

CONTEXTUALIZATION AND GREAT COMMISSION FAITHFULNESS

By

Scott Hildreth

Director for the Center for Great Commission Studies (SEBTS)

Published in the “Contemporary Practice” section www.globalmissiology.org October 2010

INTRODUCTION

Among evangelicals, one can usually win friends by speaking or writing about missions. After all, the label *evangelicals* means, at the very least, identifying with those convinced that the gospel of Jesus Christ is the only hope for the salvation of the nations and therefore the eternal destiny of the masses is dependent on hearing and receiving this gospel message. However, these same friends may quickly become critics when the conversation shifts to the importance of contextualization. Recently a colleague confided, “I know that it is important to help national believers develop their own faith, but the risk is just too great. I have seen it go horribly wrong, so I choose to stick with what I know. It is safer.” Another missionary remarked, “My orthodoxy just isn’t that generous...”

Who among us can’t identify with these brothers? Every cross-cultural worker feels the pressure of communicating the gospel in a way that is both orthodox and understandable. Indeed, the risk is great. In the following quote, Dean Gilliland captures this tension quite well:

Contextualization [is] a delicate enterprise if there ever was one... the mission strategists stands on a razor’s edge, aware that to fall off on either side has terrible consequences... fall to the right and you end in obscurantism, so attached to your convention ways of practicing and teaching the faith that you veil its truth and power from those who are trying to see it through very different eyes. Slip to the left and you tumble into syncretism, so vulnerable to the impact of paganism in its multiplicity of forms that you compromise the uniqueness of Christ and concoct “another gospel which is not a gospel.

The apostle Paul warned the Galatian Christians that preaching an altered gospel would leave the preacher accursed before God (Gal. 1:6-10). Who wants to struggle with the difficulties of learning languages, understanding culture, not to mention the daily struggles of living cross-culturally, and then allow careless evangelism to “make twice as much a son of hell...?” (Matt. 23:15). This tension is enough to tempt the missionary to shrink into comfort and familiarity, choosing to preach from his own culture rather than working for a properly contextualized faith. However, in light of the commission given at the end of Matthew’s gospel, timidity is not an

option. Rather, obedience to the Great Commission requires contextualizing the Christian message for and with the people in a ministry field.

CONTEXTUALIZATION DEFINED

Before addressing specific concerns raised by the Great Commission, it is necessary to settle on a definition of contextualization. This is not a simple task, because it is nearly impossible to arrive at a definition that everyone is comfortable with and accepts. According to Moreau, the different definitions or the key distinctions of contextualization rest upon the emphasis one places on either scripture or cultural setting. David Clark labels contextualization that emphasizes culture above scripture “mainline/liberal,” while maintaining that “evangelical” contextualization takes place when the scriptures are prioritized. Even Bevan, in his important work describing different models of contextualization, does not stray too far from the distinctions provided by Clark and Moreau. In fact, he introduces the entire discussion by pointing out that contextualized theology has two basic orientations. The first he labels “creation centered” orientation. This position considers all of creation as sacramental, “the place where God reveals Godself. Revelation... comes in daily life, in ordinary words, through ordinary people.” The second he labels “redemption centered orientation.” This position is built on “the conviction that culture and human experience are either in need of a radical transformation or in need of total replacement.” The world is fallen and in need of redemption; therefore, God’s revelation can only come through his special redemptive work in Christ and inspired scriptures. These orientations/emphases provide a reasonable scale upon which different definitions and models of contextualization can be measured or described.

The evangelical doctrine of the inspiration and sufficiency of scripture demands that the biblical text serve as the source of authority for life and ministry. VanRheenen describes how this doctrine affects evangelical contextualization:

Models emphasizing scripture usually define contextualization as the translation of biblical meanings into contemporary cultural contexts. Therefore, images, metaphors, rituals, and words that are current in the culture are used to make the message both understandable and impactful. This model “assigns control to Scripture but cherishes the ‘contextualization’ rubric because it reminds us that the Bible must be thought about, translated into and preached in categories relevant to the particular cultural context.”

Evangelical contextualization, then, becomes a form of translation. This is not “a mere word-for-word correspondence of, say, doctrinal language of one culture into doctrinal language of another. Rather... translating the meaning of doctrines into another cultural context - and this translation might make those doctrines look and sound quite different from their original formulations.” The end result of good contextualization should contain all three of the following attributes:

- Reaffirmation of the faith once for all delivered to the saints.
- Rearticulation of this faith with forms, symbols, and language that communicate the message as it was intended to be understood.
- Reapplication of Christian living in a way that is culturally appropriate.

The fulfillment of the missionary task, as described in the Great Commission, requires that local missionaries, along with local believers, be involved in this process of working toward a properly contextualized Christian faith that includes each of these attributes.

THE GREAT COMMISSION AS PRIMARY MISSIONARY TEXT

Christopher Wright has successfully argued that the Grand Biblical Narrative, rather than a single verse (or a string of verses), ought to shape missionary theology. However, this fact should not cause us to ignore the importance of single missionary passages (like the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19-20) as a primary missionary text. This verse has probably inspired, as well as instructed, more Christians toward the task of Global Missions than any other single text in scripture. William Carey drew from this verse in his influential tract *An Enquiry Into the Obligation of Christians to use Means for the Conversion of the Heathen* (1792) to shake the church of his day from its missionary slumber. David Bosch notes that with the use of this verse, “Wm. Carey was, in fact, one of the very first to have attempted to spell out [a biblical] foundation for the church’s missionary mandate.” Then most recently, The Global Missionary Consultation, *Tokyo 2010*, used this verse as its theme and mandate. Considering this passage, the delegates of this historic conference pledged to deploy 100,000 new missionaries and follow the mandate of the Great Commission by encouraging “transformation at every level.” These two examples can serve as a bracket for the modern missionary movement and speaks to the significance of this verse.

The Great Commission is not only important in the historical development of missions; it is also a key text for biblical interpretation. Köstenberger and O’Brien have demonstrated that the commission should not be understood as an addendum at the end of the book or an afterthought by a redactor. Instead, this verse should serve as the key interpretative text for the entire book of Matthew. “This passage is intricately interwoven with the gospel [Matthew] as a whole.” Consequently, the Great Commission serves as a valuable interpretative key for understanding the entire gospel of Matthew. With this in mind, it would be impossible to overestimate the importance of the Great Commission in any discussion of the redemptive plan of God, including the OT prediction of the coming Son, his presentation in Matthew’s gospel, and, finally, the proclamation of the message to the nations.

THE COMMAND OF THE COMMISSION

The main verb of the sentence that makes up Matthew 28:19-20 is μαθητευσατε (make disciples), followed by descriptive phrases βαπτιζοντες αυτους (baptizing them) and διδασκοντες αυτους (teaching them). According to Blomberg this command calls for “a kind of evangelism that does not stop after someone makes a profession of faith. The truly subordinate participle... explain what making disciples involves... The first of these will be a once-for-all decisive initiation into Christian community. The second proves a perennially incomplete lifelong task.” This includes coming to faith, identifying with the Christian community, and growing in faith throughout the life of the believer. Rengstorf notes that μαθητευσατε “always implies the existence of a personal attachment which shapes the whole life of the one described as μαθητης.” These descriptions highlight that the command of the Great Commission is for followers of Jesus to introduce unbelievers to the faith; however, the work is not finished until the whole of life is affected.

Scores of books have been written on the subject of making disciples; for the most part, they are filled with modernized tips and techniques for selection and training. However, Bosch reminds us that the command to *make disciples* “has to be interpreted against the backdrop of Matthew’s gospel as a whole.” One may assume that Matthew intended for the reader to recall the way that Jesus dealt with his own disciples. According to Rengstorf, Jesus’ disciples were different from the other types of disciples in the NT (i.e. disciples of the Pharisees and John the Baptist); the latter were drawn to join a cause, while Jesus called his disciples to himself. This is a difference that should not be overlooked by modern missionaries. Again, Bosch notes, “Discipleship is determined by the relationship to Christ himself, not by conformity to an impersonal ordinance. The context is not the classroom (where ‘teaching’ usually takes place) nor even the church, but the world.” With apologies to Walter Henrichsen, the Great Commission calls for disciple-making that does not simply reproduce disciples after the disciple-maker’s “own kind.” Rather, the missionary’s challenge is to produce a disciple who is a follower of Christ within the specific and unique cultural location, a context that is always different from that of the missionary. Therefore the missionary must think through and work toward a properly contextualized faith.

CHRISTIANITY: A UNIVERSAL FAITH WITH LOCAL EXPRESSION

Timothy Tennent has written, “The life blood of Christianity is found in its ability to translate itself across new cultural and geographic barriers.” One dare not forget this important point when considering the mandate of the Great Commission. Unlike Islam and Hinduism, Christianity has proven, often through fiery trials, that its message is both relevant and life-changing in every culture. The Great Commission serves as a reminder of two key features of Christianity; it is a universal message strengthened through local expressions of faith.

Universality of the Christian Faith

Post-modern thinkers are quick to reject Christianity's claim of universal truth in our meta-narrative. However, Stanley Grenz has warned Christians that we dare not fall into the same trap. "We simply cannot allow Christianity to be relegated to the status of one more faith among others. The gospel is inherently an expansive missionary message. We believe not only that the biblical narrative makes sense for *us* but is also good news for *all*." This warning is especially important as we discuss the importance of contextualization and the Great Commission. It is easy to confuse talk about the necessity of a contextualized theology with postmodernism's rejection of a universal story. However, the call for contextualization is not an elevation of localized narratives above the Christian meta-narrative.

The Great Commission itself provides a clear indication that Jesus understood the Gospel was a universal message. This is why he commanded his followers to take the message to all nations. The message of Christ is universally applicable for all people in every culture. The new disciples are to be baptized into the name of the one God and instructed to obey the teachings of Jesus. It is impossible to miss this emphasis of the universality of the Christian. Continuing Grenz's quote, "[The Gospel] provides the fulfillment of the longings and aspirations of all peoples. It embodies *the truth* - the truth of and for all humankind." The Christian message addresses universal issues and is universally true. However, it is greatly strengthened when it finds local expressions.

Importance of Local Expression

The command to "make disciples of all nations" requires that the followers of Jesus translate the message into other languages and guide new believers in living out and expressing the gospel within their cultural context. Anthropologists and linguists have demonstrated the role that language plays in the shaping of one's worldview. Translating the Christian message into another language involves decisions about word choice and emphases. These choices naturally produce expressions of Christianity that are rooted in local soil – thought forms, symbols, and stories. Linguistics notwithstanding, Paul Hiebert pointed out that failure to contextualize the faith, encouraging local expressions, can create two serious problems. First, the gospel is identified as an imported, foreign religion rather than the universal message which can speak to the local concerns. Second, lack of contextualization derails complete and proper obedience to the teachings of Jesus. According to Hiebert, "Old beliefs and customs [don't] die out. Because they were not consciously dealt with, they [go] underground." In other words, failure to encourage believers to properly contextualize their faith with culturally appropriate expressions and applications of the faith may actually hinder obedience to the mandate of the Great Commission.

The Task for Great Commission, Cross-cultural Workers

As previously shown, it is vitally important to develop a properly contextualized form of Christianity which reaffirms the universal historic faith, while at the same time allowing for culturally appropriate expressions and applications of this message. It has also been demonstrated that obedience to the command of the Great Commission requires that the cross-cultural missionary should include this in his objectives as a way of engaging in cross-cultural disciple-making. However, the question remains, “What should an outsider do to foster a contextualized faith?” After all, contextualization must include contributions from those inside the culture. Timoteo Gener notes that contextualization is, “Doing theology... not having it done for them by others... received and owned by the local people... describes a two-way process...from *without* and from *within*.” This being true, what should the outsider do in order to both participate in contextualization as part of *making disciples* while at the same time releasing nationals to *do theology*?

Not only does obedience to the Great Commission require that the missionary not leave the development of a contextualized theology exclusively to the new church, but providing this measure of care also serves as a protection for new believers. Abdicating this responsibility might, by default, condemn the local church to repeat much of the 2000 years of theological development that has shaped the faith of the church. Heresy, theological debate, violence, and creeds of orthodoxy mark our Christian history. Some of these circumstances have contributed to a stronger faith, while others have not been so positive. Of course the new church will make mistakes, however it would be presumptuous to assume that a fledgling church would be able to avoid all of the missteps of previous generations. Guidance by the experienced missionary should prevent the new believers from accidentally drifting into issues that were addressed years ago. At the same time, contextualization is completed from within the local Christian community. It is this tension between the necessity of local church *doing theology* and the missionary mandate to *make disciples* that causes us to ask again, “What can an outsider do to foster a contextualized faith?”

Suggested Process

Several have offered proposals for a process of contextualization. It is not the purpose of this paper to suggest a wholly new venture but rather to build on what has already been proposed and relate it to the features of contextualization put forth earlier in this paper.

The first step to making disciples cross-culturally is for the missionary to present the gospel in both word and deed. He should give careful consideration to the way he expresses the message, being sensitive about the features of the presentation that are rooted in the home culture

rather than the biblical message. According to Dyrness, “What is commonly overlooked is that the impact comes often from the life as well as the message of the evangelist.” To the degree the missionary can live a Christian life in a culturally appropriate manner, nationals will begin to see the message applied, and the process of contextualization will begin. In this way, the missionary is seeking to obey the command of the Great Commission, making disciples, but care is given to cultural nuances. The message, as well as his lifestyle, should both affirm the culture while at the same time challenge some of the socially accepted norms.

Next, as questions about the message and even the lifestyle of the missionary arise, he should guide the new believers to read the scriptures as the source of answers. According to Clark, these questions should be applied to the “themes and texts from the biblical teachings.” The goal is to achieve more culturally appropriate expressions or applications of the Christian faith without falling into syncretism or a version of the faith that simply copies that of the missionary. Hiebert recommends “the pastor or missionary leads the church in a study of the scriptures... [he or she] plays a major role, for this is the area of his or her expertise.” However, it is at this point that the missionary should serve as a guide, not simply a teacher, often refusing to answer questions until nationals have discovered the answer first in scripture. This posture will allow the scriptures rather than the missionary to occupy the place of authority. Though the process might be long and complicated, the result of this is the initial step toward a contextualized faith. The church is doing theology and seeking to live obediently to its teachings, but not in isolation from the wider Christian community. The missionary is fulfilling the mandate of the Great Commission in making disciples of Jesus, not Western culture or himself. The result should be Christianity lived out and articulated differently than it has been received, but remaining faithful to the core elements of the faith.

As the missionary continues to engage the national believers, he will begin to serve as a friendly critic, offering correction and encouragement as necessary. Clark recommends, “Christians in one culture discuss their findings with theologians in another culture, either in time or in space.” It is in this phase that missionary serves as an external voice, pointing out where this newly contextualized faith is at odds with scriptural or traditional norms of the faith. Again, great care must be taken, because the missionary’s cultural sensitivities will be tested, and he must continually ask, “Is this behavior (or teaching) really at odds with biblical teaching or my own cultural understandings and preferences?” The answer, and response, to this question should cause both the missionary, along with the national church, to return to the scriptures, seeking greater insight.

CONCLUSION

This suggested process is, by necessity, loose and incomplete. However, it does provide some way forward for missionaries to fulfill the mandate of making disciples without neglecting

the importance of contextualization and the necessity for local believers to actually *do theology for themselves*. To be sure, the process is fraught with pitfalls; it is not a safe or painless journey. At each turn, there is ample opportunity for mistakes. However, timidity is not an option; the vibrancy of the faith and the mandate of the Great Commission demand that missionaries intentionally strive for a contextualized faith.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bevans, Stephen, B. *Models of Contextual Theology*. Maryknoll : Orbis Books, rev ed. 2002.

Blomberg, Craig *Matthew: NAC*. Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992.

Bosch David J., *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. American Society of Missiology series no. 16, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991.

-----, "Hermeneutical Principles in the Biblical Foundations for Mission," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 17 (1993), 438.

Clark, David K. *To Know and Love God: Method for Theology*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2003.

Dyrness, William A. *Learning About Theology from the Third World*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990.

Dyrness, William A. and Veli-Matti Karkkainen, eds. *Global Dictionary of Theology*. Downers Grove: InnerVarsity Press, 2008.

Escobar, Samuel. *The New Global Mission: The Gospel from Everywhere to Everyone (Christian Doctrine in Global Perspective)*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003.

Flemming, Dean E. *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2005.

Gilliland, Dean S., ed. *The Word Among Us*. Dallas: Word Publishing, 1989.

Grenz, Stanley James. *A Primer on Postmodernism*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1996.

González, Justo. *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective*. Abingdon, 1990.

Henrichsen, Walter A. and Howard G. Hendricks, *Disciples Are Made Not Born*. Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2002.

Hiebert, Paul G. "Critical Contextualization," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, July 1987.

Kittle, Gerhard, and Gerhard Friedrich, eds. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Translated by Geoffrey W. Bromily. 10 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964-1976.

Köstenberger, Andreas J. and Peter T. O'Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission*. NSBT 11; Leicester, UK: InterVarsity, 2001.

Philip Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South*. Oxford, 2008.

Ott, Craig, and Harold Netland. *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006.

Ott, Craig, Timothy Tennant, and Stephen Strauss. *Encountering Theology of Mission: Biblical Foundations, Historical Developments, and Contemporary Issues*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010.

Pocock, Michael, Gailyn Van Rhee, and Douglas McConnell. *The Changing Face of World Missions*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005.

Schreier, Robert J. *Constructing Local Theologies*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1985.

Taylor, David, "Setting the Pace," in *Mission Frontiers*, July-August 2010, 7-10.

Tennant, Timothy C. *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church Is Influencing the Way We Think about and Discuss Theology*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007.

Vanhoozer, Kevin J. *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach To Christian Theology*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005.

VanRhee, Gaylen. *Contextualization and Syncretism*.
<<http://www.missiology.org/mmr/printable/mmr38.pdf>>, 9/10/2010.

Walls, Andrew. *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in Transmission of Faith*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996.

Walls, Andrew. *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in Transmission of Faith*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002.

Wright, Christopher. *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative*.
Downers Grove: IVP, 2006.