

were within the law, but Jacob and Leah were not; in the case of the latter, the Canaanite law may have permitted it. According to the Code of Hammurabi Hagar's behavior of despising her mistress after she became a mother was against the law; but perhaps there was no such law in Arabia or Egypt.

69. See A.R.S. Kennedy, Art.: "Family," *DEB*, p. 292, col. 1.

70. C.W. Emmet-J. Paterson, *op. cit.*, p. 624, col. 1.

71. J.S. Wright-J.A. Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 786, col. 2.

72. Gen. 16:1-6; 21:1-19; Deut. 21:15-17; Judg. 8:29-9:57; 1 Sam. 1:6; 2 Samuel 11-13; 1 Kings 11:1-8; Deut. 17:17. See also C.W. Emmet-J. Paterson, *op. cit.*, p. 624, col. 1, and J.S. Wright-J.A. Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 787, col. 1. Almost all the stories of polygamy and bigamy in the OT were written with a view to show that they cause evil and sorrow in the family. See Eugene H. Maly's comment on Gen. 16:4-6 (*op. cit.*, p. 20, col. 1).

73. *DEB*, p. 70.

74. William Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 516, col. 2.

75. J.S. Wright-J.A. Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 787, col. 1.

76. A.R.S. Kennedy, *op. cit.*, p. 292, col. 1: "In the prophetic writings the note of protest (against polygamy) is more clearly sounded. Not only Adam but also Noah, the second founder of the human race, represent monogamy, and on that account recommends it as God's ordinance. . . . Hosea and others constantly dwell upon the thought of a monogamous marriage as being a symbol of the union between God and His people. . . ." C.W. Emmet-J. Paterson, *op. cit.*, p. 624, col. 1: "Polygamy is, in fact always an unnatural development from the point of view both of religion and of anthropology; monogamy is by far the most common form of human marriage; it was also amongst the ancient peoples of whom we have any direct knowledge. . . . Polygamy . . . in Hebrew society . . . fell into disuse; the feeling of the Rabbis was strongly against it. . . ." William Smith (*op. cit.*, pp. 516-17) says, "In the post-Babylonian period monogamy appears to have become more prevalent than at any previous time: indeed we have no instance of polygamy during this period of record in the Bible, all marriages noticed being with single wives. . . . During the same period the theory of monogamy is set forth in Eccles. 25:1-27. The practice of polygamy nevertheless still existed. . . ."

77. *The Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament*, London, 1955, pp. 11-17.

4

Towards a Theology of Gospel and Culture

Bruce J. Nicholls

A theology of Gospel and Culture is an exercise in contextualization. The shift from discussions on the indigenization of the life and witness of the church to discussions on contextualization as the interaction of the Gospel with receptor cultures has been accelerated by recent events, especially the Fourth Faith and Order Commission at Montreal in 1963 where E. Käsemann raised the hermeneutical question, and by the Theological Education Fund's report *Ministry in Context 1972*, where contextualization was discussed in the context of the technological revolution and the spread of secularity. At Lausanne evangelicals began to take seriously questions concerning the relationship of the Gospel to culture.

TWO APPROACHES TO A THEOLOGY OF GOSPEL AND CULTURE

As a broad generalization we may speak of two approaches to this subject, one of which we will call "existential contextualization" and the other "dogmatic contextualization." The first approach begins with culture. It seeks to develop a dialectical interaction between questions of man in history and an existential understanding of the word of God. It is the way of dialogical theology which the recent Chiang Mai consultation *Dialogue in Community* began to popularize especially in ecumenical circles.

It begins with two relatives and expects to find tentative theological formulations in a progression to synthesis of understanding.

The second approach begins with a concern for biblical theology as a fixed and authoritative orientating point for contextualization. It seeks to translate and communicate the biblical message with understanding to each particular culture. It transcends the boundaries of particular cultural conceptual forms and practices. It begins with a dogmatic framework rather than a cultural one.

Both approaches recognize that understanding culture involves understanding the integrated worldview, consciously or unconsciously expressed, of any cultural group and that religion and spirituality are normally the dominant factor in any cultural conceptual framework. Further, culture is a total "design for living," a way of behaving, thinking and reacting. It includes the group's value systems and the institutions of family, law and education. Because culture is the sum total of behavioral patterns learned by instruction, observation and imitation, it is constantly changing, and therefore the task of contextualization, however understood, is always a continuing one.

An important study of existential contextualization has been given by Dr. Daniel Von Allmen, formerly of the Protestant Theological Faculty at Yaounde, Cameroun, in an article entitled "The Birth of Theology" (*IRM* January 1975, pp. 135-153). Von Allmen defines Christian theology as a reflection on living preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ who died and was raised for us. It is existential theology in Bultmannian terms. He believes that New Testament theology is contextualized in the cultural forms of Hellenistic Judaism and influenced by "a dying and a rising god" of the mystery religions. Paul corrects and adapts this Hellenized Gospel. This is a model for the contextualization of theology in Africa and elsewhere. Further, Von Allmen argues that contextualization cannot be built on any existing theology but must ever begin anew. Thus, a truly African theology must presuppose a *tabula rasa*, stripped of existing, especially western, theologies. African culture has a value of its own and must become the framework for doing theology. He suggests that just as New Testament theology grew out of preaching and worship and not out of dogmatic formulations propositionally conceived, in the same way African theology must develop from the experience of faith, rather than from a defined body of Gospel truth received by revelation. This is a point of view evangelicals will want to question.

SOME QUESTIONS RAISED BY EXISTENTIAL CONTEXTUALIZATION

We may begin with the question "Can existential contextualization avoid the dangers of syncretism and religious universalism?"

Because this method begins with a dialectical process between a changing context and a subjective existential word of God, it has no normative theological framework of belief and practice. I suggest that deviation from an authoritative and infallible Scripture as the word of God is almost inevitable, leading to a syncretistic set of beliefs and practice and a universalistic understanding of salvation, for it is difficult to live within the framework of relative thinking. If the biblical account of the Gospel is not normative, then culture tends to become semi-absolutized. This, I suggest, is what is happening in many emerging Third World theologies and it is being accentuated by the non-theological cultural factor of those who now freed from colonialism are searching for national identity and who are over-reacting to the western paternalistic Christianity to which they were previously subjected. In such discussions rarely do we find any attempt to distinguish between a biblical theology and western theology.

A recent paper "Towards a Theology of Dialogue" by S. Wesley Ariarajah of Sri Lanka (*Ecumenical Review*, January 1977, pp. 3-11) illustrates this point. He reacts against the "teutonic captivity" of Christian theology. In arguing that all theology is "story telling," he says, "All religions seek to tell their religious experience within the framework of 'a story' of the nature of the world, of man, of God and the destiny of life" (p. 5). All stories have no enduring value in themselves except to give this framework. And therefore the Judeo-Christian "Creation-Fall-Redemption" story is no more valid than the Hindu or Buddhist story. He adds, "Anyone who approaches another with an *a priori* assumption that his story is 'the only true story' kills the dialogue before it begins" (p. 5).

Most attempts to contextualize theology in India have tended to follow the same path of relativizing the Gospel and absolutizing one or other of the Hindu conceptual frameworks. For example, Brahmabandhav Upadhyaya (1861-1907) attempted to indigenize Christian theology in terms of Shankara's *advaitic* philosophy of non-dualism. He interpreted the trinity in terms of *Brahma* (the Absolute or Pure Being) as *sat chit ananda* (being, intelligence and bliss). His use of these impersonal categories resulted in his natural theology progressively weakening biblical concepts. He, himself, adopted Hindu cultural practices and on his death was cremated according to Hindu rites. More recently other Roman Catholic scholars, such as Raymond Panikkar, author of *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, have given new credence

to Upadhyaya's ideas. In passing it may be noted that Bishop J. A. T. Robinson's interpretation of Tillich and Bultmann in *Encounter with God* comes close to the language of Shankara's *advaita*. A second example is A. J. Appasamy's attempt to indigenize the Gospel using the concept of *bhakti* (which he translated as love) as interpreted in the modified non-dualism of Ramanuja. This also led to a reduction of the Gospel, as for example in his treatment of the Johannine "I and my Father are one" which he limited to a moral union of love and obedience. However, his involvement as a pastor and later as a Bishop progressively led him back to a more biblically theological framework. A third example is P. Chenchiah's (1886-1959) use of the philosophy of Shri Aurobindo and of the emergent evolution of Bergson. In his Aryan cultural framework he found no place for atonement or conversion or for the church. He left us with an Arian Christ and a truncated Gospel.

A second key question raised by existential contextualization follows: "Is revelation in any sense verbal and propositional?"

I have come to see that this is a very crucial question in the debate on contextualization and in the contemporary discussions on dialogue between living faiths and ideologies. Those who argue for an existential contextualization generally deny on philosophical grounds that God's self-revelation could be verbal and propositional. Instead, many theologians of the biblical theology school limit revelation as man's reflection on and interpretation of God's acts in history. In place of an objective word of God, they look to the immediate guidance of the Holy Spirit. Lesslie Newbigin comments, "Revelation is not the communication of a body of timeless truths which one has only to receive in order to know the whole mind of God. Revelation is rather the disclosure of the direction in which God is leading the world and his family. The stuff of the Bible is promise and fulfillment. It is the story of a journey, of a pilgrimage, of a moment" (*The Good Shepherd*, GLS, Madras, 1974, p. 123). He adds, "The work of the Spirit then is to lead the church to see all things, the whole creation, all powers, systems, ideas, cultural achievements, all intellectual structures, all things in their relation to Christ as head of all men and all things. He will lead the Church into the fullness of truth as it is in Jesus, that is to say, to the point where it is made manifest that all things are subject to him" (p. 129). In existential contextualization there is generally a fusion between the work of the Holy Spirit inspiring the biblical writer and the Holy Spirit illuminating the believing receiver.

All contextualized theologies are culturally conditioned. We may think of Thomistic theology, Calvinist theology, Liberation theology, Indian theology, Water Buffalo theology (Kosuke Koyama),

and African theology, etc. Jesus Christ was born a Jew. How valid is it to speak of a black Christ or an Indian Christ? On what basis are these attempts to interpret theology to be evaluated? I suggest that there is only one basis, namely, biblical theology. This raises another set of questions.

SOME QUESTIONS RAISED BY DOGMATIC CONTEXTUALIZATION

We may begin with a fundamental question, "Can there be an objective dogmatic contextualization?" In an absolute sense, no. All attempts at theologizing are colored by the pre-understandings of the enculturized receiver of the message. Luther's commentary on Galatians was influenced by his antagonism to the Pope, Barth's commentaries on Romans by his existentialism and so forth. No commentator can bypass his own pre-understanding. There can be no doubt that Luther and Barth's commentaries have made the Pauline epistles come alive to their own age. But how do we test their faithfulness to the biblical norm? Is a "distancing" between the theologian and the biblical writer possible? The Reformation grammatico-historical exegetical method, which takes seriously the language, historical background and purpose of the biblical writers, when used by the "believer" who sincerely seeks to put himself "under" the authority of the Scriptures, reduces cultural pre-understanding to a minimum and makes possible comprehension of biblical theology. Evangelical scholars such as James Denney, Leon Morris, F. F. Bruce, are good examples of those who have used distancing to good effect. The Bible's teaching on its own perspicacity assures the faithful student of this possibility. It is on this basis that we can speak of the Scriptures as "the only infallible rule of faith and practice." While we may rightly speak of Pauline or Johannine theology, these are harmonious and complementary elements of the one unitary biblical theology.

But distancing by itself is no guarantee against distortion. The Lausanne Covenant states, "He (the Holy Spirit) illumines the minds of God's people in every culture to perceive its truth freshly through their own eyes and thus disclose to the whole Church ever more of the many-colored wisdom of God." Evangelicals standing within the tradition of Anselm's *credo ut intelligam*, "I believe so that I may understand," believe that by the Holy Spirit enabling the reader to identify with the word of God he can know the mind of God. Biblical hermeneutics requires both distancing and fusion of our horizons.

This leads us to ask, "Is there an unchanging Gospel core?" This issue was raised at Lausanne. The report on the theology of evangelization paper "The Gospel, Contextualization and Syncretism" suggested criteria for isolating the Gospel core from other biblical elements. While we may summarize biblical truth

in a number of propositions I have a certain uneasiness about the concept of a Gospel core for it is open to the same subjective dangers as the neo-Orthodox concern that the Bible "contains" the word of God or a canon within the canon. Chris Wright, in "Ethics and the Old Testament; cut-price hermeneutics?" (*Third Way*, 5 May 1977, pp. 7-9), has rightly argued that the common practice of dividing Old Testament laws into the categories of moral, civil and ceremonial, of which only the moral is unchanging, is unsatisfactory. All the laws of the Old Testament are the word of God and speak against their social background to the ethical task of Christians in the modern world.

Any attempt to formulate a biblically dogmatic theology in order to contextualize it in a particular culture raises the question, "Can the form of the Gospel be changed without changing the content?" The distinction between content and form is relevant to any discussion on the meaning of language. Can the linguistic form of the Gospel be changed without changing its content? The answer must be both yes and no. On the pre-understanding that the Bible is the inspired word of God it must be affirmed that God the Holy Spirit overshadowed the cultural forms through which he revealed his word in such a manner that these cultural forms conveyed what God intended to be revealed. God was not at the mercy of human culture. He controlled the use of it for his particular purpose of revelation. Therefore, the way in which the biblical writers use their own culture cannot be made a corresponding model for our contextualizing of theology. There is a uniqueness about biblical theology that does not carry over to our contextualizing of theology. Our approach to contextualizing must include a process of elimination, adaption and transformation of pagan cultural forms but biblical inspiration goes beyond this process. There is always a supra-cultural newness about God's self-revelation. He is not imprisoned by any culture. In his sovereignty God chose a Hebraic cultural form and transformed it over the centuries which cover the biblical record. It might be argued that he could have chosen an Indian or Chinese cultural form. If he had done so, then I suggest that the nature of these cultures would have been different from what it is today.

In discussing the question of the permanence of the form of the Gospel I suggest that we distinguish between what we might call "symbolic" and "conceptual" forms. By symbolic form I mean the biblical language that uses analogy of nature, parables and metaphors. In the process of contextualization, new symbolic forms may be found useful without changing the content of the message. For example, symbols such as "white as snow" or "small as a mustard seed" are not essential to the conceptual meaning. They may be legitimately changed for other cultural forms if the biblical forms are outside the experience of the receiving culture.

By conceptual form I mean the form that is ontologically essential to the message because these forms are consistently used throughout Scripture. This will include the use of analogy of divine relationships. For example, the Bible speaks of God as "our Heavenly Father." Granted the term father carries different conceptual images in patriarchal, matriarchal and in Marxist cultures and therefore the biblical form will need to be translated with cultural sensitivity. But we have no authority to de-mythologize father in favor of some such form as "Ground of Being." I am unable to accept the plea of Dr. Itoto Bokeleale of Zaire at PACLA, Nairobi, that because the term father was upsetting to Africans it should not be used of God in the African context. In this case to change the form is to change the essential meaning for the term father is the unique way God has revealed his attributes to us.

This in turn raises another important question, "Is a dynamic equivalent theology adequate?" A model that is particularly relevant to this consultation is that of the relationship between "formal correspondence" and "dynamic equivalence." This consultation is rightly motivated by a desire to communicate the Gospel to other cultures and several of the papers are emphasizing the dynamic equivalence model over and against the formal correspondence model. A word of caution is needed here. The former without the latter falls into the trap of cultural containment and the latter without the former may fail to communicate. Cultures are not neutral. They are generally orientated to a particular religious worldview which may be alien to the biblical worldview and may need to be judged rather than fulfilled. Culture is always the interaction of the supra-cultural and the human. There is no dynamic equivalence in some cultures for some biblical concepts. In the several Hindu cultures, there is no dynamic equivalence to the biblical concepts of creation, incarnation, resurrection of the body, substitutionary atonement or grace. There are, no doubt, glimpses of these biblical concepts in the Hindu Scriptures, but I believe they belong more to the realm of God's general revelation than to his special revelation. I am unable to accept Dr. J. S. Mbiti's statement that "each culture must count it a privilege to have the Gospel as its guest." The Gospel is the guest of no culture, including the Hebrew culture. Jesus was a severe critic of the culture of his birth. Where there are no dynamic equivalent forms in the receptor culture, it is essential that "a formal correspondence" to the biblical form be explained and taught. In the last analysis only the Holy Spirit can make this new concept understandable to the receiver, otherwise it is not possible to communicate Christ as "the lamb of God" to a Buddhist, or the Trinity to a Muslim.

In many cases it is legitimate for the Christian communicator to use a pagan cultural form and give to it a new meaning which corresponds with the biblical thought. Paul did this when he chose a term such as *metempsychosis*, transformation, which he took out of a Hellenistic structure, and set it in a Christological framework. Numerous parallels may be quoted from Third World situations. On the other hand, Paul sometimes chose a word that had a common usage in Hellenistic and Jewish cultures, and used it in the Hebrew sense when there were differences in its meaning. When Paul used the word *mysterion*, mystery, he used it in the sense in which it was used in the Septuagint. In Hellenistic culture *mysterion* belonged to the cultic practice in which the participants received a secret initiation in order to be identified with the deity and the cosmic forces represented by it. Instead Paul uses it in the Jewish sense of a special revelation made by God about his plan for the future, whereas in Hellenistic thought to disclose a secret was to forfeit the power of mystical identity. In the development of contextualized theologies there is always the danger of attempting to retain an unbiblical conceptual form at the expense of the biblical meaning. To do so is to open the door to syncretism.

SOME BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF GOSPEL AND CULTURE

The foundation of a theology of the Gospel and culture is the doctrine of God as the Creator-Savior. We will focus our attention on two implications of God's work as Creator-Savior, our solidarity in Adam and our solidarity in Christ.

1. *Solidarity in Adam*

The high point of divine creation is man made in God's image. Three observations following this divine act may be noted:

a. *There is a Relational Continuity of Man Created in the Image of God and God Himself*

Man was created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26, 5:1, 9:6; 1 Cor. 11:7). The early church and the Eastern Orthodox churches have stressed the ontic or essential content of this image, usually in terms of reason, freedom and personality. Brunner, in his distinction between the formal and material image, comes close to the Orthodox view. The reformers and evangelical theologians have generally stressed that the image is primarily relational in terms of knowledge, love, righteousness and holiness (Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10). Universal elements in this relational continuity that provide a positive basis for contextualization as the fulfillment of culture include:

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The Obedient Worship of the Creator. The chief end of man is to worship God and enjoy him forever. This is true of man as an individual and corporate man in society. All religious cultures have some concept of the Supreme in either personal or impersonal forms. The concept of worship is the dominant factor in most Third World cultures revealing man's insatiable desire to know God and to worship him. Beauty in most cultures is invariably associated with worship.

The Choice of Moral Values. All cultures have a sense of justice based on an understanding of moral law and the belief that man has a degree of freedom to choose right and wrong. Conscience is either good or bad depending on man's response to the ever present call of the living God and the dictates of his moral law. Therefore there is truth and goodness in every man and every culture. All religious scriptures contain some truths that are in conformity with the biblical doctrine of law (Romans 2:14,15). The Hindu concept of *karma* parallels the biblical injunction "as a man sows so shall he reap," good is rewarded and evil is punished.

The Power of Rational Communication. Man is able to formulate rational concepts and to communicate them to others. He has the capacity to distinguish truth from falsehood. He understands the law of contradiction as the chief law of logic. There is a basic logical coherence in every worldview, for example, on the assumption of the Buddhist understanding of suffering, the four truths and the eight-fold path are rational and logical.

The Gift of Creativity. The Creator has given to mankind the gift to be able to create out of the existing creation pleasing aesthetic forms of sculpture, art, music and poetry, conceptual forms of philosophy and, through scientific knowledge, to have dominion over creation itself. Man's creative capacity is derived from the Creator himself enabling him to create and enjoy beauty and order in form and design.

The Corporate Basis of Society. God created man, male and female, with the family the basic relational unity of society (Genesis 2:18-24). Marriage and the family belong to the creation order and may be enjoyed in peoples of all cultures. God created man for the wider society of community and ordained the structures of government and property ownership for order and human well being.

If these component elements of man's relational activity to God's work in the world were the whole story a theology of the Gospel and culture would be self-evident. The tragedy is that man not only seeks God but also rebels against him and selfishly

demands his autonomy, creating tensions in human society that demand the judgment of God on culture. Theologically we may speak of our discontinuity as well as our continuity in Adam.

b. *There is a Relational Discontinuity between Man and God Caused By the Fall*

The account of the Fall in Genesis 3 and man's oppression of man in Genesis 4 and its theological interpretation in Romans 1 and 2 is also an up-to-date microcosm of man in society. There is no part of man's constitution that is not corrupted by the Fall, and consequently no element of culture that does not abuse the *Imago Dei*. The end is death (Gen. 2:17, 3:4, 14-17). Culture is never neutral, it is always a strange complex of truth and error, beauty and ugliness, good and evil, seeking God and rebelling against him. Elements in this relational discontinuity that evidence God's judgment on culture include:

* *The Rebellion Against the Obedient Worship of the Creator.* Idolatry is the practice whereby man closes the gap between the Creator and the creature, creates deity in his own image or the image of the created world, and through the mystic of magical identity with creation placates or controls his man-made gods. Idolatry is the fundamental sin of man and of society. Romans 1:18-32 is an accurate description of his rejection of obedient worship.

The Abuse of the Moral Law. All men abuse their conscience and rebel against the moral law. Justification by the work of the law is in reality the abuse of the law. The history of World Wars I and II and of social injustice in this century is evidence of the out-working of this principle in western society. In Hindu culture the principle of *karma* is divorced from the law-giver and becomes an absolute principle to which even the gods are subject. It becomes a tyrannical master making forgiveness impossible and any idea of substitutionary atonement absurd. Ultimately man becomes a slave of the gods he creates, the occult or the spirits of the unseen world.

The Perversion of Man's Rationality in Communication. Man rationalizes his desires and experiences and life ends in meaninglessness and silence. This is true both of the Hindu *advaitic* philosophy of non-dualism and of western existentialism and logical positivists. Francis Schaeffer in *The God Who Is There* has ably demonstrated this line of despair through philosophy to art to music and to the new theology.

The Misuse of the Gift of Creativity. Man creates that which is ugly and cruel, wantonly despoils creation, turns fields into deserts and through the abuse of scientific knowl-

edge, hastens his own self-destruction and that of the whole created world.

The Fragmentation of the Corporate Body of Society. Man abuses the principle of sex and marriage, creates disorder and lawlessness in the family and in society. In the assertion of his autonomy man perpetuates acts of aggression and of cruelty.

c. *There is a Divine Mystery between the Sovereignty of God and the Freedom of Man in Culture*

The living God is not a deistic God who stands indifferent before the arrogance of man in his rebellion. He is the sovereign God who loves the whole world and calls all men to himself in repentance and faith. He leaves no man without a knowledge of himself and all are "without excuse" (Rom. 1:20). Because of God's general revelation to mankind, sin is always sin against better knowledge. Man knows he ought to love the creator and obey the moral law. It is only the goodness of God that keeps man from self-destruction and from the total disintegration of society. Calvin's term "common grace" is not an entirely satisfactory term but it does point to God's provident care of the world.

Revelation is a unity, though a clear distinction in understanding between general revelation and special revelation is necessary to develop an adequate theology of the Gospel and culture. This double form of revelation was in the heart of God from the beginning. Revelation is always supernatural. Without a general revelation man would have no knowledge of God as creator. Without special revelation he is ineffective and powerless to obey the moral law and find salvation. The concept of an atoning sacrifice for sin is common to many non-biblical cultures. Perverted forms of propitiation and expiation are found in the earliest Hindu *Rig Vedas* but the Hindu sacrificial system offers neither hope nor power of salvation. If the distinction between God's general revelation and his special revelation given in Scripture is lost, salvation is generally reduced to the level of the mystical identification of the creature with the creator or to agnosticism. Theology becomes anthropology. Further, it leads to a confusion between salvation in Christ and God's sovereign action in history. Salvation history becomes the salvation of history as in liberation theology. Chairman Mao is not merely "my servant" alongside Nebuchadnezzar and Cyrus but becomes "a savior" of his people and of the world.

2. *Our Solidarity in Christ*

The transformation of our solidarity in Adam into solidarity in Christ (Rom. 5:12-19) is the Christian hope for a new society

and for a new culture. Christ is the New Man, the beginning of a new humanity. In Christ, the image of God in man is restored and in the lordship of Christ, the Kingdom of God becomes visible. The Church, as the new community of the people of God, is the mystical body of Christ and when his lordship is explicitly acknowledged, becomes the visible expression of Christ's reign. The institutional church is no guaranteed sign of the Kingdom. The vertical dimension of personal salvation in Christ is invalidated if it does not result in a renewal of horizontal relationship with one's neighbor, for as James argues, "faith without works is dead" (James 2:17, 20, 26). Therefore, while the Church is distinct from the world as a new called-out community, it cannot be separated from involvement in the world. It must always be light and salt to all men.

Where the people of God are truly the realm of God's reign they must progressively manifest new cultures, transforming existing cultures into conformity to the image of Christ. While we cannot at present speak of a Christian culture, for the sinner is never wholly sanctified in this life and society never perfected, yet we must be bold to work towards new cultures which become the dynamic equivalent of God's plan for society under the lordship of the resurrected Christ. The lifestyle of the universal Church ought to be a model of Christ-centered cultures which are both universal in their expression and at the same time rooted in the historic cultural situations of each particular people.

The Church's function in the world is to be God's agent to plant new churches, to expand the boundaries of the Kingdom and to demonstrate the reality of the new society. It is to be a model for the world to see. But this is not all. God's sovereign action over the world as the Creator-Savior extends beyond the church to all men, for the creation mandate is for all men. God is at work in China today as he was in ancient Nineveh or Babylon. He restrains the evil actions of men, demonic principalities and powers, institutionalized social and political evils and prepares communities to receive the Gospel. At the Cross these powers were dethroned, but their final destruction awaits the return of Christ. Therefore the church has political, economic and social responsibilities under the hand of God. It ought to become the conscience of society, the inspiration for human justice and a testimony to the love of God for all men. The church as a covenant community points to the millennial reign and to the new heaven and the new earth in which dwells righteousness. As Christians we humbly believe that the inner renewal of the church as the agent of God on earth, is God's chosen agent for bringing about God-centered cultural change. I believe that the church in India, small and weak as it is, is the ultimate hope of a better "design for living" for the whole of Indian society.

THE PROPHETIC PRINCIPLE IN CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION

The ministry of the prophet of the Lord in the cultural overshadowing of the word of God in biblical times is the key to understanding the conditioning of the Gospel in our contemporary cultures. The prophetic principle is the opposite of the accommodating syncretistic principle which seeks to harmonize man in society with the forces of nature and the spirit world.

The prophetic principle runs through biblical history separating Israel into "my people" and "not my people" (Exod. 3:7, 6:7). Israel was "not my people" in times when they were self-confident, proud of their distinctive kingship and nationhood, victorious over their enemies and in full possession of their land. These were times when their faith was noticeably conditioned by the surrounding pagan cultures of Canaan and Assyria, times when they assimilated pagan religious ideas and customs and entered into mixed marriages.

Israel was "my people" when they were conscious that Yahweh was their King and they lived by their covenant promises in obedience to the Law. At such times they were living communities of faith. These were usually periods of weakness and oppression and times when they were conscious of their calling to suffering servanthood. At such times the cultural conditioning of their faith was minimal and the rebuke of the prophet effective. The "thus saith the Lord" was God's way of restraining the conditioning influence of pagan culture and disciplining the people in obedience of the Word of God. True dogmatic contextualization is always reforming. It is the opposite of a pan-en-theism which is man's natural tendency to synthesize creation and redemption. The prophetic voice was a call for reformation of belief, worship and fidelity to the law. It was also an appeal for social and economic justice. The prophetic voice was one of promise and fulfillment, of judgment and hope. In present day attempts at existential contextualization the eschatological note of the return of Christ, the resurrection of all from the dead, the final judgment, the promise of a new earth and a new heaven are often missing. It is only a church that is sure of its calling as a covenanted community of faith and obedient in going into the world as God's servant for mission and world evangelization, that will be able to adapt and transform the symbolic forms of other cultures and give to them new meaning so that they become the bearers of the word of God. Such a Church need not fear syncretism or loss of evangelistic motivation through involvement in society. The free exercise of the prophetic word of the Lord is the only sure basis for faithful dogmatic contextualization. The prophetic principle brings about cultural transformation in four ways:

a. The prophet calls for a de-culturalization of the accretions to biblical faith. In the patriarchal period we see how Abraham and his descendants were progressively de-culturalized from their Mesopotamian culture as nomads in the promised land, during captivity in Egypt and in the Wilderness journeyings. The Exile was another period of de-culturalization.

In western culture the Gospel is distorted by accommodation to Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy, by the humanistic enlightenment and by egalitarian and Marxist ideologies. In Asia and Africa, contextualization must include not only the de-culturalization of western accretions but also of indigenous culture concepts that are contrary to the word of God.

b. The prophet of the Lord judges and condemns those elements of culture that are contrary to the word of God. Idolatry, pagan sexual morals and corrupt political and economic practices come under the judgment of the prophets from Moses to John the Baptist. Much of Israel's history is written from the point of view of the call for the destruction of the Baalization of Yahweh-worship. Jesus Christ was a severe critic of the Judaism of his day. Similarly, in the contextualization of the Gospel in Indian cultures the prophet of the Lord will condemn such evils as idolatry, tantric philosophies of ritualistic sex, caste distinctions, unjust dowries and so forth.

c. The prophet of the Lord is God's agent to re-create and transform cultural elements that are consistent with God's revelation and which may be adapted and utilized in the service of the Kingdom. The Gospel fulfills as well as destroys. For example the adaptation of "meditation" in worship and the transforming of the Hindu "extended family" are Indian cultural forms that find a new level of fulfillment in the Gospel. Similarly there are elements of Islamic culture and worship that are "convertible."

d. The Gospel brings with it new elements in culture. There is no dynamic equivalent to the messianic hope in many Third World cultures. Its prophecy has to be explained and taught. Some Asian cultures interpret sin only in terms of "shame." The biblical concept of guilt, atonement and forgiveness are new elements which the Gospel brings to these cultures. Similarly, the biblical experience of the grace of God is distinctive because it flows from a unique Cross. The hope of the resurrection as distinct from the common Asian view of immortality transforms one's attitude to the body.

We need to recover the place of "Thus saith the Lord" if our task of contextualizing the Gospel is going to be true to the normative word of God and effective in communicating the Good News to those who live in darkness.

5

Hermeneutics and Culture: A Theological Perspective

C. Rene Padilla

The basic problem of biblical hermeneutics is to transpose the biblical message from its original context into the context of the modern readers or hearers so as to produce in them the same kind of impact that the message was meant to produce in the original readers or hearers. Another way of stating this would be to say that hermeneutics is essentially the science and art of explaining in a contemporary situation the Word of God which was originally explained in a Hebrew or a Graeco-Roman milieu, for the purpose of bringing the lives of readers or hearers into conformity with the will of God. Understood in these terms, hermeneutics is strongly linked to the concrete historical context of the modern interpreter. It has to do with the Word of God which can only be understood and appropriated as it becomes "flesh" in a specific historical situation with its particular cultural and all the political, social and economic factors present in it.

The importance of awareness of the particularities of a situation and their bearing on the task of making the biblical message meaningful within a specific historical context can hardly be exaggerated. Where this kind of awareness is lacking, the final result is the confusion of culture-Christianity with the Gospel. This confusion has been frequent in Western-based missionary work and is (at least in part as a result of it) a