspective*, London UK: Lutterworth Press, 1968, p. 65.

new life of God's people, are the ultimate indications that the contextualising process has fulfilled its purpose.

Galatians, I suggest, offers an integrated set of tests for contextualisation:

- Apostolic loyalty.
- Cultural equity.
- Continuity with the heritage of faith.
- Respect for the cultural heritage.
- Not reversion, but new life.
- Freedom within the new culture.
- Transformation of the new culture.
- Honouring Christ, as God's new people.

This is no simplistic formula for answering every difficulty in the contextualising task. But it offers an overall framework of assessment for the process. Thereby, it also highlights the point of this paper: contextualisation is at the heart of knowing and sharing Christ Jesus as Lord. We cannot avoid it. We can choose whether to do it faithfully or poorly.

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