

Practical Contextualization: A Case Study of Evangelizing Contemporary Chinese

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Abstract

Fourth in a series of six articles, this focuses on the topic of practical contextualization. We move from a general discussion of theological methodology to suggestions for practical Christianity in terms of evangelizing Chinese. Based on work in Hong Kong, new ways of conceptualization, expression and application are found to be crucial in evangelism. The message of the Gospel within the Chinese cultural context should be conceptualized with an emphasis on honor, relationship, and harmony, which are at the core of traditional Chinese cultural values. In contrast to "felt need" evangelism, loving relationships and transformed lives are found to be the most powerful expression of Christianity. Evangelism is best applied through personal contact, private interaction, and/or network of the extended family.

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I. REVIEW

Last time, a summary of the problems and perils of employing the "either-or" cognitive pattern in "traditional Western theology" (TWT) was presented and the "both-and" way was proposed as an alternative method of theologizing in "Sino-theology" (ST).

For the sake of review, the definitions of two key-terms in the last article are quoted below:

"Contextualization": the efforts of formulating, presenting and practicing the Christian faith in such a way that is relevant to the cultural context of the target group in terms of conceptualization, expression and application; yet maintaining theological coherence, biblical integrity and theoretical consistency.

"Sino-theology": a unique theological orientation specifically designed for the Chinese people in contra-distinction from TWT: employing the Chinese cognitive pattern (e.g. "both-and" vs. "either-or" of TWT) and Chinese cognitive process (e.g. synthetic vs. the dialectic of TWT), the Chinese way of social interaction (e.g. relational/complementary vs. dichotomist/confrontational of TWT), Chinese vocabulary (e.g. "tien" [天] = heaven), Chinese cultural themes (e.g. group solidarity such as the family vs. self-fulfillment of TWT.), etc. The goal is not to transplant Christianity in the "pot" of Western culture but to plant it in the Chinese cultural soil so it can take root, flourish and grow.

II. INTRODUCTION

In the last article, we have examined one aspect of TWT, i.e. the problematic use of the "either-or" cognitive pattern. We also proposed the possible use of the "both-and" cognitive pattern in ST as an alternative theological worldview to TWT.

In this paper, we will focus on the topic of practical contextualization. I regard this article as a sequel to the last one on theological contextualization and my intention is to move from a general discussion of theological methodology to suggestions for practical Christianity in terms of evangelizing Chinese.

For the purpose of being context-specific, the socio-cultural context of Hong Kong Chinese is chosen for this article with the full knowledge that Chinese people are vast in number, diverse in culture and varied in accordance to local contexts: e.g. "Chinese in the Mainland" (華人) with five major ethnic groups (i.e. Han, Manchurian, Mongolian, Muslim, and Tibetan), and dozens of minority groups; "overseas-born-Chinese" (OBC), including those who have immigrated to Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, USA, Canada, etc., and "local-born-Chinese" (LBC), including American-born-Chinese (ABC), British-born-Chinese (BBC), Canadian-born-Chinese (CBC), etc. Generalizations of all Chinese are not helpful when fruitful discussion is intended.

Though there are many aspects of practical contextualization such as style of Christian living and worship, patterns of social interaction and religious institutions, processes of membership recruitment and integration, etc., we will examine the following three: conceptualization, expression and application of evangelism as an illustration of practical contextualization for Hong Kong Chinese.

III. CONCEPTUALIZATION FOR EVANGELISM

In TWT, the "message of the Gospel" is usually presented as the forgiveness of sin by the atoning death of Jesus Christ to save the condemned from the wrath of a righteous God who reckons sinners as justified. The socio-cultural background of Western civilization for the doctrine of salvation of TWT is reviewed briefly as follows:

"Western culture has a Greco-Roman, politico-legal base and Judeo-Christian ethical foundation. The Greek social system of city-state, the Roman law, etc. have been well developed for 'millennia' in the West. The influence of the Judeo-Christian value system and moral code has left its mark in the mind and heart of people in the context of western civilization, so much so that anthropologists who have conducted cross-cultural comparative studies have classified the western culture as a 'guilt culture' in contrast to the 'shame' culture of the East (e.g. Japanese, Chinese, Vietnamese, etc.)" (Wan 1995:156)

From the above quotation, readers may discover the reason for the popularity and the rationale behind the pragmatic use of the "Four Spiritual Laws" in the West.

In Sino-theology, salvation should be presented as having "en-qing (恩情) " (gracious-intimate-relationship among the "three persons of the Trinity") and "en-yue (恩約) "

(gracious-covenant of the Triune God for human kind) as the foundation of salvation due to the high value of Chinese culture on relationship. The focus of salvation is "yong-ru jiu-en-lun (榮辱救恩論) " (Christ's shame-bearing death and honor-gaining resurrection) for honor is very desirable and shame is to be shunned at all cost by the Chinese.

When we share the Gospel to the Chinese, Jesus Christ should be presented as the "zhong-bao (中保) " (mediator), "jiu-shu-zhu (救贖主) "(redeemer) and "fu-hu-zhe (復和者) " (reconciler) because "guan-xi (關係) "(relationship) is of supreme importance and harmonious relationship is the ideal for Chinese.

Chinese people try hard to avoid confrontation, which would cause someone to "lose face" and run the risk of breaking the relationship. The use of match-making in traditional marriage arrangements, the go-between for business deals, the guarantee of a reputable person rather than the signing of a legal document, etc. are all time-honored cultural practices that prepare the Chinese to accept Christ as "zhong-bao" (mediator), "shu-jia-zhe (贖罪者) " (debt-payer), and "fu-hu-zhe" (reconciler). **We present Christ as a "go-between" between God and human beings because salvation is best understood by the Chinese in terms of a reconciled vertical relationship with God and a peaceful horizontal relationship with one's fellow man.** (Wan 1998, 1999).

Table 1 - "fu-hu-shen-xue-lun (復和神學論) " (theology of reconciliation) (translated from Wan 1999:121-122)

RECONCILIATION

NECESSITY

WAYS

AND

MEANS

RESULT

HUMAN KIND

悖 We're at enmity with God because of our own wickedness (Ro 5:1-11; Col 1:21)

契 Reconciled to God in Christ because of God's grace and love (objective: 2 Co 5:19) and our positive response (subjective, 2 Co 5:20)

救 Have been reconciled to God through the death of the Son (Ro 5:10; Col 1:21-22)

紉 Jesus Christ puts to death the hostility by the cross, makes peace through his blood (Eph 2:16; Col 1:20)

紉 After reconciled, believers are citizens in the kingdom of God, are children of God's household, have made peace with each other (Eph 2:11-22)

紉 After reconciled, entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation and preaching the Gospel of peace (2 Co 5:18-19; Col 1:21-22)

CREATED NATURE

紉 Has been groaning, awaiting the liberation from the bondage of decay and redemption from the curse (Ro 8:18-23)

紉 Through Jesus Christ to reconcile all things to God Himself, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross (Col 1:20)

紉 Has been groaning with the pains of childbirth, waiting for the full redemption, which has "already but not yet" come. (Ro 8:22-23)

Table 2 - "yong-ru-shen-xue-lun (榮辱神學論)" (theology of honor/shame) (translated from Wan 1999:102-105)

GLORY\SHAME

GLORY

(pre-fall)

SHAME

(post-fall)

Glorification

(post-reconciliation)

JESUS CHRIST - THE SON

Pre-incarnation:

瓜 Glorious prior to incarnation (Col 1:15-19)

Incarnation is:

笠 Christ emptying Himself, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness, humbled himself and became obedient to death * even death on the cross (Php 2:5-11)

笠 Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us (Gal 3:13; 2 Co 5:21)

苡 Has forsaken by God the Father (Mt 27:46)

Glorification is:

紉 God the Father exalted the resurrected Son with the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue shall confess that He is Lord (Php 2:9-11)

拂 Has raised from the dead and seated at God's right hand in the heavenly realms (1 Co 15:4; Mk 16:19; Eph 1:20)

罌 Much superior to the angels (Heb 1:4)

拂 Will come back and judge the world (Ac 1:11; 17:31)

HUMAN KIND

拂 Were created in the image of God (Ge 1:26-28; 2:7)

拂 Were crowned with glory and honor (Ps.8:4-5)

拂 Were made rulers over the creatures (Ge 1:26-28; Ps 8:6)

拂 Were naked but felt no shame (Ge 2:25)

糝 Felt shame and was afraid to see God (Ge 3:9-10)

糝 Every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time:

i.e. total depravity (Ge 6:5-6)

拂 Were cursed and punished (Ge 3:15-19; 6:7)

紉 God made garments of skin and clothed them (Ge 3:21)

奐 Regain the image of God in Christ (Eph 4:24)

竝 Are new creations in Christ (2 Co 5:17)

奐 Receive power from the Holy Spirit, are transformed by the renewing of the mind after regeneration (Ro 12:1-2)

竝 After reconciled with God, clothed in the righteousness of Christ, will receive glory, will judge angels (1 Co 6:3)

Table 3 - "jia-ting shen-xue-lun (家庭神學論) " (the theology of family)(translated from Wan 1999:165-175)

True God

True Christians

True Church

= universal fatherhood of God to all believers

= believers being born into the family of God

Sonship of all Christians adopted in Christ

Universal brotherhood of all believers

= the "household of God" constituted by believers regardless of time, race, place, etc. and the communion of the saints in Christ

spiritual family: nature = transcendent (transcending time & space)

cross-cultural (embracing different cultures)

multi-ethnic (transcending various races)

Man was created in the image of God and enjoyed close communion with Him before the Fall. However, his misuse of the gift of human free will brought in sin and severed his relationship with God and the created order (relationships with others and the natural order included). Yet

God initiated the plan of salvation and implemented the process of reconciliation with Himself in the Son. This relational reinterpretation of the doctrine of salvation for the Chinese is summarized in Table 1 above:

Another way of conceptualizing the message of salvation for the Chinese is in terms of the Chinese cultural theme of "honor and shame." As shown in Table 2, Jesus Christ is both the shame-bearer for sinners and honor-winner for believers. He did so because of the fall of mankind and the fact that spiritually speaking sin and shame are closely related. On the other hand, salvation/redemption and honor/glory are also closely related. This culturally relevant understanding of the Chinese and doctrinally correct conceptualization of "honor and shame" is summarized in Table 2 above:

Since "family" is one of the key features of Chinese culture, an alternative way to present the message of salvation is "the theology of family." For instance, the use of the parable of the prodigal son of Luke 15 to show the fatherly love of God for sinners is a good starting point. **God the Father's giving of His only begotten Son to save sinners as portrayed in the Gospel of John will be more appealing to the Chinese than the cold and impersonal "forensic" nature of the Gospel in TWT. Becoming a Christian is the believer's adoption in Christ to become a child of God.** Key concepts of "jia-ting shen- xue-lun (家庭神學論)" (the theology of family) are the universal fatherhood of God to all believers; the church is inclusive of the universal brotherhood of all believers of all times and all ages; the local church is "the household of God" (1 Tim 3:15); heaven is the perfect home in eternity with the perfect communion of the saints, etc., as shown in CATW, March 2000 (see page 22).

The conceptualization of salvation in Sino-theology is in contra-distinction from TWT, which can be historically and theologically described as:

"The Protestant reformation had a strong emphasis on the doctrine of 'justification by faith.' The favorite New Testament books of western evangelicals for reading and preaching are usually Romans and Galatians. Anglophone Caucasian Christians usually define 'sinners' as 'people violating God's law' and the message of salvation is expressed in terms of 'forgiveness of sin...the penal substitution of Christ...imputed righteousness.' The gospel is introduced in the form of 'law-principle,' and in terms of 'justification by faith in Christ as Savior.'" (Wan 1995:157)

The message of the Gospel within the Chinese cultural context should be characterized by the emphasis on honor, relationship, and harmony, which are at the core of traditional Chinese cultural values. It should be different from TWT's overemphasis on the forensic nature of the Gospel, the legal dimension of Christ's penal substitution and divine justification. Of course, the whole counsel of God should be taught subsequently in discipleship programs, but Chinese non-Christians should not be alienated by cultural elements in the soteriology of TWT. At the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15, it was already resolved that Gentiles were not required to become Jews (by circumcision, Mosaic laws, etc.) prior to becoming Christians. Similarly, Chinese should not be alienated from the Gospel because certain Westernized Chinese Christians' insistence on Western interpretation of the doctrine of salvation as if that is the litmus test of orthodoxy.

IV. EXPRESSION IN EVANGELISM

The rationalistic argument, lineal logic, and abstract proclamation of TWT in evangelism are less appealing to relationally-oriented, co-relational thinking, and pragmatically-inclined Chinese.

The life-changing reality of Christianity, the Christ-like character of the bearer of the Gospel, and the loving relationship among believers are usually a more powerful expression of Christianity when evangelizing Chinese. Chinese long for the message of power in order to deliver themselves from the threat of fear and fate:

"The presence and power of evil forces and demonic beings are reality recognized (by the Chinese). Many have witnessed demonic manifestations or even personally experienced demonic oppression or possession. Their superstition and fear of the spirits would have prepared them to receive the 'good news' of a mighty but merciful Christ. The classical Christian view of Christ's death and atonement ...setting us free from evil power, would be better appreciated than the rational, logical argument of the existence of God. They want to embrace Christ and experience His victory and love that could set them free from fear and fate..." (Wan 1995:158)

To them, "the primary message of the gospel ...is not a hope to enter heaven 'by and by' and deliverance from hell in the afterlife. They want to experience the deliverance from curse, fate, fear, etc. in the 'here and now.'" (Wan 1995:158) Mere propositional truth will not do for they are in need of "...the freedom and joy in Christ...a liberating message and life style. It is something that can be declared clearly, demonstrated powerfully and experienced daily." (Wan 1995:158)

The above suggestion for evangelizing the Chinese is definitely different from the "felt need" approach of outreach in the West which emphasizes:

"the promise of prosperity and problem solving, or the gospel of health and wealth, success and happiness...parade the newly converted movie star, the professional athlete or the successful businessman in ... evangelistic rallies, and in their stage show type of program...call for a simplistic or emotional 'acceptance of Christ.'" (Wan 1995:160)

V. APPLICATION IN EVANGELISM

When evangelizing the Chinese, the method of pre-evangelistic promotion (except in the case of crusade type of mass evangelism), is best done through personal contact, private interaction, network of the extended family, etc. There should not be an unduly reliance on impersonal information via the mass media as in the West. This relational approach (vs. the Western style of marketing the Gospel) is culturally more relevant and practically more effective than the Western import. The pervasive social network of Chinese society (vs. the individualist orientation of the West) should be utilized when we try to evangelize Chinese.

General knowledge of Christianity cannot be assumed when evangelizing the Chinese. The Christian vocabulary (e.g. incarnation, sin, justification, etc.) may be foreign to many traditional Chinese (who instead know well of reincarnation and human error). Terms such as "heaven," "saved," etc. might culturally mean something entirely else to them, totally at variance with the

biblical usage. Due to the belief in fatalism, superstition about death, and fear of "bad luck" caused by merely mentioning these words, the typical opening statement of Evangelism Explosion (i.e. "what if you should die tonight") and the frequent mention of "hell, death, and God's judgment" of many Western-style evangelistic methods should be modified for the Chinese.

Instantaneous and individualistic decision-making (especially telephone evangelism) and public professions of faith (by coming forward) are not to be imposed on the Chinese. They are non-committal to salesman-style pressure, they may have problems in making instantaneous decision out of their fear of social ostracism. Some Chinese may hastily say "yes" when pressured to receive Christ. They do so out of politeness, being courteous or respectful to the one sharing the Gospel who happens to be his/her superior. But this kind of conversion is not deeply rooted and stands no test at all.

Even the method of follow-up has to be contextually Chinese as explained below

"An extensive period of in-depth follow-up of these ...converts is necessary to deal with problems such as family opposition, carry-over superstition and syncretism, social ostracism, lingering demonic entanglement, etc. The cost of discipleship....., personally and socially, as part of a well-developed evangelism program, is not to be underestimated. The fast-food mentality and quick-fix methodology...should not be assumed as valid when evangelizing (Chinese)." (Wan 1995:161)

VI. CONCLUSION

Practical contextualization for the Chinese is an important but complicated subject for research and implementation. Three aspects related to evangelizing the contemporary Chinese in Hong Kong are treated in this brief study, i.e. the conceptualization, expression and application in evangelism.

Hopefully this brief paper will stimulate others to engage in further study and conduct fruitful research in this area in the new millenium.

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