

DEVELOPING LOCAL THEOLOGY

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Introduction

One of the interesting things one encounters as one teaches theology or biblical studies is that much of the prepared material is fully accepted and needed, but there are still many questions that are asked, and need to be answered. Answering these questions is not only a challenge for the teacher, but it is a great challenge for the church, in its particular contexts.

The Apostle Paul's teaching and preaching reflects the universal message of the gospel of Jesus Christ, but it also reflects an emphasis on addressing local issues and problems (Acts 17:16-33; Col 2:6-12).¹ Paul is keen that those he taught and encouraged received the whole counsel or will of God (Acts 20:27).² In Acts 17, we note that Paul addresses the people from within their way of looking at the world (17:22-23), and he even uses their own poets to make a biblical point (17:28-29). Paul, and the other biblical writers, knew that the people they wrote to saw life and faith issues through cultural eyes. The gospel message didn't change, but the emphasis on how it was communicated, and applied, and finally expressed by the local church, does show that Paul and other writers took the background, and people's way of looking, seriously.

Theology is the study of God, and His relationship to people and the world. The only authoritative source for constructing theology is the Bible. However, the way theologians think has a very real impact on the construction and content of theology. It is they, who observe what topics the

¹ There are many texts that could be cited.

² Greek βουλήν (*boulēn*), "volition, counsel, advice, purpose".

Bible deals with, or what topics to be included, and the right way to organise them. Topics that seem of little interest or importance are given little attention, or might be left out all together.

If a group of people were given a box of nuts and bolts of varying shapes and sizes and asked to sort it out we would get a variety of ways of sorting. The classification of the nuts and bolts would probably reflect the background and experience of the sorter. A recycler would arrange them by material, an artist by colour, a builder by type, and so on. Some of the nuts and bolts may even be discarded by some, because, in their classification system, they seem out of place. Each way of sorting the nuts and bolts is intelligent and useful, but we don't all see it that way. No one way of sorting gives us the whole story about those nuts and bolts.

In the same way, the theology, with which we have grown up, has been put together in response to our questions, and our way of processing them. But, when we want to disciple, and help others grow in their faith, here in Melanesia, some of the theology we bring with us doesn't seem relevant, and leaves many questions unanswered. This can make Christianity look as if it doesn't have something to say, in many situations.

We can thank God for missionaries, who are perceptive enough to teach the scriptures in a way people can understand, while, at the same time, addressing the deep issues that lie beneath the surface of the culture of those being reached. One of our goals should be to act as instruments, in raising up men and women, who can go to the scriptures with their own questions, categories, and spiritual insights, arising out of their local culture, and way of looking at the world. New understandings and deductions can be built, based on biblical truth that they and their people can grasp and live out. Much of this theology will be the same as that of Christians elsewhere, but some understandings will be new, because these people have asked different questions. This is indigenous, or local, Christian theology, theological reflection organised in local categories, and addressing local questions.

Why are Local Theological Understandings Important?

1. Biblical Answers to Local Questions Will Strengthen Discipleship

A healthy faith will grow in a climate where people's deep questions are being answered. A student reflected that when his brother lay dying in hospital, his father (who was an elder in the church), having explored all avenues of hospital help and prayer, paid for a spirit doctor to try his spells. This student and his father needed a theology of suffering and death. Failure to deal biblically with such issues hinders discipleship.

2. Biblical Answers to Local Questions Will Help Communities be Transformed

This transformation may be expressed in different ways, depending on the needs that each culture exhibits. How will a biblical view of possessions, or land, or leadership and responsibility, impact on the problems of corruption and irresponsibility, as it interacts, at a deep level, with the issues? How will these Christian understandings affect the way things are done now, and transform society?

3. Biblical Answers Discovered by Locals Will Bring Maturity to the Church

In order for each local church to grow to maturity, and function in an autonomous way, it needs to be able to find the answers to local questions and issues. This means that the role of a missionary or graduate will be one of facilitating the process, rather than always being the source of "truth", in regard to the questions, otherwise the theology and the church will fall into paternalism. A mature church will also seek to take into account the insights of others in the Body of Christ from other times and places, otherwise the theology and the church will fall into syncretism.

4. Biblical Answers Discovered by Locals Will Enrich the Understanding of Others in the Body of Christ

The Body of Christ is enriched when the exploration of biblical answers to cultural issues results in new understandings, and ways of looking and acting. Any missionary, graduate, or lay person, involved in facilitating such a process will not be unchanged. The Body of Christ, as a whole, benefits from the insights of Christians from other backgrounds.

What can be Done to Encourage Local Theology to Develop?

We can acknowledge that this process has been started. While we may not see the need for this encouragement, the fact remains that local theologies will develop regardless of facilitation. The question is what sort of theology is developing, and how biblical is it? Those who have the ability to partner local believers ought to encourage them to understand and apply scripture to their own cultural issues and society.

Where can we start? Here are some ideas to help us begin the process. Feel free to think of others.

1. Encourage Christians to Tell the Story of What the Gospel Means to Them

In encouraging people to talk about, and defend, what they believe, they begin to understand their own assumptions about faith and salvation. The gospel story of the Bible shapes those who interact with it, as it opens up a vast new way of looking at life. This can help people to “see” who they are in Christ, and renew a vision of the hope found in Christ. A deep understanding of the gospel provides:

A New Sense of Historical Perspective

Most of the people we work with have a historical perspective that consists of tribal memory and community stories. What the gospel does, in this situation, is to transfer a temporal focus, which, in Papua New Guinea, is the ancestors (the past) to the future. Rather than seeing the key to understanding (and affecting) the present, by the way of the past, through ancestor worship, they begin to look ahead to the return of Christ, and life in heaven with God (and their relatives), as the key to a good life.

Critical thought in Papua New Guinea has emphasised critique of others outside the group, while playing down that critique within accepted group relationships. In the Bible, however, voices rose, speaking out against the excesses and dangers of the times, voices God used. Much of our tradition of critical thought within Christianity comes from this tradition of prophecy.

Christ's call on our lives, who people are in Christ, and who Christ is, will become decisive for the thinking of all Christians, but they will have their own special impact on the various cultures they come across.

A Basis to Evaluate and Weigh Ideas and Ways of Looking at Life

The gospel counters the tendency to view Christian truth pragmatically – as truth to serve our own ends and us. In traditional religions, rituals and rites revolve around the temporal and spatial structures of life, so that things continue to go well (good gardens, good relationships, etc.). Religion is practised, to bring about the end-desire of the worshipper. When presented, understood, and incarnated, the gospel brings about a new way of looking at and seeing the glory and honour of God, as He begins to displace all other considerations. Worship patterns would change from a focus on manipulation and control to one of intercession, and, finally, praise.

2. Look and Listen to the Local Context

This means adjusting our ears and eyes to the local context. It means living in the context in which one is theologising. It means being part of a group, asking questions, observing. This is not so much a technique, or a step, for that matter; it is a way of life. It is what Christ modelled for us, an incarnational lifestyle. Jesus' example in Phil 2:5-11 informs us of the need to leave our own comforts, and willingly enter the world of those with whom we are in partnership. In a setting, where one is involved in everyday life with people in the local context, a discovery of the real issues and questions is likely to arise. Paul's example to the Thessalonians informs us of the need to share our lives: "We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God, but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us" (1 Thess 2:8). This incarnational lifestyle helps us with our third point.

3. Identify and Understand Discipleship Problems That Arise From the Local Way of Seeing

This is a discovery of some of the deep, underlying themes of the culture, in which people live and express themselves. These problems and themes direct us to where theological work needs to be done. Why is it that many in leadership bow to the pressure of relatives and friends to put their hands into church or government funds? What sort of relationship with the church

should a man, who has more than one wife, have? What does the Bible say about land issues, or the spirits of departed loved ones? What does the Bible teach that addresses the deep, underlying way of looking at these issues?

4. Biblically Reflect on Steps Two and Three: a “Double Listening”

John Stott talks of the need for “double listening”, tuning in, both to the voice of God, as he speaks His ancient Word, and to the various voices of today’s world, in order to relate one to the other.

In my ethics classes, we seek to understand the basis of authority in decision-making in the local culture by listening to student’s stories, then we look at what the Bible has to say, and relate it to what we have understood about the local culture. The result is an addressing of the problems related to authority in decision-making, from a biblical point of view. As we proceed, we are building a theology of the authority of scripture, and the role of the Holy Spirit, and the community of faith in decision-making.

The local culture needs to be listened to, and understood, even by those from within it, in order for people to discover their existing framework, or ways of looking. The reading of scripture should then be facilitated, allowing the participants to “listen” and “see” how the biblical story impacts their way of seeing and doing. A discovery of biblical principles will occur, which can then be applied to the local context by the people themselves. The opportunity for a real change at a deeper level has been put into place, because the very framework, or way of looking, that a local culture imbibes, has been biblically challenged and informed. This may result in the confirmation of some practices, other practices will be transformed, in a meaningful way, or replaced by theologically-informed people from the local context.

It is important that people are allowed to think. It is so easy for the trained graduate or missionary to tell people what to think. In this case people’s faith may be reduced to a list of “dos” and “don’ts”. Jesus’ way of teaching provides us an example of balance. On the one hand, He said, “If you love Me, you will do whatever I command” (John 14:5). But, as He sought to help followers and onlookers to think straight, and live right, He used, as His

teaching tool, the unexplained parable, which left the hearer with the task of working out what Jesus was really saying.

5. Read (or Listen to) What Other Christians are Saying Locally and in the “Household of Faith”

Expose those in the local context to what others are saying. This can inform and critique the theology in a local context. Read what others write, and try to understand it, even if you don’t fully agree with it. In Melanesia, the Melanesian Institute has a lot of material that seeks to address local issues from a Christian point of view. Journals, such as the *Melanesian Journal of Theology* provide a forum for discussion on theological issues relating to Melanesia. Writers from similar contexts, such as Africa, are also informative.

6. Encourage the Writing of Local Theology, and Provide Opportunity for Other Expressions of it Through Songs, Music, Dance, and Artistic Work

Writers can be helped with funding for research and publishing. Local churches can be encouraged to include locally-written songs, music, dance, and artistic work in their programmes.

7. Teach and Model the Formation of Local Christian Theology

As people grapple with local issues, encourage them to formulate their questions, and then look for biblical principles themselves from the Bible. Try not to look for answers from outside biblical “experts” or books. Be brave enough to attempt to formulate local theology, in response to the issues being raised. Make sure that these responses are based on biblical principles that have been carefully worked through. Once this is done, local theology can then be clarified with what others may have formulated from outside the local area. We must not be frightened of clarifying our local theology with what the rest of the body of Christ has formulated in the past. This process can be carried out in the classroom, church building, or wherever people gather to talk through issues.

8. Make Available the Work of Local Theologians

Simplify the English, and paraphrase the material for the people. Relevant local theological issues can be explored by encouraging students to write

papers, or do projects (possibly follow some of the steps included in this paper), on these issues. Seek to include insights from local Christian theology in biblical teaching. See what can be incorporated into Christian education, counselling, preaching, and other subject areas. One student wrote a thesis on the problem of compensation, with the goal of trying to address this issue biblically, when he returned to his home area.

Conclusion

Many local believers have not consciously tried to formulate theology that responds to local issues, however, they will have a theology of some sort. The important thing is that they are able to understand the gospel, and their own way of looking, in such a way that, when given the tools, they are able to reflect biblically on their own issues, and respond, using biblical principles. Partnership is required in this task, whether that person may be a theological graduate, or a missionary, however, the goal is for the local church to discover, and own, these discoveries for themselves. The hope is that this will stimulate local believers to respond biblically to the deep issues they face, in order to encourage genuine discipleship that brings glory to our Lord Jesus Christ.

Questions

1. What other steps could be involved?
2. What place could “experience” and “power” have in the forming of local theology?
3. Where do we, as a group, go from here?