

### Center Church Unpacked – Session 3

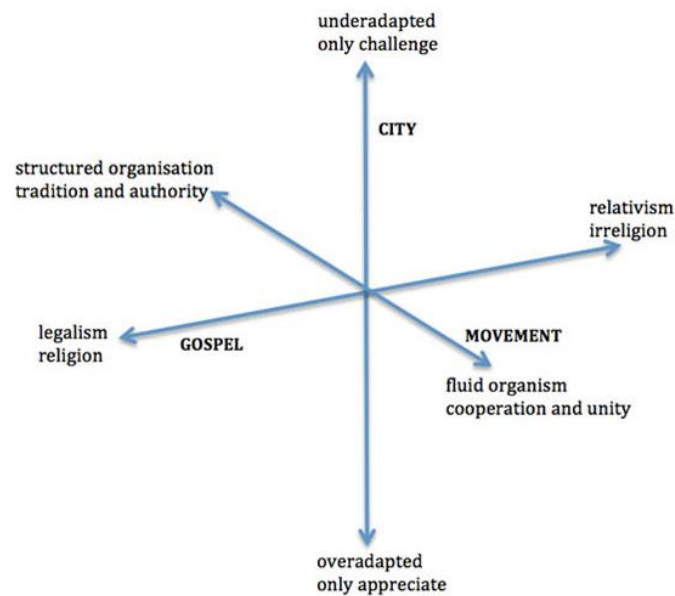
#### City: Part 3 – Gospel Contextualisation

#### A. Introduction: The three-axes of Theological Vision

Part 1: Gospel - flows from how you read the Bible

Part 2: City - flows from your reflections on culture

Part 3: Movement - flows from your understanding of tradition



#### B. Contextualization

Contextualization is not concerned to **make** the gospel message relevant to our culture but is the practice of demonstrating the timeless truth of the gospel to different people across all generations and cultures.

Paul Helm in his book, *Expository Preaching* states that contextualization is really about 'communication' that is how to present the gospel message in ways that are 'understandable or appropriate to the listener's cultural context.'

We may wish we could simply proclaim Christ, that having worked hard on the text of the Bible we can simply preach what we find. But the case for contextualization comes from recognizing that to be faithful and fruitful we can and must do more.

Tim Keller has written: *Truth should not be simply declared into a vacuum – it must be delivered as a response to the questions of particular people, and this means understanding their culture (114:2).*

### **C. Chapter 7: Intentional Contextualization**

*Contextualization is giving people the Bible's answers, which they may or may not want to hear, to questions about life that people in their particular time and place are asking, in language and forms they can comprehend, and through appeals and arguments with force they can feel, even if they reject them.*

#### **1. The danger of contextualization**

#### **2. The inevitability of contextualization**

*Contextualization is unavoidable.* We are doing it whether we recognise it or not. And if we don't then chances are we're doing it rather badly.

Maybe the reason many churches are in decline is that they have not only lost their vision but they lost their ability to connect and relate the gospel in a meaningful way to the next generation.

Unless we are intentional in our contextualisation we will be in trouble.

#### **3. The danger of not contextualizing.**

**Q. Do you think you are at a higher risk of over-contextualising or under-contextualising the gospel?**

### **D. Chapter 8: Balanced Contextualization**

#### **1. Building a bridge**

- A bridge to nowhere
  
- A bridge from nowhere

*Proper contextualization is the act of bringing sound biblical doctrine all the way over the bridge by reexpressing it in terms coherent to a particular culture. (101)*

#### **2. Two-way traffic across the bridge**

*Because of our cultural blinders, we must not only speak to the people over the bridge; we must listen to them as well. We need to listen to what they are saying and take seriously their questions, their objections to what we are saying, and their hopes and aspirations. More often than not, this interaction with a new culture shows us many things taught in the Bible — things we either missed altogether or thought unimportant, possibly even ways in which we misread the Bible through the lens of our own cultural assumptions. (101)*

#### **3. Bridge or Spiral**

*For all its benefits, the two-way bridge has limitations as a metaphor for explaining contextualization. . . evangelicals have insisted that while contextualization must be a two-way process, the final authority of the Bible must be maintained.*

**Q. Our interaction with a different culture leads us to ask the text questions we may never have asked it before and to see many things we didn't see clearly before... As a result we begin to see truths and insights in the Bible that were there all along, yet we had simply been blind to them." Have you ever experienced the benefit of interacting with another culture in this way? What blind spots has this experience revealed to you in your own understanding of the Bible and the gospel?**

### **E. Chapter 9: Biblical Contextualization**

What does *biblical* contextualization look like?

#### **1. The basis for contextualization – Romans 1&2**

Romans 1 and 2 that all human beings possess a primordial knowledge of God.

Romans 1:20 tells us that 'the reality of God's nature and our obligations to him are continuously present to us. General revelation is not just a set of innate ideas or static principles. It is the continuous and insistent pressure of God's truth on the consciousness of every human being.'

our stance toward every human culture should be one of critical enjoyment and an appropriate wariness. . . All cultures contain elements of darkness and light.

A coherent and biblical understanding of the gospel (Christians are saved but sinners); of the image of God (people are lost but indelibly reflect the nature of God); and of common grace (all people suppress the truth about God but they nonetheless "hear" and "know" it) — provides us with a nuanced understanding of culture. This gives us the basis for contextualization. (109).

#### **2. The nature of contextualization**

*Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. <sup>20</sup> To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. <sup>21</sup> To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. <sup>22</sup> To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. 1 Cor. 9:19-22 (NIV).*

a. Contextulization is an act of love. *I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible.*

b. Paul models how contextualisation is rooted in and flows out of the gospel itself.

When it comes to 'adopting a posture of generosity and other-centredness well this is how God has related to us in Christ.

#### **3. The formula for contextualization**

*Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, <sup>23</sup> but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, <sup>24</sup> but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 1 Cor. 1:22-24 (NIV).*

*It is striking, then, to see how Paul applies the gospel to confront and complete each society's baseline cultural narrative. He does this both negatively and positively. He confronts each culture for its idols, yet he positively highlights their aspirations and ultimate values. He uses the cross to challenge the intellectual hubris of the Greeks and the works-righteousness of the Jews. But he also affirms their most basic collective longings, showing that Christ alone is the true wisdom the Greeks have looked for and is the true righteousness that the Jews have sought. Paul's approach to culture, then, is neither completely confrontational nor totally affirming. (112).*

There is one unchanging gospel and yet we find that Paul adopts very different approaches to presenting and communicating this gospel as he moves from one culture to another.

It is well worth giving time to comparing and contrasting how Paul preaches Christ.

So, in **Acts 13** we meet Paul preaching to Bible-believing Jews in Pisidian Antioch. He conducts a mini-Bible overview, it's a sermon rich in Scripture, before demonstrating that Christ is the fulfilment of the Old Testament hope by citing a number of passages.

But then in the very next chapter, in Lystra, Paul is speaking to semi-literate pagan farmers. **Acts 14:15-17** he makes his appeal, not to a God revealed in the Old Testament Scriptures but the God observable through creation.

*We too are only human, like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them. <sup>16</sup>In the past, he let all nations go their own way. <sup>17</sup>Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy."*

Finally, in Acts 17, we meet Paul at the Areopagus standing before Greek intellectuals in Athens. Here Paul sets forth the Biblical worldview from creation to new creation in just 8 verses. With Jesus at the centre point of human history.

What shouldn't go unnoticed is Paul's willingness to quote two Greek philosophers. Epimenides and a Stoic Philosopher, and he takes the opportunity to build his case on their own cultural artefacts – an altar to an unknown God.

These speeches of Paul give us a strong biblical case for engaging in careful contextualisation.

In each there is;

- *an epistemological challenge. People are being told that their understanding of God and ultimate reality is wrong.*
- *a personal challenge regarding sin and a depiction of the listeners' fallen condition.*
- *a proclamation of Christ as the answer and solution to their sin.*

*They remind us that there is no universal, culture-free formulation of the gospel for everyone.*

**Q. How do Paul's approaches differ and how it helps us with the questions of contextualisation for today?**

Carson lists eight motivations to use when appealing to non-Christians to believe the gospel. I have combined and simplified his categories down to six:

When expounding a particular text, we tend to use our “pet” motivation, even though the biblical author may not. This is a failure to be fully biblical in our preaching. (115).

## **F. Chapter 10: Active Contextualization**

### **1. We need to be balanced: neither over nor under contextualised.**

Keller writes in *Center Church: Contextualisation adapts and connects to the culture, yet at the same time challenges and confronts it. If we fail to adapt to the culture or if we fail to challenge the culture – if we under-or over-contextualize – our ministry will be unfruitful because we have failed to contextualise well.*

#### **a) Entering the culture**

i) *The first task of contextualization is to immerse yourself in the questions, hopes, and beliefs of the culture so you can give a biblical, gospel-centered response to its questions. . . the most important source for learning will be the hours and hours spent in close relationships with people, listening to them carefully.*

ii) *Another main task is to discern its dominant worldviews or belief systems,*

*“A” beliefs, which are beliefs people already hold that, because of God’s common grace, roughly correspond to some parts of biblical teaching. Because of their “A” beliefs, people are predisposed to find plausible some of the Bible’s teaching (which we may call “A” doctrines). However, we will also find “B” beliefs — what may be called “defeater” beliefs — beliefs of the culture that lead listeners to find some Christian doctrines implausible or overtly offensive. (123).*

*In our gospel communication, we enter the culture by pointing people to the overlapping beliefs they can easily affirm:*

#### **b) Challenging and confronting the culture**

*Base our argument for “B” doctrines directly on the “A” doctrines. . . we need to “float” “B” doctrines on top of “A” doctrines.*

#### **c) Appealing to the listeners**

*Having entered a culture and challenged its idols, we should follow the apostle Paul in presenting Christ to our listeners as the ultimate source of what they have been seeking.*

## **G. Conclusions: Contextualisation and the local church**

*There is only one true gospel but as Paul models for us in Acts there is certainly no one, single way to express the Christian faith. So when it comes to questions of contextualisation we need to think just about everything.*

## **1. Preaching & Contextualization**

*For example in public teaching there are questions about*

1. Language: Will your style be formal or informal?
2. Time: How long will you preach for?
3. Illustration: What are culturally appropriate ideas that will connect?

We all know preachers who can't resist the opportunity to reference their favourite sporting story into any and every sermon = but perhaps it communicates more about them than the text.

A cricketing metaphor might well leave listeners confused or cold.

4. How emotional expressive should you be?
5. The manner, mode and content of preaching

Will you use notes, stand behind a lectern or pace around a stage, and so on.

Keller observes

*all gospel ministry and communication are already heavily adapted to a particular culture. So it is important to do contextualisation consciously.*

*One of the most basic mistakes ministers make is to regurgitate the methods and programs that have personally influenced them. . . Without realising it, they become method driven and program-driven rather than theologically driven. They are contextualising their ministry expressions to themselves, not to the people they want to reach.*

## **2. Growing in contextualization skills**

1. Who is in your community that you are seeking to reach?
- 2 How can you take steps to move from outside the culture to inside?
  - Do I need to watch different programs on tv?
  - Read a different newspaper?
  - Listen to a different radio station?
  - Join a sports team?
  - Join a book club?
  - Volunteer at a charity shop?

How do I become all things to all people,

3. Is there anyone who can help you in that process?
4. How will you continue to make this a priority moving forward?