Review

Contextualization: A Theology of Gospel and Culture

Bruce J. Nicholls

Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing, 2003.

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Published in *Global Missiology*, Review & Preview, July 2008

www.globalmissiology.net

Bruce J. Nicholls first published this excellent volume in the late 1970's when he was executive secretary of the World Evangelical Fellowship Theological Commission. Regent College has wisely chosen to re-issue it because it was and remains one of the most excellent foundational summaries of the issues involved. I only wish that he had added a few pages to update the development of the concept of contextualization. As it is, he ends his historical survey in the mid-seventies. I also think that he should have interacted with a couple of others in the development of his central section on the "supracultural." But these two weaknesses are minor compared to the strengths of this introduction to the topic.

Nicholls comes to this task with a rich background. He worked for many years in theological education and pastoral ministry with the Church of North India. He was Editor of the Evangelical Review of Theology for 18 years and is presently Editor of the Asia Bible Commentary series. *Contextualization: A Theology of Gospel and Culture* demonstrates that cross-cultural communication of the Good News of Christ is indeed exceedingly difficult. Every missionary, he shows, must understand at least three cultures: The culture of Scripture, his or her own culture, and third, the culture of the people to whom he wishes to share the Gospel. Actually, missionaries from the Two-Thirds World, must also add a fourth. They must understand thoroughly the Western missionaries' worldview and culture because they were the ones who first came with gospel.

Most missionaries, whether from the West or from the Two-Thirds world presuppose that "it is possible to transmit the pure gospel of the Bible direct to the hearer without the carrier modifying it" (Nicholls 1979, 8). Thus many missions and their missionaries proclaim the same basic message, packaged in the same forms to "Catholics, Hindus, Muslims, or Marxists" (9). Humans are not a blank slate, he states, so that the Word can be poured into their minds in exactly the same form for every language and ethnocultural group.

Nicholls provides an excellent model for the contextualization of the Gospel. He demonstrates that God's message must be taught and proclaimed in meanings and forms that are derived from within the targeted culture. In order to derive these culturally relevant forms, he begins with two foundational presuppositions. First, many reject the Gospel not because they think it false but because they believe it is a threat to their family and cultural solidarity. Second, he assumes that God created many features of every cul-

ture. Even though they are twisted by human rebellion, they can thus be redeemed and transformed as vehicles for the Gospel. He presupposes what H. Richard Niebuhr terms, "Christ the transformer of culture." This, I believe, was Calvin's perspective and is founded solidly on Scripture's whole message. However, each mission agency comes with cultural and philosophical baggage, which makes it difficult to accept certain aspects of both of these presuppositions. Hence, missions have a strong tendency to underestimate and then completely downplay the transformative aspects of the Gospel message.

To aid in true contextualization, Nicholls first defines culture following Roman Catholic missionary anthropologist. Louis Luzbetak, as "a design for living." He suggests that culture is like an onion with various layers. The most important is the deepest layer consisting of "ideology, cosmology and worldview" (11). The second layer is that of values. The third is that of "institutions such as marriage, law, education" (11). The surface layer is that of "artifacts and observable behavior" (11). Though this is not a totally adequate explanation of culture as he acknowledges, it gives cross-cultural communicators a picture of what contextualization must address. He summarizes: "Culture is a macrocosm of spiritual man responding to his environment within the historical stream of his cultural continuity" (12).

In addressing each of the layers, a communicator must take "the supra-cultural" into account. Unfortunately, this term has Greek dualist connotations, which leads some such as GM editor Enoch Wan to abandon the term but not the concept as Nicholls describes it. A cultural – supra-cultural contrast is similar to the natural – super-natural contrast of dualistic theologians. Instead a more biblical distinction is the Creator—creature difference. There is no absolute supra-culture or supernatural sphere above the creature, yet below God. The sphere of the angels and demons, for example, is not a separate realm of "the spirit" but is part of creation. The triune community of the Godhead is the model culture. His power is all there is. Every other culture and every other power depends upon his culture and power either as a direct image or as an opposite mirror image. Nicholls, however, approaches this nuance in his definition of "supra-cultural": "The phenomena of cultural belief and behavior that have their source outside of human culture" (13).

At this point he rejects John Mbiti's idea that only the Gospel comes from outside man. Culture is purely a human product. Not so, Nicholls states. For example, the Hebrew culture is a complex interaction of "the supra-cultural and the Hebrews in their environment and history." He then immediately adds, "The Word of God changes the direction of culture and transforms it" (13). In addition to the human and divine element, Nicholls also wisely adds the demonic. He writes, "the New Testament witnesses to the conviction that the world is not a closed system but the arena of a battle between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan" (14).

Culture then is a complex interaction between what Enoch Wan terms Hominoculture (or Anthroculture), Diabloculture, and Theoculture. Contextualization must take all three into account. "Culture is never neutral. Every culture reflects this conflict. Religion is never a purely a human affair, but an encounter within the supra-cultural realm of the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan," he continues (15). I agree and would only wish that he had stated that the conflict is both in the spiritual realm and in the cultural realm as Revelation 12 makes clear.

Therefore, the Gospel when it is contextualized is never the "guest of any culture; it

is always its judge and redeemer" (15). Faith truly comes by hearing with understanding, and such hearing comes from a contextualized and relevant presentation of the Word of God with the power of the Spirit. Faith then is a result of both a contextualized Word and power encounter. The problem, thus, is to find the right cultural forms and then to keep the Gospel message both clearly biblical and culturally relevant.

Nicholls deals next with tough social, theological and hermeneutical questions and proposes a direction for missions in the future. He first surveys the development of the term "contextualization." The term came to the forefront in a debate concerning whether the older term "indigenization" best describes the incarnational process of bringing the Word with power to each ethno-cultural group of humanity. Advocates of the term contextualization generally came from the Counciliar movement and wanted to add the concepts of "social justice" and development into the concept of indigenization. That latter term was inadequate because it was primarily ecclesial and did not take into account the socio-political issues such as the class struggle, oppression, and corruption.

Evangelicals, Nicholls states, have now adopted the term "contextualization" because they too have become convinced that the Gospel must address "the world of economic and political structures" as well as the "work of evangelism and the indigenizing of the church" (23). This came, however, with struggle and by imputing new meaning to the term in order to strip away much of the neo-Marxist background it carried. Evangelicals now take a "both-and" approach instead of an "either-or" dialogical approach, which has a tendency to abandon evangelism and church planting altogether.

Nicholls is primarily interested in the deep level areas of culture when it comes to contextualization. Worldview, cosmology, and ethical values are the domain of theologians, whereas Christian anthropologists and sociologists are most interested in the surface levels of institutions and behavior. Unfortunately, this is again a type of dualism. Paul, for example, was interested in both as most of his epistles demonstrate. The first half deals with worldview and core values, but the second half deals with institutions and behavior. It is Scriptural to make the distinction, but not wise to separate them. Social science is increasingly dealing with core issues and theologians ought to deal with the surface levels as well to have a balanced contextualization process.

The volume then divides contextualization into "two approaches" (24): Existential and dogmatic. It is at this point that the excellence of Nicholl's study reaches its peak. Existential contextualization, he writes, "involves the interaction of two basic principles" both of which are relative and not absolute or unchanging. First is the "relativity of the text and the context" and second, is the "dialectical method of the search for truth" (25). The basic presupposition is that all theology is "culturally conditioned and therefore in some sense relative" (25). No theology is "perfect or absolute" (25).

He certainly admits that Western theological imperialism has indeed been a major problem in "many Third World churches . . . stifling the efforts of national Christians to theologize within their own culture" (25). However, the existential contextualization approach is not the answer because it rejects *a priori* the idea of "a propositional verbal revelation as objective and authoritative" (25). Hence there can be no single biblical theology but only many biblical theologies.

All theologies, both in Scripture and post-Scripture writings, are thus contextualized because there is no normative theology. The theologies of Scripture came in response to a community's or person's existential encounter—in their own relative con-

text—with the living Christ. He cites a Two-Thirds world theologian who claims that there is not one but at least five Jesus' in Scripture with whom believers then existentially interacted. In exactly the same manner, contemporary cultures must contextualize the Gospel. They must follow the example of the early church, which interacted with many different visions of Christ and applied these varying encounters to their own contexts.

This is not, however, the way forward because it leads to syncretism, which almost all now recognize is negative. Nicholls defines syncretism as the "attempt to reconcile diverse or conflicting beliefs, or religious practices into a unified system" (29). Yet an "unhealthy phobia of syncretism" (29), on the other hand, can hobble true attempts at contextualization. The way forward is first to distinguish between biblical theology (singular) and Western or Eastern or Two-Thirds world theologies. In this way, there is only one unified-yet-diverse biblical theology, which is the norm. One's own culture, one's own people, tradition, and Scripture cannot be normative. Here Nicholls unconsciously returns to the Reformational sola Scriptura norm.

Syncretistic theology is based on several principles. First is that of an existential encounter with the Christ-event. Second is "reductionism" that is an attempt to "regress from historical fact to ideal or timeless truths" (32). The background is pantheistic religion and monistic philosophy. Third, is the principle of "complementarity in which the sum total of particular truths is greater thatn the expression of any one truth. Truth is . . found in the consensus or synthesis of particular truths" (33). This ultimately leads to "universalism in salvation and ethics" (33). The fourth principle is that of progressive absorbtion." All claims to universal truth, or a meta-narrative, as post-moderns call it, are re-absorbed by the particular, natural, and human. Fallen man becomes the measure of all things. Syncretism kills truth, the church, and above all, evangelism.

At this point, Nicholl's brilliant volume moves to the "Understanding of Biblical Theology" (37). How we use the Bible in contextualization is the central issue. That, in turn, depends on how we understand and use the "hermeneutical task" (37) in contextualization. All in both the Ecumenical and Evangelical movements understand that theology is culturally conditioned. But the answer to the question, in which ways is Scripture itself conditioned by culture has historically divided the two movements. What is "transcultural" and what is cultural? How can the " 'gospel core' " be identified and objectified?

Here he mentions the issue of "pre-understanding." Neo-orthodox and dialectical theologies believe that there is no "presuppositionless exegesis" so that everything is relative. Everyone sees what they want to see and no one can come to a meta-narrative. However, Nicholls correctly assesses that there are actually only two possible pre-understandings: God's and humanity's. The Holy Spirit clears a person's mind and causes one to be able to think using God's mind (presuppositions). He causes the one encountered with the birth from above to be able to see clearly the "supra-cultural verities which are inherent in the Word of God itself" (43). Thus there is one biblical theology, which is expressed in various theologies (Pauline, Johannine, etc.). "The Bible's pluralism is a pluralism of complementarity within a single divinely controlled whole" (45). In other words, to put it in simpler terms, there exists true theological diversity and real unity of theology at the same time in Scripture. Each author complements and contributes to the harmony of the whole. The essential diversity, however, does not destroy the perspicuity of the unified message, which shines clearly forth with the illumination of the

Spirit.

At this point, I believe, Nicholls makes a mistake in his discussion. He states that God sovereignly chose "the Semitic Hebrew culture through which to reveal his Word." So far so good. He then adds, if he had chosen another culture, such as the Chinese or Indian, then the "content of the Word would have been different." The reason he gives is mistaken. "To radically change the form which carries its own world view and set of values is to change the content" (45). Indeed, God guided the Semitic form through Abraham, to Shem, to Noah, and the Sethite line back to Adam. He did not capriciously choose the form but guided the form and kept the form pure though the prophets under the inspiration of the Spirit.

Last, the volume gives very sound foundational principles for understanding Biblical Theology. 1) "The lifestyle principle of faith-commitment" (48) (2) "The objective-subjective principle of distancing from and identification with the text" (49). This is similar to what several have termed a hermeneutical spiral. The reader will allow the text to correct his own pre-understanding and that corrected understanding will lead to further application and deeper understanding in an on-going spiral. (3) "The bodylife principe of the believing community" (51). All contextualization must take place within the context of an interpretative community. Wisdom is in many counselors. All of us have different gifts, perspectives, cultures, and life-experiences. We all complement one another just as the multiple authors of Scripture complement each other as well. (4) "Mission-in-the-world principle" (52). Contextualization must be thoroughly comprehensive, including "worship and fellowship, social service and justice, and evangelizing and making disciples." Anything less is a "truncated theology" (52).

Based on these principles, Nicholls finally gives sound counsel to put Biblical theology into each cultural context. Here he is correct. "Any particular contextual formulation of theology may be valid and true to the gospel, but it cannot claim to comprehend the totality of the revealed Word of God. All contextualized formulations remain inadequate" (53). He then proceeds to give sound counsel for the actual process of contextualizing.

Nicholls has done an excellent job of summarizing and evaluating the foundational principles of various kinds of contextualization. I highly recommend his work for intermediate students of missions and believe it is a valuable asset to the missiological endeavor.