CONTEXTUALISATION AND GLOBALISATION IN THE BIBLE TRAINING MINISTRY OF THE CHRISTIAN BRETHREN CHURCHES OF PAPUA NEW GUINEA (PART 3 OF 4)

Ossie Fountain

Ossie (MA, MTh, Dip.Tchg) and his wife Jenny are from New Zealand, and have been mission partners with the Christian Brethren churches in Papua New Guinea since 2000, working as Bible School advisors and trainers. They were missionaries in PNG from 1967 to 1984, spending most of their time in church leadership training roles. This series of articles is adapted from Ossie's Master of Theology thesis that he completed in 2000.

PART 3: COMMUNICATING THEOLOGY

In this series of articles, I look at the two major forces that impact Bible school ministry – contextualisation and globalisation. We ask how far should we go in adapting to the local context, and to what extent should theological education embrace global norms and expectations? In Part 1 (see volume 19-1), we explored these two fundamental concepts. In Part 2 (see volume 19-2), we looked at how global and contextual issues impact the curricula of the Bible schools of the Christian Brethren churches of PNG (CBC). Now, in Part 3, we first look briefly at the theological orientation of these schools, and then examine, in some depth, three approaches to communicating theology. Next, we see how globalisation and contextualisation impact theology within the schools, and offer some comments on developing a biblically-based approach to theological education.

A. THEOLOGICAL ORIENTATION – UNDERGIRDING COMMITMENTS

Theological orientation can be explored from at least two different perspectives: that of the undergirding theology that motivates and drives the training institutions, and that of how a working theology is developed within the schools, and communicated to the student. We will briefly comment on the first of these, but our chief interest is with the second.

The Christian Brethren churches worldwide, as a grouping of independent congregations, do not have an agreed creedal statement, nevertheless they are thoroughly evangelical, and almost all their membership would accept the basic commitments of an evangelical statement of faith.[1] Rather, a cluster of emphases, instead of any one doctrine, tend to distinguish them from other traditions. The combination of five elements – the view of scripture, the conviction that the New Testament provides a model or guidelines for church life and practice for all times, the autonomy of the local church, the practice of believer's baptism by immersion, and the Lord's Supper, observed weekly within a largely unstructured service of worship – would generally be agreed to comprise their set of distinctives.

The Brethren have, throughout their history, contained a tension over how the Bible, and especially New Testament material, is to be used as an interpretive guide to church life now. Two different hermeneutical methods lead to rather different outcomes, in terms of church life. On the one hand, the belief that the New Testament provides a universal "pattern" for the structuring of church life is often supported by a "proof-text" approach, substantiated by a number of biblical references. Other Brethren, sensitive to the dynamic movement of church planting in

[1] This basic core of beliefs includes: acceptance of the divine inspiration and authority of scripture; the Trinitarian nature of the Godhead; the full divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ; His death and resurrection, as fully sufficient for human salvation; the fallenness of human beings; the indwelling of the Holy Spirit; the final resurrection; the unity of the church, composed of all true believers in the Lord Jesus Christ; spiritual gifts, given for building up the body of Christ; and the two ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper.

New Testament times, and the range of contexts into which the gospel was preached by the apostles, have sought to discover "principles" from the New Testament that are applicable, with local variations, to a range of modern contexts.

In relation to global and contextual elements, this brief outline highlights several contrasts. The "pattern + proof-text" approach makes the perceived "New Testament church" a global and normative structure for all times and places. Thus, Brethren churches would be recognised by the same set of distinctive practices anywhere. It very largely ignores local contexts, either in New Testament times, or in the modern context. A "principles" approach also takes the New Testament as its normative framework, but is much more sensitive to, and accepting of, local variations in the range of biblical and modern settings.[2]

COMMUNICATING THEOLOGY IN CBC BIBLE SCHOOLS

Now, we look more closely at how theology is transmitted by three dominant hermeneutical approaches to biblical studies in the CBC Bible schools.[3] In particular, we look at three methods adopted in the Bible schools, and the contrasts between them. Using the globalisation and contextualisation themes, it will become evident how the three methods of studying the Bible encourage different attitudes to the biblical text, and to developing a theology. We conclude the paper by pointing to a biblical approach to leadership training that emerges from a Brethren-style of theology.

[2] This argument is considerably expanded in chapter 5 of my thesis: Oswald C. Fountain, "Some aspects of globalisation and contextualisation in the Christian Brethren Bible schools in Papua New Guinea", M.Th. thesis, Auckland NZ: BCNZ, 2000.

[3] All the Bible schools teach some doctrine as courses (see Part 2 of this series). Here, our interest is in the theological implications of differing approaches to deriving theology from scripture.

B. BRETHREN THEOLOGY AS TRANSMITTED IN CBC BIBLE SCHOOLS OF PNG

How is theology communicated in CBC Bible schools? More specifically, for churches that base their theology firmly in an inspired scripture, how are theological positions derived from that scripture? Much of this theology is communicated in ways that are difficult to evaluate, because it is shared orally in the classroom. Theology is also modelled by teachers in the Bible schools, and by other Christians, including CBC leaders. The attitude and actions of teachers powerfully reinforce an underlying theology.[4] It is not possible to quantify the impact of these influences, for the purposes of this study.

We, therefore, restrict our investigation to written materials, produced for Bible school use.[5] Written materials, however, suffer from a range of communication limitations. Beside the simple matter of typographical and grammatical errors, teachers may not express concepts clearly in writing, and thus be open to being misunderstood. Many teachers prepare their written material, not as final or polished theological statements, but as working papers to stimulate student thinking, which, outside the classroom, may be thus open to misinterpretation.

On the other hand, the Bible school teacher is usually aware that what is said on paper makes a lasting impression, and is likely to be taken as "truth". The teacher hopes it will be read repeatedly, once the student has completed the course of study. Therefore, it has an impact beyond the immediate context, and reinforces the oral context of the classroom.[6]

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[4] Or, if there are perceived inconsistencies between teaching and practice, the theology modelled may well undermine the theology taught.

[5] In this article, I make detailed reference to published works of current missionary colleagues. No personal criticism of them, or their ministries, is implied in doing this. I respect and honour each of them.

[6] It is worth noting that the written word is, therefore, a more-globalising communication media than the spoken one. Furthermore, the published word is communicationally more globalising than duplicated classroom notes. As a consequence of globalisation, the impact of the personal communication style, and the modelling effect of the oral situation, is thereby lessened as we proceed from oral to classroom notes to published book.

The teacher who is aware of this will often take more care over written material that will be preserved and reused. This is even truer for published than duplicated Bible school material.

What are the three approaches to communicating theology in the CBC Bible schools? The first is a systematic approach to teaching doctrine. A common method is to attach biblical references to statements of doctrine in the text to substantiate the position being stated by the teacher. We will call this the "topical" approach to teaching theology.[7]

The second is the "commentary" approach, involving exposition of biblical passages to assist understanding of the inspired text so that the student forms a personal theology as a derived product from the exegetical process. One underlying assumption in this process is that it is necessary to have access to, and understanding of, the whole text for an adequate theology. Several types of commentary exist, some of which require the student to interact more with the text than others.[8]

The third is an inductive approach that does not produce notes to be learned, but focuses on the process of carefully attending to the text, in order to develop understanding, interpretation, and both theology and praxis. The teacher seeks to develop in the student the set of skills required to gain an adequate understanding of the text on which to base theology. It does not aim at passing on a theology already developed by others, but at engaging the student in studying the text. Theological insight is, therefore, a resulting product.

[7] The topical approach may be further subdivided into at least three sub-types: (a) an explanatory method that requires the student merely to read and understand; (b) a study outline approach that involves the teacher making a summary statement, and the student using scripture to check the validity of the points made; and (c) a group-study approach, where the main teacher inputs are questions, with references for the student to read and make his or her own deduction or evaluation.

[8] The best-known CBC Bible school example of this approach is Les Marsh's *Baibel Tisa* commentaries on the whole of the New Testament (see below).

1. THE "STUDY OUTLINE" TOPICAL APPROACH TO THEOLOGY

An example of the topical approach is *Baibel Doktrin*,[9] a book of study outlines. Teaching points are accompanied by Bible references, and the reader is encouraged to refer to these, and discover that the point being made is derived directly from scripture.[10] As a teaching tool, *Baibel Doktrin* encourages a principle the Christian Brethren have always desired to follow, to hold scripture as the source of guidance for faith and practice, including church practice.

The book is a published example of unpublished Bible school lecture notes, common in the CBC Bible schools, treating a range of doctrinal topics. By publishing, the authors appear to intend it to be used beyond the classroom situation, globalising this method of learning doctrine. The introduction states that the book "was prepared to help any person wanting to teach the truths of the Bible with depth and clarity."[11] However, the authors are aware of some risk that the book will be misunderstood or wrongly applied. They say, "We are not responsible for any misunderstanding or false teaching that any individual may present while using this book."[12]

Baibel Doktrin is a guide to developing a systematic theology. It attempts to be comprehensive, covering common major headings used in systematic theology.[13] Some topics are dealt with more extensively than others. The proportions, however, reveal some interesting emphases. One is the concern of Brethren, in their distinctive views about the church. The largest section of the book is devoted to that. The

[9] David Wainwright and Dave Baker, *Baibel Doktrin: Ol Stadi Autlain*, Wewak PNG: Christian Brethren churches, 1999.

[10] "In no way is it to replace the Bible, or the diligent study of the Word. We desire that each person would prayerfully receive these outlines with eagerness and examine the scriptures every day to see whether these things were so" *Baibel Doktrin*, p. ii (a quotation from Acts 17:11).

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Headings are: the Bible, God, the Father, Jesus, Holy Spirit, humankind, sin, God's plan (seven dispensations, eight covenants, and eschatology), salvation, the church, marriage, heaven and hell, the angels.

ecclesiology it develops treats the New Testament as a "pattern" of church order that, with minor variations, is viewed as transplantable to Melanesian cultures and elsewhere.[14]

In the section on God's plan, dispensationalism and the premillennial, pretribulation rapture (with charts) are taught as standard Brethren teaching on eschatology. This version of eschatological thinking, while common among the Brethren, has never been the only accepted interpretation of the future, or of apocalyptic passages of the Bible, and is now widely rejected.[15]

Baibel Doktrin does not distinguish matters that are essential, common core for most Brethren, and those who are peripheral. It seems to use scripture to establish a set of distinctive doctrines and practices, rather than to encourage open enquiry about important points of doctrine. Although the book, at points, does state "some denominations believe that . . .", or "some Christians approve of/agree to . . .",[16] the book makes little or no concession to the fact that some of its teachings are not held by other orthodox Christians, or even all Christian Brethren,[17] or that there may be other ways of interpreting the passages cited. It, therefore, becomes difficult to distinguish the common core of Christian truth from more-distinctive doctrines of the Brethren, or even personal emphases.

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[14] Under the heading *sios* (church) the topics include baptism, communion, giving, the priesthood of all believers, prayer, the will of God, the eternal security of the believer, witnessing, church leaders, elders, deacons, false elders, teachers and prophets, and how the church can correct elders. In all these cases, Bible references are used to support practices in the Bible to develop an authoritative pattern.

[15] The author of this article made a survey of the doctrinal positions of elders in a sample of NZ Brethren churches. As many as 38 percent of these elders questioned the correctness of this approach to eschatology.

[16] "*Sampela lotu i bilip olsem*", "[*s*]*ampela Kristen i orait long*", Wainwright and Baker, *Baibel Doktrin*, pp. 89, 109 [translations mine].

[17] Wainwright states his purpose in writing thus: *Mi bin redim dispela stadi buk bilong helpim sios bilong God i ken save moa long Jisas Krais na bikpela plen bilong em bilong kisim bek ol manmeri bilong em.* (I have prepared this study book to help the church of God to know more about Jesus Christ and His big plan to save His people [translation mine]), *Baibel Doktrin*, p. 2.

A major feature of this approach is the way it handles scripture, using a "proof text" approach to make a teaching point, followed by one or more Bible references for the reader to examine, and to validate the point at issue. This is different from a more-typical evangelical method of biblical interpretation, whereby the student would expect to read whole sections of scripture (usually as literary units of meaning) with the aim of establishing both the literary and historical contexts to understand the selected passage in its original setting. Exegesis, on these lines, is needed before applying the passage to the present situation, or comparing this passage with other texts, with a view to developing a coherent doctrinal position.

When this process is short-circuited, and verses are extracted from their contexts, to prove separately-established points of teaching, the way is open for the scriptures to be misunderstood in their original intent, and to be misapplied. Fortunately, for missionaries like Wainwright and Baker, this approach does not normally lead people too far astray. Their knowledge of the thrust of the whole of scripture acts as something of a safeguard in much of what they say. However, the approach has other weaknesses.

Points are sometimes made that are not being directly established in the text, but appear an oblique reference to the point at issue. For example, *Baibel Doktrin* has a section called "*Sampela pasin bilong helpim yu i stap gut wantaim God*" (Things to help you stay in fellowship with God).[18] Abraham is held up as an example of someone who followed God. But the point is established by Gen 19:27, a verse which carries forward the narrative rather than making the point of the heading.

Proof-texts function satisfactorily only if their literary and historical backgrounds are well known.[19] Most CBC Bible school graduates have

[18] Wainwright and Baker, *Baibel Doktrin*, p. 102.

[19] Arthur G. Clarke's *New Testament Church Principles*, 3rd edn, Kilmarnock UK: John Ritchie, 1962, is a parallel example of the proof-text method of establishing doctrine, in that case, Brethren ecclesiology. It relies on a well-taught readership, as was often found in the Brethren of Clarke's era, to evaluate the truth it sought to establish.

been taught a useful Bible survey that would cover, broadly, the social, political, and religious background to the books of the Bible. It is more doubtful that they appreciate the importance of the literary contexts, and the way literary genre affect interpretation. However, the Bible teaching ministry among the Brethren is not restricted to those who are Bible school graduates, nor is *Baibel Doktrin* intended only for such. In fact, the typical Brethren understanding of the priesthood of all believers allows at least men to teach the Bible, regardless of theological qualifications. For such people, a proof-text method provides little assurance that the text will be understood in its context, unless that context is pointed out.

The process involved in furnishing the reader with "proof-texts" is especially risky with new and semi-literates, who are frequently struggling to get meaning from the text. They focus on making sense of words and phrases rather than larger units of meaning. They do not naturally read an isolated verse in its wider context. The Bible school teacher needs to take more than usual time to guide his or her reader to the wider context. If not, the student is encouraged to read the text, and attempt to derive meaning non-contextually.[20]

a. Viewing This Method Through the Perspective of the Globalisation and Contextualisation of Theology

What perspective do the concepts of globalisation and contextualisation provide on the "study outline" method? We draw these and wider aspects together.

[20] Proof-text approaches are risky, because "false" teachings, as well as orthodox ones, are established from scripture by this method. It is on the basis of a non-contextual reading of 1 Cor 15:29, for example, that Mormons (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) find a basis for being baptised for the dead. Rather than protecting the flock from false teachers, this approach to scripture sometimes opens the door to its misuse.

i. Globalisation and the "study outline" method

The "study outline", combined with a "proof-text" approach, is based very largely on a set of assumptions that can be regarded as a globalised version of Christian teaching. We note four levels of globalisation.

> *Universal gospel message.* The Brethren, along with other evangelicals, regard the gospel of Jesus Christ as universally salvific for all peoples, in all times and places. The gospel must be preached to all for all to hear and believe (Rom 10:13-15). Those who do not actively believe are lost, and subject to judgment in hell.[21] Its faithful presentation is to be urged upon all believers in Jesus.
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> *A globally-applicable scripture.* The whole of scripture, both Old and New Testaments, is regarded as inspired and authoritative. Lessons for the Christian life can be learned from any part of scripture. This is a view that many evangelicals would share.[22]
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> *A global pattern of church practices. Baibel Doktrin* endorses the view that a pattern of Christianity, as observable in the New Testament, is desirable globally, and is to be reproduced as closely as possible in every cultural context. Consequently, Brethren-type fellowships worldwide can be recognised by a set of common practices. Certainly, cultural adjustments need to be made, but there are limits to this type of deviation from "New Testament Christianity". A core of these practices would include the weekly celebration of the "breaking of bread", baptism of believers by immersion, the silence of women in mixed public worship,[23] especially in any teaching role, and the autonomy of the local church, under the rule of a male, plural eldership.

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[21] Wainwright and Baker, *Baibel Doktrin*, pp. 141-142.

[22] Similarly, the various statements of historic creeds, like the Apostles' Creed, would find endorsement in *Baibel Doktrin*.

[23] Increasingly, in "progressive" Brethren fellowships in Western countries, women are allowed to participate audibly in worship, and, somewhat less commonly, in teaching. Several Brethren churches in New Zealand now allow women to be elders.

> *The proof-text method of Bible study.* Using this method, teaching points can be made in the briefest of forms, often only a line or two. The reader is then asked to look up one or more references from the Bible and see how these endorse and validate the point being made. A globalised interpretation of the text is thereby offered to the reader.

Of the weaknesses in this method of Bible study, one is that experienced cross-cultural exegetes are aware that biblical passages are frequently read quite differently in varying cultural contexts.[24] A less-directive discussional approach would alert the teacher to other possible understandings of the text. Another weakness is the tendency towards a single, dogmatic interpretation of the text, where there may be optional readings. Bible verses are used to substantiate a particular viewpoint. Finally, the method is less open than other approaches to a study of the worldview, and cultural background, of the text. A rather wooden understanding of how scripture applies in other contexts is, therefore, encouraged.

ii. Contextualisation and the "study outline" method

Some aspects of *Baibel Doktrin* demonstrate a healthy contextualisation. The book is written in Melanesian Pidgin, the *lingua franca* of the majority of CBC members. The attempt to communicate to literate Pidgin-speakers is commendable.[25]

The method used has, however, two significant contextual weaknesses – its failure to place biblical texts in their historical and literary context, and the failure to grapple, at any deep level, with the immediate context of Melanesian communities.

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[24] For example, see Robert McAfee Brown, *Unexpected News: Reading the Bible with Third-World Eyes*, Philadelphia PA: Westminster Press, 1984.

[25] However, communicating some doctrinal concepts in Pidgin seemed a difficult exercise, and, on occasion, English words and Anglicisms were used that would not be understood by the majority of adult, Pidgin-speaking Melanesians.

Verses must be read in the light of their *biblical contexts*. It cannot be satisfactorily understood without acknowledging that the divine Creator has revealed Himself to particular people, within their mental and socio-cultural frames of reference, in ways that are immediately significant. One important aspect of biblical faith is that God has entered into human history in specific times and places. Many scripture passages are difficult to interpret without this.

Three cautions seem warranted. Firstly, juxtaposing a variety of verses from very different historical contexts, without further explanation, is confusing to the marginally-literate reader. Secondly, the brevity of explanation makes it difficult to understand what is meant, or why particular references are included. Thirdly, without an explanation of the wider biblical context, suspect deductions could be made from the process. A much greater knowledge of biblical history, and socio-economic conditions of the nation of Israel, and the Middle East as a whole, is assumed, than is warranted for the likely reader of the book.

Another weakness is that *the Melanesian context* seems to have been given insufficient attention. The book follows a pattern found among the Brethren Bible teachers in Western countries.[26] However, we question how a book of Bible doctrines should be modified to engage PNG readers, and lead them into a good understanding of how to apply scripture in their own context. What issues are the burning ones in Melanesian minds? How do Melanesian worldviews impinge on the process? Can teachers assume that a study guide will be used effectively to answer the serious theological and ethical issues facing the country's churches? At least the following factors need further consideration.

The Melanesian concepts of the spirit world need to be understood and dealt with. The book contains few references to such Pidgin concepts of the spirit world as "*marila*", "*posin*", "*sanguma*", "*masalai*", "*spirit nogut*", "*gutpela spirit*", "*tambaran*", "*glasman*", and so forth. At what points do the scriptures coincide with, revise, amplify, and confront traditional Melanesian perspectives? That is left a largely open question.

[26] *Baibel Doktrin* follows the pattern of Clarke's *New Testament Church Principles.*

The book seems to vary little from the answers given in Western contexts. The section on angels, for example, discusses good and bad angels, but it is not until the last two pages that we find reference to the work of evil spirits, and some useful points made about the way they interact with human beings.[27]

A deeper engagement is required to treat issues of community and social ethics – the extended family, justice, the environment, government and society. What role should Christians play in government, and the modern economy? Does the Bible speak into these situations? Or does it speak only about the church and its order, personal piety, and marriage and family.

A study outline approach might be more useful if it had been built around the questions and issues that Papua New Guineans are asking, rather than presenting mainly Western answers, and from a framework derived in Western church contexts.

In summary, then, the "proof-text" approach to communicating theology is heavily weighted in favour of the global end of the global-contextual polarity. Its approach to scripture is determined by the authors' orientation, with minimal attention to the literary or cultural context of the verses cited. The contemporary perspectives of the authors, and the limited literacy levels of many readers, tend also to inhibit its relevance to the readers' context.

2. THE "COMMENTARY" APPROACH TO BRETHREN THEOLOGY

Another approach used in the CBC Bible schools is to teach theology as an integral part of the study of the Bible, book by book. The method wins approval among the Brethren for it brings together concepts developed from the Bible in theological statements, explanation of the meaning of the biblical text, and the study of the text from which theology is derived. It is close in concept to the function of the sermon in explaining and applying lessons drawn from the text of scripture. Furthermore, in the running commentary form that teaching notes take

[27] Wainwright and Baker, *Baibel Doktrin*, pp. 150-151.

when dealing with passages from the Bible, the teaching is reinforced, on a number of occasions, and derived as they emerge from the text.

While lecturing students at BTTS at Amanab, Les Marsh conceived the idea of producing a series of commentaries on all the books of the New Testament in Melanesian Pidgin. The *Baibel Tisa* commentaries are the published product, derived from Marsh's classroom teaching.[28]

Like Wainwright and Baker, Marsh is aware of the wider impact of publication, and he, too, is careful to provide directions about how the commentaries should be used. Each volume contains a description of the purposes of the commentary, and a set of directions as to how they are best used.

By undertaking this huge project, Marsh has provided the Pidgin-speaking Christian public of PNG with an extensive and usable explanation of the whole of the New Testament, a valuable contribution. The full set is comprehensive, covering every book of the New Testament. It is a detailed verse-by-verse commentary. Sometimes two, and occasionally three, verses are treated together, but the vast majority of verses are treated individually. Thirdly, it is devotional and practical. Marsh aims to apply the word of God to individual and corporate Christian life and work.

In using the commentary, Marsh offers the reader seven steps.

1. Keep your Bible open every time you use the commentary. Read the Bible, chapter-by-chapter, first.
2. Read again the part of the Bible you want to study.

[28] L. A. Marsh, *Rom: Baibel Tisa: Buk 6*, Wewak PNG: Christian Books Melanesia, 1980, p. vii. Marsh includes a statement, similar to the following, in the introduction ("*Toksave bilong man i raitim dispela buk*") to all his commentaries: "*Mi redim dispela buk taim mi autim tok na lainim ol sumatin long Baibel Tisa Trening Skul long Amanab*." Marsh later makes the point, however, that the commentary is the product of many years of personal Bible study.

3. Read from this book, verse-by-verse, along with reading the Bible, verse-by-verse again, to get the meaning of each verse.
4. Think again about what you have read, so that it bears fruit in your life, and you understand what God is showing you.
5. Write something [that is, what you have learned] in an exercise book to help you remember.
6. Answer the questions, when you have finished reading. This will test your knowledge.
7. Pray that God will help you understand well all that is said, and obey whatever talk has spoken to your heart.[29]

Marsh integrates his personal devotion to Jesus Christ with his many years of Bible study, and thus encourages the reader to study the biblical text in the same manner. In fact, the biblical text is included in the commentary, passage-by-passage, helpfully dividing the text into manageable units. In writing the commentary, Marsh has modelled a style of Brethren and evangelical study of the text for the purpose of deriving spiritual and practical lessons for Christian living.

The commentaries follow a conservative, evangelical approach to the text. In each book, the traditional authorship remains unquestioned,[30] and is reinforced by "godly imagination",[31] and brief introductions about the book and commentary.

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[29] My translation from Tok Pisin.

[30] Matthew is Levi of Matt 9:9, one of the 12 apostles; Mark is John Mark, whose mother is referred to in Acts 12:12, a resident of Jerusalem, and convert of Peter; Luke is the doctor who accompanied Paul on his journeys; and so on.

[31] In the introduction to *Matyu*, Marsh pictures Matthew sitting in his tax office writing up his tax records, when the shadow of Jesus falls on his page. He looks up and looks into the eyes of Jesus, and hears His authoritative voice say, "Follow me", and then He turns and walks away. Matthew remains seated, but he keeps on thinking about Jesus. He is different. He has authority. His eyes are bright. So Matthew closes his books and follows Jesus. This is a dramatic expansion of Matt 9:9, L. A. Marsh, *Matyu*, 1991, p. 1.

In the earlier volumes, Marsh listed the commentaries he had found helpful in preparation. Usually these included the relevant volume of William Barclay's *Daily Study Bible,* a daily devotional style of popular scholarship; the relevant volume in the *Tyndale Commentary* series, a basic exegetical commentary; and, generally, a conservative commentary, providing a supporting doctrinal perspective.[32]

a. Baibel Tisa *Commentaries and Brethren Theology*

The *Baibel Tisa* commentaries have several strengths. They offer explanatory comment for the whole New Testament, and refer, by cross-reference, to passages of the Old Testament as well. Their detail sets an example of Brethren "lay" Christian theology that may inspire Papua New Guineans to attain the same level of devotion to God's word. In the absence of other Bible school study materials, these have become basic tools for many CBC Bible schools.[33]

Several aspects of how they transmit theology are noteworthy. Firstly, a developed theology lies behind the volumes, and emerges explicitly in some passages, but it is implicit throughout. For example, an explicit theology is stated with reference to the different kinds of spiritual gifts listed in 1 Cor 12:8-11, where Marsh discusses whether all the listed gifts are for today. He claims that some gifts were given to strengthen the preached word, but others were for starting the church, just as the apostles were given to commence the church.[34] Use is made of 1 Cor 13:8-10 and Eph 2:20-21 to support this division of spiritual gifts into permanent and temporary.[35] Having taken this position, Marsh then

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[32] Examples are: For *Jon: Baibel Tisa: Buk 4* – William MacDonald, *The Gospel of John*, Emmaus Bible School; For *Rom: Baibel Tisa: Buk 6* – William McDonald [sic], Emmaus Bible School; For *Revelesin: Baibel Tisa: Buk 16* – John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*.

[33] In some cases, their purchase has been subsidised for the students, making them even more attractive.

[34] ["*God i givim sampela presen bilong statim wok bilong God tasol na ol i stap long sotpela taim.*"]

[35] L. A. Marsh, *1 na 2 Korin: Baibel Tisa: Buk 7,* Wewak PNG: Christian Books Melanesia, 1987), pp. 157-158.

proceeds to assure his readers not to worry if their local church has not been given all the gifts.

Fundamentally, this theology promotes an orthodox evangelicalism, but with Brethren emphases emerging, including ecclesiology, a non-Pentecostal pneumatology, as discussed above, and a version of Brethren eschatology of the dispensational variety.

Secondly, issues of textual criticism, and variant interpretations, are not raised. For example, the student is not made aware, except by the unexplained square brackets in the quoted Tok Pisin text, of the textual problems surrounding the alternative endings of Mark's gospel.[36]

Thirdly, the approach to theological understanding is deductive. It aims to transmit to the student a given body of understandings and interpretations of the text. These have been worked out by the "hard work" of the author over many years, and are the product of his distilled wisdom.[37] Students are expected to read and agree with the commentary. The questions at the end of each chapter test reader comprehension of the text of scripture, rather than invite a deeper study of the Bible. In the classroom, undoubtedly, students are attracted to the Bible by the personal charisma and devotion of the teacher. But this enthusiasm is more difficult to convey in book form.

Fourthly, a danger of the commentary is that, since the teacher has done the exegesis prior to writing the commentary, it may easily come between the student and the biblical text as "the way to think" theologically.

Finally, in the interaction between biblical understanding, faith, and praxis, the emphasis is undoubtedly on the first of these. Cognitive understanding of the text is assumed to be the essential foundation. It is also assumed that faith and action will follow.

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[36] L. A. Marsh, *Mak: Baibel Tisa: Buk 2*, pp. 255-257.

[37] "*Long dispela rot mi bin hatwok long redim dispela buk . . .*" [In this way, I have worked hard to prepare this book . . .], L. A. Marsh, *Baibel Tisa: Buk 2*, p. vii, and parallels.

b. Global and Contextual Implications of the "Commentary" Approach

As with *Baibel Doktrin*, the doctrine of the inspiration of scripture, and its authority and adequacy as a guide to personal and corporate life, are global theological commitments, along with other evangelical commitments. Beyond this, Brethren positions on some controversial issues, common in the 1950s and 1960s are similarly advocated as global. In fact, the commentary approach globalises the personal viewpoints of the author, especially where it does not discuss optional interpretations of the text. In a language and cultural context, where only one commentary is available, there is a danger of theological narrowness developing. The assumption is easily made that the commentary gives the final word on the meaning of the text, and no other applications are likely or necessary.

The commentary approach is considerably more context sensitive than a proof-text one. The former makes several important accommodations to the historical and literary context of the original text. The break-up of the commentary into sections, by including the biblical text, assists the reader to become sensitive to contextual issues. The verse-by-verse approach, however, while ensuring depth of coverage, actually limits contextual sensitivity, making it more difficult to determine important matters from those of lesser significance.

The commentary approach also has considerable value with reference to the contemporary context. It presents the finished product of exegesis in the Melanesian Pidgin language,[38] and models a way to apply the biblical text. It is the product of active classroom teaching in PNG, so the applications are more relevant than translations from other languages and Western contexts tend to be.

However, there are at least two major problems of contextuality with the commentary approach. One is that the applications, the author makes, may inhibit fresh light from scripture by the commentary reader.

[38] Much of the author's study of the text was done in English.

Interaction with the biblical text is largely an internal mental process, completed prior to writing, rather than involving the reader.[39] The other is that such a commentary attaches a particular interpretation and application to the text, making it a static approach within a changing context. As the context changes, whether through time, or by transfer into another different context, it becomes less relevant.

In this approach to communicating theology, then, the balance is considerably tipped in favour of the global rather than the contextual.

3. THE "INDUCTIVE BIBLE STUDY" APPROACH TO THEOLOGY

Another approach is developed by Graham Erb[40] and by Reggie Howard,[41] who are training Papua New Guinea Christians to study the Bible for themselves, using an inductive method. The rationale behind this is to equip Christians with the skills of Bible study, so that they will understand the Bible better, and apply it to their personal Christian lives. We will outline the method, and then see how it develops a workable theology.

The method uses a three-step process, and the training is essentially practical, explaining the process, and developing the skills, on particular passages of scripture. Based on Howard's notes, the three-step process is:

a. *Observation:*[42] Using specified biblical passages,[43] the student is asked to observe and list all the people, individuals, or groups in the story. Then, taking each

[39] Alternative approaches would be, for example, to raise questions about application, or to emphasise that the author is making one application, and the reader may make others.

[40] Graeme Erb, personal communication.

[41] In Pidgin training courses he conducts. Reggie Howard, "*Baibel Stadi Kos*", (unpublished MS, Wewak PNG: National CBC office, nd), and "*Tisa Nots bilong Baibel Stadi Kos*", (unpublished MS, Wewak PNG: National CBC office, nd).

[42] Pidgin: *Lukluk gut long olgeta tok i stap.*

[43] Howard has used John 16:4-15; Mark 11:15-19; Luke 19:1-10; Col 2:6-10; Mal 1:11-14; Acts 19:11-20.

person or group, the student is asked to write down what the passage says about them. In epistolatory and prophetic passages, the people or characters change. In Col 2:6-19, the significant persons are "you" (plural) and "the Lord Jesus Christ". In Mal 1:11-14, they are "God" and "Israel".

b. *Interpretation:* The second step is built around the question, "What is God wanting to teach us from this passage?"[44] For this, the student is expected to write out a range of teaching points that emerge from the passage.

c. *Application:* The final step is practical application, and is built around the question, "What should I do to obey this talk?"[45]

Howard has developed this study method a stage further to train participants on how to develop a sermon. Beginning with the three steps listed above, he encourages prayer, and a focus on the needs of the congregation, during preparation. The sermon outline has three parts to it – introduction, sermon, and conclusion (Pidgin: *Kirapim tok*; *Autim tok*; *Pinisim tok*). The main body of the sermon is divided into several main points (Pidgin: *Bikpela poin*), and supporting details (Pidgin: *Sapot*). This seems a rather Western approach to sermon style.

For Christian theologising, one of the most impressive aspects of inductive methods of Bible study is that they do not commence with a given fully-fledged theology. This is built up over time, by consistent and diligent application of the method. That is not to say that a theology does not lie behind the method, especially in relation to scripture. It does. Space does not allow us to flesh out these theological assumptions. Suffice to say that evangelical Christianity, particularly Western and Brethren versions of it, ride comfortably with the essential ingredients of this implicit theology. Core ingredients of it include a respect for the

[44] Pidgin: *Skelim gut, God i laik skulim yumi long wanem ol samting long*.
[45] Pidgin: *Tingting gut, mi mas mekim wanem bilong bihainim dispela tok?*

detailed text of scripture, an expectation that God's Holy Spirit will speak personally, and specifically, through the text, and that God intends us to understand His Word, and to apply it to ourselves, personally.

The method has several strengths. One is that it insists on the priority of understanding the written text, as a first basic essential. It focuses on the actual events, words, and literal meaning of that text. Another strength is the focus on passages of scripture, as literary units. The participant is asked to take a whole passage, as broken up by textual headings (inserted as reading aids during the translation process).

The method attempts to be comprehensive about the teachings drawn from the immediate text under study. It is also designed to avoid mere head knowledge, by emphasising the need for practical change, in light of the study done.

However, there are dangers and weaknesses in the method, too. It is possible that more will be drawn from the text than was intended by the original writer. By focusing on a very small text, and expecting action in the light of it, there is a danger of unbalanced and exaggerated emphases. Theology and praxis must relate to the whole of scripture, and not only scripture in fragmentary form.[46]

Secondly, the considerable attention to the immediate literary context of scripture must be balanced by the wider context of the Christian community. If used as a method of personal Bible study, little allowance is made in the method for input by the wider Christian community. Such insight may be gleaned through exegetical commentaries,[47] and through the living Christian community, whether that is the Bible school classroom, a Bible study discussion group, or the local congregation.

[46] In CBC Bible schools, the text of scripture has been translated into the common language. A risk is present that the meaning of the text may have been skewed in the translation process. But all biblical studies of translated texts, where access to the original is not available, suffer from this, not only this method.

[47] For the Pidgin speaker, the ***Baibel Tisa*** commentaries, being more devotional than exegetical, are only part of the answer.

Personal use of the inductive method needs to be checked against that of the wider interpretive community, if a balanced theology is to result.

The method also appears to take insufficient account of the original context of scripture. It would seem that the second step, asking the question of what the text *teaches*, disposes too quickly of what the text *taught* (and how it functioned) in the original context of the writer, and the probable first recipients.

A final weakness to mention is that the method is developed for use in an essentially Western and literary context. It develops skills of personal Bible study. It encourages personal and individual action in response to the word. It provides the literate Christian leader, working in an oral and non-literate, or only partially literate, community with the resources for continuing personal growth. The literary skills are essential tools for a Bible-based Christianity. But they are inadequate, on their own, for a strong Christian community.

In Melanesia, the method should be developed to include the dynamic of group interaction with the text of scripture. As a class-based method, with teacher-student and student-student interaction, and corporate wisdom emerging from this process, the method has considerable strength. When accompanied by studies in historical theology, biblical surveys, and Melanesian cultural perspectives, there is great potential. But the wider church community is ignored, at very great risk. Theologising is much more than a personal task; it is a corporate one.

a. Global and Contextual Aspects of the Inductive Bible Study Method

The inductive Bible study method has been developed in the West,[48] as a method of developing an approach to Bible study that is based on adequate understanding of the text, and is applicable to personal spiritual formation, and practical Christian action. It is regarded as a global

[48] Howard G. Hendricks, and William D. Hendricks, *Living by the Book*, Chicago IL: Moody Press, 1991, among others, have developed this approach to an inductive Bible study method.

methodology, applicable in all literate cultures. The philosophical assumption is that every Christian should adopt a similar methodology, to become strong in their faith, and consistent in their Christian practice. The belief that this method, on its own, is sufficient to grow a strong Christian community, is highly suspect, being a product of the individualistic Western society. This globalisation is transmitted rather easily, along with other Western perspectives, through the interaction of Melanesia with the West. Accommodation to the need for the private study of scripture to be integrated into Melanesian Christian community is a necessary contextualising process. Part of the reason for this is that the integrated Melanesian perspective may alert the Bible student to applications to the wider society that the student on his/her own may overlook.

Further contextualisation of the inductive method is needed, in two respects. The first is to counter the danger of non-contextual readings of scripture that may occur through focus on detailed study of units of the text, without sensitivity to its wider historical and literary settings. The second is the process of ensuring that the Bible is applied within the modern context of the Melanesian Christian community. To do this, personal study of the inductive method will need to be supplemented by the insights of both the history of interpretation and the wider living Christian community. In Melanesia, a dialogical and group approach to the method needs to be adopted.

In summary, then, the inductive method lies much more towards the contextual pole than the global, but still retains some weaknesses from its development within an alien Western culture. It requires further adaptation to be appropriate for Melanesia in terms of, at least, corporate application, and it needs to be supplemented by other approaches to be fully integrated into the Melanesian context.

C. Global and Contextual Aspects of Communicating Brethren Theology

Three approaches to the study of scripture have been described and evaluated from the perspectives of globalisation and contextualisation.

In all three, global and contextual influences were involved, but resulted in contrasting balances between them. Of the three, the "study outline" and the "commentary" approach began with a prior exegesis of the text, with a theology largely developed in a Western context. In both, while modifications were made to take account of the Melanesian context, the assumption was that Melanesian readings of the text would arrive at the same understandings as those of the authors. Therefore, they globalised the results of the interpretive process. The Bible school student is expected to agree with the theological understandings of the authors. In their passion to communicate doctrinal "truth" (the study outline method), or a particular understanding of the meaning of the Bible (the commentary approach), both appear to fail to adequately address contextual questions emerging from within the Melanesian environment. Where they are addressed, responses are already worked out, explicitly or implied.

The commentary approach to hermeneutics attempts to lead the student to adopt theological positions by encouraging a reading of the scriptural text, thereby emphasising the importance of the original literary context, and supplying something of the historical context in its exegesis. In that sense it is more sensitive to a contextual approach than the proof-texting method of the "study outline". The latter not only assumes a globalised theology, but also a globalised hermeneutical system.

The "inductive" approach is in marked contrast to the other two. It assumes a globally high view of the significance of scripture, for both theology and practice. It seeks to maintain the integrity of the text, and to develop a method of understanding, interpreting, and applying it. The Bible is treated as a global message. The inductive approach is, therefore, sensitive to both the original and the present reader's contexts. Its major potential weakness is that it tends to play down the important role of the corporate life of the believing community in understanding the text. Its original purpose was as a personal Bible study method. However, the Bible school context, in which the approach is taught, mitigates this individualistic orientation to some extent. Even so, the method does not ensure that major issues of the local or wider context

will be engaged by scripture. The "inductive" method, therefore, must be complemented by a sensitive dialogue with the local Christian community in its context, and between it and scripture.

D. Developing A Biblically-Based Approach to Theological Education

Our survey of the CBC Bible schools has demonstrated how a distinctively-Brethren theology, with its strong emphasis on an authoritative, inspired scripture, has developed into a strong commitment to a biblically-based curriculum. Each school has attempted to cover all the available scriptures in as much depth as possible. The conviction that the whole of the Christian life, including church life, should be based on the Bible, has influenced curriculum formation towards some parts of scripture, which are seen to be more significant than others. Other theological underpinnings, common among the Brethren, could also be shown to have impacted the process.

In examining how theology is transmitted in the CBC Bible schools, three approaches have been outlined. All approaches have a common loyalty to scripture, but develop that in different ways. The study outline example makes assumptions about a global theology, and, in particular, a universal pattern of New Testament church life. It employed a non-contextual proof-text method to achieve this. The commentary assumes a global interpretation of the text of scripture. The inductive method advocates a globally-applicable method of studying the Bible. This article has critiqued each of these, pointing to ways in which CBC Bible schools need to strengthen their training, making it more sensitive to the Melanesian context.

We now raise the broader question of whether Brethren theological commitments provide a contribution to theological education. If, for example, the Bible is the reference point for the whole of the Christian life, does it also provide guidelines for theological education. In 1976,

John Hitchen contributed a paper to a MATS symposium.[49] He outlined a series of biblical models for ministerial training, drawing lessons from Old Testament examples, Jesus, and Paul, which he applied, in five key ways, to Melanesia.[50] Although the specific applications from 1976 need updating, Hitchen's strongly-biblical approach presents a significant model, from which Brethren Bible schools can learn. Most recently, and on a broader canvas, Robert Banks has developed a similar methodology.[51] From a study of comparable biblical material to that used by Hitchen, Banks developed a "missional" model of training, offering guidelines as to how current practices of leadership training should be redirected, in the light of his biblical study.

A significant opportunity exists now for Bible school administrators and teachers to use the Bible in ways demonstrated by Banks and Hitchen, to rethink the direction of their leadership training methods. Part 4 of this series will address some aspects of this.

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[49] John Hitchen, "Models of Serving: Some Biblical Patterns of Ministerial Training and Their Relevance for Melanesia Today", *Point* 1 (1976), pp. 85-121.

[50] (1) Selection and recruitment for training; (2) Training for ministry as a continuing process, not once in a life-time; (3) The principles of apprenticeship, example, and counselling; (4) Developing the right ideas about the nature of ministry; and (5) Ministry must increasingly become fellowship with Christ.

[51] Robert Banks, *Reenvisioning Theological Education: Exploring a Missional Alternative to Current Models*, Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1999.