

Translating the Gospel©

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by Michael Frost

"Don't think church, think mission!"

I don't know how many times I have used that phrase with my students. Stop thinking conventionally about how to do church, as if there is some presupposed purpose for church in the contemporary scene here in Australia. If many, many Australians don't see any great usefulness, far less relevance, for the church today, how can they see churches as anything but anachronistic and quaint? Start thinking mission. Start thinking in a missions-to-the-first-world kind of way. Start thinking of the church in Australia as an uninvited, intrusive missionary movement in an uninterested, sometimes even hostile, pagan land.

We are only now getting used to the idea that the church in the west must become a missionary church in its own milieu if the church is to survive. Institutionally, of course, this is a massive paradigm shift from our standard ministry focus. Before reading any further, pause for a moment and ask yourself the following question, "If we could completely dismantle everything we now know as church (its structures, its ministries, its institutions, its traditions etc.) and literally begin everything from scratch, would you still do it the way we do it today?" I am not asking you to question the biblical basis for Christianity, the teachings of Jesus. I am asking, if we took Jesus' teaching seriously and if we really cared about the eternal destiny of Australians, would we do church the way we're currently doing it?

Literally everyone I have asked that question of has responded with a resounding "No, I wouldn't do it the way it's being done." So why do we put up with an approach to being church that neither reflects the radical thinking of Christ nor makes a way for the lost to encounter him?

The seemingly steadfast refusal or resistance by the western church to seriously contextualise the gospel is one of its greater mistakes and will sadly hasten its declining influence on Australian society. We are not taking the gospel seriously. And we are not taking our cultural context seriously either.

Knocking on the Wrong Doors

Let me begin with two examples, one from Africa, the other Australia.

When the first British missionaries arrived in what was then called Rhodesia in southern Africa to preach the good news about Jesus they came with all the trappings of the colonial era. Bound up with their preaching were certain assumptions and inherent belief systems that they thought to be Christian, but which we now see as simply reflecting the culture of Victorian England. For example, when the Zanaki people along the shores of Lake Victoria were first converted to Christianity they were encouraged to wear western style clothing, since Victorian modesty was supposed to be a Christian virtue. When the Zanaki were baptised they were given 'Christian' names like James, William and Charles.

We could talk at length about the mistakes of the colonial-style missionaries. Their inability to respect the cultures to which they were taking the gospel is now infamous. But one telling example will suffice. When the British preachers evangelised the Zanaki people of what is now called Zimbabwe they did so by quoting Revelation 3:20, "Behold I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me." This verse and its use by the preachers is a very helpful case study in what is called poor contextualisation. That is, an inability to communicate the gospel in a form that is sensible within a particular context. Allow me to explain.

In polite and proper British culture, when one visited someone else's home of another, the door would be closed and probably locked and the inhabitants would be privately and securely ensconced inside. Therefore you knocked loudly on the front door to gain entry. In Zanaki culture, homes have no doors. To enter the home of a friend in your village you would call out loudly at the doorway. In a small community your voice would be immediately recognised and you would be invited to enter. The only people who knocked were thieves. They did not wish to be identified. Having knocked surreptitiously if the thieves heard stirring inside the house they would sneak away.

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If you know this about Zanaki culture when you came to preach Rev.3: 20, in which Jesus talks of himself both knocking and calling out, which would you emphasise? Because the British missionaries had no knowledge of Zanaki customs they blithely preached that Jesus was knocking on your door. And by doing so had inadvertently made him out to be a sneaky thief. In London perhaps the idea of Jesus knocking on your door presented him a respectable, polite young man. In Zimbabwe it meant something else altogether.

This is an example of non-contextualised Christian ministry. The message is still true; Jesus desires to have relationship with you if you would only open your life to him. The context in which that truth was presented meant a different use of metaphor and language needed to be employed to make it sensible.

A second, less dramatic example reminds us that the difficulties of non-contextualised evangelistic mission still dog us today. Recently, I visited a church in an inner city suburb of Sydney. It is a magnificent, grand old building in an advanced state of disrepair. The building is situated in the midst of some of Sydney's most exotic urban communities. Outside the church the cafes and sidewalks are filled with artists, actors, students and academics. It is an area noted for the bohemian lifestyle of its inhabitants. There are many sex workers, transvestites and drug dealers operating in the area and there is a higher than average number of mentally ill residents.

It is a very visibly non-conservative community where difference and diversity seem to be highly valued. In this culturally rich and disparate community, the small group of Christians who meet in the church I visited appear like an anachronism. They are neat and conservative. They spoke in a Christian jargonese that everyone present understood, but which was only for the initiated. Their hearts were certainly in the right place (as were the British missionaries from last century), but their modes of ministry, their language and their customs were quite likely indecipherable to those outside.

I am not simply making a play for 'relevant' preaching or more contemporary worship. I am talking about the symbols, the language, the metaphors, the vernacular and idioms we employ when presenting Christ to our world. This is a church that has the true message of the gospel, but it is a truth almost entirely unheard by the local community in which they exist. I don't believe we can any longer make excuses for non-contextualised mission.

The only worthwhile Christian ministry is culturally contextualised mission. It is truth ministry, but it is also understandable, believable, accessible truth. As David Bosch says, "*The missionary nature of the Church does not just depend on the situation in which it finds itself at a given moment, but is grounded in the Gospel itself.*"

A Liberal Concept?

For certain reasons contextualisation has had a shaky reception by the more conservative or moderate sections of the church. Some conservatives claim that if "we just preach the gospel" our nation will be transformed by the power of God's Word. I have had one noted evangelical leader tell me, "You can examine culture and understand contemporary trends if you like. As for me I'll just preach the Bible." He said this with the kind of flourish that betrayed his assumption that he was making a high and noble claim. But in many cases where we ignore principles of contextualisation our preaching of the Bible may well have as much impact as preaching in Swahili to English-speakers.

One of the reasons for the misgivings held by some Christian leaders has to do with the roots of the concept and in particular its emergence from the liberal Christian community, specifically as it was first articulated in the discussions of the World Council of Churches in the early 1970s.

But even though the more liberal end of the church spectrum first discussed it, does this make it a liberal term? I certainly think not. In order to understand some of the resistance by many churches to embracing it as ministry initiative; let's look briefly at a history of the term.

In 1972 the World Council of Churches Theological Education Fund (TEF) published a document that revealed the WCC's dissatisfaction with then current models of theological education. Called *Ministry in Context*, it sought to wrestle with the difficult issue of how best to respect and value the cultural context in which any ministry takes place. Its chief concern seemed to be with those churches and denominations that were not

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equipping their leadership to relate effectively to the needs, concerns and interests (material, political and otherwise) of the people to whom they were ministering.

In that document there is one of the first attempted definitions of a very new missiological term; contextualisation. But because of the perceived liberalism of the WCC the word was first seen by some evangelicals as meaning something like a preparedness to water down the biblical message in order to make that message more palatable in certain cultural contexts. In particular it was seen as a theological smoke screen for putting political (and generally leftist) agendas before the preaching of the gospel. And to be fair, most of the momentum for the church embracing contextualisation initially came from Latin American theologians who, in the 1970's were battling both a right-wing political regime and an increasingly irrelevant Catholic church. The Latin American pastors and theologians were engaging with contextualisation in an attempt to do Christian ministry in a way that directly related to the political needs of oppressed people. In accepting the term more recently, evangelicals and other conservative Christians wished to be more sensitive to the context in which gospel ministry operated, while remaining faithful to Scripture. Yet even within evangelical circles, there is an ongoing struggle to agree on a more precise definition of contextualisation, ranging from those who wish to limit the term to a relevant formulation of the gospel message, to those (like Charles Kraft) who advocate that the very forms of Christianity must be culturally adapted to preserve the meaning of the gospel.

Contextualisation: A Working Definition

The term contextualisation can only be understood if we can first agree on some presuppositions. Firstly, proponents of contextualisation believe that the core of the gospel is valid for all cultures and times. Secondly, however, they recognise that such a gospel must be clothed in time-specific cultural forms in order for it to be communicated and understood.

Contextualisation, then, can be defined as the dynamic process whereby the constant message of the gospel interacts with specific, relative human situations. It involves an examination of the gospel in the light of the respondent worldview and then adapting the message, encoding it in such a way that it can become meaningful to the respondent. Latin American theologian Rene Padilla says,

To contextualize the gospel is so to translate it that the Lordship of Jesus Christ is not an abstract principle or a mere doctrine, but the determining factor of life in all its dimensions and the basic criterion in relation to which all the cultural values that form the very substance of human life are evaluated. Without contextualization the gospel will become tangential or even entirely irrelevant. (1985:93)

Because the gospel is always God's good news to humankind it cannot be defined without reference to the human context. So, although the gospel is unchanging, the contexts in which it must be related will be regularly changing. It must be communicable for it to be *news*.

When I give thought to a contextualised approach to evangelism in Australia, I am not supposing some simple, cosmetic reworking of church symbols or language. I yearn for something more rich and complex, more daring and dangerous. In the late 1980's there was a brief movement within the church in Australia toward contextualisation, but it tended to be characterised by a focus on symbols that connected the church to a nineteenth century colonial Australian experience. It has been summed up in the now-disparaging term 'gumleaf theology' in so far as it focused on granny smith apples, Ned Kelly, anti-authoritarianism and bush music.

In a cosmopolitan, multicultural, technologically advanced nation like Australia, cosmetic tinkering will not suffice. The churches must recognise the diversity of contemporary Australian culture and must therefore allow ministry to take different forms and approaches in different sub-cultural contexts. The one-size-fits-all approach to church mission and evangelism must be abandoned. This wouldn't seem to be a radical statement, but yet churches throughout the country seem to be more eager than ever to embrace formularised, pre-packaged models of evangelism. Less and less churches, from my experience, seem to be developing evangelistic ministries specifically contextualised to the geographic area or sub-culture in which they find themselves.

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No matter the socio-economic, ethnic or age group, the gospel must relate to the whole human context, including both the situational and the experiential.

By situational I mean all that is true of people in their given situation, comprising their past, present and future; their lot in life, including their culture, nationality, language, the laws that affect them. It also includes their situation as God sees it; their fallenness and their beauty. But the gospel must also relate to the experiential context of people - the subjective experiences of humans arising out of but also creating their situational context, such as feelings of insecurity, hopes, fears. The totality of context is obviously very wide and fluid. This makes the concept of contextualisation an ongoing, dynamic process wherever the gospel is being preached and lived.

This is not merely the dilemma of missionaries who are ministering cross-culturally. As I have mentioned, if we take the diversity of contemporary Australian culture seriously we must conclude that the previous distinction between pastoral ministry and mission work has to be diluted. Martin Robinson, in *To Win The West* says, "*It is necessary for the church to rethink its stance entirely and to become a missionary church within the west.*" I couldn't agree more.

Three Common Positions

To better understand how contextualisation can work and how Christian leaders have dealt with it in the past I'd like to introduce the system used by the mission theologian H. Richard Niebuhr in *Christ and Culture* (1954). This is an approach I make much of in two of my previous books, *Longing for Love* (1996) and *Eyes Wide Open* (1998).

Niebuhr identified a number of ways that the church has approached contextualisation. I will look at three of them here:

1. Gospel-Over-Context Position

This position is taken by most of those who may be called conservative evangelicals and traditional fundamentalists. In Niebuhr's categories, they take the "Christ-Against-Culture" position and therefore reject contextualisation as a liberal fad.

Basically these people believe that an axiom like sola scriptura is synonymous with dogmatic theology, and that contextualisation represents a compromise on the authority, uniqueness and sufficiency of Scripture. They expend a lot of energy in defending Christianity against the encroachment of syncretism and universalism. They tend to see the development of culturally sensitive and sensible symbols or language as an abandonment of the gospel.

Of course, their fears of syncretism are well founded but this position generally invites the unsaved to leave their culture, their world, their social network and embrace a new culture, a church culture. I recognise that Christ Himself calls us out of this sinful world, but those who hold the gospel-over-context model confuse a repudiation of human sinfulness with a call to embrace exclusively conservative western cultural baggage.

2. Context-Over-Gospel

The second, and opposite, category consists of those who uncritically accept the existing context. In this category there has been a very wide diversity of opinion and approaches. Among them are Roman Catholics, primarily Jesuits, liberation theologians and members of the concilia movement. What they hold in common is the need to respect, sometimes even to absolutise, the existing cultural context to the point where the gospel becomes distorted or where it assumes a subservient role.

A classic example is German theologian Karl Rahner, who speaks of people of other faiths as 'anonymous Christians'. Liberation theologians like Gustavo Gutierrez, who absolutises the context, take a similar position.

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3. Gospel-In-Context Position

Each of the above two positions is valuable insofar as they call us to take either the gospel or the context seriously when doing evangelism. But clearly a more balanced position would be to take them both seriously, thereby avoiding either irrelevance (gospel-over-context) or syncretism (context-over-gospel). Most people who take this third position could be classified as progressive evangelicals. They are committed to critical contextualisation. The most significant thinkers in this field include David Bosch, David Hesselgrave, Charles Kraft and Paul Hiebert. And from the Two-Thirds world, Rene Padilla, Orlando Costas and Samuel Escobar.

This position takes as a given the essential link between gospel and context and it is to that matter that we now turn.

The Essential Link of Gospel and Context

Charles Kraft (1979:46) rightly states the obvious when he says that human beings are as immersed in culture as fish are in water; that culture constitutes the most fundamental aspect of human beings' context. There seems to be general agreement among the evangelical scholars mentioned above that in an important sense the gospel is supracultural, in as much as it originates in the mind of God who is outside the context of all human culture. Yet, as we've noted, the gospel is good news for humankind who can access truth outside of their cultural context. Kraft and others therefore operate from within the fundamental premises that God is above culture, but has chosen to work within it to achieve his purposes.

Orlando Costas argues that the gospel cannot be defined at all without reference to context, since

The context is the stage where all comprehension takes place. It is the reality that ties together and therefore shapes, all knowledge... We participate in it, actively or passive. Not one of us can claim to stand outside it. The question is whether or not we can consciously and critically incorporate it into our efforts to interpret and communicate the gospel. This is what we do in contextualisation (1982:5)

At the same time the coming of the gospel from outside the cultural context gives it the ability to affirm those aspects of every culture that agree with God's purposes and that predispose members of that culture to comprehend the gospel.

But the gospel also comes to judge the satanic elements in every society that are contrary to God's will. The creation of humankind in God's image means that there is no culture that lacks virtuous elements in terms of which the gospel can be expressed. At the same time the fall of humankind from grace means that no culture is completely virtuous. It was ethnocentrism that made many western missionaries impose western culture on the Two-Thirds world nations as the standard expression of Christianity.

The gospel message as we find it in Scripture is for all peoples, all nations and all sub-cultures. Yet it is given in terms of the Jewish and the Graeco-Roman cultural contexts of the first century. Therefore, for God's message to cross from that context into ours, or from our context to others in evangelistic ministry, there has to be the complex work of contextualisation.

Biblical Examples of Contextualisation

1. General Comments

Finding biblical examples of contextualisation is not difficult, since it could be argued that the whole Bible itself is an example of divine contextualisation. To claim that an eternal, omnipotent Spirit-God, who is above all human culture, has spoken to us in human language, using human imagery, tapping into human longings and fears is to claim God is the ultimate contextualiser. Says Orlando Costas, "When we take a close look at its pages...we note that the Scriptures are contextual from beginning to end." (1982:5)

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Charles Kraft presents four principles for seeing the place of contextualisation in the Bible. They are:

- a. The Bible goes considerably beyond revealing merely intellectual truth or information. It demonstrates how truth is conveyed. Says Kraft; "Our God... is mainly a God of dialogue who interacts with us, not simply a God of monologue who makes pronouncements above us." (1979:24)
- b. God's communication with humanity is depicted in the Bible as coming to humans in familiar, expected ways (though the message itself was often unexpected).
- c. God's method of self-disclosure is demonstrated to be participatory.
- d. We observe God's revelatory activity in the Scriptures to be situation-specific.

If we adopt these principles we are logically drawn to recognise the biblical writers' role in contextualising the divinely revealed truth they present. In other words, the contextualising process is as keenly recorded in Scripture as is the message itself. Some times God reveals himself and his will through a thunderous visitation at Mt. Sinai, and at other times through the systematic argumentation of St. Paul. Not only is the information revealed on those occasions recorded, but the very process of their transmission is also revealed.

2. The Incarnation

Clearly, the most profound example of contextual self-revelation by God is the Incarnation. If we believe that in the Incarnation God's true self has been ultimately revealed and, as Karl Barth states, the true identity of humankind is also revealed, then two things follow: firstly, men and women discover their authentic humanness in Jesus; and secondly, they come to know the true God through him. Let me put it another way, the Incarnation makes the study of God and the study of anthropology a Christological issue. It therefore makes contextualisation an essential and inevitable process for a proper communication of the Christian message. Contextualisation becomes a theological necessity in the sense that it is simply not possible to understand God or humanity without understanding the person and work of Jesus. We cannot remove God from the picture and examine him under a microscope as it were, in some clinical, abstract way. He can only ever be fully known in context and that context is in Christ.

Evangelism then is a missiological enterprise. It is about using contextual methods to point people to a God who has revealed himself contextually. This will demand a rigorous devotion to the centrality of Christ and to the ongoing examination of human culture.

3. The Ministry of Paul

Let's turn our attention to two New Testament examples, both of which demonstrate attempts to make the proclamation of the gospel in thoroughly contextualised ways.

In Acts 14:8-20, Paul and Barnabas enter Lystra and are faced with some peculiar linguistic and cultural problems that forced them to respond in a distinctly contextualised manner.

After witnessing a miraculous healing by Paul, the Lystran crowd becomes excited and begins shouting wildly in their Lycaonian dialect. F.F. Bruce suggests that due to the remoteness of the city, the inhabitants of Lystra would most likely not have spoken the common universal languages of the time but an ancient language of Asia Minor which Paul and Barnabas would probably not understand (1952:281). Further to this significant language barrier, the apostles seem to have been unaware of the local lore and legend that incites the ensuing riot. Hesselgrave explains:

As recorded by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*...an elderly couple, Philemon and Baucis, slaughtered their last goose to feed Zeus and Hermes after these gods, wandering about in human form, had been rebuffed by many of the people of that region. As a result, the inhospitable citizens were punished and the couple was rewarded. (1989:8)

Obviously, one interpretation of the Lystrans' behaviour in this text is that they were anxious about making the same mistake twice, so they herald the apostles as the incarnations of Zeus and Hermes.

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This passage in Acts 14 is an example of cultural dissonance, where Paul, unaware of the local story, performs a miracle as his introduction to Lystra with disastrous results. In certain cultures miracles might be perceived as an authenticating sign that the miracle-worker's words had supernatural authority. In Lystra they create panic because of the cultural assumption that incarnated gods are malevolent and must be appeased, not simply listened to. The language barrier notwithstanding, Paul finds himself in v.14 as an object of pagan worship and must work particularly hard (and particularly quickly) to develop a more appropriately contextualised response to this misunderstanding.

Paul's speech at Lystra (vss.15-17) is a superb example of contextualised communication, no matter how hastily it may have been conceived. Assuming nothing more than his listeners' primitive world view (polytheism) and guessing at an unsophisticated appreciation of natural revelation on their part, Paul urges the Lystrans to turn from empty and worthless idols to the living God who has already revealed himself in nature. Both the assumption and the guesswork were neat examples of contextualisation. There is no scathing repudiation of polytheism, only a firm recommendation of the true God who has revealed himself in the created order of things, a concept already well known to them in classical legends.

Of course, Luke, as the author of Acts 14 is chiefly concerned, not with giving a complete account of all that Paul said in Lystra, but of conveying his intent. It seems unlikely that Paul would not have introduced Jesus into the situation. Luke's interest here is to show us Paul's capacity to encode the message of the gospel in such a way that it can become meaningful to its hearers. Luke is apparently impressed by Paul's devotion to remain listener-oriented at all times, rather than to simply rehearse some memorised, theologically correct screed. Later, in Acts 17:16-34, while in Athens, Paul employs more or less the same process while preaching to the intellectuals at the Areopagus. While the form is different, the model is not. At Lystra he "quotes" nature to demonstrate God's self-revelation. In Athens it's the Greeks' own religiousness and poetry. And while Luke has Paul in Athens including considerably more information, in particular the Resurrection, the approach is identical; an affirmation of what his listeners have discovered already about the living God, and an encouragement to search further for God (as revealed in Christ - assumed at Lystra, explicitly mentioned at Athens).

Critical Contextualisation

If the case for contextualisation is made, it follows that then we need to explore its process. If we embrace contextualisation as a fundamental principle of evangelism, we will be always living with the tension of not wishing to fall into the gospel-over-context or the context-over-gospel positions. The process of ensuring that we can present the gospel to both Lystrans and Athenians without compromising the gospel message or becoming unintelligible is called critical contextualisation. It is process that we will do well to consider in detail.

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