

TYPES OF REVELATION AND “HOLY BOOKS” AND THEIR CONTEXTUALIZATION*

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I. INTRODUCTION

One major dimension of contextualization has received but scant attention on the part of evangelical theologians and missiologists. We have dealt with it at greater length in other places (cf. Radmacher and Preus 1984:691-738; Hesselgrave and Rommen 1989 :128-43), but it cannot be completely overlooked in the present context. It has to do with the fact that, just as there are many “gods that are not God” and numerous “gospels that are not gospel” in the world, there are also numerous “holy books that are not holy” as well. From the perspective of peoples of other cultures and religions, missionaries bring, not just a foreign religious message, but also a foreign religious book. Like it or not and know it or not, Christian missionaries are faced with the challenge of other books held to be sacred and even revelatory. As Eric J. Sharpe says, “Since virtually all scripture is understood in *revelatory terms* . . . [the missionary must have] some prior understanding of Hindu, Jewish, Christian, Muslim and other doctrines of God and *doctrines of revelation*” (Sharpe 1971:64-65, emphasis mine).

Sharpe is correct. Missionaries will not go far, either in their studies or in their travels, before they discover that respondent peoples not only acknowledge other gods, they rely on various “holy books” as sources of that knowledge. The missionary must find ways to communicate the truth that, though the true God is not circumscribed in the ways he can communicate with mankind, he has chosen to reveal himself most clearly in just one book, the Bible, and in one person, the Christ of the Bible. But to do that missionaries must be able to differentiate between the *kinds* of revelation represented in the holy books of the various

religions in ways that can be clearly understood. All of this is part of the contextualization process.

II. DIFFERING TYPES OF REVELATION AND HOLY BOOKS

I believe that the sacred books of the major religions of the world can be placed in one or another of four major categories.

1. Mythological writings. These are sacred books that provide narratives and information (generally fiction and often fantasy) that bind peoples together in common loyalties and destinies as, for example, the Japanese Kojiki, Nihongi, and Engishiki.

2. Writings or reports and teachings of the “enlightened.” Common to this class of sacred books is the notion that actual knowledge of the divine and reality comes only through personal enlightenment experience(s). Knowledge of the Divine cannot be conveyed through verbal propositions *per se*, but personal experiences and understandings can be reported in ways that will facilitate enlightenment and knowledge. Examples would be the Hindu Vedas, the Buddhist Tripitaka, and the Chinese Tao-Teh-Ching.

3. Divine writing. This kind of writing purportedly comes directly from the Divine apart from any sort of human involvement other than, perhaps, the mechanical writing process. The primary example would be the Koran, though the Book of Mormon also fits this category.

4. Divinely inspired writings. The Old and New Testaments are held by orthodox Christians to be different from all other books. As noted above, they are “God-breathed” by the true and living God in such a way that, though the personality, background, ideas and research of human authors are involved, all are directed by God the Holy Spirit in such a way as to make the final product the very Word of God.

The importance of these distinctions cannot be over-emphasized. Practically as well as logically, the type or kind of revelation contained in sacred books is every bit as important as their teachings *per se* and is determinative of the way in which they are understood and applied; and how they are translated and contextualized. When the absolute uniqueness of God's revelation in the Old and New Testaments is not recognized, the Bible takes on the characteristics of indigenous holy books, its God remains hidden, and its message becomes relative.

III. MYTHOLOGICAL WRITINGS AND THEIR CONTEXTUALIZATION

The contextualization of the Kojiki, Nihongi and Engishiki

Shintoism has served to unify the Japanese nation around Shinto deities, the Emperor of Japan, and the destiny of Japanese people for many long centuries. We cannot go into details here. Many readers will be somewhat familiar with them inasmuch as the Shinto myth undergirded the Japanese war effort of the 1930's and 1940's. At that time almost all Japanese were convinced by Shinto warlords that their divinely ordained destiny was to share the beneficent rule of the *Tenno Heika* (Heavenly Emperor) with the rest of the world.

Now the Shinto myth (with which some history is interwoven) is fundamentally put forward in the three sacred volumes mentioned above. The question here is, "How did Japanese chauvinistic scholars use those texts so as to elicit the wholehearted support and sacrifice of the Japanese people? Not by objective analysis of their historicity and trustworthiness. That would be self-defeating. Not by publishing updated and idiomatic translations. That would achieve nothing. Myths are not potent because they are "true" or historically accurate. Nor are they useful only to the extent that they are read and understood ordinary people. It is the nature of myths and mythological language that they function in such a way as to provide linguistic

symbols out of which scholars can construct a “contemporary” and persuasive faith. And, as D. C. Holtom makes clear, that is exactly what the Japanese warlords did, and in so doing they convinced Japanese people that they were “a race of unique divine attributes, of a peerless nation structure, and of a sacred commission to save the world” (Holtom 1943:25).

IV. CONTEXTUALIZING THE BIBLE WHEN IT IS ERRONEOUSLY CONCEIVED OF AS A COLLECTION OF MYTHOLOGICAL WRITINGS.

In his book *Toward a Recovery of Christian Belief*, Carl F. H. Henry writes about “theistic atheism, or deconstructionism”—the position of those scholars who have attempted to “overturn the whole history of Western thought by turning it loose from God and logic, from verificatory criteria and shared signification” (Henry 1990:30). Included in the category are “Bible as myth” theologians such as Paul Tillich and Rudolf Bultmann and “God is dead” theologians such as Thomas Altizer. According to these theologians, the language of the Bible is not to be understood literally; objective knowledge of God is impossible; and the God of the Bible and traditional theology is no longer an option. For Tillich, for example, God is not to be understood in the way that a literal reading of the Bible presents him, but in the way that a symbolic reading of the Bible might indicate—as the “Ground of all Being” according to Tillich’s terminology. I recall John Warwick Montgomery’s response to Tillich’s proposal. He said, “The only ‘Ground of all Being’ I know of is hamburger.” Montgomery’s criticism is as harsh as it is humorous. But it is not without validity.

I happened to be present when Paul Tillich offered a series of lectures in the University of Kyoto in the late 1950s. Tillich went to great lengths to explain that the Bible is not a book of historical and ontological knowledge as taught by misguided Christian “fundamentalists.” The real meaning of the Bible is to be found in its “myths” as is the case with most holy books. In

one of his lectures, he referred to Rudolph Bultmann saying, “My friend, Professor Bultmann, says that one must ‘demythologize the Bible’ in order to understand its meaning. I told him that would be a mistake. The real meaning of the Bible is in its myths such as ‘In the beginning, God,’ ‘creation out of nothing’ and ‘Christ, the Son of God.’ Demythologize the Bible and it loses its significance.”

I have no way of knowing the overall effect of Tillich’s lectures. I do know that he offered little reason for Shintoists to forsake the Kojiki or for Buddhists to abandon the Lotus Sutra. I also know that, immediately after the lecture series, a key member of my weekly Bible class abruptly stopped coming. She was the daughter of the University president.

Ludwig Wittgenstein had a hand in much of this. He believed that words are not so much labels for things as they are tools for tasks. The members of any and every linguistic group are engaged in a kind of “language game,” and the meanings of their words are to be determined by the way(s) in which members use those words. The proponents of “theistic atheism” mentioned above, therefore, were appealing to moderns by playing a kind of Wittgensteinian “language game” that began by turning the Scriptures into mythological writings.

One must wonder how many of our contemporaries are playing the same or a similar game in their attempt to appeal to postmoderns! According to Gordon Lewis, the notion of Stanley Grenz and John Franke that there is no one-to-one correlation between language and the world ultimately means that objective knowledge of God attained by God’s revelation in creation and Scripture is, at best, tenuous. What we are left with is the faith of various linguistic and religious communities, each of which relies on its own language to describe God and the world. “For all the world” their notion would seem to reduce the meaning of Scripture to whatever the

Christian community might choose to make of it. It is difficult to see that such an approach is either biblical or missionary (cf. Lewis 2003:279-83; Grenz and Franke 2001:23)!

V. THE WRITINGS OF THE ENLIGHTENED AND THEIR CONTEXTUALIZATION

The translation and contextualization of the Upanishads

Hinduism holds to two primary types of sacred literature: *Sruti* (Skt.; lit. “that which is heard” or revelation) and *Smṛti* (Skt.; lit. “that which is remembered” or tradition). *Sruti* is highest and includes the Vedic literature and later commentaries on the Vedas called the Brahmanas and the Upanishads. As valued as the Vedas, Brahmanas and Upanishads might be, however, logically they must be approached as dictated by basic Hindu epistemology. According to Hinduism, God and ultimate truth can be known only through the experience of personal enlightenment. The most that any *guru* or sacred writing can do is to help *occasion* that experience.

Swami Prabhavananda and Frederick Manchester provide us with an “enlightening” example of this approach. They attempt a translation of the Upanishads for Westerners (cf. Prabhavananda and Manchester 1957). They explain that all Hindus recognize the Upanishads as being of the highest written authority and “concerned with the knowledge of God, the highest aspect of religious truth” (Prabhavananda and Manchester 1957: ix). Nevertheless, they “allow themselves the freedom” as “seems desirable” to do anything possible in order to convey the “sense and spirit” of the original into English. They take the liberty to render the poetry of the original text into English prose, for example. Why? To produce a heightened effect. After all, words and forms are not really important. The “real meaning” is to be found in the way the words and forms *function* in and among those who read them (Prabhavananda and Manchester 1957:xi, xii).

Translating and contextualizing the Bible in those cases where it is erroneously conceived of as the “writings of the enlightened” (or something similar)

Among false notions rather commonly held among untutored Christians is the idea that the biblical text, especially its doctrinal portions, consists of “dead letters.” Only when we allow the Bible to speak to our hearts and not just our heads does it “come alive” and become really meaningful.

Among scholars it is not uncommon to come across a somewhat similar but more sophisticated idea. Namely, that Bible *contains* the Word of God or *potentially is* the Word of God only by virtue of a special work of the Holy Spirit or creativity of Bible scholars does it effectively become the Word of God and meaningful to readers and hearers. The neo-orthodox doctrine of the inspiration of the Bible generally holds to this view. And extremist understandings of “dynamic-equivalence” Bible translation and contextualization theory (and dynamic-equivalence messages, lifestyles and even churches) are often based on this view of inspiration as well. When that is the case, dynamic-equivalence theory ceases to be helpful and may even become hurtful and heretical.

Why? And, how?

First, it should be noted that the origins of dynamic equivalence are not to be found in Scripture but in the human sciences. The term *dynamic equivalence translation* was coined by one of the most insightful and influential linguistic scholars of our times, Eugene A. Nida, “to describe a ‘meaning-based’ approach to translation—one that looks for *functional equivalence* rather than *formal equivalence* in translation” (Neff 2002:46). In answer to the question, “How did you develop your ideas about Bible translation 50 years ago?” Nida responds as follows:

When I was at the University of California, Los Angeles, our professors would never let us translate literally. They said, “We want to know the meaning. We don’t want to know just the words.”

I found that a number of the Greek classics had been translated very meaningfully, much better than the Bible had been translated

I studied linguistics, Greek, Latin, and Hebrew, and I decided that we've got to approach the Scripture as though it is the message and try to give its meaning, not just repeat the words. (Neff 2002:46)

Nida goes on to say that, when studying for his doctorate, he studied anthropology in addition to linguistics, communications and lexicography because, “words only have meanings in terms of the culture of which they are a part” (Neff 2002:46).

The interviewer never inquires, and Nida never informs readers, as to his understanding of revelation and the inspiration of Scripture. We can safely assume that he has a high view of Scripture, but that is not to say that he subscribes to the verbal-plenary view espoused by the likes of Warfield and the founders of the Evangelical Theological Society. And that is important because, apart from the limitations imposed by divine inspiration of the *very words* of Scripture, the views of brilliant but unbelieving (in verbal-plenary inspiration) scholars easily become altogether too decisive to the theories of even conservatives.

Second, in order to illustrate the extreme to which dynamic-equivalence can be taken, consider the translation and contextualization approach Charles Kraft as outlined in his *magnum opus* mentioned above (Kraft 1974). To his great credit, Kraft provides us with a clear explanation of his view of revelation and inspiration as well as language and contextualization. As for revelation he believes it to be subjective and continuing (Kraft 1974:184). As for the Bible, he believes it to be “like the ocean and supracultural truth like the icebergs that float in it” (Kraft 1974:131). It is potentially the Word of God, not error-free except in its intended teachings (Kraft 1974: 208). Therefore he holds to the kind of “dynamic livingness of Scripture” and “vital Christian experience” supported by recent “behavioral insights” but not allowed for by the “static philosophical presuppositions” of conservative scholars (Kraft 1974:211).

As for hermeneutics, Kraft does not hold to grammatical-historical interpretation but to what he calls “ethnolinguistic interpretation” (Kraft 1974:134ff.). In his view the Bible is an “inspired casebook” of events that were time- and culture-specific (Kraft 1974:134, 202). We have the responsibility of analyzing the context in which Bible events occurred; determining their functions and meanings in that context; and translating and contextualizing the biblical message in ways that it will impact contemporaries just as it impacted original hearers and readers.

According to Kraft this is what dynamic and functional equivalence is all about. Meaning is not in words. Meaning is in people. Forms, and especially ancient forms, are relatively unimportant. Function is all-important. Revelation occurs whenever the message of the text is made “meaning-full” and “impact-full” to an audience, ancient or modern.

Kraft is to be applauded for being forthright and honest as well as for his many, and sometimes brilliant, insights. But in his approach the God-breathed words of Scripture are scarcely more important than the insights of their modern interpreters—perhaps no more important. If his understanding of biblical revelation and inspiration is not the same as a Hindu understanding of the Vedas, it is at least sufficiently reminiscent of it to be scary.

Third, in order to show how dynamic-equivalence theory can impact contextualization efforts within our own changing culture, I will point to a current controversy before moving on.

One of numerous problems facing Bible translators (and Christian writers in general) in the Western world has to do with the “maleness” of both the Old and New Testaments. A recent debate concerning the validity of a “gender correct” translation such as that of the *Today’s New International Version* (note “Today’s New”!) will serve to illustrate what is involved.

Take the simple greeting of Paul in Galatians 1:1-2 as a case in point. In his greeting Paul wrote, “*kai hoi sun emoi pantes adelphoi*” (“and all the brethren who are with me”). Now we can assume that the “maleness” of this greeting occasioned no special problem in first century Galatia. And it is highly unlikely that it would cause a problem in most of the non-Western world today. But it *is* a problem in gender-conscious United States and Europe generally, and among feminists especially.

To politically correct *TNIV* translators that was unacceptable. To be “dynamically equivalent,” Paul’s greeting should not communicate any more “male bias” in twenty-first century California than it did in first century Galatia. So they translated the problematic phrase as “and all the brothers *and sisters* with me” (emphasis mine). They knew that this was not what Paul actually wrote. But neither did Paul intend to offend Galatian women, so they changed the ancient *form* in order to convey a *meaning* that, in Western cultures today, can be expected to be more acceptable and inoffensive.

Well and good. But we must not close the book on that note. We are obligated to go on to inquire as to whether the new translation is grammatically, historically and theologically correct. And the answer to that question is, “Very possibly not.” Why not? Because Bible scholars are not in agreement as to whether women actually were included among those who were “with Paul.” Until we know the answer to that question, we are not only unsure of the historical accuracy of the new translation, we are also unsure whether or not there might be theological implications growing out of the “maleness” of Paul’s original greeting. *The upshot is that we know what Paul actually wrote. We know the form. But we do not know how that form actually functioned and exactly what it meant in first century Galatia. And, though an understanding of*

ancient Galatian culture is helpful at that point, the original meaning will not be understood apart from a further study of the significance of gender in Scripture itself.

To some all of this will seem like splitting hairs. Not so to careful Bible students, however. And not so to thoughtful missionaries either. To be sure, contextualizers must pay attention to “meaning in culture.” But, if the very words of Scripture are God-breathed, then textual accuracy is more important than seeming cultural relevance. In fact, when it comes to the biblical text, accuracy will be culturally relevant by definition. It will either confirm or correct cultural values and practices.

With that in mind, take yet one more look at the Galatian greeting. Notice that it also contains the phrase “*Theou patros*” (Father God). May not this phrase also represent a male bias for some? Of course. In fact, some radical functionalists (not necessarily the *TNIV* translators, however) maintain that, in Latin America, a better understanding of God would result from translating “Father God” as “Mother God” because in Latin America the word “father” carries negative connotations while mothers are loved and revered. And even in North America a leader of “goddess religion,” Carol P. Christ, says that Christ reconciled traditional polarities and on that basis proposes the adaptation “Goddess/God” (cf. Mollenkott 2004:38)!

Vern Poythress speaks precisely to our basic concern at this point. He writes:

Political correctness can, I believe, influence Bible translation *in spite of* contrary intentions on the part of translators. The influence mainly affects details of meaning, so it may not seem too serious at first glance. But in the end it threatens the vital doctrine of the *plenary* inspiration of Scripture. (*Christianity Today* 2002:37, emphasis his)

In the final analysis, that is what is at stake, isn't it? It is not just, or primarily, “What is your philosophy of translation and/or contextualization”? It is rather, “What is your doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture?”

VI. THE CONTEXTUALIZATION OF SCRIPTURES WRONGLY CONCEIVED OF AS “DIVINE WRITING”

Translating and contextualizing the Koran

Though not often dealt with in popular literature, there are actually two types of inspiration in Islam: “lower level” inspiration or *ilham*, and “higher level” inspiration or *wahy*. *Ilham* is a gift of Allah given to holy men as well as to prophets, but it is subjective and therefore trustworthy only to a point. *Wahy*, on the other hand, is a gift of Allah to certain prophets only and is objective and fully trustworthy. From a Muslim perspective, a problem accrues to the fact that the *wahy* writings of prophets prior to Muhammad (Moses and Jesus, for example) have been corrupted and therefore we are left with the Koran as the only final and fully authoritative divine revelation.

According to W. Montgomery Watt the essential features of Muhammad’s *wahy*-type inspiration were: “the words in his conscious mind, the absence of his own thinking; and the belief that the words were from God” (Watt 1969:69-70). The upshot of all of this is that, in the Muslim view, the Koran (Qur’an) is “the language of Allah” and “made in heaven.” It is, in fact, a replica of the “Mother of the Book” which is in heaven. As such it can be read, memorized, preached, and taught, but it cannot be translated. Inquirers into the faith themselves must ultimately become “contextualized” in the sense that they must learn Arabic and read the Koran for themselves. So-called “translations” are not that at all, but only “interpretations” and, therefore, not completely trustworthy.

Though not a Muslim himself, as a faithful “translator” of the Koran, A. J. Arberry recognizes all of this and does his best to reproduce or to “imitate, however imperfectly, those rhetorical and rhythmical patterns which are the glory and sublimity of the Koran” (Arberry

1955:28). In other words, Arberry takes into account the fact that the precise *form* in which Muhammad is said to have received the Koran is absolutely vital to the way in which the Koran *functions*. In the end, Arberry settles for calling his work *The Koran Interpreted!*

Bible translation and the King James Version

Though conservative evangelicals are sometimes accused of believing in dictation theory and are sometimes called “word worshippers” (cf., Nida 2002:46), I personally am not acquainted with any such person. I believe the person is a “straw man.” Those who might appear to be guilty are simply very conservative when it comes to their doctrine of inspiration—scholars of the likes of Edward Hills and Wilber Pickering (cf., Hills 1956; Pickering 1977). Their case for the superiority of the King James Version does sound somewhat akin to Arberry’s assessment of the Koran. They say that the King James or Authorized Version is both the most trustworthy and enduring translation of the Bible available. They call special attention to its beautiful prose, its majestic rhythms, and its influence upon English language and literature over the centuries. And they project that, somewhat updated and slightly revised, it will be the standard translation for many years to come.

But their argument goes deeper than that. They are rightly concerned with manuscript evidence and providential preservation of the biblical text in the face of higher criticism. They believe that in his providence, God chose the Greek church to become guardian of the New Testament. They are persuaded that the King James Version, based as it is upon the Byzantine text and the *Textus Receptus*, is the purest and most accurate version. They agree that periodic updating on the basis of new manuscript evidence and language change is warranted, but that changes should be minimal and introduced only with great care.

All of this devotion to, and all of these arguments for the superiority of, the King James Version do not merit the charge that these scholars believe in dictation theory. Nor that they are “word worshippers.” Inspiration by divine dictation is not an issue in this particular debate. The issue ultimately has to do with the inerrancy of the autographs and the trustworthiness of Bible manuscripts and translations. We may or may not agree with some of the arguments of King James Version supporters, but we should at least be appreciative of their concerns and intentions.

VII. THE “INSPIRED WRITINGS” OF THE BIBLE AND THEIR CONTEXTUALIZATION

As for the Old and New Testament “inspired writings,” they are unlike any of the “holy books” mentioned above. They are absolutely unique—the only members of this class of holy books in the history of the world!

How then are they to be treated? How are they to be translated, interpreted, explained and applied? How are they to be contextualized? Certainly, not like other so-called “holy books”! To approach the Bible as one might approach the Kojiki or the Upanishads or the Koran is to do it a gross injustice. If we believe the Bible to be the very Word of God, we must approach it differently. We must approach it with something of the reverence with which ancient copyists approached the early manuscripts—something considerably beyond the seriousness with which even the most respected translator might approach any other religious book. Following Warfield, we should assume that the claims the Bible makes for itself are true and treat the text in that light. Any and all reasonings and opinions stemming purely from human origins, however scholarly and well intentioned, cannot claim more than secondary or tertiary importance.

In continuing and concluding this chapter, then, my purpose will be to demonstrate that a completely authoritative revelation of God in Holy Scripture and the clear teachings and implications that accrue to Scripture constitute a basis for contextualization that is superior to

any and all proposals emanating from the investigations of the human sciences. I will attempt to demonstrate the significance of this approach by pointing out certain implications stemming from various Scripture texts along with affirmations selected from the Chicago statements on inerrancy and hermeneutics as restated and updated at Ft. Lauderdale, 2003 by International Church Council leaders and members, especially those texts and affirmations appearing under Topic 13, “Culture, Contextualization and the Gospel” (available from www.ChurchCouncil.org).

The person of Christ and contextualization

Scripture: *“Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world”* (Heb. 1:1,2).

Affirmation: *“We affirm that God has inspired Holy Scripture to reveal Himself through Jesus Christ as Creator and Lord, Redeemer and Judge”* (Topic 1, Short Statement 1).

As we have already noted, perhaps the most widely referred to example of gospel contextualization in the whole of Scripture is Paul’s address in Athens and recorded in Acts 17. The aspects of that address that are usually highlighted need not be repeated here. Rather, we take note of the fact that

profound [Athenian] notions of the deity stand condemned, and their path leads to destruction, for the deity about whom they spoke such exalted things is not the true God who has shown his mercy in Christ Jesus, but is what Calvin referred to as the *umbratile numen*, the nebulous all-pervading being, fabricated by us to fill the emptiness caused by our unwillingness to recognize the true God. (Bavinck 1960:137)

I have suggested previously that the genius (if we may call it that) of Paul’s contextualization of the gospel in Athens is to be found not so much in his employment of aspects of Greek religiosity and culture as it is to be found in the way he presented the Creator

God, his dealing with the nations, and Christ. Paul referred to past times included the “Golden Age of Athens” as “times of ignorance” and called upon Athenians and all men to repent of their idolatrous ways (Acts 17:30).

Paul speaks here as an apostle, as one of that small group of men who were personally chosen and sent forth by Christ to proclaim his gospel. He, among others, would also be chosen and inspired to make an enduring written record of that gospel—of whom Christ is and what he said and did as Messiah and Lord. That apostolic record remained to be completed, but as for Paul’s experience with the risen Lord and his calling to be the “apostle to the Gentiles,” that was verifiable, vivid and the revelational basis of Paul’s message. The written record would come later and become the inspired source of both the mission and the message of all who, following in Paul’s train, would preach the gospel of Christ and build his church. Of that mission and church, Paul writes that it is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus being the cornerstone” (Eph. 2:20). Christ Jesus, then, is the cornerstone, not alone of the Christian church, but also of gospel contextualization.

Propositional revelation and biblical truth

Scripture: *Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth (John 17:17).*

Affirmation: “*We affirm that the Bible expresses God’s truth in propositional statements, and we declare that Biblical truth is both objective and absolute*” (Topic 2, Articles of Affirmation and Denial, Article VI).

All Scripture is true including all of its propositions. The Bible contains much more than propositional statements, of course. Some of the Bible is poetry; some is narrative; some is command; some is exhortation, and so on. But the propositions of Scripture have occasioned most of our problems in modern and postmodern times. Propositional statements are judged to be

true or false in a way that poetic and hortatory statements, for example, are not and that constitutes a special problem for many.

Modernism was characterized by an inclination to judge many of the historical propositions of the Bible, and some of its doctrinal propositions as well, to be false. Therefore, modernists did not read Bible history in order to learn history, for example, so much as to make judgments about that history. Postmodernism is different. It tends to judge most of the propositions of Bible, and perhaps its doctrinal propositions especially, to be more or less inconsequential even if true. Therefore, postmodernists tend to neglect doctrinal sections and prefer other parts of the Bible in the mistaken belief that doctrinal propositions are not essential to spirituality. The judgments of both modernists and postmodernists are erroneous, but since the latter constitutes the greater threat to evangelical orthodoxy currently we will focus on that here.

Opposing both mistaken views of inspiration and misguided understandings of the nature of biblical doctrine, Gordon Lewis makes a strong case for propositional revelation as being essential to evangelical spiritual formation (Lewis 2003:269-98). Lewis's monograph is particularly pertinent in this context. He first shows that the various kinds of propositionless spiritualities are without foundation. He then points to foundations of evangelical spirituality such as the Creator as the Author of universally revealed propositions; the basis of revelational propositionalism in the Incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus; and the working of the Holy Spirit in and through biblical propositions. Finally, he lists ten distinct and practical ways in which biblical propositions produce true spirituality. For example, propositions sharpen the goals of spirituality, reveal love to be normative, direct us to sources of strength, show us how to live by faith, encourage us to practice the presence of God, and encourage us to love the church.

If we truly believe that the Bible is without error and completely trustworthy, Lewis's case is incontrovertible. True spirituality is precisely that which the Holy Spirit effects, not apart from but by means of, the Bible and Bible doctrine. Jesus prayed that his people would be sanctified in the truth and immediately added "Your word is truth" (John 17:17). The apostle Paul declared "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

If missionaries are to be *Christian* contextualizers, and especially if they are to be *evangelical Christian* contextualizers, they are obligated to respond to both the postmodernist spirituality of the West and the classic mystical religiosity of the East by reverently studying and fervently teaching Bible doctrine.

The work of the Spirit and Bible interpretation

Scripture: "*And the Spirit is the one who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth*" (1 John 5:6).

Affirmation: "*We affirm the necessity of interpreting the Bible according to its literal, or normal sense. The literal sense is the grammatical-historical sense, that is, the meaning which the writer expressed. Interpretation according to the literal sense will take account of all figures of speech and literary forms found in the text*" (Topic 2, Article XV).

All too often the hard work of studying the biblical text and the necessity of trusting the Holy Spirit for guidance and illumination are divorced from one another. That ought not be so. In the various documents of the I.C.B.I and I.C.C., the ministries of the Holy Spirit in both inspiring and illuminating Scripture are never divorced from the human work of interpreting and applying Scripture in accordance with the normal rules that apply to historical inquiry and literary

interpretation. We have already seen some of the ways in which the abrogation of this approach to a Holy Spirit-inspired Bible works havoc with its meaning and significance. There are still others.

About half a century ago, the writings of a “new” rhetorician and literary critic, Kenneth Burke became prominent in academies around the country. Burke’s seminal mind allowed him to range over a vast expanse of literary works including theological writings. Pertinent to our present discussion is the fact that in one context Burke notes four kinds of “medieval interpretation” defined by Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica*: literal, allegorical, moral and anagogical. For Burke, Aquinas’ definitions illustrate how ordinary descriptive language can be “socioanagogical”—how its meaning can be interpreted mystically and lend itself to arguments for sweeping social change, for example (Burke 1962:774). In Burke’s view this can occur quite irrespective of the intention of the original author whose “scene” (the total situation or set of circumstances in which he or she wrote) can be assumed to be very different from that in which a reader is called upon to interpret (discover the meaning of) the author’s writing. It follows that the intention of the author is not as crucial to the interpretation of what he wrote as is the “scene” in which he wrote it. And, for that matter, neither the author’s intent nor the author’s “scene” is as important as the reader/interpreter’s “scene” and intention!

Burke greatly influenced both secular and Christian literary criticism. Just before the mid-twentieth century mark, W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley began speaking about the “intentional fallacy” in Bible interpretation. Applying Burke’s ideas to Bible interpretation, they concluded that what the Bible writer meant or intended to say has become irrelevant with the passage of time. It is the meaning and application of the text as determined by the reader in his or her world that is important. In a very real sense, therefore, the ancient authors of the Bible are

not as important as the contemporary interpreters in determining both the meaning and application of what is written. Sometimes called “formalist criticism,” this approach to Bible interpretation invaded many a theological school just at a time when baby-boomers were getting their education in the late 1960s and 1970s and its influence is still widely felt. Meaning for you, meaning for me; meaning for our times, meaning for this generation—this is where many schools, many churches, many Bible study groups now find themselves.

But that is not the end of mischief in this connection. Burke’s “rhetoric of motives” underscores the potency of the intentions of readers/interpreters (and their audience). In a passage that is seldom noted, he recalls Pascal’s criticism of certain Jesuits who proposed to “direct the intention” of wayward believers of their day. Since church members would not change their ways, these Jesuits proposed to teach wayward believers how to apply Christian motives to their unChristian behaviors. By doing so, worldly believers could stay in the church while living unChristian lives (Burke 1962:680-81) A contemporary illustration of what Burke, and Pascal, were talking about would be the case of one of my former students. He wanted to be a missionary and maintained that he was serious about being a good witness for Christ as commanded in Acts 1:8. In this way he justified frequent attendance at X-rated movies. His intention, he said, was to witness for Christ. He always tried to go in the company of unbelievers and use the movie to demonstrate that the Bible is true when it says that all people are sinners!

It is little short of amazing what both the educated and uneducated can come up with when the text and meaning of Scripture are divorced from the intent of its authors and their inspired words. Meaning intended by the authors is prior to meaning interpreted by the readers. Meaning then comes before meaning now. Little wonder, then, that the framers of both the ICBI and ICC statements said, “We affirm the *necessity* of interpreting the Bible according to its

literal, or normal sense. The literal sense is the grammatical-historical sense, that is, *the meaning that the writers expressed under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.*”

The Christian church and orthodoxy/orthopraxy

Scripture: *“You are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone”* (Eph. 2:19-20).

Affirmation: *“We affirm that true Christian unity must be based on a doctrinal foundation that includes historic Christian doctrine as revealed in the inerrant Scriptures and expressed in the Apostles’ Creed”* (Topic 11, Article VI).

When Christian missionaries go into the world they are duty-bound to deliver God’s Word of redemption. But that is not all. The framers of the affirmation above, as well as our Lord Jesus and the authors of Scripture themselves, attest to the fact that the inerrant Word of God is integral, not just to the *saving faith of individuals*, but also to the *time-tested faith of the church!* Of the many reasons that can be adduced for this, I will make mention of but two here: linkage with the historic church and “critical contextualization.”

First, biblical mission links the emerging church with the historic church, the church of the twenty-first century with the church of the first century! From the lips of Jesus we hear “*The Word is truth.*” From the pen of Paul we read, “*All Scripture is breathed out by God.*” From the early church we learn the Apostles’ Creed. From the works of Papias, second century bishop of Hierapolis, we read statements like “*Mark made no mistake when he thus wrote down some things as he remembered them; for he made it his especial care to omit nothing of what he heard and to make no false statement therein*” (cf. Bettenson 1947:38).

Local churches are not spiritual islands. The historic church of Christ, and sending and receiving churches today, are best served by a conscious and careful linkage with each other through a common confession of the authority of Scripture, the deity and lordship of Jesus Christ, and other cardinal doctrines affirmed and re-affirmed through history.

Second, as soon as practicable, missionaries and leaders of the emerging church should hold regular discussions concerning the meaning of the biblical text as it relates to cultural practices and expectations. Paul Hiebert's term for this process is "critical contextualization" (cf. Hiebert 1987:287-96). Once converts are forthcoming and the church begins to form, these discussions become, well, critical! Rituals and revels, ceremonies and celebrations, and monuments and meetings of indigenous cultures have cultural meanings and functions that are important and may be something more or other than reported. Missionaries, pastors and laity need to come together with the members of the church body in order to discuss cultural beliefs and practices that impact the church in the clear light of Scripture. Together they should decide how the church will respond to them either as obstacles to Christian living and testimony or as opportunities for communicating the gospel of Christ.

This discussion of ICBI and ICC affirmations of biblical authority and perspicuity and their significance for Christian contextualization could be greatly extended. For example, we might go on to show how they reinforce the practical importance of the kind of biblical theology that "describes God by recounting what God has done. . . . the acts of God in history, together with what must be inferred from those acts" (Wright 1991:101). Or how, while still holding to the importance of Western theologies (cf. Davis, ed. 1978), along with Tite Tienou we still must recognize that Western theology is not universally normative and theologians in other cultures should be encouraged to do their own theologizing (Tienou 1992:261).

So, much remains to be said, but what has been said is perhaps sufficient to demonstrate that the best starting point and most valid foundation for Christian contextualization are the teachings of the biblical text rather than the insights of secular science. This is not to diminish the helpfulness of the latter. When one thinks of the value of comparative linguistics to language acquisition alone, for example, one is even more astounded by the accomplishments of William Carey who labored without them. Nevertheless, when one also considers the open-endedness of contextualization attempts unattended and untethered by the requirements of verbal-plenary inspiration, one becomes profoundly grateful that we have not been left without an authoritative Word from the Triune God!

VIII. CONCLUSION

Missionary contextualization that is authentically and effectively Christian and evangelical does not begin with a knowledge of linguistics and communication, and anthropology and culture, as such. It begins with a commitment to an inerrant and authoritative Word of God in the autographs of Old and New Testament Scripture. On the basis of a commitment to the authority of that Word and its truth and dissemination, tools afforded by relevant sciences can and must be utilized to enable us to understand Scripture and communicate it meaningfully and effectively across cultures. Apart from that commitment, the utilization of the tools of the various sciences may not serve to enhance understanding and may even endanger it.

*Excerpted from David J. Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict: 10 Key Questions in Christian Missions Today* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005) 254-274.

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