

# The Theology of Contextualization

By Ernst H. Wendland

A missionary in Africa has the advantage of not being constantly bombarded with all sorts of new missiological theories, couched in terms which can't be found in a dictionary, even if he were aware of their existence. Second-class mail takes months to reach him, and often it reaches him not at all. So how is he to know that the "indigenous church policy" has been pretty well supplanted on the agendas of most mission seminars by "the theology of contextualization"! Fortunately his day-to-day work schedule carries on in spite of this lapse.

In America, however, anyone interested in world missions had better find out what the theology of contextualization means if he wishes to stay abreast of what missiologists are discussing today. As far as can be determined the word itself has been in use in discussions of the World Council of Churches since 1972.<sup>i</sup> Byang Kato introduced the term to the International Congress on World Evangelization in Lausanne in 1974.<sup>ii</sup> The Trinity Consultation on Theology and Mission, held at Deerfield, Illinois in 1976 considered "The Contextualization of Theology" one of its main topics.<sup>iii</sup> *Gospel in Context* is a new missiological journal, produced since 1978 by an organization known as "Partnership in Mission." The purpose of this publication, as stated on its cover, is to present "an international, cross-cultural, interdisciplinary and interdenominational dialogue, focused on *the contextualization of the Gospel* of Jesus Christ in the six continents."

As some years ago "indigenization" captured the imagination of people on the world mission scene, today it would appear that the same applies to "contextualization."

## What Does It Mean?

"Contextualization" as applied to theology has been variously defined, depending upon the specialized theological inclinations of the missiologist as well as the aspect of the work he may wish to emphasize (culture, church structure, language, etc.). Whatever definition is expressed here may therefore be considered imprecise by one or the other expert. A synthesis, however, will have to do for purposes of a more general consideration of the subject.

*Contextualization is the process whereby the message of the Word of God is related to the cultural context of the society to which it is proclaimed.* When, for example, the gospel is brought by people coming out of Western civilization, they should be aware that the recipients are often living in a different cultural context, with varying structures and thought patterns, and that they have different linguistic and emotional modes of expression. People coming to Christ should not be made to feel that He is a "foreign" Christ. Neither should there be an insistence upon forms of worship according to cultural patterns which make people of the receptor-context feel like strangers. "The gospel in context," as someone has expressed it succinctly, "brings Christ as both Savior and Brother."

Other words are sometimes used synonymously to emphasize the cultural aspect of contextualization's concern, such as "inculturation," "transculturation," "cultural adaptation," and so on. Particularly since Vatican II the Roman Catholic Church has spoken of its "incarnational mission" as it carries out its task "within the characteristics of the culture to which it is sent."<sup>iv</sup> Somewhere we recall a statement something like this: "As the Lord became incarnate as a Jew in Palestine, so the church must become incarnate in each culture."

## Not A New Concern

While the theology of contextualization is a term of comparatively recent usage, it deals with a matter which has been a missiological concern for many years.

Anyone working in Central Africa already over a half-century ago will have known about the works of E. W. Smith, a Methodist missionary who made intensive anthropological studies of the Ila tribe of Northern

Rhodesia.<sup>v</sup> The insights gained from his writings added considerably to an understanding of the Bantu as a people. A knowledge of tribal customs, traditions, and natural beliefs is certainly helpful when working among the people and applying the Word of God to their needs. As far back as 1953 a publication called *Practical Anthropology* made its first appearance as “a bulletin for Christian anthropologists.” Many missionaries are grateful to Dr. Eugene Nida, a chief contributor of this quarterly, for opening their eyes to the importance of communicating the message of Scripture in a meaningful way to people living in a foreign context. Nida, of course, has written several helpful books on linguistic and anthropological subjects connected with the communication of the gospel. In 1972 the American Society of Missiology took over the publication of *Practical Anthropology*, renaming it *Missiology*. This journal continues to deal with the relationship between culture and Christianity.

Our own Synod’s Board for World Missions, when enumerating its principles and objectives in 1965, emphasized that our missionaries are to be “thoroughly trained in the language and culture of the people whom they are to serve.”<sup>vi</sup> At our five World Mission Seminary Conferences (Hong Kong, 1971; Lusaka, 1972; Tsuchiura, 1974; Mequon, 1976; El Paso, 1978) the matter of cultural adaptation of theological courses in our worldwide worker-training programs was repeatedly discussed.<sup>vii</sup> In an article appearing in *The Evangelism Life Line*, produced under the auspices of our Synod’s Commission on Evangelism, Darwin Raddatz refers to the “contextualization of the gospel” and poses the question, “In giving witness to Christ are we being sensitive to the culture and individuality of our auditors?”<sup>viii</sup> At the 1979 Epiphany Mission Seminar of the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary at Mequon, students spent three days exploring the theme “Bridging the Cultural Gap—All Things to All Men.”

It can therefore hardly be said that many Christian churches, ourselves included, have been unaware of this matter of relating the Gospel to varying cultural contexts in a world which has become increasingly culture-conscious.

### **Why The New Terminology?**

It is but natural to wonder why the word “indigenization” has to a great extent been discarded and replaced by “contextualization.” The indigenous principle, we recall, has been in use nearly a hundred years, and emphasizes metaphorically that a planted church should take root in the cultural soil where it is planted in order to grow naturally. In order to do this the national church should not be a hot-house replica of the parent organization in Europe or America, but it should be “self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating.”

One can see several reasons for this shift in terminology. The indigenous church policy harks back to a time when it was still an accepted part of missionary practice to think in terms of “parent organizations” from Western countries being busy about “planting churches” in relatively undeveloped continents. That, one can readily see in these days of national sensitivity, has all the earmarks of “paternalism.” This is the next thing in the minds of many these days to that bygone era known as colonialism! Today it is rather generally accepted that we refer to the church as being “in mission on all six continents” on a “partnership basis.”

The indigenous church policy also brought along with it a weakness not inherent in the concept itself, but which came as a result of a faulty emphasis in the application of its principles. The “do-it-yourself” element was overstressed. The national church, in other words, could remain culturally a carbon-copy of some Western church, yet if it could stand on its feet according to the three “selves” it was felt by many that the goal of indigeneity had been achieved. Which wasn’t the case at all, many will argue, since it was simply a “white man’s church on foreign soil,” giving strength to the argument that the national “must become a pseudo-European in order to become a Christian.”<sup>ix</sup>

In the light of these arguments one can see some justification for this word change, which places greater emphasis upon the cultural aspect in an age when the nations throughout the world are becoming more insistent about establishing their own identity.

## A New Theological Direction

If “contextualization” were concerned merely about the practical aspects of relating the message of the Word to the peculiar culture of the receptor-context, there would be no cause for raising too many theological concerns. Missiological developments, however, are not without their accompanying doctrinal implications. Unfortunately those who have had the most to say about this recent movement have made statements which raise some rather serious theological questions.

One of contextualization’s leading spokesmen is Charles R. Taber, editor of *Gospel in Context*, the publication to which we have already referred. Taber states his theological position candidly. He is convinced that most if not all confessional statements subsequent to the Apostles’ Creed “have served to divide the church.” In his opinion “they have also served to maintain the tutelage of Christians in the West over Christians in other parts of the world.”<sup>x</sup>

Western theology, Taber postulates, has been shaped by neo-Platonism, Aristotelianism, and scholasticism. Africans and Asians need “to start afresh,” he argues, “beginning with the direct interaction of their cultures with the Scriptures rather than tagging along at the tailend of the long history of western embroidery.”<sup>xi</sup>

As a professed disciple of Thomas Campbell, Taber states openly a theological view which is implicit in other writings on contextualization. Campbellites, of course, are opposed to the use of all creedal formulations, ecclesiastical terminology, and denominational names. Taber gives expression to this theological principle in his argument that confessional formulations militate against the contextualization of the gospel, since they come out of cultures with thought patterns and modes of expression vastly different from those of Africans, Asians, and Latin Americans of today. People from other cultures, he argues, should be free to express themselves in ways which are “contextually appropriate” to their own cultures.

Taber reminds us of others who follow the theological principles of the Disciples of Christ. Their strong denunciation of confessional statements is in itself an expression of a confessional position. Aside from this, it is naive and unrealistic to hope that African, Asian, or Latin American Christianity can do away with all previous confessional statements and “start afresh” in the interests of a gospel which conforms more to its own cultural context. The fact of the matter is that all these confessional statements are already there. Africa, for example, does not exist in a confessional vacuum. It already has more sects and denominations than America.<sup>xii</sup> It is very much a part of this pluralistically confused century. To deprive Africans of insights which historic Christianity has expressed in its confessional formulations would be interpreted by many Africans as considering them to be intellectually inferior as well as culturally insensitive.

Just to give one example: the “Watchtower Movement” has had a greater impact on parts of Africa than anywhere else in the world. Not to make fullest use of the Nicene Creed in places where Arianism has resurfaced in such a crass form would be a dereliction of Christian duty.

## Another Theological Spirit

A more recent issue of *Gospel in Context* is revealing in that it shows how recognized experts in the field of missiology often express their own theological convictions as they try to set forth their own ideas about contextualization.

In this issue both Donald R. Jacobs and Orlando E. Costas write about the “conversion experience” as it relates to a particular cultural context. From his Reformed background Jacobs defines an individual’s “conversion experience” as “elevating Jesus Christ to a position of Lordship in his or her power constellation.”<sup>xiii</sup> Costas, on the other hand, is a well-known and an articulate theological liberationist. For him the “conversion experience” was not complete as far as his cultural context was concerned until he became involved in a personal struggle for social justice.<sup>xiv</sup>

In both instances, varied as the theological insights of the writers involved may be, the emphasis of the “conversion experience” is subjective. God’s initiating action through His Spirit in conversion as well as His

gracious means of sustaining faith through Word and Sacrament receive little if any attention. One may wish to argue that when relating the matter of conversion to a particular cultural context one is concerned more with man's response than with God's action. Theologically we happen to disagree. Whether white, yellow, or black, the "conversion experience" must begin with God's power rather than man's "personal elevation of Christ" or "personal struggle for social justice." And no matter what the "cultural context," we as Lutherans will be thankful that we have been taught, "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, nor come to Him; but the Holy Ghost has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith" (Luther's Explanation to the Third Article, Apostles' Creed). These precious truths apply to any cultural context.

### **A Contemporary Parable**

One more example should suffice to illustrate the extremes to which some protagonists of "cultural contextualization" go in their efforts to make the gospel "culturally relevant."

In the October 1978 issue of *Missiology* Marvin K. Mayers shows us how to apply Christ's parable of the Good Samaritan to the cultural milieu of the Philippines. A Filipino "samaritan," Mayers relates, was driving along the road leading to his capital city. He saw an accident in which the driver was seriously injured. A local policeman arrived, but had no transport vehicle. The policeman requested the Filipino "samaritan" to provide transport. The "samaritan" refused. The policeman drew his gun and insisted. The "samaritan" obeyed and transported the injured man to the nearest hospital.

A typical American "samaritan" would have acted differently, Mayers comments. He probably would have refused to move the body until professional medical aid could arrive at the scene. The Filipino's culture, however, dictated the action taken by the Filipino described above as "responsible action." Had he helped the injured man without the intrusion of the policeman, the injured man according to the rules of his society would have felt himself morally obligated to his benefactor for the rest of his life. Thus "responsible behavior" required that the Filipino "samaritan" ignore the wounded man until in some way the rules of society could be called off. The policeman "served such a purpose."<sup>xv</sup>

This is what it means, Mayers asserts, for a missionary not only to learn to *live* in a foreign culture, but also to *think* in a foreign culture. This according to some is "translating scriptural principles into proper cultural perspectives."

We don't agree, of course. We don't happen to feel that it was our Lord's concern in telling this parable to show how an act of love ought necessarily to conform to all the rules of society in order to indicate "responsible behavior." Whenever we try to press the biblical definition of love into ethical or cultural patterns devised by man, we can so easily end up in human explanations which do not fit the intended sense of Scripture at all. The Samaritan's love simply transcended all the cultural laws and ethical standards of natural man. "Go and do likewise," Jesus says to the expert in the law.

### **Summary Thoughts**

1. Proclaiming the gospel in context is an important missiological concern, if understood correctly. When bringing the gospel to new areas and helping to establish Christian churches on continents other than our own, we as Lutherans will want to remember words from Article VII of our Augsburg Confession: "Nor is it necessary that human traditions, that is, rites or ceremonies, instituted by men, should be everywhere alike."
2. Missionaries working in foreign environments will constantly guard against letting their own natural feelings of ethnocentrism take control, either by manifesting a presumed cultural superiority, or by evincing a domineering spirit when working in cross-cultural relationships. All such expressions cause hindrances to the proclamation of the gospel. This warning applies especially to those who bring a message which is initially alien into a new receptor-context.

3. A real concern for proclaiming the gospel in context, however, will not lead to “contextualize” the gospel in the sense of attempting to make it more palatable, appealing or understandable to human reason. Christians need to remember that the gospel message itself is a foolishness to man’s natural wisdom, and a stumbling block to man’s natural reason. The gospel on the other hand is and will ever remain the power of God and the wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:18–24).
4. Much of the literature appearing in missiological circles today with appeals to “contextualize the gospel” comes from enthusiasts of other religious persuasions. While we as Lutherans must admire a mission zeal which often appears to surpass our own, and while we appreciate many of the practical insights concerning mission work which these people are willing to share with us, we must exercise every possible care that our principles of *sola gratia*, *sola Scriptura*, and *sola fide* are upheld in our own mission work. The gospel which we share with others must be the same in which we ourselves find comfort and strength.
5. Theological systems which emphasize self-determination in conversion are at cross-purposes with the *sola gratia*. Those which seek to harmonize human reason with divine revelation undermine the *sola Scriptura*. Those which look for religious answers in subjectivistic experience are in conflict with the true nature of the *sola fide*. Those which find the eschatological goal of theology in political liberation, social justice, and racial equality are a humanistic distortion of the purpose of the gospel of Christ. This gospel alone is “the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile” (Ro 1:16 NIV). We as a church dare never lose sight of these principles, no matter under what kind of conditions or circumstances we do our work.
6. Our Lutheran Confessions are just as valid today as they were hundreds of years ago, and just as relevant. Modern heresies are often the same old fallacies in other garb. These are just as rampant and truth-destructive today as they were centuries ago—whether in a Medellin barrio, a Lusaka shantytown, on a Kowloon rooftop, or in affluent suburbia, U. S. A. {U. S. A. United States of America}. While it may be necessary to convert language or adjust thought patterns to accommodate other cultural contexts, not to share as much as possible of the content of these confessional writings with younger churches which we have helped to establish would be a serious neglect of our Christian responsibility.
7. No theological statement is culture free. Our use of language places us within cultural limits. God’s Spirit can work through us in any cultural context. When we use His means of grace faithfully we can be sure of accomplishing His purpose. May this be our greatest source of strength as we do His work in spite of our own human limitations and cultural barriers!

<sup>i</sup> *Ministry in Context: The Third Mandate Programme of the Theological Education Fund, 1970–1977* (London: Theological Education Fund, World Council of Churches, 1972).

<sup>ii</sup> Byang H. Kato, *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, ed. J. D. Douglas (Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 1975 ed.), p 1217.

<sup>iii</sup> David J. Hesselgrave, *Theology and Mission*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), Part Two, pp 69–127.

<sup>iv</sup> W. M. Abbott, *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Guild Press, 1966), p 48.

<sup>v</sup> E. W. Smith, *African Ideas of God* (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1966). E. W. Smith and A.M. Dale, *The Ila-Speaking People of Northern Rhodesia* (New York: University Books, 1968).

<sup>vi</sup> *Proceedings*, Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 38th Convention, 1965, p 244.

<sup>vii</sup> World Seminary Conferences, WELS, held at Hong Kong 1971, Lusaka 1972, Tsuchiura 1974, Mequon 1976, El Paso 1978.

<sup>viii</sup> Darvin Raddatz, *The Evangelism Life Line*, II, p 3.

<sup>ix</sup> Diedrich Westermann, *International Review of Missions*, (Jan. 1925), p 26.

<sup>x</sup> Charles R. Taber, *Gospel in Context*, I, (Jan. 1978), p 3.

<sup>xi</sup> *Ibid.*, p 10.

<sup>xii</sup> Cf. David B. Barrett, *Schism and Renewal in Africa* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968).

<sup>xiii</sup> Donald R. Jacobs, *Gospel in Context*, I (July 1978), p 8.

<sup>xiv</sup> Orlando E. Costas, *Gospel in Context*, I (July 1978), p 16.

<sup>xv</sup> Marvin K. Mayers, “The Filipino Samaritan: A Parable of Responsible Cross-Cultur-al Behavior,” *Missiology*, VI (October 1978), pp 463ff.