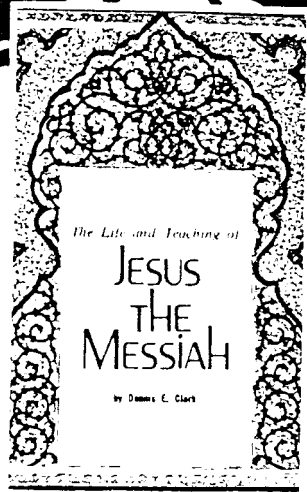


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38

Contextualization: a new dimension for cross - cultural hermeneutic

HARVIE M. CONN

Jose' Miguez-Bonino tells of a young Puerto Rican professor of theology in prison for political reasons — demonstration against U.S. military experiments in his land. As he was trying to explain to other (non-Christian) fellow prisoners how his participation in this action was anchored in his Christian faith, one of them cut him short: "Listen, your faith does not mean a thing, because you can justify your political course of action, and the man who put you in prison can do the same, appealing to the same truth." How can this objection be answered?¹

Two missionaries represent the same confessional church in South Korea, both committed in full measure to the inerrancy of Scripture and to their church's creedal confession. But the one, though aware of the abuses of power and human rights by the government, defends the *status quo* by an appeal to the threat of communism and the message of Romans 13. And the other, equally aware of the Marxist threat and the Pauline injunctions, speaks out against the violation of human rights, seeing the question as integrally related to the call for justice imposed by the good news of the coming of the kingdom in Christ. How have they reached such divergent strategies?

Two pastors in Nigeria approach the question of evangelism in a tribal village. The one moves systematically from house to house, first down one street and then another, sharing the gospel with the aid of the "Four Spiritual Laws." The other first seeks out the elders of the village, presenting the gospel of Jesus Christ as God's power encounter with the

Harvie M. Conn served as a missionary in Korea and is presently teaching missions at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

39

53

Tiv notion of *tsav*. On the basis of a word of encouragement from one of the elders, he proceeds to visit systematically the members of that elder's extended family, scattered throughout that village and nearby ones. What theoretical formulation can be of use in explaining the diversity of their approach to the Tiv culture?

What questions emerge from this discussion that draw us into the contextualization debate? Are not some of them these? How much is theology (and exegesis) inevitably influenced by the ideological, cultural and socio-political values and commitments of the interpreter? In what way does the emergence of the "theology of liberation" in its Latin American, Black and feminist forms expose the myth of objective exegesis?

How much has an erroneous view of science assuming its own religious presuppositionlessness and objectivity created an atmosphere demanding the same of the Bible and absorbing too much evangelical vitality with what some fear is an apologetic goose chase? How may the evangelical standing on the inerrancy of the Bible also face seriously the so-called "cultural" conditioning of the Scriptures, allegedly mirrored in a "rabbinical" attitude of Paul toward women, or a supposedly three-tiered view of the universe?

Few evangelicals would answer the question of the Puerto Rican prisoner or evaluate the divergent views of the two Korean missionaries with the subjectivism of "this is the way he (they) feel, but this is the way I decide." On the other hand, many might respond in language rejected by Miguez, "There is an absolute Christian truth, or Christian principles, found in Scripture. But, then, there are more or less imperfect *applications* of that truth." On a surface level, there is an element of truth in this answer. But behind it also is a "hidden curriculum," an understanding of the relationship between truth and practice that still remains unchallenged over the past 400 years. It is not isolated to the narrow understanding of hermeneutics as "the science which teaches us the principles, laws and methods of interpretation." It is also the modeling force behind evangelical hermeneutic as the process of understanding itself. Contemporary scholars like Charles Taber, Eugene Nida and Charles Kraft have used the science of linguistics as a comparative model to get at this deeper question. I see the evangelical model of exegesis developed through history as an easier and more directly pertinent methodological influence on our contemporary experience in cross-cultural hermeneutic.

THE EVANGELICAL MODEL IN HERMENEUTICS: EXEGESIS

The evangelical model or style of exegesis continues to use techniques developed during the Reformation. And these in turn were heavily dependent on the literary-grammatico-historical method masterminded by sixteenth century humanist studies of the classical past. In the development of that science of how the Bible was to be interpreted,

certain hidden presuppositions have been made and reinforced over the centuries, which have deeply influenced our understanding of "context."

1. Exegesis was carried on in basically a western-oriented, monocultural mindset, a "Constantinian cultural captivity."

2. Context then and now in exegesis was defined narrowly in terms of the language of the text. Against the challenges of the Tübingen school, and their attention to the text's *sitz im leben*, that tradition was expanded, but even then, the classical evangelical model, exemplified in men like J. B. Lightfoot and B. F. Westcott, remained heavily programmed towards lexicography, etymology and syntax. That tradition remains a part of the evangelical model today. Evangelical commentaries remain relatively shorn of introductions where questions of context are fully dealt with. By and large, evangelical and liberal commentators confine themselves to a form of critical interpretation of the text which can be designated commonly as that of historical critical methodology.

3. Increasingly in the background of the evangelical tradition of interpretation is the unseen borrowing from nineteenth century German idealism's impact on linguistics. The evangelical interpreter of the Bible assumes that language as brute fact and language as interpretation are not the same. Language is in need of interpretation, isolated as it is presumed to be from its cultural context. Another part of this assumption is the thesis that a word, since it is always independent of its cultural context, can easily be translated into a receptor language. In Bible translation, *Logos* becomes "word" or "Wort" or "malssum" with relative ease. The leftovers of such unrecognized idealistic assumptions are with us in the furor among some over whether *The Living Bible* is translation (language as brute fact) or paraphrase (language needing translation). Of, more academically, it is sensed in the debates among Bible translators over formal correspondence or dynamic equivalence.²

4. Forgetting the unique insights into exegetical method provided by Calvin, the evangelical tradition began to build on the western Cartesian distinction between truth and its practice, abstract theoretical cognition and concrete application. Thus, in exegesis and in communicating the results of exegesis, a narrow view of hermeneutic has been developed that reduces theology to the ideational, and application to the practical. In seminaries it functions by department compartmentalization, exegesis being defined as the relatively detached judgment on the text by the Old Testament or New Testament departments, a study of the text's "application" reserved for the practical theology department.

The end result of such an exegetical model has been the erection of a methodology for exegesis and communication that leaves the evangelical vulnerable to contemporary discussion on several levels. The monoculturalism in which Reformation patterns were born has hardened from a backdrop to an ethnocultural blindness which makes the western interpreter often insensitive to the *defacto* cultural ingredients that play a

formative part in his exegesis, his church life, and his efforts at communication. This same blindness creates in the missionary and western-trained churchman an ecclesiastical parochialism that inhibits him from seeing any good come from the Nazareths of the Third World church's struggle with its own culture, and which can fossilize the progress of dogma at the seventeenth or eighteenth century.

Our single focus on linguistic context drains us of sensitivity to the three-fold context in hermeneutics: (1) The understanding of the original situation or context in the original frame of reference; (2) the context in which the communicator is placed in his effort to interpret the relevance of the text for his audience; (3) the context in which the hearer re-encodes the original message within his own frame of reference "in such a way that both communication and response are dynamically equivalent to those of the original situation."³

So, the "Four Spiritual Laws" booklet is presumed to be usable among the Tiv of Nigeria because it is usable on the campuses of Philadelphia. The question/request, "Will you pray this prayer with me?", forgets that in many world cultures, people will pray with you, not from conviction of sin, but out of concern lest what you obviously would like to see happen (prayer) will not happen and you will be offended by losing face. The first law, "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life," presumes a western context where there is a general acknowledgment of some sort of Ultimate Being, but falls on deaf ears in those Buddhist cultures where the existence of a personal God is denied, or a Hindu setting where there is no discontinuity between Creator and creature. The communicator neglects the process by which the hearer fits the message to his own computerized cultural system, and what comes out is not what goes in. The idealistic distinction between language and meaning forgets that all language is itself interpretation, always loaded with its own cultural context, and presumes that linguistic symbols understood in a western context ("God loves," "Will you pray?") will be understood in the same way, in a Tiv or Chinese culture.

42

Under the impact of Cartesian influences, and properly fearful of the existentialist rejection of Biblical authority so characteristic of current discussions, the evangelical has narrowed his vision of hermeneutic to the development of scientific skills of exegesis, and cannot participate with ease on the contemporary level of debate — the phenomenon of meaning and understanding itself. He sees theology as "objective" exegesis, a reconstruction, in as finalized a form as possible, by abstracted categories, of what it is that Scripture teaches. In this isolation from life's cultural contexts, western theology takes on a mythic character as a final refuge against theological relativism. In the process, we lose the nerve center of theology as "simply the application of Scripture to all areas of human life,"⁴ involvement in the human dialogue over the answers of the inerrant Word of God, and the questions implicit and explicit in the variety of the world's cultures.

A NEW DIMENSION FOR EVANGELICAL HERMENEUTICS: CONTEXTUALIZATION IN COVENANT

There are more than subtle hints of wide dissatisfaction with this classic model of hermeneutics from many sources. Liberation theology reminds us that the theology of the North Atlantic is inevitably influenced by the ideological, cultural, and socio-political values and commitments of the interpreter/theologian.⁵ And there are evangelicals willing to listen in repentance to that corrective.⁶ Emerging from the debate is an evangelical call to see theology as the disciplined (not simply disciplined) reflection/action of "knowing God," theology as the conscientization of hermeneutic, radically transforming reflection, the transforming of the believer into conformity to the image of God in his culture.

This process may be called contextual hermeneutic, the covenant conscientization of the whole people of God to the hermeneutical obligations of the gospel in their culture.

This kind of hermeneutical dimension must address two questions to the church. How are the divine demands of the gospel of the kingdom communicated in cultural thought forms meaningful to the real issues and needs of the person and his society in that point of cultural time? How shall the man of God, as a member of the body of Christ and the fellowship of the Spirit, respond meaningfully and with integrity to the Scriptures addressing his culture so that he may live a full-orbed kingdom lifestyle in covenant obedience with the covenant community?

The core of this contextual hermeneutic is the recovery of the covenant dimension of doing theology — a dimension modelled most beautifully by John Calvin's expository method, of *theologia pietatis*. Recently evangelical biblical theologians like Meredith Kline, in their study of the classic Hittite suzerain treaty patterns, have begun to recover some of the dimensions of that hermeneutic model. But its exposition has often remained confined to exegetical insights without a full application to questions of hermeneutic in context.⁷

In terms of hermeneutic, this divine pattern of covenant speaking forbids us from isolating covenant witness from covenant life. It does not permit a split between thought and action, truth and practice. Covenant witness affirms the divine word given and calls the creature to covenant life before the Creator in the world of history and its cultures. Unconditional submission to covenant remains the responsibility of covenant man in context.

So Moses was given a second set of tables by the Lord after Israel's display of obstinate sin. And the Lord's response to his petition for forgiveness and restoration was "I am going to make a covenant" (Ex. 34:10). The great covenant reform under Josiah was summarized in God's demand "to walk after the Lord and to keep his commandments and his testimonies and his statutes . . . to carry out the words of this covenant." (2 Kings 23:3).

43

54

"Knowing" in the prophetic literature borrows its rich background from its covenant usage in Hittite and Akkadian texts where it is used in two technical legal senses: to recognize as legitimate the suzerain or vassal, and to recognize treaty stipulations as binding.⁸ Thus, Jehovah's rebuke of his people through Amos becomes a covenant curse for obligations in context unfulfilled. "You only have I known of all the families on earth. Therefore I will punish you for your iniquities" (Amos 3:1-3; cf. Hosea 13:4-5, Jer. 22:15, 16, 24:7).

Against this Old Testament background, the New Testament concept of "truth" becomes one of covenant faithfulness to God who is constant in fidelity to his covenant.⁹ So Paul exhorts us "to prove what the will of God is" by "the living and holy sacrifice" of our lives lived out before God in the contexts of the world's cultures (Romans 12:1). His exhortation to Titus to pursue "sound doctrine" (Titus 1:9) is not the suggestion of an academic exercise, but, in terms of the context, the expression of covenant faithfulness in a God-centered way of living (Titus 1:6-9, 2:1ff), the practice of truth, a repentance that "leads to the knowledge of truth" (2 Timothy 2:25).

And, in the Johannine literature, this emphasis is even more prominent. The truth that sets us free is not a Greek ontological category, but Jesus, the fleshed-out expression of the Father's covenantal faithfulness (John 8:31-36; 15:10-11). By our walk "we do not the truth" (1 Jn. 1:6). None of this is to discard the is-ness of truth in some surrender to neo-orthodox activism. Paul can also use the term "truth" to describe that deposit he calls "the mysteries of God" (1 Cor. 4:1); the "tradition" he had "received" (1 Cor. 15:3, Gal. 1:12).¹⁰ But since it is truth in covenant it may never be isolated from immersion in the cultures of the world, a simple affirmation of "Lord, Lord" by those who practice lawlessness (Matthew 7:21-22). The traditional evangelical hermeneutic rightly confesses that "without the norm of Scripture (canon), the Christian faith runs the risk of losing itself in the concrete situation . . ."¹¹ The new dimension of covenant contextualization adds that without the concrete situation, the Christian faith runs the risk of losing itself in cultural irrelevancy or ethnocentricity.

44

A NEW MODEL FOR CROSS-CULTURAL HERMENEUTIC

This hermeneutical sensitivity to the situational context out of which the covenant community responds is not simply a re-emphasized dimension for the narrow exegetical work to be undertaken by the churches of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. It is an essential dimension in creating a liberating model for missionary and national to do their own work of theologizing, and not simply transplant something created out of another situation.

It does not presuppose a kind of *tabula rasa*, e.g., a beginning of some Chinese indigenization of the gospel so new it operates without a sensitivity for the progress of dogma, the results of the Spirit's teaching his

church through the ages (John 16:13).¹² Neither does it assume the universality of western theology in some sort of complicated or simplified African transcription. In the face of the reality of the world's varied contexts it sees theologizing as "an ever-renewed re-interpretation of the will and the way of the one Christ in a dialogue with new thought forms and culture patterns . . ."¹³ It places a pastoral concern at the heart of theology, neither as some detached, abstract exercise of western or eastern professionals, nor seeing itself in some narrow way as communication.¹⁴

It draws this concern for context from the Bible itself. And it recognizes in the multi-leveled character of biblical context the multi-leveled character of context in the process of understanding itself. What was that original context addressed by Jesus Christ when he called, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 4:17)? What was that context to which Matthew spoke as interpreter of Jesus when he used the words, "kingdom of heaven"? How was it different from the context of Mark who summarizes the same message of Jesus in terms of the "kingdom of God" (Mark 1:15)? What was the context Paul addressed as the re-encoder of the kingdom message at Rome, transposing "preaching the kingdom of God" into "teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 28:23,31)?

A process of this kind can be liberating as the man of God wrestles with biblical context, his own, and those to whom he speaks and before whom he lives. Charles Taber writes that such an appeal to Scripture "can free indigenous theology from the bondage of Western categories and methodologies." At the same time, we are by no means as sure as he is that "another aspect of the freedom is the possibility of being less bound by considerations of methodology of any kind."¹⁵ Every culture, in its self-preserving and integrating capacity, carries its own "hidden" methodologies to which man as culture bearer and covenant keeper is always liable. The danger of syncretism is always stronger when the "translator" of biblical truth into the life of that culture is not aware of its pull, or thinks the possibility of its pull less likely in his situation. Our fullest freedom of covenant expression in culture remains in being bound by the hermeneutical methodology of God himself. The Reformation heritage of Scripture interpreting Scripture (*analogia fidei*) continues to provide the hermeneutical key for our struggle against (cultural idols), against our repression of the divine questions, our response to contemporary answers.

In the dialogue with the covenant community, the world and the Scriptures out of which this process of hermeneutic will arise, four questions will constantly be posed by the evangelical: (1) To whom am I bringing the gospel? Paul, after all, addressed himself differently to Festus than to the crowd at Lystra. "The different way in which God spoke at different times is so essential in the history of revelation that it constitutes a controlling element. The revelation of God does not hang in a vacuum, it is not an abstract universal truth that descended upon us,

45

55

but God's revelation entered into our history."¹⁶ (2) What person brings the gospel? Elijah was not Elisha, Matthew presents the word of the Lord in a completely different form than does John. The bearer of the gospel is not a thing, but a person. (3) What is the time of hermeneutic? Paul spoke differently to the crew of a ship in the middle of a storm than when the ship lay quietly in the harbor. Each moment has its own peculiar difficulties and opportunities, its *kairos*. (4) What is the place of encounter? John the Baptist found his context at the river, in the wilderness; Jesus sought men in their houses. The contextual circle is drawn by who, and where, and when, and to whom.

Within the flexibility of those questions we may speak of the open-ended character of contextualization, aware of flux of the world's cultures, mindful of what Charles Taber calls the distinction between the closing of the canon and the closing of our theologizing. Constant awareness of the call for contextualization in cross-cultural hermeneutic can, under God, be a great aid in avoiding the erection of graven images and theological idols in Northern hemisphere or the Southern.

¹Jose' Miguez-Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), pp. 87, 88.

²See the excellent discussion of these questions by my colleague, Dr. Raymond B. Dillard, "Translators, Translations and the Church", *Theology, News and Notes* (March, 1977), 6-8, 21.

³Charles Kraft, *Christianity and Culture*. Prepublication draft (Pasadena: Fuller Theological Seminary, 1973), p. 302.

⁴John M. Frame, *Van Til: The Theologian* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Pilgrim Publishing Company, 1976), p. 25.

⁵Miguez-Bonino, *op. cit.*

⁶Carl E. Armerding, ed., *Evangelicals and Liberation* (Nutley, N. J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1977).

⁷Compare Meredith Kline, *Treaty of the Great King* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1963), pp. 13-44; *By Oath Consigned* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1968).

⁸Delbert Hillers, *Covenant: The History of a Biblical Idea* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1969), p. 121.

⁹Philip C. Holtrop, "A Strange Language," *Reformed Journal*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (February, 1977), 11, 12.

¹⁰Though Holtrop remains critical of an existentialist and neo-orthodox loss of "awareness of the consistency of God's faithfulness," he does not seem to emphasize the "givenness" of truth (he does not like the word "objectivity") sufficiently to guard against making truth more than "relational."

¹¹Orlando Costas, *The Church and its Mission* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1974), p. 252.

¹²Daniel von Allmen, "The Birth of Theology," *International Review of Mission*, Vol. LX9V, No. 253 (January, 1975), 50.

¹³Bengt Sundkler, *The Christian Ministry in Africa* (London: SCM, 1960), p. 281.

¹⁴This is the way in which Eugene Nider defines religion in his *Message and Mission* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), and it is the preponderant definition provided for contextualization in evangelical circles.

¹⁵Charles Taber, "The Limits of Indigenization in Theology." Unpublished paper delivered at the American Society of Missiology, June, 1977, p. 17.

¹⁶J. H. Bavink, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian

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