

**CONTEXTUALIZATION IN DIASPORA MISSION:
AN AFRICAN CHRISTIAN’S PERSPECTIVE OF THE MISSION
AGENDA IN THE US**

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INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the concept of contextualization in the quest to fulfilling God’s redemptive mission by the diaspora Christian community. It addresses this key mission imperative from the lens of an African Christian leader residing in the United States. It highlights the need for immigrants; especially Christian leaders of African descent who are already involved or in the process of church planting in the US, or participating with majority culture of American churches in mission.

Diaspora is the movement or migration of persons away from their native land to a new location (i.e. a new host country abroad or urban center domestically). This move may be voluntary, or involuntary. Craig Ott argues that migration, which has recently been intensified by globalization, has played a significant role in Christian mission from the early church to date.² Jehu Hanciles postulates on the significance of the diaspora in the missionary agenda thus:

...migration has always played a critical role in global Christian expansion. It is impossible to get away from the fact that human migration – the experience of uprootedness, displacement, and other forms of

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² Craig Ott, “Diaspora and Relocation as Divine Impetus for Witness in the Early Church” in Enoch Wan (ed.), *Diaspora Missiology: Theory, Methodology and Practice* (Portland, OR: Institute of Diaspora Studies, 2011), pp. 73-94.

mobility – is among the fundamental features of Christian missionary enterprise.³

The African Missionary in the United States

The mission of spreading the gospel to the uttermost ends of the world is an achievable goal in this generation due to factors such as globalization, information and communication technology. What is not as easy is the penetration of the gospel within America's increasingly diversified cultural settings.

America is one of the most exciting places in the world for new comers. A young nation in comparison with other characterized by rapid population growth and development at many fronts. Consequently, it attracts people from all over the world who desire to live within her borders.

The *Hart-Celler Immigration Reform Act of 1965*, with its subsequent amendments, has ensured a large influx of immigrants to the US from different parts of the world. It is no surprise that Africans make up a sizable portion of diaspora communities. Immigrants come with their cultures and lifestyles, so much that it is common assertion that diversity is a hallmark of the American experience. Many people come to America's shores with perceptions derived from books and the news media. Often after arrival, they realize that knowing about a people differs from knowing and living with and among them.

The American Church has held a prominent place in missions from the 19th to the early 21st Century. This has changed as the church in America continues to witness a decline in membership and impact. This consequence stems from a misconception of

³ Jehu J. Hanciles "In the Shadow of the Elephant: Bishop Crowther and the African Missionary Movement" especially, p. 9 being an inaugural lecture paper presented at the opening of the Crowther Center for Mission Education, CMS, Oxford) excerpted from www.cms-uk.org, accessed July 5, 2012.

mission as God intended it to be. Traditional mission had concentrated on foreign lands while leaving the home turf unattended. This thinking was so pervasive in the age of Christendom when there was the assumption that Europe, America and the West was already Christian in culture, thought, policy and government, without need of evangelism and mission. Samuel Escobar notes:

Christendom presupposed the predominance of Christianity in Western societies and a certain degree of influence of Christian ideas and principles on the social life of nations and on their international policies.⁴ ...Western churches understood themselves as sending churches, and they assumed the destination of their sending to be pagan reaches of the world that needed both the gospel and “the benefits of Western civilization”.⁵

In line with the idea, gigantic cathedrals dotted the West’s landscape as evidence. The western Christian’s responsibility was to take the gospel to yonder, dark places since (as was assumed) the people at home were Christians or would be. This has proven fatally wrong. African missiologist, Tokunboh Adeyemo sadly surmises:

The most striking reality facing Christian missions in the world today is the decline of Christianity in the West, largely caused by a deadening, anti-Christian, humanistic, secularist philosophy. It is disheartening to see church buildings being converted into cinema houses and entertainment centers in Europe. More and more young people in the West are committing themselves to Eastern mystery religions and cults such as Transcendental Meditation, Hare Krishna, Yoga and New Age.⁶

The reality is that as the philosophies of the enlightenment and humanistic secularism engulfed the ideas space, organized religion retreated to a safe spot. In its place, human logic, diversification of options for self-salvation and fulfillment, proud feats at self-preservation, and enhancement of human pleasure took center stage.

⁴ Samuel Escobar, “The Global Scenario at the turn of the century” in William D. Taylor (ed.), *Global Missiology for the 21st Century: The Iguassu Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000), p. 34.

⁵ Darrell L. Guder, (ed.) *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), p. 6.

⁶ Tokunboh Adeyemo, “Profiling a Globalized and Evangelical Missiology” in William D. Taylor (ed.), *Global Missiology for the 21st Century*, pp. 259-270 at p. 266.

Christendom had promoted cooperation between Christianity and state, giving the church prominence and influence. This only lasted temporarily when law and public policy of that time contained dashes of that influence which continued until the civil rights era. By the 1960s to the 1970s, the civil rights movement had substantially taken center stage, forcing the church and its message to lesser relevance. Today, the deification of the individual, his rights and happiness are more relevant. Related to that is the adulation of postmodernist, relativist, and secularist philosophies that trump on objective, tangible reality while scorning the spiritual. Escobar aptly notes:

...Christianity has lost a grip on contemporary Western societies. The rejection of Christian values could be understood within the larger frame of a rejection of ideologies and worldviews that had been shaped by the ideas of the Enlightenment...we have the predominance of feeling and revolt against reason, the revival of paganism in elements such as the cult of the body, the search for ever more sophisticated forms of pleasure, and the ritualization of life.⁷

Today, “North America is as much a mission field as any other nation or people group on the face of the earth.”⁸

Scholars trace the wave of the Christian faith in the global South witnessing exponential growth while the Northern Hemisphere, which includes the United States, continues to wane in number, church attendance, and evangelism. A recent Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life poll of the Pew Research Center shows that for the first time, a larger percentile of Americans does not identify itself with organized church membership.⁹ It is no surprise that Jenkins states: “the two main centers of Christianity

⁷ Samuel Escobar, “The Global Scenario at the turn of the century” in William D. Taylor (ed.), *Global Missiology for the 21st Century*, p. 35 supra.

⁸ Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st - Century* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), p. 18.

⁹For more information, please see <http://religions.pewforum.org/pdf/report-religious-landscape-study-full.pdf>

will be Africa and Latin America....”¹⁰

Christian immigrants of African descent come to the United States for various reasons but end up bearing the missionary mantle. Hanciles postulates:

African immigrant churches...are characterized by a strong missionary vision that echoes the exalted aims of the earlier and still forceful Western missionary movement....Such religious initiatives form part of a remarkable and growing trend within the American Christian experience....¹¹

Many African Christian immigrants find themselves ill equipped to initiate, build and nurture churches and ministries in the west. On arrival in the United States, they grapple with survival issues, and cultural values they must relate with but which they find difficult to connect with. They lack platform(s), or at best connect with a limited, occasional network of people of similar perceptions and worldviews, and are at points drawn to nostalgic feelings that often deprive them of potential and possibilities. For a missionary, it is necessary that he participates in daily living with the people to whom he is sent. Sometimes this poses a challenge, making proper communication crucial. The plurality of worldviews, perceptions and values intrinsic within American culture makes contextualization of the gospel a necessity, not an option.

Contextualization: Defining a Concept and Its Priority in Cross-cultural Mission

Every person with a message needs to communicate it in such a way that it will elicit a positive response. The purpose of contextualization is the need to effectively communicate a message that connects with the audience. Where communication is lost,

¹⁰ Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: the Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 12.

¹¹ Jehu J. Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom: Globalization, African Migration, and the Transformation of the West* (New York, NY: Orbis Books (Mary Knoll), 2008), p. 248.

or was never done, it invariably means that the message was either distorted in the manner (method) or object (means, invariably the person) of presentation. Context is indispensably required for cultural engagement and success in mission. Hugh Halter and Matt Smay define context as “the background understanding that God has been at work weaving together Spirit-led thoughts, dreams, and kingdom innovations in a city, in a neighborhood, and in the life of every person you’ll meet”¹², summarizing that missionaries need to do context “by becoming friends with people.”¹³ Context usually influences men’s communication, perspectives and preferences. J.R. Woodward goes further to say, “Communication is the medium for relationship, community, and culture.”¹⁴ Mission(s), especially in the diaspora, thrives on the assurance that the gospel penetrates through the culture of the host community, achieving God’s redemption purposes thereby. According to Charles H. Kraft, “If we are to reach people for Christ and to see them gathered into Christ-honoring and culture-affirming churches, we will have to deal with them within their culture and in terms of their worldview.”¹⁵ Context provides the gateway through which the missionary “enters the cultural matrix of the people (he) seeks to win.”¹⁶

Mkwaila quotes Wilbert Shenk, who defines *contextualization* as “a process whereby the gospel encounters a particular culture, calling forth faith and leading to the

¹² Hugh Halter and Matt Smay, *AND: The Gathered and Scattered Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), p. 55.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ J R Woodward, *Creating a Missional Culture: Equipping the Church for the sake of the World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2012), p. 67.

¹⁵ Charles H. Kraft, “Culture, Worldview and Contextualization” in Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne (eds.), *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, (3rd ed.) (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2000), pp. 384-396, esp. at p. 388.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 386.

formation of a faith community which is culturally authentic and authentically Christian.”¹⁷ Craig Ott expands Shenk’s statement:

Contextualization means relating the never-changing truths of scripture to ever-changing human contexts so that those truths are clear and compelling. It is the process of engaging culture in all its varied dimensions with biblical truth. Appropriate contextualization shapes the presentation of the gospel and the release of its transforming power in evangelism, lifestyle, church life, and social change. Thus a theology of mission must reflect on the process of contextualization, guiding the church in living out Christian faith in ways that are both faithful to biblical truth and relevant to specific cultural contexts.¹⁸

Contextualization is key to achieving God’s redemption plan. It is doubtful whether a missionary would be able to do anything without it; and that without it, the beautiful message known as the Gospel would be lost, humanity would still be groping in the darkness of sin, and all hope would be lost. Contextualization makes the message cognizable or interpretable, enabling the host or respondent to connect with it intelligibly.

Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch state:

Contextualization ... (is) the dynamic process whereby the constant message of the gospel interacts with specific, relative human situations. It involves an examination of the gospel in the light of the respondent’s worldview and then adapting the message, encoding it in such a way that it can become meaningful to the respondent.¹⁹

A missionary’s proper grasp of this principle will yield astounding results. The concept of contextualization is so important that Jesus Christ, in coming to earth and offering His life, is considered as archetype. In Philippians 2:5-8 (KJV), the Bible says:

¹⁷ Andrew Mkwaila, “Contextualization and the Challenge of Contemporary Pentecostal Missions from Africa to the Northern Hemisphere” in *Ethne: Online Journal for Pentecostal and Missional Leadership Studies* Vol.3, Issue 1, p. 4 accessed from www.antsonline.org/article2v2i1.html on May 5, 2012.

¹⁸ Craig Ott et al, *Encountering Theology of Mission: Biblical Foundations, Historical Developments, and Contemporary Issues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), p. 266.

¹⁹ Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st Century* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), p. 83.

Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.

Jesus Christ came into the world as a human being born of a virgin (in theological parlance, the incarnation), and lived in a village called Nazareth. After fulfilling His ministry, He gave Himself up to die on the cross. The principle here is that Jesus Christ migrated from His dwelling above to the earth below (a form of diaspora), became a human being (translation), and bridged a chasm that existed because of sin, for the purpose of saving humanity. According to Frost and Hirsch, “In the incarnation, God enters fully into close relational and physical proximity to humanity in the pursuit of reconciliation.”²⁰

Living with Intentionality: A Call to Identification in the Mission Agenda

Incarnation does not just happen. It involves a process that presents itself in several variants. One crucial element of that process is amenability with regard to persons, time, place, and experience. Amenability to God’s calling and leading is sometimes manifested in circumstances that present themselves in such a way that the missionary is left without option. However, it is difficult to believe that a missionary would willingly submit to fulfilling the call of God on the basis of circumstances alone. To demonstrate that willingness and availability is devoid of coincidental factors, the missionary lives the concept on the currency of intentionality. Incarnation is the result of intentionality in cross-cultural mission.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 54.

Incarnation requires one to relinquish that to which he might be rightly entitled, with the intent to connect with another person. It demands abandonment of privileges, honor, comfort, and convenience and the embracing of lack, suffering and being in want. As Ott puts it, “Mission in the spirit of Christ is an undertaking of selfless love, a surrender of rights and privileges, in order to serve and identify with others for the sake of the gospel.”²¹ Drawing from Philippians 2:5-8 from which he emphasizes that Jesus’ incarnation, expresses in “his commitments to identification and relinquishment”²², Frost commends Christians to imitate Jesus Christ. His thesis is that the incarnation initiative basically narrates how God draws close to man in order to reconcile him unto Himself. God accomplishes this by coming close to man physically and relationally. In doing this, He seeks a relationship that is built on trust. It follows that the African Christian leader needs physical and relational proximity to be able to see success in the mission agenda in the United States. This process ought to start and develop from his heart: “Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:5, KJV). The missionary action then follows from that incarnation attitude, identification being the primary and radical move.

Identification in missions is “the process in which the one who proclaims the good news must make every effort to get into touch with the listener. Man’s heart is not a clean slate that the gospel comes and writes upon for the first time. It is a complex tablet which has been scrawled upon and deeply engraved from birth to death.”²³ Identification occurs on two levels – the one from the missionary identifying the people and place of

²¹ Craig Ott et al, *Encountering Theology of Mission*, p. 104.

²² Michael Frost, *Exiles: Living Missionally in a Post-Christian Culture* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006), p. 54.

²³ William D. Reyburn, “Identification in the Missionary Task” in Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne (eds.), *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, (3rd ed.) (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2000), pp. 449-455, esp. at p. 450.

mission, and the other by the missionary understanding, embracing, and sharing community with the people among whom God appoints him as His redemptive agent. In practical terms, it requires the missionary to know (more than simply gathering facts about), and live within the culture of his host community, expressing “Christian truth in the thought patterns of (his) receptors.”²⁴ The canon or standard must not be a slavish following of the host culture, but living and delivering the gospel message in that culture within the ambit of Biblical authority. In the event that contradictions arise between the pull of culture and the teachings of the Bible, the latter must prevail. This is because when a missionary identifies with a culture with the aim of passing the message, he needs be wary that there exists the risk that the concept (contextualization) may fall into the subtle, surreptitious snare of syncretism. Kraft summarizes:

There are great risks involved in attempting to promote a Christianity that is culturally and biblically appropriate. The risk of syncretism is always present. *Syncretism* is the mixture of Christian assumptions with those worldview assumptions that are incompatible with Christianity so that the result is not biblical Christianity.²⁵

Of course this is not out of place but a given, bearing in mind that the missionary enterprise by itself involves great risk. In it God in Jesus Christ reconciled men (who were His enemies) to Himself and gave believers the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18-19, Rom. 5:10). In the context of the African Christian leader in the United States, the important initial step is to eliminate the assumption that the United States is a Christian nation.

However, preserving the notion that the culture is Christian may be compared to avoiding a ditch yet falling into a pit. Both in the act of belonging to the host culture and

²⁴ Supra, Kraft, p. 389.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 390.

the interpretation of Scripture, it may be necessary to develop sound biblical principles to live by. In order to strike the balance between not compromising on Biblical principles, and not raising unnecessary tension within the respondent, host community and culture, the missionary must utilize redemptive analogy. *Redemptive analogy* may be described as the set of tools (usually language in words, gestures or artifacts) by which the Christian on mission “facilitate(s) human understanding of redemption. The purpose of redemptive analogy is to precondition the mind in a culturally significant way to recognize Jesus as Messiah.”²⁶ Don Richardson²⁷ explains that when the missionary applies this principle in any culture, it yields three advantages, namely

- i. People are made aware of spiritual meaning dormant within their own culture;
- ii. (People) experience heightened insight into both the Scriptures and their own cultural heritage; and
- iii. “(People) are better prepared to share Christ meaningfully with other members of their society.”²⁸

Craig Ott gives a useful summary of the concept of redemption analogy and what it entails:

Every culture has elements that conform to God’s truth and other elements that violate it. Good contextualization recognizes this good and evil in every culture. It affirms the good in a culture by building links between the Bible and those good elements, speaking clearly and compellingly so that the gospel rings true and sounds authentic in that culture. It challenges the evil in a culture by speaking prophetically from scripture, disturbing those elements of the culture that violate God’s truth.²⁹

In incarnation, the necessity of proximity cannot be overemphasized. When a

²⁶ Don Richardson, “Redemptive Analogy” in Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne (eds.), *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, (3rd ed.) (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2000), p. 397.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 397-403 at p. 398. Don Richardson who pioneered mission work among the Sawi tribe in what was then Papua Guinea is also author of some missionary classics including *Peace Child*, *Lords of the Earth* and *Eternity in their Hearts*.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 397.

²⁹ Craig Ott et al, *Encountering Theology of Mission*, supra, p. 270.

person meets another for the first time, it takes time to develop a relationship. That is because each person takes along with him certain assumptions about himself, his worldview and perception of reality. In shaping relationships, some of these assumptions may have to be dropped either because we now know the next person and his values better than we first presumed, or the person has let us into their world and we begin to see things from his perspective. Either way, relationships do not develop and thrive when we maintain distance. Maintaining distance will not create common ground between two or more people. A missionary is able to pass his mission message only when he steps into and participates in the world (and culture) of the host community. Also, to be successful in missions, a degree of humility is required to enable the missionary to become identified with the host culture. The other side is that, though it seldom appears obvious, the missionary will simultaneously relinquish what he may have had or been entitled to before his encounter with the culture of the place of his engagement.

Engaging the Host Culture: The Model of Jesus Christ and Paul

A disciple is a follower under the authority of another. In a sense, discipleship, a fundamental requirement to be a Jesus follower, may be regarded as contextualization. This is because being a disciple demands giving up any present benefits or future ambitions, and submitting to the discipline and plans of Jesus Christ. In this instance, contextualization will be seen as a principle that comes at great cost to whoever embraces it. This is not unusual, as Jesus Christ Himself exemplified contextualization at the cost of His life. Jesus Christ became man's mediator before God (Heb. 4:14-16, 5:1-10), and His priesthood is effective "because He understands us. Jesus translated Himself from

His privileges of Deity to the limitations and burdens of humanity,”³⁰ eventually giving His life as a ransom for man (Mark 10:45). At various times He did not have a home (Luke 9:58), or a bank account from which He could draw (Mat.17:24-27), or even bread to feed people who attended His crusade (John 6:1-13). For humanity’s sake, Jesus became poor (2 Cor. 8:9; see also Rom.15:3). The Apostle Paul embraced this principle in his ministry. In the epistle to the Church at Corinth (1 Cor. 9:20-21) he writes:

And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; 2To them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law.

Eventually, Paul admonished the Church to imitate him as he imitated the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 11:1). This admonition encourages God’s people to live and teach His word contextually wherever He places them and it is noteworthy for the African Christian leader in the United States. Commenting on the practical imperative of contextualization from the perspective of African mission initiative in the West, Mkwaila notes:

...while immigration has been the key to opening the door for African churches to be established in the western world, it also represents its greatest potential liability. As immigrants come to the Western nations and become naturalized, their second-generation immigrant children have a different frame of mind more shaped by their context in the land of their birth than from the countries that their parents are from. Thus unless these churches can expand their base and develop a contextual approach to ministry suitable to their western environments they will not only be unable to attract new membership from the wider society, they will probably be unable to retain the second generation immigrants as well.³¹

Another aspect of contextualization lies in the importance of translating the gospel into cognizable culture forms so that potential respondents within the host cultures can be drawn to a point of contact with the person and teachings of Jesus Christ. For

³⁰ Supra., Mkwaila, p. 5.

³¹ Ibid., p. 6.

example, when Paul was on a missionary journey, he delivered the gospel in the context of the audiences he addressed (Jews in the synagogue in Acts 17:1-9, a Greek believing community in Berea in Acts 17:10-15, and philosophers in Acts 17:16-34). He discovered that the city of Athens was full of superstition and idolatry; they even had a dedicated temple with inscription “to an unknown god.” Paul used that inscription to draw a redemptive analogy connecting the Athenians’ beliefs and value system to the gospel message, and some believed (Acts 17:34). When one is unable to connect to a message, it could turn into an echo, never making sense to the hearer, and the missionary may be considered ‘a babbler’ (Acts 17:18). When the message is in written form, it becomes more challenging. This is because a large percentage of the world is illiterate and cannot read or write.

The African Christian immigrant (and for that matter any Christian immigrant appreciative of his calling) enters the United States with a set of values, views and perceptions. This may prove valuable from the onset, but holding on tight to those values in a new location with a different people with different mindsets and cultural settings will engender avoidable tension. The African Christian leader must develop a never-ending desire and open-ended capacity to learn. This is because technology, mobility and knowledge change quickly. While the mission mandate and the gospel remain constant, the methods and strategies for delivery need always to adapt. Also, it is necessary to conserve, and utilize technology and communication forms available at the point of engagement to connect with people and disseminate the missionary message.

Still another aspect of contextualization to consider is the need to be aware of the urgency of the evangelism task. The missionary needs to incorporate this idea as part of

his routine, first, because it meets the requirement of his deployment, and second, because he will be walking on the familiar road that Jesus Christ Himself walked when He said “(We) must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work” (John 9:4, ESV). The reality that opportunity does not last for eternity should stir him to direct his energies and efforts to the most important activity – God’s priority. After all, in carrying out the missionary task, he is fulfilling his steward’s office: “Moreover it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful” (1 Cor. 4:2, KJV).

Jesus Christ commissioned His disciples to go into the world and make disciples of all nations, teaching them to obey everything He commanded them (Matt. 28:19-21). Fulfilling this commission requires presenting and proclaiming His word. Jesus modeled the way to teach by presenting His teachings in creative parables (Mark 4:34). Though basically illustrations with underlying meanings, He succeeded in painting lucid word pictures on the hearts of His audience (Luke 18:1; 20:19). The Bible is the word of God (2 Tim. 3:15-17) containing information, literature, teachings, and prophecies set within the context of geography (territories), history (timelines of people and events), and life-giving nurture. But more than that, it describes itself in many ways.

The Bible is likened to bread (Deuteronomy 8:3; Luke 4:4), water (Ephesians 5:25-27), milk (1 Pet. 2:2), meat (Heb. 5:12-14), pure (Psa. 12:6), and a sword of the Spirit that is powerful, sharp and quick and is a discerner of thoughts and intentions (Eph. 6:17; Heb. 4:12). The Bible is truth (Psa. 119:43; John 17:17), a light and a lamp (Psa. 119:105), a fire and hammer (Jeremiah 23:29) and gives understanding (Psa. 119:130). By it God works, prospers and accomplishes His purpose (1 Thess. 2:13; Isa.

55:10), saves (James 1:21; Rom. 10:17; 1 Pet. 1:23), and sanctifies and builds up the Church (John 17:17; Acts 20:32). It is practically impossible to live the Christian life without the word of God. The nature of God's word possesses such integrity that it self-preserved (2 Cor.13:8). Along with prayer, it is another one of the missionary's primary tools. As the disciples answered Jesus Christ regarding the priority of His word in John 6:68, the missionary might just rephrase that to the Lord of His mandate to say, "How can I go without your word that produces eternal life?"

The issue of translating the gospel to a responding culture is not new. Guder says, "The translation was more than mere literal language: it was witness to Christ as expressed by persons of the receiving culture. It was the event of faith, the experienced relationship of faith, becoming event and relationship in a new cultural context."³² This issue was born in the early days of the Church when disputes arose regarding the conduct of Christians among themselves, and what was required of one professing faith in the 'new way.' In the tensions that developed, one finds that Hellenistic Jews spoke out against discrimination (Acts 6:1-7), Stephen interpreted scripture in the context of prophecy that cost him his life (Acts 7), persecution resulted in the dispersion of the Jerusalem church to other cities (Acts 8), and the circumcision question (Acts 15) created controversy. In these and later events, God used persecution against His Church in order to disperse her to reach other people groups with the Gospel message. Simultaneously, God was drawing Gentiles to believe the gospel (Acts 8:26-40; 10:1-47). In all cases, it is necessary that the people to whom the gospel is proclaimed gain revelation of the

³² Darrell L. Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000), p. 83.

message, and that the missionary understands how to gain access into the responding community.

In missions, the gospel has to be given with clarity and with the intention of eliciting response. It is important that the missionary recognizes previous knowledge and experience for what they are – previous. He must have his faith and sight trained and focused on the ultimate prize of fulfilling his calling, which includes forgetting ‘what lies behind and stretching forward to what lies ahead.’ In knowledge, he must not become dull or ineffectual. Being at the place of his calling intensifies the need to learn and know the people and place he serves. Continued learning equips him to adequately minister the gospel to his hearers so that as he interprets their customs, values, mores, etc., he strikes the correct chords in the hearts and minds of his audience. This does not relieve him of the burden to always be cautious, asking questions when and where he can, until the message reverberates within the people and their community. Even with all of that, there are no guarantees of immediate harvest. Sometimes, the result is unpredictable.

The response may bring joy or create tension. This is because “all cultures bear the mark of sinfulness. Therefore, the impact of the gospel will be both affirming and critical of all cultures.”³³ Even the disciples in the early Church knew it was not something that they themselves could make happen. They simply could not have done it on their own, nor would they have dared to do so. Instead, it was God’s plan that they make the gospel accessible to all people, according to His design. The disciples only needed to discern the way in which the Holy Spirit would prosecute His unfolding agenda. Guder posits:

³³ Ibid., p. 85.

The gospel is not merely a set of words grammatically related, or a system of ideas arranged in a philosophically informed structure....So, it was God's intention that the call of Christ be articulated and the concrete practice of discipleship and apostolate be shaped in each culture as a Spirit-empowered response, as Christ's lordship prepares and empowers this translation to happen.³⁴

Translating the gospel to any receiving audience is what the Holy Spirit does when He goes beyond language forms. "Translatability of the gospel is not to be understood solely in terms of translating the Bible into other languages, as important as that is."³⁵ Translation by language fulfills only the intellectual requirement, but the new life goes further than mental assent. It involves a spiritual transformation. Guder adds:

Translatability is not merely a linguistic passage, limited to words, but a cultural appropriation for which the language becomes the primary medium and symbol, and the practices of faith become the tangible demonstration. The result of the process of translation was the formation of a mission community, a people of God in a particular place, sent and empowered by God to be gospel witnesses in that cultural context.³⁶

In God's design, Guder notes, "no particular culture is privileged in the missionary enterprise, and no culture is rejected,"³⁷ but all of humanity submersed in sin is candidate for His grace, mercy and love to be received by faith in Jesus Christ. Therefore, there is no gainsaying that "the most significant missiological implications of translation is (sic) the transformative power of the gospel to shape a community for its evangelistic ministry in its context."³⁸

³⁴ Ibid., p. 83.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 93.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 84.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 85.

The Holy Spirit as Paraclete of the Missionary Enterprise

The Holy Spirit plays a significant role in mission, evangelism and the contextualization process. He it is that reveals and makes the gospel cognizable to the missionary disciple in the first place (John 16:5-15). Jesus mentions the role and importance of the Holy Spirit in a disciple's life in John 16 and Acts 1:8, and He encouraged the disciples to expect His coming and work (walk) with Him. As He drew close to the time of His crucifixion, He prepared their minds by telling the disciples to expect the Holy Spirit, the Helper, Comforter, Revealer of truth, and Leader (John 16:7-14); and after His resurrection, He assured them the Holy Spirit would come to baptize them with fire (as John did with water) and give them power to be His witnesses everywhere (John 15:26, Acts 1:8). The Acts of the Apostles can be therefore be properly called the Acts of the Holy Spirit, for even though the book rightly chronicles the evangelization and missionary activity of the apostles and the early Church, the undergirding power that brought these acts about was the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is a missionary Spirit and viable sponsor of the mission(s) enterprise. "Mission is impossible without the work of the (Holy) Spirit, and the work of the (Holy) Spirit will result in mission."³⁹ He teaches, and reminds the Church of the truth of His word (John 15:26-27, 16:13), He convicts non-believers of the guilt of sin, giving them opportunity for repentance (John 16:7-11), and He regenerates those who come to the faith. The Holy Spirit empowers and emboldens His church to preach the gospel fearlessly, with signs and wonders accompanying (Acts 1:8, 7:55), is the commissioner of those who submit to God's redemptive mandate (Acts 13: 3-4), and the

³⁹ Craig Ott et al, *supra*, p. 240.

giver of every gift necessary and required for ministry and building the church (1 Corinthians 14:1-12). Reflecting on the role of the Holy Spirit in the African Christian immigrant's missionary adventure in the West, Enson Mbilikile Lwesya states:

The "People of the Spirit" from Africa still believe that the Holy Spirit, as the great *Paraclete*, goes with the Global South Church in mission. Additionally, they believe that the Holy Spirit is the source of creativity, pioneering and innovation; He is the constant companion of the missionary and the multiplier of the efforts of missions.⁴⁰

At the onset of the mission when He came, the Holy Spirit gave ability to the apostles to boldly declare salvation to be obtained by faith in Jesus Christ. The disciples could utter words in tongues they were never trained to speak because the Holy Spirit gave them supernatural ability. That act of speaking in other tongues translated the gospel, connecting it to the audience (made up of Jews and Gentiles from far and near) that was at Jerusalem at that time (Acts 2:1-12), and three thousand people heard the word and believed (Acts 2:41). Guder captures the essence of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit's power at Pentecost.

(The) Holy Spirit made translation into all tongues possible. In the gracious economy of God, the joyful message was intended from the very outset to be infinitely translatable and multicultural; it is to be conveyed into every language and culture of the world....The full confession of God's grace and glory can only take place through the assembled choirs of all human tongues and cultures. We catch something of this sense of massed multicultural choirs praising God in the heavenly anthems that we find in the visions of the Revelation.⁴¹

Contextualization remains a missionary's imperative. No mission agenda could be accomplished without it. It has to be learned, and or lived.

⁴⁰ Enson Mbilikile Lwesya, "Missional Implications from Africa's Trends: Globalization, Migration Urbanization and Mission" in *Ethne: Online Journal for Pentecostal and Missional Leadership Studies* Vol.1, Issue 1, p. 2 accessed from <http://www.antsonline.org/v1i1a1.html> on May 5, 2012, p.9.

⁴¹ Darrell Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, p. 80.