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Contextualization: An Evangelical Reflection on Its Agelessness in Contemporary Christian Enterprise

By

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Abstract

The church, through its Christianization expansion in the southern hemisphere countries, has had much to do with the twentieth-century discovery of indigenization as phenomenal and ecclesial shifts in execrably from the North Atlantic to the new, empirical understanding of Christian theology, Bible reading and Church history in terms of contextualization. I argued that evangelical theological-missiological reflection on contextualization is ageless. This will assist contemporary Christians apply contextualizing Scriptural message within local contexts that penetrate their mother tongue. In the process, I have demonstrated that those evangelical theologians and missiologist and missionaries should not resist contextualizing theology and theologizing as if the Scripture has nothing to offer on contextualization. I also argued for a range of Biblical models for contextual reflection for the tasks of Christian presence, witness, and discipleship required in a multicultural world. This is done to facilitate in the quest to grow in faithfulness to the Scriptures and to the nature of God's revelation in Christ and to remain faithful in Christian witness in contemporary setting particularly in Africa. The work begins with an introduction to contextualization. The problem is stated. Then, it proceeded to reflect on contextualization in the Old and New Testaments. It surveys its historical development. Moving onwards, the historical terms, qualities of good contextualization, sup up, and recommendation.

Key words: theology of mission, history of religion, biblical studies, missiology, theology, church history

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Background to Contextualization

Frost and Alan Hirsch (2006:83) opined that “Contextualization attempts to communicate the gospel in word and deed and to establish churches in ways that make sense to people within the local context.” Michael and Alan (2006:83) reiterated that “It is primarily concerned with presenting Christ in such a way that meets peoples’ deepest needs and penetrates their worldviews, thus allowing them to follow Christ and remain in their own ... local context.” Whiteman (1997:2) argued that “Contextualization is one of the most important issues in missional theology today. Unlike the Death of God movement in theology, contextualization is no mere missiological fad that will fade when another hot topic catches our attention.” Kato (1975: 1217) maintained that “Since the Gospel message is inspired but the mode of its expression is not, contextualization of the modes of expression is not only right but necessary.” Vanhoozer (2006:112) wrote “The Bible itself rather than any one interpretation of it, is the ultimate locus of transcultural authority.” As Ott (2010:270) wrote, “Contextualization involves not making the message of Scripture comfortable, but rather speaking clearly to all areas of context-beliefs, values, emotions.” This is just as Walls (2007:53,54) wrote that “The gospel should penetrate in such a way [that] believers in Jesus Christ are both at home in their local language-indigenous principle. It should also speak prophetically into their context-pilgrim principle.” Concern over issues of contextualization has been a part of the Christian church from its inception, even though the vocabulary of contextualization dates back only to the early seventies.

It is a perennial challenge and one that Christians have faced every time they communicate the Gospel across language and cultural boundaries. The church has struggled with this problem through the ages. Essentially, contextualization is concerned with how the Gospel and local context connect to one another across geographic space. Contextualization captures in method and perspective the challenge of connecting the Gospel to all peoples’ local settings. In this sense the concern of contextualization is ancient going back to the early church when it struggled to break loose from its Jewish cultural trappings and enter the Greco-Roman world of the Gentiles. Contextualization is part of an evolving stream of thought that has relationship to the Gospel and church to a local context. In the past, words such as adaptation, accommodation, and indigenization were used to describe this relationship between the Gospel, church, and tradition. Contextualization is not something that is pursued and motivated by an agenda of pragmatic efficiency. Rather, it must be followed because of faithfulness to God, who sent God’s Son as a servant to die so that all may live. Theologians and missiologists have the obligation to search continually for ways in which the good news can be more deeply lived, celebrated and shared. This is so because one of the geniuses of Christ as revealed in the Bible is that it is translatable into every language of the world. Sanneh (2003:23,24,25,26) wrote “It is in no small measure due to this reality that the church has exploded around the world.” This fact of translatability is reflective of a reality as Walls (2007: 26) noted “Christian faith rests on a divine act of translation: The Word became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14). To make sense to a local people, the gospel-indeed, the Christian faith -must be enfleshed in their local...languages.” Therefore, Pocock (2005:323)

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argued that “The goal is to make the Christian faith as a whole-not only the message, but also the means of living the faith out in the local setting understandable.” Contextualization is of crucial significance for all Christians. Even those who never cross a cultural boundary. Every Christian life in a local context has to incarnate the Word of God and the Christian faith appropriately in that setting. Why does contextualization call for a reflection? What is the problem?

The Problem

Walls (2007:51) advocated that “Conversion to Christ does not isolate the convert from his or her community. Conversion to Christ does not reduce a bland universal citizenship.” In the light of Ephesians 4:8-13, the expected Christian faith produces distinctive discipleships as diverse as human life itself. It also means that the influence of Christ is brought to bear on the points of reference in each local context. These points of reference according to Walls, “are the things by which people know their identify and know where and to whom, they belong.” Walls (2007:51) opined that “discipling a nation involves Christ’s entry into the nation’s thought, the patterns of relationship within that nation, the way the society hangs together, the way decisions are made.” Therefore, placing the idea in context of contextualization, Christian proclamation is for the children and grandchildren of the people who heard it. Walls (2007:52) affirmed that “Just as personal discipleship I involves the lifelong working of holy word through the personality, so national discipleship a generational penetration of the ways of thought, the springs of action, the points of reference of people forming a nation.”

The significance of the mind of Christ to these points of reference will mean that the Master’s Word is constantly penetrating new realms of human reality. The problem lies in what Walls (2007:52) concluded that “All too often those who have been the means whereby Christian faith has spread across cultural frontiers have wanted new Christians to regard as important all the things that have been important to themselves.” Bediako (1992:53) caped the problem that “In our own day there are signs that African theologians are at a similar point in the application of the word about Christ to another vast complex of thought, action, and relationships to that which Greek Christians thinkers reached when they faced the problem posed by their cultural identity.”

Walls (2007:53) wrote a statement of fact that “Throughout Christian history two forces distinguishable in constant tension. One is an indigenizing principle, a homing instinct, which creates a diverse community a sense that the church belongs there, that it is ours. The other is a pilgrim principle that creates within the Christian community the sense that it is not fully home in this world, so that it comes into tension with its society from its loyalty to Christ.” The good thing is, they are not in opposition, r are they to be held in some kind of balances. (Walls (2007:54) alleged “We need not fear getting too much of one or the other, only to little. To understand their relationship, we have only to recall that both are direct result of the incarnational and translational process whereby God redeems us through the life death, and resurrection of Christ.” The aforementioned are the reasons why this reflection of contextualization is undertaken. Hence the need to start a reflection on contextualization in the Old Testament from a theological-missiological point of view.

Old Testament Contextualization

From a theological point of view, contextualization in the Old Testament started within a context and in an environment. How does a person know this? It began with a pronouncement. “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth,” (Genesis 1:1). Heaven and earth needed salvation. God happened to become the first to contextualize when

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he put into motion his covenant of grace by creating the context to reveal himself. The rational creation of male-female in his image shows the image-bearer of God is a rational Being. So, man is also rational (Genesis 1:1, 26, 27; 2:7). Wright clarified on the man being created in the image of God. Wright (2004:119) enlightened his audience that “Much theological ink has been spilled on trying to pin down exactly what it is about human beings that can be identified as the essence of the image of God in us. Is it our rationality, our moral consciousness, our capacity for relationship, our responsibility to God?” Wright (2004:119) argued that ... “In any case, we should not so much think of the image of God as an independent thing that we somehow possess. God did not give to human beings the image of God. Rather, it is a dimension of our very creation.

The expression in our image describes the way God is not so much something we possess as what we are. To be human is to be the image of God. It is not an extra feature added on to our species. It is definitive of what it means to be human.” From a missiological perspective, it is the affirmation that human beings have been created in the image of God, along with the immediate context of the narrative of Genesis. Wright (2006:422,423,424,425) noted “Genesis 1-3 implies significant truth about humanity which is all human beings are addressable by God. Human beings are the creatures to whom God speaks. There is therefore a fundamental God awareness or God-openness that is common to all humanity, in comparison with which all other labels are secondary, including religious ones.” Wright (2006:424) opined “The living Creator God of all flesh needs no permission, no translation, no cross-cultural contextualization when he chooses to communicate with any person whom he has made in his own image.”

Wright (2006:425) reiterated “To be human is to be addressable by one’s creator.” This then means contextualizing his Word is a platform to address humanity in their own local context from generation to generation until today. God revealed himself to mankind so that humanity can understand and have cordiality with him rightly. Once missiologists identify with people in their local context as God did, there will be success in contextualizing the gospel message to people. Furthermore, contextualization exposes humanity to go into a covenant with God and mankind as exemplified in the action of Noah and Abraham (Genesis 9:11-18, 12:1-3).

The prophets were masters of contextualization as illustrated in Ezekiel (15 & 17). The Old Testament is full of examples of God himself using linguistic context, and religious forms already familiar to his people to reveal himself. Glasser (1989:33) affirmed, “The Old Testament is replete with evidence that God continually use contextualizing process in his self-disclosure of himself to his people.” This shows that in the Old Testament, God is the primary contextualizer. Ott (2010: 271) noted “to be sure, the Old Testament emphasizes that God’s people must avoid the idolatry of the surrounding nations and root out any pagan practices that had infiltrated their way of life. But this did not prevent God from using some of cultural, linguistic and even religious forms used by these other nations to facilitate Israel’s life and worship.”

For example, a primary name for God in Hebrew, EL, was the name of the high god of the Canaanite pantheon. God chose to use this word even though the EL of the Canaanites had attributes that were not congruent with his own attributes. He revealed himself as the One true EL who was qualitatively different from the EL of the Canaanites. Averbeck (2004:337,344) opined “The Old Testament authors frequently make use of mystical figures and language from ancient Near Eastern religion, such as Rahab and Leviathan...” Glasser (1989:40) noted “Both the Bible and Covenants themselves and the preaching styles and object lessons of the prophets who called for loyalty to the covenant were well known to the ancient Near East.”

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Glasser (1989:47) clearly pointed it that “The most striking evidence of contextualization in the Old Testament is the manner in which God deliberately and repeatedly shaped the disclosure of himself using the widely known ancient phenomenon of covenant.” This leads to a reflection on the New Testament examples of contextualization.

New Testament Contextualization

Contextualization in the New Testament occurs in at least four ways. First, the New Testament makes it clear that the gospel was not connected with any particular customs, especially Jewish customs. Sanneh (1995:61) wrote, “Christianity affects cultures by making them to a position short of the absolute, and it does this by placing God at the Centre.” Fleming (2005:138) summed up, “Because no single cultural expression is ultimate, the gospel is free to come to life in a plurality of culture and circumstances. Yet, Because God values all cultures and because the gospel cannot be heard in the abstract apart from (indigenous) home, God must speak to the Jew as a Jew, to the Greek as a Greek...” This so, because it is the life of Christ which enters the life of each new community where he is received by faith, and which is to be realized through that community’s thoughts and traditions. This allows them to support one another, interact, share experiences and modern life struggles. Having this open bond with others is what builds valuable relationships, and gives them a deeper sense of belonging. Fleming (2005:15), mentioned “The second example of contextualization in the New Testament is the Jesus’ and the apostles tailor the gospel message to address different groups of people.” Scriptural confirmation presents Paul’s teaching in Acts 13,14, and 17, are directed to both build bridges to and challenge the religious assumptions of his listeners in diverse audiences.

The third way the New Testament demonstrate contextualization, is found in the apostles’ use of words prepackaged with deep meaning, sometimes using pagan religious roots to communicate spiritual truth. Davies (1997:209) noted “In all cases, they reloaded those words with new meaning to communicate the unique concept of who Christ is.” Fourth, Fleming (2005:15) concluded “The New Testament writings themselves are examples of theological task for contextual approach to theologizing.” They are theological task because in Bible translation and interpretation, contextualization is the process of assigning meaning as a means of interpreting the environment within which a text or action is carried out. This is why the next thing is to reflect on the importance of the emergence of missional history of contextualization through to modern era.

History of Contextualization

Although the term contextualization was not coined until the 1970s, missionaries and theologians have been adapting their presentation of the truth of scripture to diverse human contexts throughout church history. Early church apologists such as Tatian, Justin, and Clement sought to communicate Scripture in Greek historical and philosophical categories and answered questions being discussed by Christians with a Greek philosophical background. Sanneh (1989:73,74,75,87) noted “Cyril and Methodius were missionaries to the Slavic peoples in the ninth century. They translated the Scriptures into Slavic in the face of opposition from established church leaders who insisted that only Latin, Greek, and Hebrew were appropriate languages for Scripture.” Their work opened door for theologizing to take place outside the Hellenistic tradition and worldview of the Greco-Roman world. Sanneh (2003: 95,96,97,128) wrote, “In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Jesuit Missionaries such as Robert de Nobili, in India and Matteo Ricci in China used local forms and indigenous language to explain Christianity.” The great Protestant missionary movement of the

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nineteenth and twentieth centuries involved contextualization. Sanneh (2003:95) explained “The missionaries’ emphasis on vernacular language Scriptures allowed new believers in Africa, Asia, and Latin America to claim Christian faith as their own and stimulated fresh thinking about the opportunities.” Thus, ever since the word emerged there has been almost an explosion of writing, thinking, and talking about contextualization.

Placing contextualization in its later history, the term was introduced in 1972. Dadang (2021:30) historically traced that “The desire for evangelical approach to contextual theology and education motivated Shoki Coe who was originally from Taiwan, joined the Theological Education Fund of the international missionary council in 1858 while in exile for his evangelical views.” Dadang (2021:30) reiterated that “This position offered him the opportunity to develop tools towards mission theology and theological education contextually, at a global scene. It was in 1972 that Shoki Coe coined the term contextualization when he and Subnivean Aharon submitted their report, “ministry in context.” Shoki Coe and Subnivean Aharon were directors of theological Education Fund.

Fleming (1980: xi) noted “Theological education fund encouraged contextualization in the areas of missiology, theological approach, educational method, and educational structure.” After, a companion term inculturation emerged in the literature in 1974, became a deeper, more dynamic, and more adequate terms to describe what theology and missiology are about in context of witnessing Christ today. Inculturation is not limited to theology only. It is put to use in contextualizing. Schineller (1990:6) noted, “In the final analysis, therefore, inculturation refers to the correct way of living and sharing one’s Christian faith in a particular context.” Inculturation is discussed along important historical terms in contextualization.

Historical Terms in Contextualization

This reflection is intended to show concepts and similar theories to the understanding of contextualization. It has been discussed that the term contextualization was introduced in the 1970s in a publication of theological educators’ (ministry in context). Woodberry (1996:110) opined “The term was explained as the capacity to respond meaningfully to the gospel within the framework of one’s own situation.” Gilliland (2000:225) noted “Because the study of contextualization centers on the understanding of the relationship between the gospel, church and human contexts, there is the need to explore concepts that are in relationship to anthropology and cross-cultural communication that had been in use prior to the consideration and use of contextualization that are now used for its study.” Pocock (2005:325) alleged “Every society of the world has gifts of contextualized thinking to provide the universal church, and the church benefits from each contribution.” Yet, as important as it is, I observed over the years, contextualization is not understood by all missiologists and theologians in the same way. This is why discussing the history of significant terms in relation to contextualization set the stage for contextualizing as it is known today. The terms are: accommodation, adaptation, indigenization, inculturation, and incarnation.

Accommodation

Accommodation referred to cleaning the rituals, practices and forms of Christian practice to fit a local context. Otto (2010:326) alleged “The primary goal of accommodation as traditionally express was the planting of a local church as an extension of the church universal.” Historically, the term accommodation was originated from the missionary practice of early Catholic Church through which they referred to a series of strategic experiences to use indigenous terms to share the Christian faith. Niebuhr (2001: 45,83,116,149) opined that

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“Culture comprise language, habits, ideas, beliefs, customs, social organization, inherited artefacts, technical processes and values.” In Niebuhr (2001:145) spectrum of “Christ against culture,” it gives a posture that envisions the church’s primary identity as resisting cultural accommodation. This may be illustrated in *Things Fall Apart*, the author, Chinua Achebe described Reverend Smith as a missionary who used force and violence and had no tolerance for the customs of the people of Umuofia. Smit was an example of a missionary whose approach was simply non- accommodative as compared to his predecessor, Mr. Brown. This picture a church in “exile” as a sub-customary movement in the midst of a fallen world.

The other spectrum Niebuhr (2001:83), “Christ of culture,” is a significance of an uncritical accommodation concerning the relationship between the gospel and customs. It is a picture of the church at the center of blind cultural adaptation. Those who hold this view do not have a feel of any tension between the church and the world. Niebuhr (2001:116) discussed another position which is “Christ above culture” that seeks to avoid both uncritical accommodation of customs and total rejection of any custom. In contrast to this, there are those who fail to see how sin has permeated human institutions and so reject “Christ against culture” for finding it hard to close the gap between Christ and custom. Those in this group favor a synthesis approach in which the gospel elevates and validates customs that are in harmony with Scriptural norms and they reject customs that are antithetical to the gospel. Thus, accommodation in context of mission practice is in line with adaptation. The next historical term is adaptation.

Adaptation

Adaptation means to adapt some forms of the receiving customs and leave those that are regarded as impediments to the spread of the gospel. This means to accept people from different, ethnic groups, backgrounds with the view of allowing the gospel to change and shape their lives. It has the idea of reexplaining the Christian message and theological ideas and practices so they can be understood in a local context different from the communicator’s own context. It means to communicate the gospel message in context of the recipient and still maintain the Biblical truth and standard of the Bible. In missiological parlance, adaptation is the process in which a missionary undergoes cultural changes from his indigenous custom to a foreign context in order that he or she is better suited to communicate the gospel message cross-culturally.

Paul’s theological and missiological model of customary adaptation in (I Corinthians 9:19-23) provides a purposeful missiological model for the sake of the gospel. Paul called attention to unlimited willingness to leave that which is natural and comfortable, learn what is new and unfamiliar, and do all of this without violating the Supra-cultural boundaries of Christ’s commands. Supra-cultural boundaries refer to the aspects of the Christian faith that are, non-negotiable, unbending and unchanging. They include among others, the facts that man is born sinful, bearing the adamic nature (Romans 3:23; 5:12) and Jesus is the only divine and human offer for the remission of humanity’s sin (Romans 3:24; Ephesians 3:23, 5:12). Therefore, there is always a limit to the extent in which people can contextualize and rightly so for the sake of Christ. Thus, indigenization is inevitable in contextualizing the gospel.

Indigenization

Pocock (2005:327) stated “Indigenization was coined in the mid-1800s in Protestant mission circles to express the idea that a church must be local within its own context. In its broadest sense, indigenization is a term describing the translatability of the universal Christian faith into forms and symbols of particular cultures of the world. Terry (2000:483) opined,

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“Indigenous” comes from biology and indicates a plant or animal native to an area.” Scott Moreau (2000: 638) stated “Indigenization describes translatability of the universal Christian faith into forms and symbols of the particular customs of the world.” Missiologists adopted the word and used it to refer to churches that reflect the local distinctives of their ethno-linguistic group. The missionary effort to establish indigenous churches is an effort to plant churches that fit naturally into their environment and to avoid planting churches that replicate foreign patterns. MacDonald (1983:2) noted “Therefore, indigenous missiologists avoid planting ministries that resemble their western counterparts.” Pocock (2005:327) opined “Indigenization was most clearly exemplified by three self-principles. The focus of this principle was on planting churches that were self-propagating, self-governing, and self-financing.” From insights of scholars, indigenization refers to the ability to develop biblically based theological expressions that meet the needs of the church in its local context. Putting it in a plain language, indigenization means expressing the gospel message in the mother tongues of ethnicities of the world so that God’s Word can transform their sinful inclinations. That is why Turaki (2000: 277) rightly opined “The indigenization policy of some Christian missions led to the founding of national Churches in the 1950s in some African countries.” Therefore, one can say that the strength of indigenization unites the church as a universal, global community as well as a particular individual community that shapes its local context and its own society. From indigenization, inculturation is applied in contextualization. This is discussed for understanding and use of the word in contextualization.

Inculturation

Inculturation is the incarnation of the Christian life and Christian message in a particular local context, in such a way that transforms and rebrands it so as to bring a new creation. It translates the concept of the gospel into a new local setting and integrates the meaning, teaching, and message of the gospel into the lowest local level of a people’s tradition. Shorter (1998:3) opined “The mid-second -century document known as the Epistle to Diognetus is an apologetic treatise in the form of a letter...But this anonymous epistle seems to usher in the era of the Fathers who are called Apologists and with them the beginning of inculturation as a historical reality in the church of the Gentiles.”

Christians are not distinguished from the rest of mankind by country or language or customs. Inculturation is derived word enculturation. It means the process in which an individual learns the language of another context and assimilates its practices and values. It is a process that begins at birth in which path ways, rules, values, dreams, patterns and regulations of life are passed from generation to the next. Enculturation accords humanity to have a pattern of life that makes it possible to observe, interpret, and get involved in learning customs while growing up. Morea (2000:310) opined, “Enculturation process is important for successful contextualization of the gospel because it provides crucial insights, needed for success in the understanding of the gospel by people of a new or different culture.”

Inculturation was first used in the twentieth century to refer to the process through which local insiders who came to Christ, adapted, assimilated and applied the gospel to their own context. Connors (1997:103) noted “The inculturation of the church is the integration of the Christian experience of a local church in the context of its people, in such a way that this experience not only expresses itself in elements of the tradition, but becomes a force that animates, orients, and innovates the local context so as to create a new unity and communion, not only within the custom in question, but also as an enrichment of the church universal.” Moreau (2000 :476) opined, “inculturation goes beyond accommodation, and rather than translating the concepts of integrating gospel in a new local context setting by outsiders.

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Inculturation is insiders of integrating at the root of values, ideals, teachings and orientation of the gospel and church tradition.” Thus, inculturation is a process whereby the Christian faith becomes incarnated within a particular local context in such a way that this experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the context in question, but becomes a principle that emanates, directs and unifies the custom, transforming and remaking it so as to bring about a new creation. Last, but not the least, is incarnational missiology.

Incarnation

Incarnational mission refers to the fact that Jesus’ act of taking on humanity is a model for missionaries in their practice of adapting to local context. From biblical point of view, the incarnation itself is a form of contextualization. The Son of God condescended to pitch his tent among us to make it possible for us to be redeemed (John 1:1,14). Rheenen (1996:72,73) referred to incarnation as the model of ministry imitating that of Christ, “who became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” Incarnational evangelism is based on the principle of the incarnate Word. The implication on missionary practice is just as Jesus ministered during his earthly work. He took the form of a man in order to save fallen man. Contemporary missionary work ought to seek similar form of contemporary expression as Jesus did in the Jewish context. So as to do ministry meaningfully and preach the message of salvation to all people. (John 17:18; 20:21).

Therefore, in incarnation, those who witness the gospel are called to penetrate the world of unbelieving sinners, so close that they influence them while remaining clean without being smeared by their sin. It is thus important that the communication and contextualization of the gospel penetrate the receptors’ worldviews at a level deeper than just the surface, reaching the sub-conscious realm. To arrive at this, the communicator of the gospel view life and reality which is achievable through application of healthy principles of accommodation, adaptation, indigenization, inculturation, and incarnational evangelism. Thus, contextualization enables insight into social networks and associations that help humanity understand church structures and its political context. But putting this discussion in its context, contextualization is evaluated in the light of missiology and theology. Ott (2010:324) affirmed “Contextualization is interdisciplinary in approach. It is anchored in the Bible and it combines other disciplines.”

Human beings have become more critical in a postmodern world today than ever. Those in theology/missional practices have discovered how urgent the task of contextualization has become everywhere in the world, particularly in context of Africa. Contextualization is a balancing act between necessary involvement in people’s local contexts, being in the situation, and also maintaining an outside, critical perspective that is also needed. Ott (2010:266) argued that “When the gospel is presented in ways that ignore the local context, much of culture and life remain unaddressed by biblical truth.” Hiebert (1987: 105, 106) opined that “nominal responders to the gospel will accept Christianity on superficial level, but their core worldview will remain unchanged, and many of their old, unbiblical practices will continue secretly.”

Ott (2007:266) noted that “For example, new believers from animistic background may attend church on Sunday, but if their Christian faith does not tell them how they can ensure a good harvest or bear children, they may visit a local shaman to meet these needs. In these cases, syncretism develops, not because of contextualization, but from failure to contextualize.” Whiteman (1997:5) concluded that when we fail to contextualize, we run a much greater risk of establishing weak churches, whose members will turn to non-Christian syncretistic explanation, follow unbiblical lifestyles, and engage in magical rituals.”

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Biblically-based contextualization is essential if Christian faith is to take deep root in any local context. This is why evangelical reflection is based on good contextualization.

Qualities of Good Contextualizing

First, good contextualization has the right approach in biblical contextualizing. Michael and Alan (2006:84) explained that “Contextualization is when the gospel presented and response called for, offends for the right reasons and not for the wrongs ones.” Thus Pocock (2005:324) described the elements of good contextualization. Pocock outlined that First “Good contextualization is grounded in the Scripture.” Secondly, “Good contextualization is interdisciplinary in its approach to local context.” Pocock (2005:324) argued the point that “Contextualization is anchored in the Bible and it brings to bear a number of disciplines which are history, theology, anthropology, sociology, communication, psychology, economics, politics and law.” Thirdly, “Good contextualization is dynamic. Like local societies, should never be thought of as static.” Fourthly, “Good contextualization is concerned with the whole of the Christian faith.”

From my theological stand point, I am aware that contextualization is not only often applied to theological formulation or expression. Unless theologians and missiologists explore all elements of the Christian faith and how they may be indigenously expressed in a local context, there is danger of reproducing forms to fit them together with local theology. Fifthly, “Good contextualization is aware of the impact of human sinfulness on the process.” Sixthly, “Good contextualization is both propositional and existential. It is concerned with the idea and truth that are expressed timelessly.” Seventhly, “Good contextualization is a two-way process. It is not a one-way process in which people from one custom go to another to show those people how they should express their faith and live their lives.” Rather it should be two-way process in which each side contributes.

When the Gospel is presented in word and deed, and the fellowship of believers the church is organized along appropriate local patterns, then people will more likely be confronted with the offense of the Gospel, exposing their own sinfulness and the tendency toward evil, oppressive structures and behavior patterns within their custom. It could certainly be argued that the genius of the Wesleyan revival in eighteenth-century England was precisely that through preaching, music, and social organization in a society undergoing rapid and significant social and economic change, John and Wesley contextualized Christianity so well that the power of the Gospel transformed personal lives and reformed a nation. That is why Padilla (1985:93) argued that “To contextualize the gospel is so to translate it that the Lordship of Jesus Christ is not 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 local values that form the very substance of human life are evaluated. Without contextualization, the gospel will become tangential or even entirely irrelevant.”

Walls (2007:53) said it so clearly years ago in contrasting the indigenizing and the pilgrim principles, which must always strive to hold in balance. Walls (2007:53,54) noted “Along with the indigenising principle which makes his faith a place to feel at home, the Christian inherits the pilgrim principle, which whispers to him that he has no abiding city and warns him that to be faithful to Christ will put him out of step with his society; for that society never existed, in East or West, ancient time or modern, which could absorb the word of Christ painlessly into its system.” Walls (2007:54) “Jesus within Jewish culture, Paul within Hellenistic culture, take it for granted that there will be rubs and friction not from the adoption of a new culture, but from the transformation of the mind towards that of Christ.” This faith is both universal and local and therein lies a source of great tension. That is the reason why,

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when Christianity is not contextualized or is contextualized poorly, then people are offended in their local context, turned off to inquiring more about who Jesus is, or view missionaries and their small band of converts with suspicion as local misfits and aliens.

When people are offended for the wrong reason, the garment of Christianity gets stamped with the label. Made in Africa and Proud of It, and so it is easily dismissed as a foreign religion and hence irrelevant to their local contexts. When this happens, potential converts never experience the offense of the Gospel because they have first encountered the cultural offense of the missionary or Westernized Christians. This tension is addressed better by Moreau. Moreau (2000: 637) opined that mission Dei “focuses on everything God does in his task of establishing his kingdom in all its fullness in all the world.” Moreau (2000:637) reiterated “While it includes what the church does it is not limited to that, for God works both in and out of the church.” This is why Pocock (2005:323) emphasized “Christian contextualization is the process whereby Christians adapt the forms, content and praxis of the Christian faith so as to communicate it to the minds and hearts of the people with other...backgrounds.” Contextualization need not prohibit the prophetic role in mission as some fear it will.

Hiebert’s model of Critical Contextualization is a wonderful tool for applying this prophetic dimension and evaluation of Biblical contextualization. Hiebert’s model attempts to build safeguards that minimize the risks and limit the position of syncretism that might have potential betrayal of the gospel. This is because it encourages the church to engage seriously in with an examination of the host local context. This model strongly recommends a clear commitment to Biblical authority. Pocock (2009:336) agreed that “If the people do not clearly grasp the Biblical message as originally intended, they will have a distorted view of the gospel.” Mipo E. Dadang (2021:8) noted that “We must seek to understand the culture, background, and situation that prompted the text. It requires recognizing the nuances of the original language of transmission.”

A *third* function of contextualization in missional theology is to develop contextualized expressions of the Gospel so that the Gospel itself will understood in ways the universal church has neither experienced nor understood before, thus expanding our understanding of the kingdom of God. In this sense contextualization is a form of mission in reverse, where learning from other people how to be more Christian in a given context. This is an important function of contextualization in mission because it connects the particular with the universal. The challenge is creating a community that is both Christian and true to its own local heritage. Thus, every local Christian community must maintain its link with other communities in the present around the world, and with communities of the past, through an understanding of Christian tradition. Escobar (2003: 129) concluded that “The Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century was a time of intense activity in translating and spreading the Bible and the practice of the Reformers flowed from their conviction about how God gives life renewal and growth to the Church through the Bible.”

This is the reason why there is no translation model accepted and used in evangelical settings that Hiebert’s (1984:287,288,289,290,296; 1987:104,411) model. The first is exegesis of the culture, which is done by studying the local custom phenomenologically. Moreau (2001:636) noted that “A phenomenological approach is one in which missionaries temporarily suspend questions of what is right or true until they are sure they understand the phenomena.” Gratton (1983:95,112) opined that “When an issue or question arises that merits attention, the local church leaders lead the congregation in uncritically gathering and analyzing the traditional beliefs and customs associated.”

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The second step is exegesis of Scripture and the use of the hermeneutical bridge. In order to achieve result, have the local leaders guide the community in a study of the Scriptural passages in relation to the question at the moment. They are also responsible to provide a larger platform that allows the community to transmit the Biblical message into every dimension of their local context by bridging it from the text of Scripture to their setting. Dadang (2021:39) noted that “The purpose of exegesis is to dig out from a passage what it is inherently stating.”

The third step is the community’s decision regarding how to respond to the situation. There would be no tension concerning this with new Christians from West Africa because of their relational communal existence. Together, the community of new believers critically evaluate its beliefs and practices in the light of new Biblical understanding and make decisions based on newly discovered truth. Hence, Paul’s model of critical contextualization suggests that the community of new believers: (i) Help keep any old belief or practice because it is not against Biblical norms. (ii) They should reject the belief or practice as unbiblical. (iii) They can modify the belief or practice to give it a specific Christian meaning through appropriate rituals or symbols.

Fourth and lastly, is to develop a new contextualized practice. Pocock (2005:337) noted that “In this step, the leaders help the faith community arrange the practiced and beliefs they have chosen into a ritual that expresses the meaning of the event.” This method can apply to almost every situation encountered. But the focus is not on developing a new theological system yet. Rather, it is on helping people deal theologically and practically with issues of the moment. Escobar (2003:133) concluded with a counsel that “With the existence of new, young, thriving churches that possessed the Bible in their own language, the scene was set for the rise of vigorous, fresh theological debate for a dialogue between the old and new Christian churches.” J Terry (2000:483) opined that “The missionary effort to plant churches that fit naturally into their environment and to avoid planting churches that replicate Western patterns.” That is why inculturation is not limited to theology only. It is put to use in contextualizing. Schineller (1990:6) noted, “In the final analysis, therefore, inculturation refers to the correct way of living and sharing one’s Christian faith in a particular context.” Gomez (2010:174) argued that “Salvation addresses the individual’s social, economic and political concerns in addition to spiritual dimension.”

For example, a friend of mine in a school that was about to introduce a doctor of philosophy program in intercultural studies complained that such a program was not needed. His reasoning was that non-Western church leaders who would be attracted to the program would be people who already understood their tradition and context. He expressed, “what could they possibly learn from a doctor of philosophy. in intercultural studies that they did not already know because they were born in a non-Western context?” What they really need, he argued, is a doctor of philosophy in systematic theology and biblical studies so that they can return to their countries and teach and preach the truth which to him meant his particular denominational theological system. My friend’s thoughts went in line with what Jenkins (2002:8) wrote that “The theological coloring of the most successful new churches reminds us once more of massive gap in most Western listings of the major trends of the past century.” But little does my colleague realize that until non-Western Christians learn how to exegete their own local context as well as they exegete the biblical text, no number of doctors of philosophy students trained in standard Western theological and biblical studies will automatically enable and encourage church leaders to plant and grow indigenous, contextualized, churches.

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Escobar (2003:133) concurred that “It seems that just as the possibility of posing the kinds of questions that Western theology had never raised because the subject of controversy.” This is why there usually certain elements of oppositions in contextualization when international graduates with theology or missiological disciplines returned to their home countries with adapted Western culture. Escobar (2003:133) affirmed that “The young churches needed to be able to respond to the pastoral questions that arose in their context for the penetration of their cultures with the gospel.” Although we can see the obvious need for contextualization, the actual practice of it is not easy. Blinded by our own ethnocentrism and ecclesiastical hegemony, we find it is very difficult to cultivate the art of listening and learning from those different from ourselves. But in a spirit of humility this is a fundamental requirement for contextualization.

The challenge that contextualization brings to us is, how do Christians carry out the Great Commission and live out the Great Commandment in a world of ethnic diversity with a Gospel that is both truly Christian in content and significant in form? The function of contextualization in mission theology leaves my readers with the following challenging reflections: *First*, in the Old Testament, Athyal (1997:9) opined “The Old Testament prophets in the Old Testament times also received God’s messages and communicated them in contextually, appropriate fashion to the people of God.” *First*, contextualization changes and transforms the context which is the prophetic challenge.

Contextualization expands our understanding of the Gospel because users now see the Gospel through a different cultural lens this is the hermeneutic challenge. *Second*, the New Testament itself is a contextualized document. Pocock (2005:333) explained “For example, Matthew was composed for a Jewish audience. John for an audience familiar with Greek categories of thought and Luke/Acts for a Gentile named Theophilus.” Indeed, contextual issues lived out in the lives of New Testament characters. That is why contextualization models that prioritize the pole of Scripture are typically called translation models. They take the Bible as normative and the role of the contextualization is to translated the message of the Bible so that it can fit indigenously in a new setting.

Pocock (2005:335) alleged “The bulk of evangelical models are translation models which is expected given that evangelicals see Scripture as the Foundation of God’s message for all humankind. Contemporary translation contextualizers pay careful attention to context but primarily so that the message is adequately conveyed.” *Third*, contextualization changes the missionaries because they will not be the same once they have become part of the body of Christ in a context different from their own this is the *personal challenge*. *Fourth*, in this discussion and practice of contextualization, theologians, missiologists and mission Practioners are to take their cues from the incarnation. In the same way that Jesus offered himself and dwelt among us, witnesses to the faith should be willing to do likewise as they enter another local context with the Gospel. Incarnational evangelism is the model for contextualization. Jesus is the only God-Man set so that human beings can understand him in their own local contexts.

Conclusion

In sum up of this discussion, Christian faith from historical understanding has endured longer than the greatest empires and had more influence than the physical sword. The Scriptural text still shape lives when explained and presented in every local context of people. This is set out in Hebrews 4:12 which says, “For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow, it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart,” (NIV). When the gospel is presented within

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peoples' local contexts and in their own mother tongue language, it can penetrate joints and down into the marrow of the bones, spiritually speaking. And when it cuts deep and enters the depths of human heart, it has capacity to judge not just the thoughts but also the motives attitudes and intentions to live rightly with God. This discussion therefore, shows that a major reason for the success is applying the Biblical basis for contextualization which might not be exhausted or ended until the eschaton takes place.

Recommendation

Understanding the above reflective theological and missiological concepts within the framework of contextualization and applying them in context of Africa and others in the world, can enable anyone administer the gospel message and theologize effectively to the people groups concerned, in a manner that fits their local contexts and shows sensitivity to their local language. The lesson learned from this work shows that the complexities associated with the use of these concepts exposed the socio-cultural and religious contexts of people groups require a painstaking commitment to being clear on the basis of biblical norms that are nonnegotiable and meaningful in communicating the gospel while also avoiding extremities that veer off into pits of syncretism. Therefore, in order, to sustain Biblical method of contextualization from generation to generation yet to come, critical contextualization is the solution for every generation.

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