

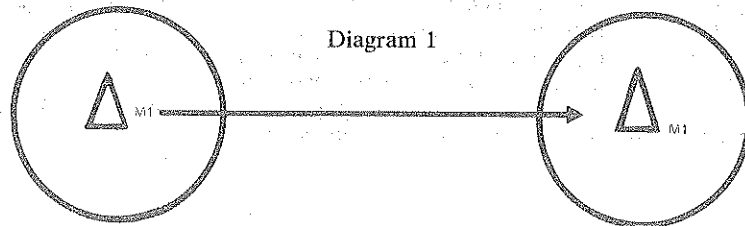
THE GOSPEL, CONTEXTUALIZATION AND SYNCRETISM REPORT

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The overarching concern to the communication of the Gospel to every person in our generation must seriously take into account the clothing of the Gospel in meaningful terms for the hearer and the adequate response of the hearer, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, that will take into account both his day-to-day ministry and his life-style. In this attempt to communicate meaningfully, there is an inherent danger of syncretism that must be faced; but fear of it should not distract the evangelist and theologian from rooting their message.

In many minds there exists an ideal model of communication, illustrated in diagram 1, where the once and for all message, clothed in the culture of the Hebrews and Jews, is communicated unchanged into a new culture, taking on the forms of such a culture, but the essential core remaining unchanged.



In the real world, however, the ideal model breaks down and diagram 2 better illustrates the communication process. God communicates both by act and word his message — the revealed Word — through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit within the language and culture of the Hebrew and Jew. Jesus Christ, the central focus of the revelation, took on flesh as a human being — a Jew. This message was communicated through the Greek and Roman world to the West; but in the process, the essential core takes an additional substance, which make the lines around the central core fuzzy. This message two, is then clothed in the culture of the West. Examples of this can be best illustrated from the hellenization process, whereby ideas such as substance were incorporated into the trinitarian definitions, or where the concepts of soul and body almost became the basic presentation in evangelism. These concepts were hellenistic and not biblical. The West becomes the carrier, which in turn clothes the message with its own culture and communicates the message to the "receiving people." The essential core, however, is somewhat changed by the presentation of the carrier, and so we may speak of message three. In the core there are elements of the original Hebrew, Greek and Western cultures. While this process occurs, there are basic elements of the Gospel — elements that may well have been retained throughout.

Having stated all this, it should be emphasized that what ensures the final communication of the Gospel from the early Church to the entire world is the constant illumination by the Holy Spirit, so that blind eyes can see, stony hearts are turned to flesh and can respond. This process, however, is not linear, but as illustrated in the model, is triangular, allowing the receiving people to turn directly to the Scripture under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to search the original message for themselves and in turn rediscover elements of the Gospel lost in the transmission by the carrier. If a truly submissive attitude exists in the carrier, he is willing to drop out of the process and allow the Lord to be sovereign in that missiological context.

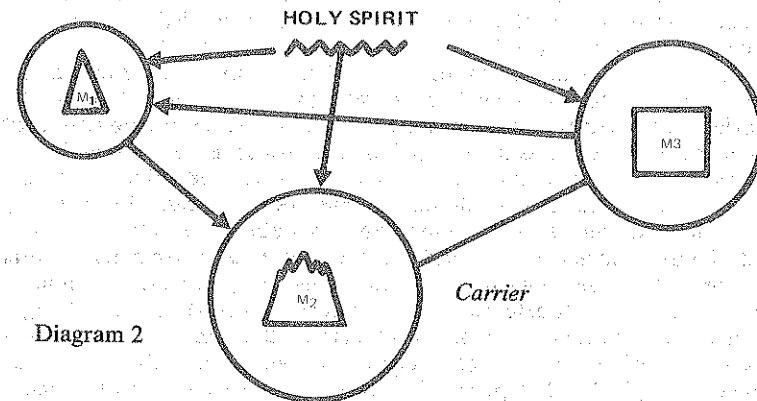


Diagram 2

Thereafter, several crucial questions surfaced:

1. The Gospel

- What are the key biblical principles of hermeneutics that will help us identify clearly and objectively the Gospel core?
- What criteria can I use to isolate these elements which I call the Gospel core from other biblical elements?
- What is the Gospel? Is there an unchangeable core?

2. Contextualization

- How do we define contextualization? How do we isolate it from indigenization?
- Does contextualization take in more than the physical expressions of the culture, e.g., musical instruments, liturgical clothings; or does it include thought forms as well?
- What are the criteria or biblical guidelines we should observe to contextualize the Gospel message in a healthy way to produce a growing church loyal to God and the evangelization of the world?
- Are contextualization and syncretism the same thing on a continuum, or are they two different things?
- Should each cultural zone have its own theology?
- Who should undertake the task of contextualization?

3. Syncretism

a. How do we define syncretism? In what ways can we differentiate it from a contextualized message?

b. How does syncretism arise?

c. What guidelines can we lay down to avoid syncretism, e.g., in translation?

d. Are there different types of syncretism? What are they?

e. Is there a similarity between the syncretism found in the USA and that in the Third World?

f. Is there a time when syncretism can be good (e.g., Christmas in the West)? What is wrong with syncretism?

g. What should be our attitude to those who intentionally syncretize, or to those who are involved in a syncretistic process unconscious to themselves?

It was recognized from the start that all the discussion should be framed in the missiological context of the evangelization of the world. Further, it was recognized that due to the severe limitation of time many of the questions listed above would have to remain unanswered. And, that while the discussion would be initiated in the area of contextualization, all three areas were basically interlocking.

Contextualization — In attempting to define, the following four definitions surfaced: the identification of the Gospel from its cultural clothing; the communication of the same in pertinent, meaningful cultural forms, both external (e.g., liturgical garments) but also thought forms (e.g., time-space dimensions, etc.); the communication that spoke to the "real issues and needs of the person and his society; the response made by that person in cultural and societal context under the guidance of the Holy Spirit should be done with meaning and integrity. In no way should demands be placed on the person that would dehumanize him or destroy his identity as a person in his culture; as a consequence of his response, he should live an integral Christian life in obedience to the Lord, expressed in cultural forms that are meaningful to him and his community; this life should be expressed in the local community of saints as they together face their call to missions.

We may summarize this statement by identifying the two sides of the coin in this definition: meaningful communication in forms that are real to the person, and his full response to the Lord in repentance and obedience of faith that affects his whole life-style, his attitudes, and his values, etc.

In the discussion to bring out guidelines or criteria in the contextualizing process, two models were studied: one from Bali presented by Dr. Munstra, and a linguistic model by Dr. Loewen. As a result, the following tentative suggestions were made:

1. In the biblical message there is both form and meaning; as we see in I Peter 1:13. In attempting to give a new form, the communicator must ensure that the true meaning is being conveyed. It may contradict the essence of the meaning and so confuse the hearer and destroy the communication. In giving a new form to "Gird up the loins," the meaning found must be fully understood and effectively

communicated in a form meaningful to the receiver.

2. In some cases the form may not have a deep value and can be easily exchanged without the loss of the original meaning; but in some other cases, the form may have a historical value, (e.g., the lamb). The message is essentially tied up with the form and so the form will have to be carried over to the receiver culture. An example of this is the Cross. Here a crass translation has to be undertaken.

3. In a particular message, the types of words must be identified, e.g., "the dead bury the dead." The first dead is not the same as the second. The former has a "teaching" value which contains within it a theological idea, while the latter speaks of the "happening" dead. It is not always easy to separate those words, symbols, analogies, that contain within them the theological idea from a mere description of visible reality.

4. The form that is adopted in the new context must in no way contradict the biblical message.

5. In attempting to contextualize, the focus must not only be on the words, but also in the total message. An attempt to identify the pieces of meaning in the message and their relationship must be made before contextualizing a particular section. The overarching message of pieces of meaning will and must hold in place a particular part of that message.

We may summarize these brief guidelines by underscoring the necessity of knowing the receptor's world view and thought forms. What are they? What are his space-time dimensions? His social structures? His authority patterns? His socio-economic dimensions of class and economy? What are his dimensions of relationships? In this dimension of contextualization there must be a constant concern to bring our "communication theologizing" under the judgment of the Scriptures, so that an effective proclamation of the Gospel under the illumination of the Holy Spirit may ensue. There must be a zeal and a zest in the proclamation, which is accompanied by a fear and trembling in the Holy Spirit.

Syncretism

While there was no final agreement on a definition of syncretism, various elements were brought to light. Syncretism might be said to occur when critical and *basic elements* of the Gospel are lost in the process of contextualization and are replaced by religious elements from the receiving culture; there is a synthesis with this partial Gospel. In some cases syncretism reaches such proportions that a totally new "gospel" appears.

It was noted that there were several stages and factors that could cause syncretism; these are:

a. A conscious and deliberate mixing of the message, in a desire to identify with the people.

b. There is a semi-conscious attempt when the message is partial. The speaker has not fully grasped the Gospel message.

c. Generally the syncretist processes round the world tend to be unconscious to the communicator as in the following cases:

- (i) When the speaker gives an unanchored message — a topical message without anchoring it in the Scriptures.
- (ii) When the receptor hears the message on the basis of his own presuppositions.
- (iii) When the receptor must fall back on an indigenous model for expressing his new life in Christ Jesus.
- (iv) When a gradual cultural change leads to a major change of values which is subtle and unconscious to the person living in that culture, as has occurred with much of Western Christianity facing secularism.

It was natural in the discussion to constantly resurface the basic question, "What is the Gospel and how can we find it?" While no final conclusion was reached, Dr. John H. Yoder helpfully presented the following seven hermeneutical guidelines which take the student of the Scriptures down the layers to find the Gospel core. These are as follows:

- a. The linguistic layer. A study of words in Scriptures when the two languages are in the same world. A transliteration of the Word can occur through the use of simple lexicographic aids.
- b. The quasi-linguistic layer, where a transliteration cannot occur. An interpretation of an idea in a particular historical point of time must be made. An understanding of the particular historical background is critical.
- c. Linguistic level, when the two languages are in different worlds, so that all referents differ.
- d. Linguistic level, when the two languages have different basic logics, such as in the cases of the Hebrew and the English. Some of the basic ingredients of the Hebrew thought patterns are not found in the English.
- e. Cultural level (e.g., what does the head covering of I Cor. 2 mean?).
- f. Ideological. This is the filter that each student of the Scriptures has into his self-consciousness — his world view that imposes itself on his grasp of the biblical message. This is best exemplified by showing how Bultmann has intentionally placed his world view as a filter for the understanding of the biblical message.
- g. Existential level — what is the meaningfulness of the Word for a specific subject?

In conclusion, the methodology that must guide both the communication of the Gospel and the theologizing is the missiological concern that the "whole world hear his voice."

HOW TO EVALUATE CULTURAL PRACTICES BY BIBLICAL STANDARDS IN MAINTAINING CULTURAL IDENTITY IN AFRICA

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"To you who were spiritually dead all the time you drifted along on the stream of this world's ideas of living, and obeyed its unseen ruler (who is still operating in those who do not respond to the truth of God) to you Christ has given life! We all lived like that in the past, and followed the impulses of our evil nature being in fact under the wrath of God by nature, like everyone else" (Eph. 2:1-3, J.B. Phillips).

These words of Paul to the Ephesians should help us in thinking about cultural practices, past or present. Paul, a Jew, liberated by the Lord Jesus Christ, is unafraid in applying the grace of God and his salvation to himself as well as the Ephesians, both Jews and Gentiles. For him the criterion of judging any idea of living is whether it is from God's grace, from God's love in Christ or from the ruler of this world and those still under his control. In union with Christ, Paul is freed from applying the criterion of Judaism to applying only that one, valid for all time, the grace of God in Jesus Christ. We can do no better than follow his example, since we too now belong to the same Lord Jesus Christ as he did and we live in union with him.

During the period of colonialism, much of African culture in all its forms was subjected to extreme pressures of subjection and despised because of the more vigorous and technically advanced forms of the colonizing Western culture, backed by the political power dominant at that time in any particular area. Even in the church there was generally an attitude of looking down on African culture.

With the coming of independence, there has been a strong reaction to all this, and the political liberation forces have played a great part in reasserting African culture in its various forms. For example, African traditional dances and other forms of artistic expression have now been given their rightful place in public entertainment. African handicrafts are now displayed all over the world.

But in church life several generations have grown up largely cut off from traditional forms of worship and the only ways they know are adopted Western models. Educated young people, for example, who are gifted in music will compose tunes for the guitar rather than for drums and flutes or other traditional instruments with which they have lost touch. And yet, what they produce is original and peculiarly their own. Must they go back to drums and other rattles to be African?

Their non-Christian contemporaries produce jazz and other musical forms for secular entertainment and no one grumbles that such music