

10 CONTEXTUALIZING THE GOSPEL TODAY



You ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation.

REV 5:9

The gospel is a rich and compelling song capable of being sung in many variations and in different keys. Any attempt to reduce the gospel to a set of prefabricated formulations that can be carried about and unpacked for all situations runs contrary to both the spirit of the New Testament and the nature of the Christian mission. Furthermore, I have tried to show that the New Testament writings do more than give us a finished theological product. They also model for us a process of doing theology in context, of engaging their cultures and offering their audiences a fresh and fitting articulation of the good news. While we must recognize the distinctive and authoritative character of New Testament theologizing as the expression of divine revelation, the church today is called to the same essential theological task. The contemporary church must therefore be shaped not only by what the New Testament *says* (the message), but also by what it *does* (the *process* of doing theology). This does not mean that we can imitate the contextualizing activity of the New Testament apostles and theologians in a direct cookie-cutter fashion. They articulated the good news in specific historical and sociocultural circumstances that are quite different from our own. Rather, the New Testament precedents function for us primarily in an analogous and exemplary sense. I am convinced that such biblical resources are vital for our time. This final chapter will seek to build on what we have learned from our study of New Testament patterns of contextualization as a whole and apply those insights to the church's theological task in the early twenty-first century. First, I will reflect on how Scripture models for us the need to give diverse theological expression to the one gospel story, as well as to provide constraints and limits to theological innovation. I will then ask what resources the New Tes-

tament might offer us for addressing such complex issues as globalization, post-modernity, and how the gospel engages our cultural worlds. Finally, I will consider the critical role of the church as the agent for incarnating the gospel within a host of challenging contexts today.

SINGING THE STORY IN DIVERSE KEYS

There is a delightful diversity to the New Testament. All of its writings in one way or another bear witness to the transforming story of God's self-giving love, revealed above all in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But that gospel is too pregnant with meaning to be confined to a single set of terms or images, or to one way of telling the story. The four Gospels give us four different versions of the story, each with its own theological interpretation of the gospel narrative for a target audience. The book of Acts narrates how that decisive story continues to be retold and reappropriated as it crosses new cultural and social barriers. The rest of the New Testament writings interpret and expand the gospel story by drawing out its theological and ethical implications for different audiences and communities of believers. The New Testament writers articulate the good news in distinctive ways, with their own styles, literary genres, vocabularies, perspectives and persuasive strategies. Even a single author such as Paul is capable of tailoring his theological reflection to the circumstances and pastoral needs of particular churches, so that in each case it becomes a word on target for his audience.

Although this book has concentrated on representative writings rather than the New Testament as a whole, I believe the same pattern of contextualizing the gospel could also be demonstrated in the remaining books. When we listen to the New Testament witness to Christ, what we hear is not a theological monotone but a chorus of different voices, or, as David Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen put it, "Holy Spirit-inspired 'contextualizations.'"¹ These allow the one gospel to be expressed and applied in a variety of ways, using language, images and ideas that make sense to the audience. This pattern of context-sensitive theologizing legitimates—even mandates—appropriate theological diversity in our own time. The multitextured gospel story must be told and lived out in flexible forms as it engages new contexts. Otherwise, it will never-truly be understood or embodied.

To be sure, contextualization always involves a risk. When theologians in the New Testament like Paul and John incarnated the gospel for people in the Helle-

¹David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1989), p. 236.

nistic world, they sometimes co-opted "dangerous new language."² Terms like "mystery" (*mysterion*), "transformation" (*metamorphōsis*) or "word" (*logos*) had long-standing associations with Greek religion and philosophy; they carried the potential of being confused with their pagan meanings. What is more, the process of doing theology in the early church was at times a messy business. Groups of Christians disagreed over a whole variety of matters, such as circumcision or sacrificial food or whether or not to be a vegetarian, resulting in competing interpretations of the gospel and its ramifications. There is still a real risk that attempts at doing contextual theology will result in something other than a genuine representation of the gospel. Indeed, it might be "safer" to resist diversity altogether—to simply memorize and recycle specific formulations of Christian doctrine that were developed for another time and place. We might even be tempted to think that our tried and true ways of telling the story are timeless expressions of the "pure" gospel. But we would only be fooling ourselves. All theology is *contextual* theology, from the creeds of the early church to the modern "Four Spiritual Laws." All theologizing is done from a particular location and perspective whether we are conscious of it or not. Contextualized theology is not just desirable; it is the only way theology can be done. This insight ought to give us pause that, whatever rich gifts the church has received from a particular historical expression of theology (for instance, Martin Luther's understanding of "justification by faith," or John Wesley's insights into sanctification, or liberation theology's concern for socioeconomic justice), we cannot simply import these interpretations of Scripture into a new cultural setting without considering how they might need to be recontextualized.

We have much to learn from the ways that Matthew, Luke and Paul appropriated concepts and images from their world in order to shape their audiences. Some of their language was biblical and traditional, which they recast for new circumstances. Other images were creatively drawn from everyday realities in their cultural world. Both forms of appropriation are needed today. First, the New Testament writers' theological reflections, as Scripture, continue to carry foundational significance for our own theologizing. Certain metaphors and ideas, however, may speak more clearly than others to a particular setting. Thus, the Synoptic Gospels' image of Jesus as Exorcist and the emphasis on Christ's victory over the powers in Colossians and Ephesians will be especially relevant among traditionally animistic peoples, for whom the issue of freedom from evil spiritual forces is of paramount concern. On the other hand, a biblical metaphor like rec-

²Brian D. McLaren, "The Method, the Message, and the Ongoing Story," in *The Church in Emerging Culture: Five Perspectives*, ed. Leonard Sweet (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2003), p. 209.

onciliation, which focuses on the restoring of broken relationships, connects with the experience of a wide range of people. It speaks with a clarion voice to the increasingly postmodern European context in which I now live, where people have a deep longing for community and authentic relationships. At the same time, Joel Green and Mark Baker wisely caution against "the temptation simply to read [the New Testament writers'] words and metaphors into our contemporary world."³ Sacrificial language, for example, evoked deep religious associations for ancient Mediterraneans, as it still does in many cultures today. But that same language may need careful translation for many contemporary Westerners, for whom an act of "sacrifice" could mean giving up desserts to lose weight.⁴

Second, as Christians seek a language in which to communicate the saving story to their specific contexts, fresh images need to be found that can relate the gospel to life as people know it. African theologian P. O. Iroegbu relates one example:

Among the Gbaya people of Cameroon and Central African Republic, there is a tree: the *Soreb*. . . . It is not extraordinary in size or appearance. But it is so in the reality that it portrays, and in the symbols it represents. . . . The *Soreb* cools hot situations: murder, conflicts and wars. When somebody is killed, willfully or accidentally, if the perpetrator party wants to prevent the offended party from savagely avenging, they will plant a branch of *Soreb* in between their border. On seeing that, the offended party will await a serious, quick and effective reconciliation. . . . Jesus becomes . . . *Jesus Soreb-ga-mo-kee*. Jesus our *soreb-cool-thing*. Like the *Soreb*, Jesus is for making new villages, new families, new alliances and friendships. Like the *Soreb* also, Jesus becomes an antidote against death, suffering, disease and eternal loss. Above all, the *Soreb* creates the lieu [place] for life-together, for dialogue, for communication, for communion. It is a tree of life.⁵

Here the symbol of the *Soreb* tree is highly evocative for a specific cultural group, but its explanation of the person and ministry of Jesus coheres well with the biblical witness to Christ. Such efforts to locate apt forms of telling the good

³Joel B. Green and Mark D. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Contexts* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000), p. 111.

⁴In some cases, in order for the power of biblical images to be grasped we may need to find "dynamic analogies," in which we "discern dynamic equivalents in our own cultural context to that which is addressed in the text." (Brian J. Walsh and Sylvia C. Keesmaat, *Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire* [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004], p. 136). See pp. 137-39 for one creative attempt of this kind of reading of Colossians 2:8-3:4 for a postmodern context.

⁵P. O. Iroegbu, *Appropriate Ecclesiology: Through Narrative Theology to an African Church* (Owerri, Nigeria: International Universities Press, 1996), p. 96. Cited in Clemens Sedmak, *Doing Local Theology: A Guide for Artisans of a New Humanity* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2002), p. 149.

news from the everyday lives of people can be reenacted for each culture, each generational group and each linguistic community across the globe.

The dynamic and context-specific way that Jesus and the apostles do theology, then, should encourage us that diversity in the way we think about and live out the gospel is not a problem to be avoided but a gift to the church. Such diversities "are a stimulus and aid disclosing more deeply the inexhaustible mystery and power of the gospel."⁶ When we hear the gospel being sung in its varied harmonies, we can discern more fully the richness of the song. Yet, theological diversity also raises important questions: first, is there not a danger of Christian theology splintering into a thousand different pieces? What holds these variegated theological reflections together? Second, how do we know which contextual expressions are authentic and which have distorted the gospel? The next two sections will explore how the New Testament witness helps us to address such concerns.

CONTEXTUALIZING A COHERENT STORY

Our study has shown that although there are many diverse voices, the gospel itself provides coherence to the New Testament witness. Fundamentally the gospel is news of what has happened. It proclaims what God *has done* in Jesus' life and ministry, death and resurrection, and what God *will do* to bring Jesus' saving mission to a consummation. This Christ-centered story of God's intervention in human history is told explicitly in the Gospels and is assumed, interpreted and expanded in the other New Testament writings. We find the one coherent story running through the Gospel passion narratives, Paul's bedrock confession that Christ died for our sins and was raised according to the Scriptures (1 Cor 15:3-4), Peter's witness to the Roman God-fearer Cornelius (Acts 10:34-43) and Revelation's song in praise of the Lamb who was slain to redeem the nations (Rev 5:9). This gospel story becomes the lens through which the New Testament writers view all other stories, whether the story of Israel, with which it stands in continuity, or the story of humankind in the world, or the ongoing stories of Christians and the church. The gospel of Christ that Scripture proclaims is *the* defining and norming story.

The gospel, of course, is more than *just* a story. Paul's understanding of the gospel, for instance, embraced foundational convictions about the gospel's saving effects "for us": justification by faith, reconciliation, sanctification, liberation from sin, the gift of the Spirit, and so forth. But such notions all flow out of the central narrative of God's gracious and loving act of salvation in Christ and un-

fold its meaning for humanity and the cosmos. Furthermore, the New Testament response to false teaching and sinful behavior makes it clear that there are certain nonnegotiables that all Christians must believe and live out. When Christians confess that there is one sovereign God and that Jesus Christ is Lord (1 Cor 8:4-6; Phil 2:10-11; Rev 1:8; 4:8; 11:17), this excludes all other loyalties and deposes all idols. Again, however, such gospel truths are inseparable from the narrative of how this sovereign God has exalted Jesus as Lord by raising him from the dead (Rom 10:9; Phil 2:9-11).

Just as the gospel story offers coherence to the various stories and theological reflections in the New Testament, which take shape in both narrative and non-narrative forms, so it grounds and forms our theologizing within our particular cultural worlds today. This has several important implications for the ongoing task of contextualization. First, it means we should not seek the heart of the gospel that we are trying to contextualize in any core of doctrines or in a set of timeless propositions that can be abstracted from Scripture. The danger is that when it comes to actually defining a gospel core (and what is *not* the core), it is hard to avoid remaking the gospel in line with our own cultural and doctrinal biases. The gospel announces in the first place a living story, not a cluster of abstract theological ideas.

Second, focusing on the narrative of what God has done allows us to engage the gospel in a way that shapes our own contexts and stories. Christians affirm that the biblical story of God's saving purpose that climaxes in the Christ event is truly a metanarrative, that is, a story that gives meaning to all of reality and the whole of human history. As Richard Bauckham explains, "If the Bible offers a metanarrative, a story of all stories, then we should be able to place our own stories within that grand narrative and find our own perception and experience of the world transformed by the connexion."⁷ Instead of standing outside of the story in order to simply analyze it and then apply it to our context, the gospel invites us to become a part of the biblical story. Brian McClaren keenly observes that entering into God's story in Christ will lead people to abandon competing narratives—stories of idolatry and oppression, greed and corruption, power and domination, despair and self-destruction.⁸

Third, a grasp of the coherent biblical narrative points the way to finding unity in the midst of our theological diversity. Although people in various life circumstances talk about and embody their commitment to Christ in multiplex

⁶"On Intercultural Hermeneutics: Report of a WCC Consultation, Jerusalem, 5-12 December 1995," *IRM* 85 (1996): 244.

⁷Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2003), p. 12.

⁸McClaren, "Method," p. 206.

ways, they all take part in the larger story of God's loving purpose for the world in Jesus Christ. Just as the biblical writings, with all of their differences in form and content, participate in telling the single overarching story, so that defining story continually draws us back to the shared understanding of our faith. The story is bigger than any particular cultural expression of it.

Fourth, understanding that the gospel proclaims a defining story encourages a way of doing theology in our diverse settings. Stories are basic to human experience, and cultures throughout the world are teeming with stories and proverbs, myths and metaphors that help people understand and order their world. Christians in Asia, Africa, Oceania and Latin America have long been using stories as cultural bridges to link the larger biblical story with their own life worlds. This kind of narrative theology, which is modeled by Jesus and occurs throughout Scripture, is especially important for communicating Christian truth in predominantly oral cultures like those of the New Testament world and of much of the world's South today.

DISCERNING THE LIMITS

The second question raised by the need to enunciate the gospel in diverse ways for different circumstances has to do with the matter of authenticity. Where do we draw the line of demarcation between genuine contextualization and inappropriate syncretism that compromises the "truth of the gospel" (Gal 2:5, 14)? How do we recognize when the story being told is no longer the gospel story? It is not always easy to discern when theological innovation is healthy and when it is not. As Richard Cunningham affirms, "Our challenge is always to remain open to a new word from God or a new breeze of the Holy Spirit without being enticed by every siren's song that catches our ears. Throughout the universal church, we must learn how to say 'no' as well as how to say 'yes' to local theologies and how to achieve the wisdom to know when to do which."⁹

So when do we "just say no"? Once again, the process of doing theology we observe in the New Testament provides important precedents. At times the apostolic church says "no" to the *unwillingness* to contextualize the gospel. In Acts, we see the people of God struggling to keep pace with what the Spirit of God is doing, as reactionary elements of the church resist Spirit-led interpretations of the gospel for the Gentiles (Acts 10—11; 15). Paul reserves some of his harshest rhetoric for the Jewish Christian teachers in Galatia who were trying to force an ethnocentric version of Christianity on Gentile believers, which in-

⁹Richard B. Cunningham, "Theologizing in a Global Context: Changing Contours," *RevExp* 94 (1997): 359.

cluded practicing circumcision and kosher food laws. He calls this constriction of the faith a "different gospel," a perversion of the true gospel of Christ (Gal 1:6-9). In modern times, missionaries and mission organizations have sometimes imposed an imported brand of theology and Christian behavior on younger churches in a well-meaning effort to prevent heresy or syncretism. But short-circuiting the development of a contextualized theology has often had the opposite effect. When the Christian message appears to be irrelevant to peoples' lives and worldview questions, they will likely turn elsewhere for answers, especially to traditional religious beliefs and practices.

At the same time, we have seen that the New Testament writers are profoundly concerned over cultural accommodation and syncretistic compromises of the gospel's integrity. To recall just one example, Paul shows in 1 Corinthians 15 that the Corinthians' defective thinking about the future, which is anchored in the dominant cultural worldview, is not only incompatible with the gospel Paul delivered to them (1 Cor 15:3-5) but places their very salvation at stake (1 Cor 15:2, 14-19, 58). Throughout the New Testament, the authenticity of the gospel is of highest priority, and it should be for us as well. In general, however, the New Testament writers do not seem to be interested in precisely defining the boundaries of what is genuine theology and what is not. They offer no definitive articulation of the gospel to use as a template and no single attempt to summarize the gospel story as a whole. Rather, the dynamic theological activity modeled in Scripture reveals both a range of acceptable contextualizations and parameters that bind all theological reflection to the central gospel proclamation of what God has done in Christ. Bauckham points out that we can recognize limits to theological diversity when we compare the Fourth Gospel, for instance, with the Gnostic gospels from Nag Hammadi: "The Gospel of John tells recognizably the same story as the Synoptics, whereas the gnostic gospels do not."¹⁰ Likewise, the Jerusalem Council affirms the understanding that all peoples are saved on the basis of grace through faith without distinction, but it rejects the alternate interpretation of the gospel by the Pharisaic group that would require "add-ons" like circumcision for membership in the people of God.

At least four criteria seem to emerge from the New Testament witness that can guide us as we seek to recognize both the possibilities and the parameters of contextualization.¹¹ First, the biblical witness to what God has done in Jesus Christ is fundamental. Paul, we have seen, affirms that there is *one* gospel,

¹⁰Richard Bauckham, "Reading Scripture as a Coherent Story," in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, ed. Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2003), p. 43.

¹¹Cf. Paul G. Hiebert, "Critical Contextualization," *IBMR* 11 (1987): 110-11.

which has been attested by Scripture and given to himself and the other apostles (e.g., 1 Cor 15:3-5, 11; Gal 1:6-9; 2). All theologizing in the New Testament church had to be tested against that revealed gospel. "The gospel," insists Lesslie Newbigin, "is not an empty form into which everyone is free to pour his or her own content."¹² Theological reflection that is context or culture-driven rather than rooted in Scripture runs a high risk of moving beyond the limits of acceptable diversity. For example, when Sri Lankan theologian S. Wesley Ariarajah tries to contextualize the gospel within the Hindu and Buddhist contexts of South Asia, he consciously plays down the biblical witness to the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. In light of the present context of religious pluralism, Ariarajah advocates a rethinking of New Testament Christology and a movement toward a more "theocentric" theology.¹³ If, however, we acknowledge that a biblical witness such as the letter to the Colossians, also addressed to a pluralistic context, has any normative significance as God's Word for us, then the uniqueness and supremacy of Christ are simply off the negotiating table. Whenever the voice of the interpreter or the contemporary context drowns out the voice of Christ as revealed in Scripture, that interpretation moves "out of bounds."

Second, our theologizing must be guided by the Spirit, who leads the community into all truth (Jn 16:13). The book of Acts makes it clear that "the Holy Spirit was active both to push the early Christian community beyond its structures and commitments . . . and to close the door to certain innovations in the mission."¹⁴ The church's explanation of the theological process in Acts 15 is that "it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (Acts 15:28). The people of God must continually be open to the check of the Spirit on their theological reflection.

Third, Christians in different local settings must be willing to test theirologies in light of the wider Christian community. This includes a dialogue with both the historic tradition of the church through the ages and with today's global community of Christians in other cultures and life circumstances. We saw in the example of the Jerusalem Council that one part of the church was able to help another to recognize areas in which their thinking or practice had strayed from its roots in Scripture and the gospel of Christ. One question that must be asked regarding the legitimacy of any contextual theology or reading of Scripture is, does it ring true for the church in settings different than my own? This kind of intercultural critique must always be done in a spirit of love, humility and mu-

¹²Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1989), pp. 152-53.

¹³S. Wesley Ariarajah, *The Bible and People of Other Faiths* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1992), e.g., pp. 68-69.

¹⁴Green and Baker, *Recovering the Scandal*, p. 219.

tual edification. Too often the charge of "syncretism" has been wielded by the traditionally powerful churches in the West as an instrument of theological control over younger churches. We must be willing to recognize the weeds of syncretism that are growing in our own garden as well as that of our neighbor.

A fourth test of authentic contextualization is that it bears fruit in the furtherance of the Christian mission and the transformation of individuals and the community. Throughout the New Testament, both theological innovation and the critique of unacceptable thinking and behavior have a common goal—that the people of God might be increasingly conformed to the pattern of the Crucified in their attitudes, thinking, and living. Orlando Costas grasps this well:

I submit that the ultimate test of any theological discourse is not erudite precision but transformative power. It is a question of whether or not theology can articulate the faith in a way that it is not only intellectually sound but spiritually energizing, and therefore, capable of leading the people of God to be transformed in their way of life and to commit themselves to God's mission in the world.¹⁵

This criterion will protect our theological efforts from being self-serving or manipulative. Authentic reflection on the gospel for our particular context will lead us deeper into a life of self-giving service and a more faithful worship of God within that context. Any theology, however "relevant," that does not help to shape God's people in their shared life of discipleship and their participation in God's kingdom mission is unworthy of the gospel.

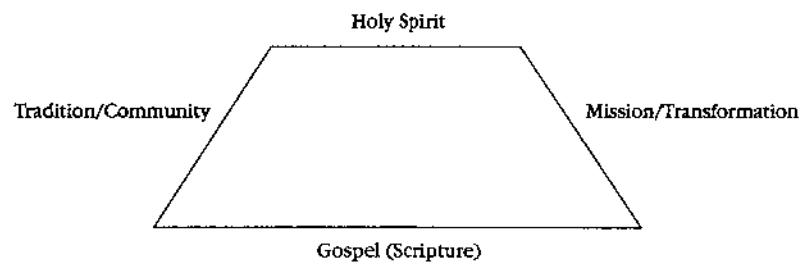


Figure 10.1. Tests of authentic contextualization

We can picture these criteria for authentic contextualization as a kind of trapezoid (figure 10.1). The gospel and Scripture are foundational but never isolated from the other tests of the Spirit's guidance, tradition and the wider Christian community, and the capacity to promote transformation in the people of God.

¹⁵Orlando E. Costas, "Evangelical Theology in the Two Thirds World," *TSF Bull* 9 (1985): 12.

ENGAGING OUR CULTURES

We cannot talk about contextualization in the first century or today without considering how the gospel engages the human cultures in which it comes to life. What light does our study shed on the task of *inculturating* the gospel? First, we cannot know the gospel apart from culture, either in Scripture or in our present world. Newbigin is quite right that "[e]very statement of the gospel in words is conditioned by the culture of which those words are a part, and every style of life that claims to embody the truth of the gospel is a culturally conditioned style of life. There can never be a culture-free gospel."¹⁶ This means that when the gospel enters a particular culture, it is never simply a matter of adapting a "pure" gospel to that setting. Indeed, sometimes the task of contextualization has been described as a process of decoding a "supracultural" message from its original biblical cultural forms and then reclothing it in a new cultural garb without loss of meaning.¹⁷ The problem comes, however, when we try to isolate and identify this decontextualized gospel essence. A supracultural gospel may be a theoretical possibility, but we have no access to it. Cultural forms and supracultural content cannot be easily separated like oil and water. When New Testament writers like Paul or Mark or Luke articulated the gospel message for communities of Gentile believers, they told a particular story about what God had done in history through Jesus Christ, a story that was thoroughly immersed in Jewish culture and the tradition of Israel. But they told that story in ways that would make sense within the cultural world of their audiences.

Second, the relationship between the gospel and culture is complex and multidimensional. The gospel is both at home in every culture and alien to every culture. The New Testament bears witness to the gospel engaging its cultural and social world at a variety of levels. Different circumstances require different approaches (compare, e.g., Rom 13 and Rev 13). The kinds of cultural engagement we discover in the New Testament can serve as precedents for how Christians respond to various facets of a given culture today.

In Acts 17, for example, we find a striking example of Paul the evangelist respecting and listening to Athenian culture by drawing upon its language, im-

ages, and literary forms and concepts in order to tell the gospel story in a way that would make an impact on his audience. Christians must still look for ways to utilize the internal resources of a culture in order to connect the biblical story to particular cultural stories. To cite one case, Martin Goldsmith describes how the method of "parabolic preaching" used by Jesus can help to communicate fundamental theological ideas to Islamic peoples. It does so in a nonconfrontational and dialogical way that is appropriate to the culture. Here Goldsmith retells Jesus' story of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Lk 18:9-14):

Two men went up to the mosque to pray. One was a good Muslim who knew all the right actions for his ritual lustrations; his Arabic was perfect . . . and he was accomplished in the words and movements of the *salat*. He therefore went confidently to the centre of the mosque and prayed, but his mind wandered to think about the pretty girl next door! . . . The second man was a real sinner who had led a rather corrupt life (easily described!) and had not prayed for many years. He could not remember how to perform the lustrations and therefore just gave his face and hands a quick wash. He also could not remember in detail how to perform the *salat*, so he was shy to enter the mosque. On doing so, however, he went diffidently behind a pillar, squatted down and began to pray in his own words: "O God, forgive me; I have made a complete mess of my life, but I long to follow and serve you . . ." Local people recognize the characters of both men as typical of the hearts of many around them and they make suitable comments! I then ask the Biblical question as to which man's prayer God approved of.¹⁸

Although many Muslims may not get the point of the story immediately upon hearing it (similar to Jesus' hearers), this approach provides a point of contact with people in a traditional story-telling culture and can spur further reflection on what truly pleases God.

At other times, however, the gospel says "no" to cultural stories, ideas and behaviors. The gospel judges as well as affirms. We have seen many occasions where Jesus or a New Testament writer takes a countercultural stance. New Testament reflection on the practice of eating food offered to idols is but one notable example. Eating idol food during religious or social occasions at the temple was normal cultural behavior in the Roman world. Both Revelation and 1 Corinthians, however, perceive this activity as an unacceptable form of idolatry. It seems clear that Christians in the churches in question sharply disagreed over how to relate to the surrounding culture in this matter. We still need the Spirit's wisdom in order to discern when to affirm the culture and when to confront it, when to participate and when to withdraw. This is no simple task. I recall a sem-

¹⁸Martin Goldsmith, "Parabolic Preaching in the Context of Islam," *EvRT* 15 (1991): 275-76.

¹⁶Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (London: SPCK, 1986), p. 4.

¹⁷This is the "translation" or "transculturation" model of contextualization popularized by anthropologist Charles H. Kraft (*Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* [Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1979]). For a critique of Kraft's approach to the relationship between the gospel and culture, see my "The Third Horizon: A Wesleyan Contribution to the Contextualization Debate," *WestJ* 30 (1995): 151-54.

inary student from Korea struggling over the relationship of the gospel to Korean traditional religion. "Shamanism is part of my culture, my heritage," she agonized. "How can I be Korean and reject my heritage?" Ultimately, she came to believe that there were dimensions to her cultural heritage that were incompatible with her new commitment to Christ. With disarming candor, Nigerian theologian Teresa Okure singles out aspects of her own culture that need to be challenged by the gospel, including the practice of witchcraft and sorcery, the cult of secret societies, endemic bribery and corruption, and the cultural oppression of women.¹⁹ When the gospel is truly contextualized, it will oppose oppressive and sinful elements in *every* culture.

Perhaps the most characteristic and suggestive response to the gospel's encounter with first-century Mediterranean culture is that of *transforming engagement*. New Testament writers sought to shape and reshape not just their readers, but dimensions of their cultural and social worlds as well. We have seen, for instance, how both Paul and Luke engaged the cultural conventions of benefaction and patronage in order to transform them. While living in the Philippines, I encountered a modern-day parallel in the Filipino cultural value of *utang na loob* (debt of gratitude). Negatively, *utang na loob* can take the form of an enslaving compulsion, such as when a father demands his son's exclusive loyalty, affection and service for raising him and sending him to school, or when the poor are caught in a perpetual snare of obligation to reelect a corrupt politician in return for services rendered to the community. But the gospel can liberate this same cultural value from the chains of a manipulative, unequal relationship. When this happens, *utang na loob* becomes an expression of the Christian virtues of gratitude, loyalty, and willingness to care for someone in need.²⁰

Jesus and the New Testament writers model a delicate dance between formulating the gospel in terms that make sense in their cultural worlds and at the same time calling those worlds into question in order to re-form them. Today it is possible to lose this balance in either direction. On the one hand, when we become too much at home in our culture we can begin "to transform the gospel in light of cultural values instead of the reverse."²¹ The gospel of health and prosperity that is often preached in North American pulpits and propagated over

the global media is an especially blatant example of such an uncritical accommodation to culture; it is syncretism dressed in a Sunday suit. On the other hand, failing to tell and live out the sacred story in forms that both reflect and speak to a given culture will trivialize the good news and cause it to be perceived as irrelevant. The task of every Christian interpreter and communicator is to enable the Word of God, which is incarnated within particular cultural worlds in Scripture, to speak once again in ways that are both relevant to our own cultures and faithful to the biblical message.²²

Third, although to this point we have been talking about the gospel's engagement of specific cultures, the New Testament also offers some perspectives for inculcating the gospel and embodying God's mission in multicultural settings today. The first-century Roman world was a multicolored mosaic featuring interacting cultures, complex societies and religious pluralism. The churches Paul established were heterogeneous communities which embraced Jew and Greek, barbarian and Scythian, male and female, slave and free (Gal 3:28; Col 3:11). Paul himself, although retaining his primary identity as a "Hebrew of Hebrews," had a rich and multifaceted cultural background, which equipped him to become "all things to all people" for the sake of the gospel. What is more, many of the New Testament writings—the Gospels of Mark and Luke, Acts, Paul's letters, 1 Peter and Revelation, to name some—are themselves intercultural documents rooted in a Jewish heritage but retelling this "Jewish" story for predominantly non-Jewish audiences.

The mission of the church to which the New Testament bears witness, then, is not simply a monocultural or even a classic "crosscultural" mission, in the sense of moving directly from one culture into another target culture. It is an *intercultural* mission, which requires enormous creativity, flexibility, and Spirit-inspired wisdom. This has obvious implications for contextualizing the gospel within our increasingly multicultural and pluralistic ministry settings today. On the one hand, the New Testament writings show respect for the particular cultural identities of believers. As C. Norman Kraus notes, the gospel does not recruit believers to a particular cultural (Jewish) form of Christianity, but it allows them to do theology and live out their faith within their own culture.²³ At the same time, however, the gospel relativizes all cultures and demolishes the old cultural lines of division and ethnocentrism in favor of a common identity "in Christ" (Acts 10:34-35; Gal 3:26-28; Col 3:11). This is part of the transforming na-

¹⁹Teresa Okure, "Inculturation: Biblical/theological Bases," in *32 Articles Evaluating Inculturation of Christianity in Africa*, ed. Teresa Okure and P. van Thiel et al. (Eldoret, Kenya: Gaba Publications, 1990), p. 78.

²⁰See Evelyn Miranda-Feliciano, *Filipino Values and Our Christian Faith* (Manila: OMF Literature, 1990), pp. 69-75.

²¹Henry H. Knight III, *A Future for Truth: Evangelical Theology in a Postmodern World* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), p. 165.

²²See Green and Baker, *Recovering the Scandal*, pp. 210-11.

²³C. Norman Kraus, *An Intrusive Gospel? Christian Mission in the Postmodern World* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998), p. 114.

ture of the gospel. In the many-cultured and multilingual setting in which I currently teach and worship, we are learning (often painfully) that the gospel does not erase our differences. But it repeatedly challenges us to lay aside our particular cultural preferences and our ethnocentric perspectives in order to "maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph 4:3).

"GLOBALIZING" THE GOSPEL

How do we contextualize the gospel in a globalized world? Although "globalization" has become something of a buzzword, its impact on contemporary life is indisputable. Due to the barrage of Western media influences and a globalized world economy, throughout the planet people eat McDonald's fast food, wear name-brand gym shoes, watch Hollywood (and Bollywood) blockbusters and listen to the same rock and rap music. In a positive sense, globalization means an increasing interconnectedness of all cultures and parts of the world, along with a greater awareness of one another. But it also has a seamy side. Today vast numbers of people—mostly in the South—feel excluded from the benefits of global capitalism and are suspicious of the creeping encroachment of an emerging world culture. The movement toward globalization has been accompanied by a countertrend toward a renewal of tribalism and nationalism, as smaller ethnic and cultural communities assert their autonomy and try to clutch on to their particular cultural and religious identities. Bridges and barriers stand side by side.

How does this tension between the global and the local, the universal and the particular, affect our efforts to contextualize the gospel? In the first place, contextualization resists the oppressive dimension of globalization; it affirms the necessity of doing theology in a particular, local context. As a result, many Christians in the South and in groups outside the mainstream within the North have questioned the dominance of classic Western theologies, with their heavy dependence on Greek metaphysics and Enlightenment rationality.²⁴ The voices of the traditionally marginalized, the "vernacular" theologies of powerless local Christian communities, need to be heard.²⁵

When the church's faith is genuinely contextual, the shame and stigma imposed on oppressed people begins to be lifted. They find a new dignity as they see not only their own lives but also their culture in God's redeeming light. When faith is contextual, there is a recognition that the gospel speaks to Christians in their

²⁴See Cunningham, "Theologizing in a Global Context," p. 357.

²⁵On vernacular theologies, see William A. Dymess, *Invitation to Cross-Cultural Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1992).

language, connects with their symbols, addresses their needs and awakens their creative energies.²⁶

In some ways, the current phenomenon of globalization recalls the dream of ancient Babel: to create unity and power through one language and one culture (Gen 11:1-4). But that arrogant vision was reversed on the day of Pentecost, when local languages and identities were affirmed within the context of the new unified community of faith (Acts 2:1-13).²⁷ The biblical story upholds the theological and cultural integrity of all peoples.

Second, however, in the shadows of contextualization lurks the danger of what Max L. Stackhouse calls "contextualism"—a belief that none of our theological reflections have the ability to transcend a particular context.²⁸ In recent decades we have seen a deluge of contextual theologies emerging from different quarters and cultures of the global Christian community: liberation, feminist, black, African, *Minjung*, Hispanic, Chinese, *Mujerista* theologies, and many more.²⁹ Although these diverse voices offer many positive theological insights, there is a risk that in trying to sing the gospel in multiple variations we will forget the song we share. The result will be theological dissonance rather than harmony. "Contextualizing theology," insists Richard B. Cunningham, "that does not exercise self-criticism and submit itself to the judgment of the gospel can so celebrate the variety of contextualizations that theology slips into relativism, in which any contextual theology is as good as any other."³⁰

In contrast to either a homogenizing globalization on the one hand or an atomizing relativism on the other, Scripture models a dynamic interaction between the local and the global which has important implications for our time. The biblical story is both particular and universal. God is revealed in the particular stories of Abraham and Israel and Jesus of Nazareth with the purpose of bringing about the universal realization of the kingdom of God in all creation.³¹ Jesus "became flesh and lived among us" (Jn 1:14) in a specific local culture. Yet

²⁶"On Intercultural Hermeneutics," p. 245.

²⁷Johannes Nissen, "Mission and Globalization in a New Testament Perspective," in *For All People: Global Theologies in Contexts*, ed. E. M. W. Pedersen, H. Lam and P. Lodberg (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 42.

²⁸Max L. Stackhouse, *Apologia: Contextualization, Globalization, and Mission in Theological Education* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1988), p. 10.

²⁹For a helpful overview of the variety of theological developments in a global context, see Virginia Fabella and R. S. Sngirharajah, ed., *Dictionary of Third World Theologies* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2000). See also John Parrott, ed., *An Introduction to Third World Theologies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

³⁰Cunningham, "Theologizing in a Global Context," p. 359.

³¹Bauckham, *Bible and Mission*, p. 13.

as the eternal Word, he has a universal significance that transcends all cultures. The Jesus movement, which begins with a handful of messianic Jews in Palestine, is driven by the Spirit to cross one cultural boundary after another and to witness to the good news to the ends of the earth. This global mission anticipates the heavenly gathering of saints from all the world's diverse cultures, tribes and nations in the end (Rev 5:9; 7:9). Furthermore, the New Testament writings themselves illustrate the mediation between the specific and the universal. Each saying, story, letter, sermon or apocalyptic vision participates in the larger metanarrative of God's dealings with the world without sacrificing its own particularity or contextual focus.³²

Our efforts at contextualization today must likewise embrace the movement from the local to the global. Does this mean that our goal is to produce a single "global theology," one way of articulating the gospel to be applied everywhere without adaptation? Certainly not. Yet if we partake in a common story that is bigger than our local stories, then we must learn to think not just in contextual, but also *transcontextual* categories. This involves allowing our various contextual insights and interpretations of the gospel to contribute toward a richer, fuller, more adequate grasp of the Word of God and its implications for people. Local groups of Christians must envision themselves as part of a global interpretive community. Churches throughout the world must take on the roles of both teacher and learner, interacting with the church in its cultural multiplicity as well as the tradition of the church throughout its history. C. René Padilla is surely right that

every culture makes possible a certain approach to the gospel that brings to light certain of its aspects that in other cultures may remain less visible or even hidden. Seen from this perspective, the same cultural differences that hinder intercultural communications turn out to be an asset to the understanding of the many-sided wisdom of God.³³

At the same time, Christians from another setting will often be able to see my theological weaknesses and cultural blind spots more clearly than I can from within my own culture.

This kind of intercultural conversation has roots in the early church. Johannes Nissen observes that "[t]he Book of Acts as a whole is the story of the gospel being unfolded, opened up, its beauty increasingly revealed as it is appropriated

and reappropriated by culture after culture."³⁴ The encounter between the kosher Peter and the Gentile "outsider" Cornelius transformed both of their theological visions (Acts 10—11). In the Jerusalem Council, the church functioned as an intercultural hermeneutical community (Acts 15). The outcome was a new and fuller understanding of the Spirit's work. Paul's interaction with the pagan cultural and religious world in Athens (Acts 17) undoubtedly deepened his own grasp of the gospel and how to proclaim it.

When we consider today's theological landscape, particularly Christians in the North must be willing listen to the voices of Jesus' disciples from the world's South and from minority communities—voices that have historically been muffled or marginalized. Three factors make this intercultural exchange all the more imperative. First, the New Testament invites us to be open to the voices of outsiders. In Luke's Gospel, for example, Jesus repeatedly recognizes the spiritual insight of peripheral people like Samaritans (Lk 17:11-19), Gentiles (Lk 7:1-10), women (Lk 7:36-50) and even a criminal hanging with Jesus on a cross (Lk 23:39-43).³⁵

Second, we are currently witnessing a massive shift in the center of gravity of global Christianity from the North to the South. The majority of followers of Jesus Christ now live south of the equator. Christian historian Philip Jenkins estimates that by the year 2050 the proportion of Christians who are non-Latino whites will have fallen to perhaps one in five or less.³⁶ If we consider sheer demographics alone, the theological contributions of Third World churches can no longer be ignored.

Third, since Christians in the South and in minority or immigrant communities in the North often are a part of cultures that are closer to those of the biblical world, they are in a position to offer needed contributions and critiques to the global Christian conversation. For example, Christians from Africa might help to correct North American interpretations of Scripture that reflect an unbiblical individualism. Believers from Asian shame-based cultures might have a clearer insight into the meaning of the cross as God's ultimate identification with human shame, leading to freedom from shame's fear and exclusion. Such perspectives on Christ's atonement can help to balance more individualistic and legal understandings like the penal substitution theory, which has played a dominant role

³²Nissen, "Mission and Globalization," p. 42.

³³See Joel B. Green, "The Practice of Reading the New Testament," in *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation*, ed. Joel B. Green (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995), pp. 418-19.

³⁴Philip Jenkins, "After the Next Christendom," *IBMR* 28 (2004): 20. Cf. idem, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

³²See Knight, *Future for Truth*, p. 101.

³³C. René Padilla, *Mission Between the Times: Essays on the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1985), p. 89.

in Western theology.³⁷ I have personally gained much insight into the role of genealogies in Scripture—largely ignored in my own interpretive community—from Christians who live in cultures that have a deeper regard for the role of kinship and ancestral relations. Likewise, I only came to realize how incomplete was my own understanding of the New Testament passages dealing with persecution while teaching a class on the Gospels for Middle Eastern pastors, for some of whom persecution was a fact of everyday life. At the same time, the Western theological tradition and the wisdom of the church down through the ages has much to teach Christians throughout the world. Western traditions of spirituality and holiness, for example, might expose a one-sided emphasis on sociopolitical and material concerns in some Third World liberation theologies.

All local theologizing, then, must be done in the context of the global church. Doing transcontextual theology takes an attitude of humility and what John Wesley called a “catholic spirit.”³⁸ We need to recognize that all of our theologies or readings of Scripture are partial and imperfect understandings of God and his revelation in Christ (1 Cor 13:12). Are we willing to allow our cherished interpretations and theologies to be challenged by the insights of fellow Christians in Pune or Perth or Prague? Not long ago I witnessed the possibilities of this kind of intercultural listening and sharing at a global theology conference of my own denomination held in Guatemala City. For the first time, theologians, educators, pastors, students and denominational leaders from the confessional community throughout the world were able to sit down together, not simply to listen to presentations from “experts,” but to carry on intercultural conversations about concerns of mission and theology that we shared. In the discussion group of which I was a part, each participant brought to the table the unique insights she or he had gained through a particular cultural, life and church experience. We tried to lay aside issues of distribution of power and past histories, which often cloud such conversations between Christians from different cultures and socioeconomic backgrounds. Repeatedly I felt checked and challenged by others’ experiences and theological insights. For each of us,

³⁷See Green and Baker, *Recovering the Scandal*, pp. 153-70; see also C. Norman Kraus, *Jesus Christ Our Lord: Christology from a Disciples’ Perspective* (Scottsdale, Penn.: Herald, 1990), esp. chapters 12-13.

³⁸John Wesley, “Sermon XXXIX: Catholic Spirit,” in N. Burwash, *Wesley’s Doctrinal Standards: I. The Sermons* (Salem, Ohio: Schmul; repr. 1967), pp. 379-89. For an analysis of Wesley’s understanding of the “catholic spirit,” see Randy L. Maddox, “Opinion, Religion and ‘Catholic Spirit’: John Wesley on Theological Integrity,” *AsTJ* 47 (1992): 63-87. Maddox concludes that the mature Wesley steered a middle course between doctrinal indifference and theological pluralism on the one hand and a dogmatic zeal that fails to recognize the fallibility of human perceptions of theological truth on the other.

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this intercultural exchange resulted in Spirit-graced enrichment and a deeper grasp of the gospel in its mult textured expression. “After this experience,” reflected one group member from Latin America, “I feel *liberated*.” When churches in various cultural and historical settings are willing to truly listen to one another, not only will their own grasp of the gospel be strengthened, but the international Christian community as a whole will come to a deeper, more *transcontextual* understanding of the faith.

THE GOSPEL IN A POSTMODERN KEY

The context for articulating and embodying the gospel, particularly in Western societies, is in the throes of a seismic shift. It is not only more global; it is also increasingly postmodern. One of the profound challenges facing the church in the current generation is how to come to grips with the transition from a twentieth-century world dominated by modernism, with its faith in radical individualism, rational and objective knowledge, and scientific progress, to a postmodern world that questions the entire modern project. Many churches in historic “Christendom” have begun to recognize that, just as missionaries contextualize the gospel in order for it to be meaningful in a new cultural situation, so the Christian message must be transposed into a new key for a postmodern world. Especially for Christians like myself who have been shaped by the culture of modernity and are accustomed to articulating the Christian faith in ways that fit that mentality, this will take no less than a form of intercultural communication. If we are going to meaningfully address the emerging culture, we must be willing to intentionally release our theology from its enculturation for a modern worldview rooted in the Enlightenment and recontextualize it for a profoundly different situation.³⁹ According to Robert Webber, this new culture “is shaped by globalization; historical nostalgia; spiritual hunger; mystery; oral, visual and interactive forms of communication; the longing for community; and the fear of terrorism.”⁴⁰ What is more, it is a world of constant change and multiple perspectives, a world in which “difference” is awarded celebrity status. As Brian Walsh and Sylvia Keesmat describe it, “Lacking any unifying story, rational justifications and normative anchors, postmodern culture fills the boredom of our time with a carnival of worldview options and consumer-directed faiths.”⁴¹ Faced with this reality, the church must learn to speak a new language for a new postmodern world.

³⁹See Robert E. Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the Challenges of the New World* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2002), p. 17.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, p. 242.

⁴¹Walsh and Keesmat, *Colossians Remixed*, p. 24.

What will it mean to proclaim and live out the gospel in a postmodern context? Once again, under the Spirit's guidance, we must enable the gospel to come to life within postmodern categories while at the same time challenging them. One of the discoveries I have made in the course of this study is that New Testament examples of doing theology and evangelism resonate in some profound ways with the realities of a postmodern world. In many ways, the new world of postmodernity in North America and Europe, with its high level of biblical illiteracy, its greater openness to spirituality, and its religious and philosophical pluralism, is much closer to the world in which the apostles communicated the gospel than was the twentieth-century world. The postmodern challenge affords churches a fresh opportunity to revisit New Testament texts and to learn from how the first Christian witnesses and theologians engaged a pluralistic world. I do not have space here for a full discussion of the matter. I will therefore simply mention several potential points of contact for our attempts to contextualize the gospel for an emerging postmodern culture.⁴² Although this speaks most directly to the churches of the North, the influence of postmodern attitudes is growing in wider global contexts as well.

1. Community. In contrast to modernity's radical focus on individual autonomy, postmoderns yearn for an experience of genuine community and connectedness. A gospel for a postmodern context must recover the New Testament emphasis on individuals finding a new identity within a loving and healing community of faith. This suggests, for instance, a more corporate theology of evangelism, enacted by the entire community into which women and men are invited to participate. A gospel that is plausible to the postmodern world will be one that is "preached" by the shared life of the people of God. Genuine loving relationships will give our message a stamp of authenticity. This dovetails closely with the story told in Acts of a church whose loving embodiment of the gospel and care for one another became a compelling form of evangelism (Acts 2:43-47).

2. Story. A gospel contextualized for a postmodern world will concentrate on telling the biblical story. This is an obvious touch point between the New Testament message and postmodern thought, which recognizes that narratives

⁴²There has already been a good deal of creative and valuable theological reflection on relating the gospel to a postmodern setting. See, e.g., Webber, *Younger Evangelicals*; Knight, *Future for Truth*; Brad J. Kallenberg, *Live to Tell: Evangelism for a Postmodern Age* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos, 2002); Leonard Sweet, *Postmodern Pilgrims: First Century Passion for the 21st Century World* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2000); Bauckham, *Bible and Mission*.

give meaning and direction to our lives. It is also consistent with New Testament patterns of doing apologetics and theology. When Paul addressed the biblically illiterate Athenians (Acts 17), he did not offer rational proofs for God's existence or present the gospel as a string of logical propositions. Instead, he narrated the grand story of a God who has revealed himself to humanity in creation and, above all, in Jesus Christ. We, too, must tell this life-yielding story. But we must insist that the story we tell is not just one choice at a buffet of optional narratives. Here the gospel must confront postmodern thinking. Postmodernists like Jean-François Lyotard have rejected overarching metanarratives as being inherently oppressive and authoritarian.⁴³ Yet the grand narrative of the Bible, far from being an instrument of oppression, is a story of a compassionate God who repeatedly chooses and uplifts the lowly, a story that is centered in the humility, shame and vulnerability of the cross (1 Cor 1:18—2:3; Phil 2:6-8). A message for a postmodern culture will invite people to see the world through the biblical story and to allow that story to reshape their lives. It will also lead us to communicate the gospel through telling our own stories—with vulnerability and integrity—as witness to the experience of the compassion and transforming grace of God.

3. Imagination. Marshall McLuhan taught us that the medium and the message are inseparable,⁴⁴ and this is especially the case for communicating the gospel to a postmodern culture. In contrast to the word-and-reason-based modern world, postmodernity easily embraces more imaginative, emotive and aesthetic forms of communication. The church today must speak the language of metaphor and symbol. It must supplement verbal communication with various forms of audio, visual, and interactive media, ceremony, and the practice of the arts. It must portray the beauty and mystery of the gospel. "The story of Christ," writes Mark Filiateau "is a feast for the imagination. Why not serve it this way to those who are starving?"⁴⁵ We have seen that the New Testament supplies ample provisions for such an imaginative feast. Jesus was a wielder of metaphors and parables. Paul understood the power of the symbol of the cross. Revelation challenges our perspective on the world through apocalyptic symbols and multisensory visions. As the New Testament writers found imaginative bridges for communicating the Christian message to their world, so we

⁴³Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. G. Bennington and B. Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

⁴⁴Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974).

⁴⁵Mark Filiateau, "Make It Real: The Imagination's Role in Living Our Beliefs," *Re:generation Quarterly* 2 (1996): 23, cited in Webber, *Younger Evangelicals*, p. 69.

will need to draw on a whole variety of media and images. Dennis Haack makes the point that

Story, song, and image can be used as points of contact to explore the big issues of life without compromising the integrity of the gospel. Popular culture (TV, film, pop music), the very heart of the postmodern ethos, can become the beginning point for exploring the claims of Christ, and thus serve as the postmodern equivalent of the Athenian altar to an unknown god. . . . A postmodern apologetic needs to be essentially rooted in glory, with a greater emphasis on art, narrative, and image.⁴⁶

Contextualizing the gospel for a postmodern world will require a rekindling of the church's theological imagination.

THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH

Everything I have said in this chapter to this point assumes that for the gospel to be contextualized within our social and cultural worlds, there must be a contextualizing agent. Although we might say that the Holy Spirit is the *ultimate* agent of contextualization, the *visible* agent is the church. Wherever it happens to be situated, the church is a local, particular embodiment of the gospel story. Consequently, contextualization is inherently an *ecclesial* activity; it is done *by* the church and *for* the church. This carries several important implications for the task of incarnating the gospel.

First, biblically informed contextualization calls for *communal* hermeneutics and theologizing. We find a magnificent example of this way of doing theology in Luke's narrative of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 (cf. Acts 10—11). The whole community, including its leaders, is involved in the theological reflection that results in the reconciling of a divided church. Today doing theology and interpreting the Word of God within a particular context is not something reserved solely for academic "experts" or for church officials. It is the responsibility of the whole people of God. It is done best when a faithful community of cultural insiders can dialogue and wrestle with how the gospel intersects their world. At the same time, those with theological and biblical training, such as pastors, theological educators or missionaries, can play a key role in guiding and providing critical input to the process. In the New Testament, figures like James at the Jerusalem Council, Paul in his letters to communities

⁴⁶Dennis Haack, "The Glory of God and Human Culture: How Do We Influence Postmodern Society?" (Paper, Gospel and Society Conference, Bratislava, Slovakia, June, 1996): 7, cited in Brian McClaren, *The Church on the Other Side: Doing Ministry in the Postmodern Age* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos, 2002), p. 181.

of converts, and John in his messages to the seven churches in Asia (Rev 2—3) all served as catalytic agents who spurred the community to rethink its theological perspectives and come to a clearer understanding of the gospel for their situation.⁴⁷

Second, in the practice of ecclesial contextualization, the *unity* and *upbuilding* of the church is a primary goal. When Paul does theology in light of divisive issues like the matter of what to eat and what not to eat, he repeatedly stresses the priority of ecclesial unity and the community's responsibility to the weak. Christians are to "pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding" (Rom 14:19; cf. 14:15) and to "give no offense to Jews or to the Greeks or to the church of God" (1 Cor 10:32; cf. 8:9-13). Although the New Testament recognizes a range of acceptable diversity, theological or ethical innovations must not be allowed to fracture the church that is one body under one Lord (Eph 4:4-6; cf. 1 Cor 1:10).

Third, contextualization is also profoundly *missional*. The New Testament's example shows us that contextual evangelism, interpretation of Scripture and theologizing are essential components of the church's mission in the world. Jesus did theology in a way that was appropriate to diverse people and situations in order to advance his kingdom mission. Acts tells the story of a church whose boundary-breaking mission is linked to its willingness to tailor its ministry of the word to fit new audiences and contexts. Paul adapts his way of living out the gospel and enslaves himself to all in order to win more to Christ (1 Cor 9:19-23). He writes context-sensitive letters in fulfillment of his missionary calling in order to shape and equip churches for their ongoing mission. Contextualizing the gospel is more than a pragmatic methodology; it is part and parcel of what it means to be a missionary church.

Fourth, contextualizing the gospel not only involves the church's *telling* the story but also *embodying* the kingdom of God within its particular circumstances. If I have learned anything from the Wesleyan theological tradition in which I have been nurtured, it is that we cannot meaningfully talk about doing evangelism and theology apart from living and "loving" the faith. As Jesus "exegeted" (Jn 1:18) the compassionate heart of God when he entered our concrete world and lived among us, so the church must continually incarnate God's holy love within the specificity of our many cultures and contexts.

We must also recognize the tension in the church's relationship to the world it is called to serve. Too often, the church in the modern world, particularly in

⁴⁷C. Norman Kraus talks about those involved in intercultural mission and service ministries as "catalytic change agents" (*Intrusive Gospel?* pp. 42-44).

the West, has tried to be relevant to its culture by accommodating to its ideas and practices. Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon state the problem this way: "Alas, in leaning over to speak to the modern world, we had fallen in. We had lost the theological resources to resist, lost the resources even to see that there was something worth resisting."⁴⁸

Alternatively, the relationship of the church to its cultural world has sometimes been described by the image of "resident aliens" or of "exiles" in a foreign land.⁴⁹ There is some validity to this picture. Within the New Testament it probably comes closest to the perspective of the book of Revelation, where John addresses churches under intense pressure that must radically disengage from their dominant political and social order. Nevertheless, I do not think this is the best way of imaging the New Testament's understanding of the church's relationship to culture in general. The missional church does not seek to create an alternative culture that is external to the alien land of its cultural world. Miroslav Volf thoughtfully describes the position of the church in the world:

Christians do not come into their own social world from the outside seeking either to accommodate to their new home (like second generation immigrants would), shape it in the image of the one they have left behind (like colonizers would), or establish a little haven in the strange new world reminiscent of the old (as resident aliens would). They are not outsiders who either seek to become insiders or maintain strenuously the status of outsiders. Christians are the *insiders* who have diverted from their culture by being born again.⁵⁰

As I mentioned in chapter four, the church carries dual citizenship. It lives both "in Corinth" and "in Christ." Perhaps the picture of the church as a "mission outpost" is closer to the broader New Testament perspective.⁵¹ The church engages its culture missionally from within, speaking the language in order to be plausible but embodying a radically different set of values, from the vulnerable position of the cross.

Like the Christian communities to which the New Testament was written, churches today struggle to find the right balance between identifying with the

⁴⁸Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: A Provocative Christian Assessment of Culture and Ministry for People Who Know That Something Is Wrong* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), p. 27.

⁴⁹E.g., *ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

⁵⁰Miroslav Volf, "Soft Difference: Theological Reflections on the Relation between Church and Culture in 1 Peter," *ExAud* 10 (1994): 18-19 (emphasis Volf's).

⁵¹See Craig van Gelder, "Defining the Center—Finding the Boundaries: The Challenge of Re-visioning the Church in North America for the Twenty-first Century," in *The Church Between Gospel and Culture: The Emerging Mission in North America*, ed. George R. Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1996), p. 46.

culture and distancing from it in order to make an internal difference. This is nowhere more evident than in the debate over the so-called user-friendly mega-churches in North America, which practice needs-oriented and market-driven models of ministry. Granted, such churches score high marks for contextual relevance and have shown impressive success in reaching their target audience with the gospel message. But they must also wrestle with the question of whether they have so embraced the American cultural values of consumerism, individualism and materialism that they have become all too enmeshed with that culture. Have they maintained the *difference* of the gospel and its *countercultural* implications? The New Testament model of the church is ever mission-directed, but never market-driven.

CONCLUSION

If we are to fulfill our calling as a missional church in the twenty-first century, we must reenact the task of singing the gospel in new keys that we see modeled in the writings and stories of the New Testament. Although the modern interest in contextualization emerged out of missiological discussions, I have sought to show that the concerns of this study have a broader scope than the activity of crosscultural missionaries alone. Every church in every setting, every preacher or teacher of the Word, must consider how to articulate the gospel in ways that allow it to come to life for their particular audience. While this book has focused especially on biblical patterns of doing contextual theology, the issues it raises have clear implications for other aspects of the church's life and mission in the world—preaching, apologetics, theological education, evangelism and church growth, worship, leadership styles, organizational structures, social and political witness, and spiritual formation, among them. How, for instance, might theological education change if it were to go beyond simply mastering the content of a theological system and focus more on learning *how* the biblical writers did theology, as a model for theologizing today? Or what shape should church leadership take in a setting in which culturally accepted styles of leadership are in tension with the gospel pattern of Christ crucified? Such questions deserve further exploration.

Although the activity of reappropriating the gospel is integral to the church's identity and mission, it is not easy to do it well. There are no "five-step formulas." This is all the more reason to be mentored by the biblical writers. They show us the need for a sensitive balance in our approach. We must exercise freedom and imagination under the guidance of the Spirit as we enunciate the gospel in response to particular needs. However, our theology must also remain anchored in the one normative gospel that centers on God's loving and saving

action in Jesus Christ. This will help us to steer a middle course between resisting contextualization on the one hand and overcontextualization on the other. The theologians of the New Testament teach us as well that the gospel must shape not only the content of our theological reflection, but also the way that we carry out the task. Authentic contextualization is incarnational and cruciform. As Paul modeled himself after the self-emptying Jesus in his service of the gospel, we must do theology in an attitude of self-giving love and humble identification with others. Our communication of the gospel must be more than just relevant; it must be *real*. Christian witness that is reduced to marketing a religious product or that imposes a foreign theology on a less powerful church has little to do with the gospel of the crucified and risen One.

Contextual theology is never a finished product. We may attain clear theological understandings for a particular time and place as a result of critically reflecting on the gospel. But cultures and societies change. New questions arise. We must remain open to the need to reevaluate and reformulate our theology in light of fresh insights into Scripture and altered external circumstances. Like the book of Acts, contextualizing the gospel is an open-ended story.

Lest we become discouraged by the difficulty of the task, we would do well to heed Richard Bauckham's reminder that the church's mission "is God's work before and after it is ours. . . . God continually makes more of what we do for him than we can make of it ourselves, and God continually prevents the harm our foolishness and failures would do."⁵² The Holy Spirit, who led the New Testament church in its interpretation of Scripture and inspired fresh appropriations of the gospel for its world, continues to guide the church's mission today. All of our efforts to do context-sensitive theology have little value unless the Spirit is our source of wisdom and power. The task takes a prayerful mind and a humble heart. May faithful communities of disciples in a multitude of local settings purpose to truly listen to Scripture, to the Spirit, to Christians through the ages, and to one another, as they learn to sing the old, old story in new keys.

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⁵²Bauckham, *Bible and Mission*, pp. 31-02