Thoughts On Contextualisation

A paper given in 1991

All we are doing in evangelism, church planting and church perfecting is **worship**. Paul says,

"... the grace that was given me from God, to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, ministering as a priest the Gospel of God, that my offering of the Gentiles might become acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 15:15-16).

Since all we do is a form of worship, we need to be very careful what we are offering up to God. Remember Cain and Abel!

Paul's ministry was to contextualise the "Jewish" teaching of Jesus and the early church in Palestine to the Gentile World. For example, a major emphasis in the teaching of Jesus is on the Kingdom (the word is found nearly 100 times in the synoptic Gospels). This concept is rooted in the Old Testament. It would not have been understood by the Gentile World lacking, as they did, a background in Jewish thought. Paul majors on the church. The Hellenistic World **did** have an understanding of the word *"ecclesia"* – 'assembly'. Historically decisions relating to contextualisation are as old as the church.

Another familiar decision that has always confronted Bible translators in this area of contextualisation is the use of words. For example, if you are translating Genesis 1:1: ***"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth"***, what word are you going to use for 'God'? Immediately you are forced to make a hermeneutical, contextual and missiological decision. Such decisions are crucial! William Carey, in translating the Bible into Bengali, decided not to use the Bengali word for God that the Muslims used – the word 'Allah' – but a Hindu word. This decision affected the growth of the Bengali church. For 150 years the Bengali church was almost entirely a Hindu convert church. Only in the 1960s when a new translation was made designed for Muslims and using 'Allah' for 'God', was there any significant number of Muslims coming to Christ in Bangladesh.

Contextualisation is relating the Gospel to your target group, but it must be done in a way that is faithful to Scripture. We need an environment where we can experiment with contextualisation issues, but we must be aware of the danger of relativising the Gospel and the church to a particular culture. When you read the literature on the subject of contextualisation there is not only a great deal of "fuzziness" about **a definition** of the word, but also about **legitimate contextualisation and syncretism** where truth has been sacrificed. We need to pursue greater clarity as to where this line is. It disturbs me that 20 centuries after the Great Commission was given there are still no clear guidelines in this area.

Cross-cultural evangelism and church planting are very complex issues. We are all contextualising to some degree or other. But the real issues are not: should we face Mecca when we pray, should we pray 5 times a day, should we bow down when we pray? Nor are they issues like the furniture we should have when we meet – chairs or only rugs and cushions. The real issue is to make the Gospel relevant to the target culture God has led us to – but in a way that is faithful to Scripture. How can we let the Gospel take on, to some degree or other, those forms that will enable the listeners to realise what they are hearing is not totally alien?

We have to draw the line between syncretism and contextualisation. It is very difficult but we must do it. We need to encourage each other in the area of contextualisation, but rebuke each other in the area of syncretism. The Muslim World is perhaps the greatest missiological hurdle facing the Christian church and we need to discern these issues of contextualisation and syncretism. Failure to do so will cause us to lose our cutting edge.

In discussing this issue we must remember that the Kingdom of God is alien and hostile to all cultures. This is because the Principalities and Powers have influenced all cultures. Therefore Christians from all cultures need to repent and turn away from aspects of their culture that have been demonized and polluted. Contextualisation that ignores the demonic element in Islam will go sadly awry. The problem isn't just a communication issue. As I understand it, as we get closer towards the end-times we will see this hidden demonic element become much more overt. The battle is a spiritual one not just a communications problem. It isn't true that if we just use contextual methodology to get our communication techniques right, we will be fruitful. It is much more complex than this. Don't

minimise the demonic element in Islamic cultures. I would like to make ten points that I hope will help us draw the line between contextualisation and syncretism.

1. "New Paths" in Muslim Evangelism are actually fairly well beaten paths

We live in a generation that seems to accept and be an advocate of all that is new. Most of what is in Phil Parshall's book is not new. Hudson Taylor, in the last century, faced the clothes and pigtail issue. Because of his decision to dress, eat and live in a way that was as Chinese as possible he scandalised the missionary community of his day. Since Hudson Taylor's day his approach is widely accepted by everyone. But the key issues are not dress and food and style of living.

In the 1930s in Egypt church leaders and missionaries were debating whether believers from a Muslim background could call themselves by a name other than Christian. Roland Allen's book, **"St Paul's Missionary Methods or Ours?"** written in the China context in the 1920s deals with many of the issues written about in what are now termed "new paths".

We should remember that not all "old paths" were unfruitful. The old apologetic method of the "Balance of Truth" and the use of debates led to many fine conversions. It is unfair to the "old" work to dismiss it as unfruitful. We need to study church history and the history of missions. It is true that everyone is a child of his/her age, but there are many useful lessons to be learnt from the past.

Clearly, **every "path" must present its own inherent case**. Newness or oldness should not be used to validate a path. Remember not just the warning about newness. "Old paths" can become ruts. And a rut is merely a "grave with the ends kicked out".

Clearly the danger we face and have always faced is **"extractionism"**. This was the critical issue faced by the early church (Acts 15) when the church began to become multicultural. Did a Gentile believer in Christ have to leave his/her Gentile culture and become culturally a Jew (with all the Jewish ways of dress, diet, Sabbath laws etc.) or could he/she remain culturally a Gentile? The answer in Acts 15 and in Galatians was that there was no need for him to be extracted out of his cultural framework. Contextualisation should help us avoid extractionism. Clearly the Gospel will spread faster within a culture if extractionism doesn't occur.

The Book of Hebrews warns us that the Kingdom of God is bigger than any cultural framework and some forms need to be discarded (cf. the call to ***"get outside the gate"***). Read Denis Green's article **"Guidelines from Hebrews for contextualization"** in **Muslims and Christians on the Emmaus Road**.

2. Will the second and third generation of believers be recognizably Biblical?

To me this is the key issue and the only adequate test of our success. Since we are largely involved with first generation believers from a Muslim background, heavily contextualised church planting cannot be evaluated now. This should discourage us from being either too hasty in our criticism of efforts at contextualised church planting or too hasty in jumping on contextualisation bandwagons without due consideration.

There are examples of Muslims who have been inadequately evangelised so they have a heightened appreciation of the person of Jesus Christ, but they don't have a saving faith. Such groups exist in Nigeria and in Turkey (the Ahli Haq). In both cases what you have is syncretism and in both cases they appear resistant to further truth.

3. Beware of too great an application of social sciences to missions

Our missiology shouldn't be reduced to anthropology! Our theology shouldn't be culture-conditioned. Neither should culture exclusively dictate the forms of evangelism we use. I was a physical scientist and it is true that those trained in the "pure" sciences have a rather elitist view of the "soft" social sciences. It isn't the methodology of the social sciences – like anthropology and sociology – that I object to, but an **overdependence** on them. There seems to me an urgent need to put Biblical revelation back into missions. Biblical propositions have to be normative rather than conditioned by cultural contexts.

Let me give an example of this. Jesus taught that when we pray we ought to pray privately and this was in a context where open displays of (pseudo-) spirituality were both common and encouraged. Now there is an argument that goes like this: when we go into a Muslim environment, in order to be credible as religious people, we should be **seen** praying often.

In order to contextualise our spirituality into a Muslim environment, should we do something that is in clear contradiction to the plain words of Jesus? Clearly at the heart of this is how to model a Biblical spirituality and if Jesus' example in some cultural settings is anything to go by then there will be confrontation with cultural norms rather than accommodation to them.

Over-contextualisation – i.e. removing all that is offensive from our spirituality and keeping strictly all cultural taboos – will restrict our Biblical liberty. There are very many areas that Biblical revelation does not speak to and there we have liberty. Ultimately **Biblical revelation** should be what restricts us and **not culture**. Our liberty is like tennis. When you play tennis there are restrictions – there are lines, and nets and rules – stay within the restrictions and you can enjoy the game. If you eliminate the rules – the nets and lines – whatever you have left is not much fun and it is not tennis. Equally nothing is more frustrating than having an opponent or even a partner who adds new rules arbitrarily throughout the game.

The liberty of the Spirit within the guidelines of Biblical revelation gives us freedom. We should not allow culture alone to determine these parameters. Equally we can't ignore Biblical parameters. If you get "Seedbed", you will have read the articles about **Sirat ul-Masih** by David Owen and Project Sunrise. In a recent article an author compared the Lord's Prayer in the Sirat with the Van Dyke. It is an interesting article. For example, the Lord's Prayer starts in the Van Dyke ***"Our Father in Heaven".*** The Sirat has **"O God, Lord of all being."** Consistently the translators of Sirat translate "Father" as "Lord" or "God". The expression "Lord of all being" occurs in "the Fatiha" and elsewhere in the Qur'an. This is an inadequate rendering of the New Testament concept of God. The word "Father" should have been kept. It was not, because it is an offensive concept for a Muslim. This is removing the guidelines of Biblical revelation.

4. We must study hermeneutics – i.e. the study of Biblical interpretation

The New Testament states both practice and principles that were given to us in a particular time (the first century), within a cultural framework and in a series of events. Clearly we have to distinguish between practice and principle. Some practices can be used today but most indicate principles. Hermeneutics is the study of how to derive Biblical principles from their cultural framework and from the specific events. If we understand how to abstract Biblical principles from a cultural framework, it will probably help us to reverse the process and put Biblical principles back into cultures and times quite different from the original ones.

5. Over-contextualisation blurs "Kingdom-distinctives"

What about the role of women in an Islamic society? To what extent should we contextualise in this area? Clearly the teaching and the example of Jesus in regard to the position of women in society are at variance with His cultural framework and the culture of the Arab World today. Jesus clearly broke other cultural taboos. He did this to demonstrate "Kingdom-distinctives".

There are other issues involving the principles of the Kingdom of God that are at variance with and in opposition to Arab culture. There are cultural variations that militate against unity. The church has a "prophetic" ministry to the community where it is. Over-contextualisation will militate against that goal. Beware of ethno-theology!

Probably the homogeneous unit church growth principle is an example of a sociological principle that, if over-applied, will blur "Kingdom-distinctives".

6. Is the Cardinal sin "exclusivism" or "extractionism"?

When a BMB (believer from a Muslim background) is "extracted" out of his/her cultural context is it because of poor mission strategy by those who led him to Christ or because of the exclusive nature of

Islam? Islamic culture **is** exclusive. It finds it difficult to tolerate any degree of pluralism. The reason Pakistan was formed was because Muslims couldn't live under Hindu domination. It is interesting that Jinnah insisted that the flag of Pakistan, although predominantly green (the Islamic colour), should have a white strip indicating that there was room in Pakistan for a non-Muslim minority. Current moves to introduce Shariah speak against this. Note that the Saudi Arabian flag is entirely green! There is no room for pluralism in Saudi Arabia. Muslim fundamentalism is constantly militating against any form of pluralism. So when "extraction" occurs it might be not that we have not contextualised enough, but simply the very nature of Islam itself.

7. Don't let Islam define the agenda

In the Middle East Islam wants to control the cultural agenda. It wants to define a Turk or an Arab according to religious definitions. It wants religion to define culture. For example: all Arabs are Muslim. If you are an Arab you are a Muslim. Arab Christians are an embarrassment. They should be encouraged either to convert or they should be pressured to leave the Arab World and go to America etc. So more than half the Arabs in the USA are Christians. Often they aren't called Arabs, but Copts or (in Turkey) Armenians, Assyrians etc., but not Turks.

But Islam doesn't "own" all aspects of culture and neither should it be allowed to do so. It is an embarrassment to Islamic fundamentalists that parts of the Middle East had very well developed pre-Islamic civilizations and cultures. How can you maintain that to be an Egyptian is to be a Muslim when clearly Egyptians had a glorious non-Muslim past!

When we contextualise we should not only concentrate on religious areas. Culture is much broader than that. To make the Gospel relevant to Arabs or Turks there is much contextualisation that can occur in non-religious areas.

For example in music: the Wahabis in Saudi Arabia fifty years ago used to behead with a sword all those caught playing any form of music. Music is un-Islamic. Nowadays Muslim fundamentalists only allow some forms of music. Archaeology clearly indicates that for the last 5000 years in the Middle East music has been much appreciated by Middle Easterners.

In our view of culture and contextualisation don't let us accept an Islamic view of culture that is extremely simplistic. It is much more important for us to understand a Biblical view of culture. Jacques Elul has written extensively about this. Also Paul Hiebert has written some good material in this area. Briefly we should note that all cultures:

- were made by God
- are ultimately under God's authority
- are somewhat in rebellion against God – under the influence of "principalities and powers"
- are polluted but redeemable

It appears from Scripture that some of these cultural distinctives will be retained in heaven.

8. Is our motivation for contextualisation to help people escape from persecution?

We are not masochists neither are we sadists, but we must not compromise Biblical truth. Jesus said that He had come to bring a sword that would split up families. The inevitable consequence of living in the Kingdom is persecution and suffering.

B. B. Warfield, in another context, talked about "conversion by concession". Are we in danger of that? Is the reason we want to eliminate baptism because it causes persecution?

There are ethical issues involved. If you look as much like a Muslim as possible, but deep down you have a worldview that is very different, then ethical dilemmas inevitably result. Muslims know this is so and see us as wolves in sheep's clothing. To what extent are we being devious when we contextualise? Paul says, ***"We have renounced the things hidden because of shame, not walking in craftiness or adulterating the Word of God, but by the manifestation of the truth commend ourselves***

to every man's conscience in the sight of God" (2 Cor. 4:2). Are we adorning the truth by our methodology? In the end our neighbours and friends are going to find out we are really different.

It seems to me the key is not to appear totally alien, but not to offend unnecessarily. We should avoid introducing extraneous western culture, but also not pull the wool over their eyes. We must stress those things that the Gospel of the Kingdom stresses.

9. Group Conversion vs. Personal Decision

A key aspect of **Church Growth Theory** is the emphasis on "people movements". The aim is getting mass conversion of tribes or whole "people groups". This has certainly been taken on board in Bangladesh with some success and whole villages have turned to Christ. But an unthinking application of this in all situations will probably lead us astray. Should we ask our Muslim friends before they make a declaration of faith in Christ to wait until all their family not only approves but also wants to join with them? The answer is clearly, 'No'. Each individual must have a personal faith. At the same time, we should encourage working in families and with families.

As the Arab World urbanises, individuals increasingly become free agents able to make decisions to a far greater extent than in rural communities. Seeing a "Jesus Movement within Islam" happening in urban settings is probably unlikely. The norm in urban settings will surely be more and more individual conversions.

10. An Uncritical acceptance of Form vs. Meaning Distinction

The **Form** vs. **Meaning** concept is well developed in anthropology. It seems to me that it is being applied uncritically in some missiology. In much of Islam 'form' can't be separated from 'meaning'. Often the form **is** the meaning. You carry out proscribed actions because God told you to through the Shariah. One example is reading the Qur'an. Even in the Arab World the emphasis is on **reading the text** with little or no emphasis on the meaning of the text. It is reading with emphasis on correct pronunciation that gives 'baraka' rather than understanding the text.

The essence of much contextualisation is to retain the form, but inject new meaning into it – i.e. keep Islamic forms but put Biblical meanings into these forms. In practice this is not easily done. Biblical theology must be taught thoroughly before the forms can be re-interpreted.

So these are the ten points. Ponder them carefully. The heart of all incarnational, contextualised ministry is in 1 Cor. 13. Love is at a level deeper and more effective than any methodology of contextualisation. My basic plea is that we constantly re-examine how to express our Christology and ecclesiology in the light of the cultures of the Arab World. The danger is that through our witness we merely increase the Islamic agenda. They can take on board a heightened awareness of the person and work of Jesus, but still stay in the Islamic milieu and never take the step of coming out and being part of forming the Church of God – the community of faith that follows Jesus Christ.

Please don't misunderstand. I am not against contextualisation. We need to contextualise. It is Biblical. We need to think, challenge and provoke each other in this area. Some of us may need to go further in this area. Others may need to stay where they are. However we must all be aware of the dangers of over-contextualising and slipping into syncretism. This will happen if we fail to think deeply about the implications of what we are doing. We will fail unless we cry out to God for wisdom and the leading of the Holy Spirit into all truth. If we work in isolation without the challenge of others who question us and urge us to re-evaluate often, we will be a prey to the dangers mentioned in this paper.

As **priests** let us minister the Gospel in such a way that our offering of the Arab peoples to God may be acceptable and sanctified by the Holy Spirit.