

Living out the Gospel in Context: Fresh Thoughts on Contextualization of Discipleship.

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Introduction

How do we contextualize? What are the keys to contextualization? What is the text; and what are the contexts? All these questions are important, but I am particularly interested in addressing this last question, first of all, by defining three broad but interconnected contexts. However, in the process, I will also explore what is entailed in terms of content and process, in the contextualization of the gospel in discipleship. The “text” question is important. I am assuming initially that “the gospel” is the text, but at this stage I am not defining or expounding exactly what I understand comprises that text.

The “how” question is also important. We live in an age in the history of missions when we are captivated by methodology. Go into your local bookstore (Christian included) and you will find numerous books which in some way or another teach you how to do something: make money, have better sex, raise your kids, renovate your bathroom, lead a small group, or live a purpose driven life. These can be very helpful, but sometimes we might be duped into thinking that what these books contain is everything we need to know, and that if we just do what the author says, we will have a considerable measure of success.

Perhaps it is because of the nature of our upbringing and education in a modern, post-Enlightenment world where (on the one hand) reason seeks to analyze and understand the whys and wherefores of everything and anything, and then to define and classify things and processes, and identify patterns and paradigms which can be employed practically in new situations. These then are extrapolated into methodologies—three phases, five characteristics, 12 steps and so forth. On the other hand, our world tends to discard or dismiss mystery and the sacred. If you cannot prove or solve something by fact and science, it ceases to be real or lacks any practical significance. Captive to our Enlightenment-driven epistemology and praxis, we fail to dwell long in the realms of paradoxical mystery and inscrutable spirituality.

Missionaries have their own “how to” compendium of knowledge and learnable skills. Much of that is covered by the term “missiology” which is a blend of social and theological science. It has helped us understand the task we are engaged in when we take the gospel across cultural boundaries. It has examined the history of missions and sought to identify lessons we can learn from the apparent successes and failures of the past.¹ It

¹ The terms “success” and “failure” (and “measure” used earlier in this essay) now carry the baggage of the Enlightenment too, and we must use them carefully—especially when we deal with things of the Spirit.

has aided us in discerning and understanding issues and patterns of human behavior in light of both anthropology and theology. We have a better grasp of what “culture” is; we appreciate more how the gospel will spread along kinship lines; we understand better the differences between shame- and guilt-oriented cultures; and we have greater insights into worldview and worldview change which we hope will guide us to effective, transformational discipleship. Nevertheless, much mystery remains and often there is uncharted territory in our theoretical knowledge and acknowledged deficiency in our mission practice.

The Gap between Theory and Experience

One domain where this is true is contextualization. Missiological textbooks have been written and courses taught by evangelical scholars like Hiebert, Hesselgrave, Lingenfelter and others, which approach this critical issue from various angles. We can access these resources and learn the basic steps in critical contextualization² and yet missiologists like Darrell Whiteman³ and Charles Kraft will admit that there still exists a gap between theory and practice. Despite what we know, there is often a failure to contextualize effectively; and yet, on the other hand, despite our failures and inadequacies “uncontextualized” churches appear to have survived everywhere. Kraft asks, “Why have churches operating counter to our theories thrived? And why, after many years of propagating our theories, are there so few examples of contextualized churches?”⁴

Part of the answer has to do with our understanding of “church” and “church planting” and those issues need to be addressed elsewhere. Part of the answer to these questions lies perhaps in our understanding of what contextualization really is—what it seeks to accomplish. Again, part of the answer lies in the fact that contextualization (however you define it) is much more than what we envision and theorize.⁵ There is a mysterious dimension of contextualization of, and the dynamic of the gospel, which goes beyond pragmatic missiology into the realm of the Spirit of God. Moreover, the dynamic nature of the church is more dependent on the One who builds it than on the skills of those who plant and water the seed of the gospel.

Nevertheless, we are not people who live in abstract or in limbo; we are people *in context*, living out the gospel just wherever we are, and preaching “the gospel” to others in the particularity of who they are within the distinctive characteristics and constraints of their context. Because we understand the gospel in terms of context; and then communicate it

² See the chart of the four steps in critical contextualization at the end of this paper.

³ Darrell L. Whiteman. “Contextualization: The Theory, the Gap, the Challenge” in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*. Vol. 21, No. 1, January 1997.

⁴ Dr. Charles H. Kraft stated this in his lecture when he was installed into the Sun Hee Kwak Professor of Anthropology & Intercultural Communication Chair in the School of World Mission at Fuller Theological Seminary October 20, 1999. However true this might be, the question must be asked, Are these uncontextualized churches truly being the church of God in their respective communities?

⁵ Dean Flemming defines contextualization as “the dynamic and comprehensive process by which the gospel is incarnated within a concrete historical or cultural situation... in such a way that the gospel both comes to authentic expression in the local context and at the same time prophetically transforms the context. Contextualization seeks to enable the people of God to live out the gospel in obedience to Christ within their own cultures and circumstances.” Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission*. IVP, 2005:19.

into or within various contexts, it is important to think more about the dimensions of context and as we do so to consider in what ways our text interacts with these dimensions of context.

Contexts of Discipleship

In *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places* Eugene Peterson refers to Genesis 1 and 2 as a “grounding text”:⁶ “I’ve come to think that Genesis 1 and 2, prominent as they are in launching us into the grand narrative of the Bible, are among the most under-interpreted and under-used texts for shaping an obedient and reverent life of following Jesus in our daily, ordinary, working and worshiping lives.”⁷

He is, in effect, talking about discipleship—transformational discipleship—which lies at the heart of and which, ultimately, is what contextualization is all about.

My opening questions about text and context presuppose the need to determine what is the fundamental text or message which must be contextualized, and later I will seek to explain what I understand when I use the term “the gospel”, but my primary focus here is the context, and I believe that contextualization boils down to living out, or living according to the gospel within certain common, and at the same time, particular, contexts:

1. Living the gospel in history
2. Living the gospel in place
3. Living the gospel in relationships

I see these three settings for contextualization in what Peterson says about his “grounding text” of Genesis 1 and 2. Specifically, he talks about the “creation gifts” of time and space: “The understanding and honoring of time is fundamental to the realization of who we are and how we live,” and, “Place is a companion gift to go with time; it locates us on the earth where we become oriented, find work, experience freedom in obedience, and find companionship in a community of others.”⁸

Time

Peterson slowly came to realize that “ordinary time is not what biblical people endure or put up with or hurry through as we wait around for the end time and its rocket launch into eternity. It is a gift through which we participate in the present and daily work of God. I finally got it: end time influences present, ordinary time, not by diminishing or denigrating it but by charging it, filling it with purpose and significance. The end time is not a future we wait for but the gift of fullness of time that we receive in adoration and obedience as it flows into the present.”⁹

This is the reality Baukham and Hart write about so lucidly in *Hope against Hope*:

⁶ Genesis 1 and 2 are often neglected in a theology of mission, yet they are foundational to our understanding of God’s purposes in Creation, our doctrines of man, sin and salvation, and the unfolding plan of redemption from Creation to the *Eschatos*.

⁷ Eugene H. Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*. Eerdmans, 2005, page 63.

⁸ Ibid. pages 65 and 72.

⁹ Ibid. page 67.

“To be a Christian might be defined as living in the light cast by the resurrection; living, that is to say as those who insist on interpreting this world in terms of its (surprising and unexpected) future as made known to us in the resurrection of Jesus by his Father in the power of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁰

And again:

“Christianity is a faith which is essentially forward looking and forward moving, oriented towards and living now ever in the light cast backwards by God’s promised future. Christian faith, that is to say, is fundamentally a hopeful relation to God and God’s world.”¹¹

Time is a created gift of God experienced in terms of past, present and future, and lived out in the rhythms of days, months and years. Our understanding of the gospel and our living out the gospel are rooted in time and times, caught up with history—personal and corporate; particular and common; past and present and future. “Nothing in this creation is here merely to be studied, analyzed, figured out; each element, each day’s ‘work’ is here first of all to be received as an integrated and coherent ‘note’ in the all-encompassing rhythms of the creation oratorio, in which we breathe the same air that God breathed over the deep, and from deep in our lungs—our lives!—we sing and play to the glory of God.”¹²

Place

Regarding place, Peterson observes, “This second account of creation [Genesis 2] is set in geography... The place is defined as a garden as opposed to a wilderness... Everything that the Creator God does in forming us humans is done in place. It follows from this that since we are his creatures and can hardly escape the conditions of our making, for us everything that has to do with God is also in place. All living is local: this land, this neighborhood, these trees and houses, this work, these people.”¹³

Modern Christianity has paid little attention to the issue of the land and the environment until the end of the 20th century with the rise of ecological science and concern with protecting our fragile world. But creation, earth and land have a higher place in Scripture and in the nature and role of humanity than we give them. For example, the covenantal promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob specifically makes mention of the Land. Biblical interpreters have noted that this reference to the “Land” is one part of a three dimensional covenant which includes the covenant relationship with God and the promise of posterity—a great nation, mediating God’s blessing to the nations. They track this in intermediate fulfillment to the presence of Israel as a Yahweh-worshipping people in the Land God had promised them, and then they trace this to the ultimate fulfillment in the representative man, Jesus the Christ.¹⁴ However, few make much reference to how the

¹⁰ Richard Baukham and Trevor Hart, *Hope against Hope: Christian Eschatology at the Turn of the Millennium*. Eerdmans 1999 page 70.

¹¹ Ibid. page 82.

¹² Peterson, 2005. page 69.

¹³ Ibid. page 72.

¹⁴ Romans 4:1-16; Galatians 3:6-9.

promise of Land takes on meaning for the New Testament people of God—the meek inheriting the earth, and the hope-full prospect of radically new heavens and earth.¹⁵

Contexts—our creation gifts (as Peterson calls them) of time and place—are clearly fundamental to the proclamation of, discipleship in and living out of the gospel, because all God’s revelation comes to us in concrete forms through history and in particular places.

Relationships

To these two I would add a third context; relationships. Peterson does not omit this context. He roots our humanity (as Genesis does) in the place, in the earth (literally): “We are the identical stuff with the place in which we have been put.”¹⁶ However, he goes on to say, “We don’t own this place and so we can’t do with it whatever we wish. We *are* this place, an identity we have in common with all our earth-neighbors.”¹⁷ Nevertheless, in all creation, Adam found no creature he could name companion or friend—a creature with whom he could converse, have fellowship, or share intimacy. Not until God made “a helper fit for him”—“a creature other than me but enough like me to be intimate in relationship, marked from the beginning, unlike the animals and birds, by the use of language.”¹⁸

However, while Peterson sees our humanity in terms of persons-in-relationship who are closely connected with time and place, I find it helpful to separate relationships as the third of essential contexts for the gospel. For, although we are created beings dwelling in time and space and relating to each other in time and place, we are beings “in the image of God” created for vertical as well as horizontal relationship. We are called—we discover through the truths revealed in Scripture—to join in the intimacy and fellowship of the Trinity. “Trinity,” says Peterson, “is the most comprehensive and integrating framework we have for understanding and participating in the Christian life.”¹⁹ Our living in relationship, even more than living in time and place, is the primary context of our lives and therefore the principal milieu where the gospel’s power must be seen in its wholeness. Fundamentally, it is who we are in our relationships, which needs redemption.

Nevertheless, all three spheres are integrated, and as we consider what contextualization of the gospel in each area means or entails, we must keep in mind the interplay between each of them.

¹⁵ See, however, the writings of N. T. Wright: For example, *The New Testament and the People of God*, Fortress Press, 1992. *The Resurrection and the Son of God*, Fortress Press 1993. Also listen to Rikk Watts, “Knowing the Bible; Doing the Word” lectures on CD from Regent College.

¹⁶ In fact, Peterson himself does the same thing. His book has three main sections which deal with Creation, History and Community.

¹⁷ Peterson, 2005 page 76.

¹⁸ Ibid. page 81.

¹⁹ Ibid. page 45

The Text: The Gospel

The Gospel is our text, but the term “the gospel” is slippery; it is imprecise and ambiguous. Perhaps, however, it is more appropriate to describe “gospel” as a multi-layered word with various facets and dimensions of semantic meaning.

The gospel is the story of Jesus’ life and ministry as told in the four biblical Gospels; but it is not just that story. Nor is it satisfactorily reducible to an evangelistic message of “good news” which offers “eternal salvation” in terms of a place in heaven, through the invitation, “you must be born again” or “believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.” Nor is it merely a body of propositional truth to be learned or memorized; it is a *dynamic* message capable of effecting sanctifying change (salvation) in the here and now of our lives and fully consummated when Christ returns and God establishes the new creation.

The gospel is much more than the message of hope of a future life in a future heaven (a narrow soteriological emphasis in popular evangelism)—a life in some way disembodied and unrelated to the earthy life of human existence in this very tangible world. It also presupposes a much bigger narrative of revelation and redemption which begins in Genesis and runs all the way through the canonical books to Revelation. It is, to use Jesus’ own words, “the gospel of the kingdom”—an expression which is incomprehensible without examining the Old Testament scriptures and in particular the historical books, but also the Psalms and the prophets which writings give Jesus’ own words *their context*.

The gospel defined by the phrase “of the kingdom” carries dimensions of meaning that have often been overlooked in the evangelical focus on personal evangelism and church planting, while some of its social dimensions were perhaps exclusively emphasized by those who gave it their attention.²⁰ The gospel in this sense (qualified as “of the kingdom”) is more comprehensive and more holistic than either of these emphases, since the reign of God is already expected to be evident in all areas of life now—in the historical, temporal, social, ecological and local—and not simply spiritualized and left to become evident upon the return of Jesus Christ. “So, perhaps the time has come to recover in its fullness the biblical perspective of the kingdom for the mission of the church today and particularly for our evangelistic witness.”²¹

Dean Flemming wrestles with these issues of the gospel with regards to the apostle Paul’s writings:

If the gospel is at the heart of Paul’s message, then what did he mean by it? By its very nature, gospel (*euangelion*) is a rather imprecise term. It has roots in the Old Testament announcement of the good news of God’s coming salvation (e.g., Is 40:9; 52:7=Rom 10:15), and its Christian usage may go back to both Jesus himself (Mt 11:5; Lk 4:16-21) and the church before Paul (e.g., Acts 10:3638).²² But gospel was also used to refer to the good news about the birth, accession, or victory of a king or emperor in the

²⁰ Mortimer Arias, *Announcing the Reign of God: Evangelization and the Subversive memory of Jesus*. Academic Renewal Press, Lima, Ohio. 2001:xv-xvi.

²¹ *Ibid.* page xviii.

²² Peter Stuhlmacher, “The Pauline Gospel,” in *The Gospel and the Gospels*, ed. Peter Stuhlmacher (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1991), pp. 156-66.

Greco-Roman world. As a result, the term gospel would no doubt have triggered political and religious associations related to the rule of the imperial “savior” in the minds of Paul’s Gentile readers.²³ Not unusually, Paul seizes a term that has both a Jewish and a pagan past, and gives it a distinctively Christian meaning.

First and foremost, the gospel stands for the powerful proclamation of Christ so that people will believe in him and receive salvation (Rom 1:16; 1 Cor 9:16-18; 1 Thess 1:5; Col 1:5-6). This gospel proclamation, however, is not limited to what Paul preached in missionary settings to non-Christian audiences. When Paul expresses his eager desire “to proclaim the gospel (*euangelisasthai*) to you also who are in Rome” (Rom 1:15), he is speaking not to unbelievers, but to Roman *Christians*. Peter T. O’Brien crafts a compelling case that Paul uses “gospel” language to include the full exposition of the gospel that is designed to edify believers and ground them in the faith.”²⁴

Thanks to the record of apostolic ministry in Luke’s “Acts of the Apostles” and the writings of Paul and others we can deduce more about the text we encapsulate in the term “gospel” as good news for unbelievers. For example, there are the *kerygmatic* elements which crop up in the apostolic preaching, identified by C. H. Dodd and neatly summarized by John Stott as (i) The gospel events, (ii) the gospel witnesses, (iii) the gospel promises and (iv) the gospel conditions, or demands.²⁵

But it is particularly Paul who shows the nature and power of the gospel as a dynamic cross-cultural message for both unbelievers and for believers. Paul’s gospel²⁶ has both prophetic and transformative dimensions—challenging explicit and tacit beliefs, values and worldview on the one hand, and effecting radical change of belief and social behavior on the other.²⁷ It is particularly this dynamic sense of the gospel which I have in mind as I seek to address the three aspects of context: history, place and relationships

1. Living out the Gospel in History

While, as Peterson says, God gave us time, we human beings organize and fill time with our own creations and our own activities. We are people of history—people who come with a history, or histories; people who live in history; and people who make history. History past is filled with both corporate and personal experiences which shape who we are: the sacred and profane; mundane and routine as well as crisis, disaster and war; the influence of kings and governments; the practice of religion, philosophy and economics; the cultivation of the land, husbandry of animals, and enterprise in commerce; the formation of traditions, customs and mores.

²³ R. A. Horsley, “Rhetoric and Empire—and 1 Corinthians,” in *Paul and Politics: Ekklesia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation: Essays in Honor of Krister Stendahl*, ed. R. A. Horsley (Harrisburg, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 2000), pp. 91-92.

²⁴ Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament* page 92. Flemming quotes Peter T. O’Brien, *Gospel and Mission in the Writings of Paul: An Exegetical and Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1993), pp. 61-65.

²⁵ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, 1990:79-81. Stott cites C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and its Elements*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1936. Also see Flemming 2005:60-71.

²⁶ Romans 2:16; 16:25 and 2 Tim 2:8.

²⁷ See, for example, Flemming, pp. 104-117

People live *out of* their past, but they live *in* a present too—a context which is a complex amalgam of a local, physical environment, social intercourse and current events—including their interpretation of these according to worldview, beliefs, traditions and prejudices. And most people (if not all) live in light of a desired (or feared) future; in view of an ultimate destiny. Each of these (past, present and future) have particularity for each and every human being; but they also have some measure of commonality within the local society, or even universality in a wider global context.

Pay Attention to Histories

We need to pay more attention to the significance of histories—not only corporate (societal) history, but also personal (individual) stories of the people we seek to disciple in the gospel, because they are seminal to the development of worldview and values. We need to take the time to understand the history of a nation or ethnic group as well as the formative histories of the individual people we disciple within that group.

In the mid 1990s, I participated in a meeting in which we addressed ethnic tensions in Canada's multicultural society. In particular focus were the tensions between first nation Canadians and the English; or between the English and French-speaking Québécois. All present (whether immigrant or not) were English-speaking Caucasians by birth, except one. Jacqueline, who was Acadian by birth, proceeded to tell us the history of her people passed on to her by her father. She told us that her father grew exceedingly angry whenever he told the story:

The French had settled Acadia (the Maritimes of Eastern Canada) around 1604.²⁸ However, when the English began to take control in the 1750s, they did not trust these “neutral French”. In 1755, they forcibly deported between 6,000 and 8,000 Acadians to the American colonies along the Atlantic coast. Some of the American colonies refused to take the Acadians, so they were shipped to England. Others hid out in the woods of Acadia, only to be later captured and deported to northern France. Many Acadians did not survive the trip. In fact, two entire ships sank, drowning hundreds of Acadians.

As Jacqueline told this story, *she* grew quite passionate and personal: “This is what they did to us; this is how they treated us!” Here was this lady 200 years later recounting her people's history as if she were present.

I empathized with this Acadian lady. We Scots can still talk about William Wallace and the Battle of Stirling Bridge in 1297 with passion, and feel our blood stir when we read the Declaration of Arbroath signed in 1320! Our personal identity is caught up with our corporate identity which has been shaped over the centuries by the history of our people.

How Histories Shape Us

To understand a people, you have to understand their history. Their beliefs about themselves, their prejudices, their values, their lifestyle and worldview are laced with and formed by their history.

The book *How the Scots Invented the Modern World* is not a lampoon or joke.²⁹ Written by an American historian, it is a fascinating description of the Scottish Enlightenment and

²⁸ Québec was settled separately by the French and has its own distinct history.

²⁹ Arthur Herman. *How The Scots Invented The Modern World*, Crown Publishers, New York, 2001.

some of its important sons who fashioned and influenced—to an astonishing degree—the education, politics and economics of the modern, western world, and in particular North America (USA and Canada). Not all of it was necessarily for our good—whether Scots, English or Americans! I found that this book gave me enlightening insights into my own persona and values as a direct descendant of the Scottish Enlightenment through my upbringing and education; but it also gave me insights into the under-girding British worldview which led William Carey, the father of modern missions, and others into the forming of voluntary associations as “means for the propagation of the gospel amongst the heathen”.³⁰ At the same time it showed what informed the values of autonomy, liberty and enterprise which drive many Americans—and, by the way, which influence the way many churches and mission agencies function today.³¹ This is an important illustration because it shows how not merely our modern, secular society has been affected and shaped by such events, but how we ourselves have been subtly influenced both for good and ill. In other words, we must not only look at how cultural heritage and history have shaped the worldview and beliefs of others; we need to recognize subjectively how it has informed and influenced ourselves and our own society.

It is only when we get to grips with the realities of our past and how they have shaped us individually *and* societally, that we can begin to look at ourselves (or other people and their cultures) more objectively and discern how much our view of the gospel has been hidden or corrupted by inherited values and beliefs which we have learned and accepted unquestioningly. And similarly, it is only when we take time to become acquainted with a person and listen attentively to their personal history that we truly know and understand them. It is then, and really only then, that we can begin to disciple them in the gospel, so that the light of the gospel addresses the hurts and habits, fears and lies, hatreds and grievances which lie unseen, but none the less real, in the dark corners of the soul, and so that the Spirit of God can do his transforming work at the very cause of their need and ours.

Transformational Discipleship

Too often (certainly in my own experience), discipleship has consisted of cognitive teaching which helps us understand the text or content of the gospel, but leaves us frustrated by our inability to live according to it. Or else, discipleship comes in the form of Christian rules and formulae: Do this; don't do that (Read your Bible, pray every day; Don't drink, don't go to dances; don't smoke). Or another version teaches us the 12 steps or the 5 keys to effective Christian living by which we smarten up and try to reform ourselves. But our salvation (and therefore discipleship) is essentially by grace through faith, never by personal initiative. These kinds of discipleship³² are generally not transformational because they fail to engage the heart of the man or woman which is blind

³⁰ See Andrew F. Walls, “The Old Age of the Missionary Movement” in *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York 2000:255-261.

³¹ The “modern world” of the title alluded to the “new world” of USA and to a lesser degree Canada.

³² The intention is not to be derogatory about discipleship pedagogy, programs or materials, nor is it implied that we can never engage in obedience-oriented discipleship. Jesus commanded us to teach disciples the things he commanded, and there are times when we must say something like, “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us,” and then introduce some categorical instructions. However, discipleship programs often fail to bring about critical reflection, repentance and transformation within the depths of a person's life in terms of worldview, beliefs, values, habits and character.

and foolish, and totally incapable of self-help.³³ Transformation takes place at the core of a person—where worldview, values and beliefs are the engine that drives behavior. And that engine is fueled by cultural and personal history.

The apostle Paul clearly knew this as he looked at the Church in Ephesus. Christians there were clearly struggling with the issue as we do. And Paul evidently saw that at the heart of the matter was a fundamental way of viewing the world—a deceitful and blinding worldview which had to be dismantled and discarded, and then replaced by a new one given to us in Christ:

Don't live your lives any longer like everyone else in the Gentile world – guided as they are by a meaningless mindset! They can't even think straight because their minds are blinded to the truth; they are isolated from the life of God, because of their inherent ignorance and the settled resistance of their hearts to the truth. They are so morally desensitized, that they give themselves without restraint to a lifestyle that is characterized by immorality and insatiable greed.

But that's not the kind of life you learned in the Messiah—not if you really did hear about him and were properly taught in him, according to the truth that is in him! You were taught, at that time, to strip off the lifestyle and worldview of your old humanity. It is a way of life rotting away through lust's illusions. In its place, you need a renewal of your hearts and minds; you need to put on the new humanity—being created just like God himself, righteous and holy, in line with the truth.³⁴

It is possible to look at other passages of the New Testament where the writer addresses the gospel's implications to specific cultural and worldview issues. We can look at these as more than particular teaching; they also provide a paradigm for transformational discipleship which addresses core worldview issues and cultural practices.³⁵

2. Living out the Gospel in Place

People always live in a specific place, and are emotionally and physically shaped and conditioned by it. At the same time they shape their context—using and despoiling it; forming and ordering it, to bring beauty and order out of chaos; living in it and from it; managing it and defending it. Whether in plain, forest or mountain; by swamp, river or lake, people shape their environment and make their homes in it. They cultivate fields, build homes; construct offices and factories; plan cities and make roads. People live and move and have their being in place—specific place. People without that specific place are displaced persons, exiles or refugees. People who have no place, lose their personal and corporate identity, and consequently struggle for survival or they die.

People in their Land

In 1990, when a major earthquake struck the region of Papua inhabited by the Hupla and Yali people,³⁶ the government set in motion a plan to relocate the surviving population to

³³ For example, Ephesians 4:17-19

³⁴ Ephesians 4:17-24 (author's paraphrase).

³⁵ See Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament*, IVP, 2005.

³⁶ Papua here is the easternmost province of Indonesia (not Papua New Guinea). The Hupla and Yali are two distinct but adjacent tribal groups.

an entirely new location. There were various motives and reasons for this plan; but there were reasonable concerns that such a plan was potentially disastrous. For example, this kind of plan had been implemented before in other parts of the country, but had resulted in hardships for the people and eventual re-settlement of their original homeland.

About that time, I had read an article about aboriginal people in Australia which bore the title “The Land is their Life”. In it, the author showed how important it was to be sensitive to a people’s identification with their place, their land. I recall that he brought out that there is a psychological identity which goes beyond the material fact that this is where they lived, hunted, gathered and so forth. One writer says, “The land is their life, their mother, their way, their nourishment, and their spiritual connectedness.”³⁷

When I talked to the Hupla and Yali people who were facing forcible relocation, I found they felt exactly the same way. Their personal roots were in this soil. The potato fields they cultivated; the groves of pandanus trees they harvested for *weremna* nuts; the forests where they hunted birds and marsupials, gathered firewood and house building materials; and the hillsides where their pigs rooted, had been preserved and passed on to them by their ancestors. Most of them could not imagine how they could be separated from their place.³⁸

After intervention and appeal by some of us in support of tribal leaders, the government officials eventually aborted the plan. But not before several hundreds had been moved. Some of these—exposed to malaria for the first time and already traumatized by the disaster—took ill and died; some immediately set out on foot to hike through the mountains to their place of native origin. Malnourished, disheartened and weak, many of these died on the way home.

This dramatic story may seem a far cry from where we live in the urban West. But as I write this in August 2005, pictures of devastation and widespread flooding left by hurricane Katrina are flashing on the TV screen, while accounts of the rescue and relief operations mingle with interviews with survivors. A huge number of New Orleans’ 1.4 million residents need to be evacuated. Homes, businesses and livelihoods are destroyed. As I watch, my heart aches as I think about what these poor, suffering people must be thinking and feeling. This was their place, and their lives will never be the same again.

A Place to Call Home

Who I am is caught up with where I live, and especially with the place I call “home”.

Church historian Andrew Walls, in a classic article “The Gospel as Prisoner or Liberator of Culture”, has drawn attention to the tension between a “pilgrim principle” and an “indigenizing principle” which arises in the cross-cultural encounter of the gospel.³⁹ It is the tension between the local or particular relevance of the gospel and its universalizing significance.

³⁷ http://www.spiritsongs.org/Aboriginal_Australia_Totemic_Dreamtime.htm

³⁸ Some rationalized that they would now have two homes. One of the first things they did after being relocated, was to rename places with names from their place of origin. Settlers in North America did the same thing. You can take people from their homeland, but you cannot get the homeland out of the people.

³⁹ Andrew F. Walls. “The Gospel as Prisoner or Liberator of Culture” in *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*. Orbis Books, 2000. Originally in *Missionalia*. Vol. 10, No. 3, Nov. 1982 pages 93-105.

We will come back to this issue in the next section, but Walls makes an interesting statement connecting contextualization of the gospel with Christ's own incarnation:

“The impossibility of separating an individual from his social relationships and thus from his society leads to one unvarying feature in Christian history; the desire to ‘indigenise’, to live as a Christian and yet as a member of one’s own society, to make the church (to use the memorable title of a book written in 1967 by F. B. Welbourn and B. A. Ogot about Independent churches in Africa) *A place to feel at home*. The desire to do this is tied up with the very nature of the Gospel; it is patterned in the Incarnation itself. When God became man, Christ took flesh in a particular family, members of a particular nation, with the tradition of customs associated with that nation. All that was not evil He sanctified. Wherever He is taken by men in any time and place He takes that nationality, that society, that ‘culture’, and sanctifies all that is capable of sanctification by His presence.”⁴⁰

And Walls concludes this section of his essay by saying:

“The fact, then, that “if any man is in Christ he is a new creation” does not mean that he starts or continues his life in a vacuum, or that his mind is a blank table. It has been formed by his own culture and history, and since God has accepted him as he is, his Christian mind will continue to be influenced by what was in it before. And this is as true for groups as for persons. All churches are culture churches — including our own.”⁴¹

Who I am involves identification with a history which I possess as my own, and with a place where I belong, where I feel at home, where my family has its roots. The gospel has to touch me there. But as Walls rightly points out, the gospel is about incarnation. Jesus came into the world at a specific *kairos* moment in history and to a very specific geographical place. When he walked there, with the people of that time and place, he taught them the gospel in terms of their history as well as in terms of that time and place. His recorded conversations and parables create vivid cameos of the land of Palestine of his day. We can see in our minds’ eyes Jewish leaders in their righteous robes who strut the streets; children who laugh, run and play in the market place while singing their “nursery rhymes”; a farmer who scatters his seed in fields laid out by his forebears and edged with paths trodden concrete hard through the years; and a woman of different ethnic background, story and place, who sits thirsty by an ancient well. Jesus preached the gospel in terms of the place of people like that.

He himself had come, indeed was born a member of, a quite specific and particular people with their own customs, beliefs and traditions. He lived and moved and had his being, not simply in a particular time and place, but in a community with particular individuals, and that’s where we turn next—addressing how the gospel addresses our living in relationships and in community.

⁴⁰ Andrew F. Walls. “The Gospel as Prisoner or Liberator of Culture” in *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*. Orbis Books, 2000 page 7.

⁴¹ Ibid. page 8.

3. Living out the Gospel in Relationships

People have their being in community. Each and everyone of us—despite what the Enlightenment has led us to believe about personal autonomy, and what Western society dubs “personal liberty” and “rights of the individual”—are who we really are in our relationships. We are always fully people in the context of community: members of families; colleagues in a workplace; co-laborers in a field or factory. We continuously form new communities with people of like mind and common interest. Generally we dance, golf, fish, hike, bird watch, or play Scrabble or Rummikub together with others.

No one of us is an island; no matter how independent and autonomous we might feel. We are members of social conglomerates by custom and by choice, formal and informal—developing and fostering comradeship and companionship which we guard with our unspoken mores, conventions, social systems and governments. These give us the boundaries and landmarks of social intercourse, and require of us certain obligations and direct our accountability towards fellow members of our group or association.

This was the point made by Andrew Walls cited earlier:

“The impossibility of separating an individual from his social relationships and thus from his society leads to one unvarying feature in Christian history; the desire to ‘indigenise’, to live as a Christian and yet as a member of one’s own society...”⁴²

It is impossible to separate people from their context, and evangelism and discipleship must not only be sensitively cognizant of the social structure and the nature of social intercourse, it must be *affective* for change in that context. That is, it involves more than the transmission of a body of teaching; it must reach the heart and soul of the individual person and the heart and soul of the society.

Personal Identity in Social Relationships

Perhaps the most vital framework of many societies is the kinship system which not only defines the relationships within nuclear and extended families, but which also prescribes the roles of each member, how they may act toward each other; who they may or may not marry; who are the authority figures and so forth. In my study of the Yali people, for example, I learned that the kinship system prescribes how people live and interact with one another in respect of such matters as marriage, death, rites of passage, land tenure, and conflict resolution. The relationships are maintained through reciprocity, that is, by helping and being helped, by giving and being given both goods (usually pigs) and physical assistance—often over a lifetime. If kin relationships are the building blocks of Yali society, then reciprocity is the mortar which binds each member together.

In Africa some people have sought to revive the concept of *ubuntu*, in the search for a constructive paradigm for a holistic worldview and the recovery of an integrated society. Ubuntu is a Zulu word which envisions humanity as an interdependent community. The

⁴² Walls, 2000, page 7.

concept is captured in a Zulu saying: *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*—“a person is a person through other persons” or “I am what I am because of you.”⁴³

The clear understanding is that an individual’s identity is only fully realized through the medium of relationships with other people. And this is essentially the view of Scripture and the gospel. Our salvation involves who we are in our relationships, because to be human, is to be in relationship with others, including the triune God. For this reason, Jesus Christ came to redeem our humanity and lead us back into an intimate relationship with himself, the Father and the Spirit.

Thomas F Torrance describes Jesus Christ as both the “*personalising Person*” and the “*humanising Man*”.

“He is the personalising Person, and we are personalised persons. Thus, far from depersonalising human being, or overriding the human person, the coming of Jesus Christ has the effect of personalising human being in a profounder way than ever before. With the Incarnation there took place an acute personalising of all God’s interaction with us, so that the incarnational union of the Person of the Son with our human nature must be regarded as the most intensive personalising of it that could have taken place...

However, we must not forget at this point that the incarnational union was also an atoning union, in and through which our lost and damned humanity is redeemed, healed and sanctified in Jesus Christ. That means that the broken state of human personal being, resulting from the alienation of humanity from God and the conflict between them that became embedded within its very existence, is brought within the redeeming, healing and sanctifying activity of God in Jesus Christ...”⁴⁴

If discipleship means anything at all, it means leading us deeper and deeper into the experience of redeemed humanity—both in relation to who we are as human persons in all our individuality, and also in relation to who we are in the essentiality of our humanness—our being in relationship with others. These “others” may be many or few; close knit and localized or widely scattered, yet sharing an identity, history, traditions, values, and (usually) a shared language.⁴⁵

Discipling Nations

This leads us to consider a further dimension of discipling in relationships which is actually rooted in the so-called Great Commission of Matthew 28:19: “Go... and make disciples of all nations”. Referring to this passage, Andrew Walls comments, “The highly individualistic nature of contemporary Western culture has led to the interpretation of this passage as though it said ‘Make some disciples in each nation.’ No doubt this meaning can be validly deduced, but it does not represent the meaning of the words. According to the

⁴³ A similar concept for people of the Philippines is reflected in the Tagalog expression *pakikipagkapwa-tao* being a fellow to others. Dean Flemming. *Contextualization in the New Testament*, IVP, 2005:130.

⁴⁴ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, Helmers and Howard, 1992 pages 67-69.

⁴⁵ In the urban west, these are becoming less distinct, especially in multicultural societies. However, within the broader society or nation state we always find subsets of commonality.

words of the Great Commission which we have, the task of the disciples of Christ is to *disciple the nations*, to make the nations disciples.”⁴⁶

Of course, our understanding and interpretation of these words is often skewed by our current understanding of nations in terms of “nation states”. However, another related problem we face in our understanding of the meaning of this command is that “nation” in our contemporary usage is too large a concept to encompass in our minds, let alone incorporate in our mission strategies. Walls addresses this issue and points out helpfully that regardless of size, nationhood “implies commonality” with its sense of belonging together and its own unique characteristics which distinguish it from others. He then goes on to discuss the sense in which a “nation” can be made disciples.⁴⁷

It would be helpful to read the entire essay, but the following quote points to the nub of the issue:

“The holy word—the word of the Master, the word of Scripture—passes into the memory... it invades the disciple’s whole personality, to bring its influence to bear on the developing situations in which that disciple becomes involved. Discipleship, that is, involves the word of the master passing through the disciple’s memory and into all the mental and moral processes; the ways of thinking, choosing, deciding.

Let us now apply this understanding of discipleship to the task of making disciples of all nations. It is clear that more is implied than simply making the Master’s word known to all peoples. That Word is to pass into all those distinctive ways of thought, those networks of kinship, those special ways of doing things, that give the nation its commonality, its coherence, its identity. It has to travel through the shared mental and moral processes of a community, the way decisions are made in that community. Christ is to become actualized—to become flesh, as it were—as distinctively, and may I say it, as appropriately—as when he lived as a Palestinian Jew in the early first century.”⁴⁸

This implies a process that may be disconcerting and frustrating to people of our generation who are accustomed to controlled situations where immediate results and quick and measurable success are possible. But discipleship is a process—a long process. Discipleship of a community, moreover, is not only a strange concept to us today; it is a challenging one, because it may take generations. Perhaps the only way we can envision discipleship of a nation is in some microcosm, such as the transformation of a tribe through its exposure to the gospel. There are examples in church history such as the conversion of the Irish and the subsequent burgeoning expansion of Celtic Christianity through the British Isles and back into continental Europe—a movement that spanned decades. Or we can take more recent examples such as the Dani, the Sawi and the Yali of Papua, Indonesia.⁴⁹ Transformation, which may take generations in a

⁴⁶ Andrew F. Walls, “Culture and Conversion in Christian History”, in *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, Orbis Books, 2000, page 48.

⁴⁷ Ibid. pages 48-49.

⁴⁸ Ibid. page 50.

⁴⁹ John Dekker, Russell Hitt and others have written about the people movement among the Dani; Don Richardson’s *Peace Child* and the movie of the same title tell of the dramatic entrance of the gospel among the Sawi. The prize-winning video documentary *The Yali Story* recounts the transformation among the Yali.

larger and perhaps more complex culture, seems to be compressed into decades within the microcosm of the world of a relatively small tribal society. Urban societies with their complex and fragmented structure are a significant challenge. Nevertheless, the principle remains the same: transformation must take place within a specific network of relationships which share the same or similar contexts, values, activities and ways of doing things.

The Problem of Individualism

It is imperative that human beings feel connected with other people. We are created as relational beings and (while some of us enjoy being alone some of the time) we all long for company, community and identity with others. However, in the western world, we have become extremely individualistic,⁵⁰ and consequently our family and kin networks and wider social structures have become fragmented and disintegrated and have suffered the loss of personal value. Nevertheless, our innate desire for community is still evident and fulfilled (or at least we attempt to fulfill it) in other ways. It has been observed that most of us operate within a complex of sub-networks which may or may not overlap, consisting of family, work, leisure and religious friends and acquaintances.

However, in emergent postmodern society, while many people talk about and yearn for “community”, we are generally still hamstrung by our Enlightenment-driven preoccupation with individual autonomy and its legacy: the “*dis-integrated*” nature of the contemporary family within the modern, often dysfunctional, social system and structure. Even though we decry or bemoan what modernity has given us, postmodern lawmakers pay little attention to the consensus of opinions, values and benefits of society *as a whole*, while they bend over backwards to accommodate the supposed or attributed rights of individuals. The contemporary issue of “same sex marriage” in countries like Canada and South Africa exemplifies this. In Canada—despite the overwhelming popular belief that there is still something unique and significant about traditional, heterosexual marriage—the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms has been invoked to defend the individual rights of a minority, while counter-arguments based on the integrity of family as the building block of society have been largely disregarded.

It is in such a complex milieu at both the macro and especially the micro levels of our relationships where the gospel’s transforming influence is needed. Whether it is in a network of relationships based on family, school, workplace, leisure activity centre or church is not the issue. The point is that society of any kind—whether tribal, with its kinship structure, or urban, with its complex variety of social networks—is built around relationships. Ultimately, it is through transformed relationships on the micro level that society on the macro level will be transformed.

Perhaps this is the biggest challenge for contextualization of the gospel in the urban west. How will we ever see a mega culture of a multicultural and pluralistic nation like Canada, or even the people of a cosmopolitan city like Toronto, transformed by the gospel? It is hard (if not impossible) to envisage such a project, let alone know how to go about it in practical terms of witness, evangelism, and transforming discipleship. In truth, we are not

⁵⁰ Note that individualism is distinct from selfishness which pervades all humanity whether those who live autonomously or interdependently. Individualism and our individualistic life style have to do with a philosophy and worldview which elevates personal autonomy.

called to such an impossible task; but what we can do is focus on the relationships we have with our families, colleagues, fellow students and friends—the context of people and relationships of home, church, school and places of work and recreation.

Imagine this: a typical modern or postmodern family with its corporate history of suffering and abuse, with all its so-called dysfunctionality, with its anger and angst, transformed by the gospel. Then imagine this: One person in that family golfs with a group of friends, each perhaps of a different ethnic and religious background—a Caucasian agnostic, an East Indian Hindu, a Chinese Buddhist and an Egyptian Muslim. See in your mind’s eye these friends watching the transformed behavior of their golf buddy, asking questions, talking over a coffee at Tim Horton’s week after week through the summer until first one, and then perhaps another responds to the gospel. Picture what could happen throughout their separate kinship and social networks.

Are you having a hard job imagining this? Is this just a pipe dream? Not if we really grasp what the gospel is about and how gospel transformation takes place. Because the gospel is not shared in the abstract; it is shared in the context of relationships, and histories and place.

Sharing the Gospel: Telling the Story

The key lies first in how the gospel is shared and then how people are led in a transformational journey of discipleship.

First of all, the gospel is a story to be told. It is not a bundle of facts, arguments or proof texts to be expounded. Even though, in this postmodern age, the idea of a grand story for all humanity is called into question, the gospel is still, I believe, a valid story to tell. And it is a story to be told in its fullness, not in some disjointed, systematized manner which addresses particular items on a modern evangelical’s agenda.⁵¹

Perhaps it is worth noting that the postmodern person’s concern with universal stories, what they call “metanarratives”, has two important aspects. Firstly, people are sceptical about absolutes. Since truth has many facets, can we ever be sure “*our*” story is the *whole* story? Moreover, secondly, there is a well-founded concern that when people are convinced that *their* story is the *only* story, it is not only used categorically and exclusively, as if there were no alternative or counter-argument. The fear is that when people believe that *their* story, *their* dogma is the only truth, then it becomes a means of controlling and subduing people. That is, the story becomes institutionalized, and is used in a coercive or legalistic way.

Sadly many religious and political people have done that in the past and still do so today—not only Christians, but also Muslims, and Hindus; and also Nazi and Fascist dictators, Communists, Colonialists and global Capitalists. So when we present the gospel as a universally valid story, we do so in a sceptical and even fearful context.

Let us consider two key issues—somewhat simply and certainly inadequately. First of all, is the gospel true? Can it possibly be universally true? And, secondly, in order to answer those questions, the test for the postmodern person is, “Does it work?”

⁵¹ Whenever, I use “modern” or “postmodern” I am alluding to a worldview or mindset associated with the modern (post-Enlightenment) era, or the contemporary postmodern era.

That's where your words have to be backed up with your life. Has the gospel worked *for you*? This question is not necessarily meant in a utilitarian sense, such as, "Will I get rich in 30 days, if I invest my money according to your strategy?" Rather, the postmodern is looking for the gospel to be *authenticated* in a person's life. We need to be able to say like Paul, "My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power." (1 Cor 2:4)

This means that we are called to be authentic Christians—not living by a rule book; not living according to forms set by a religious institution, but living in the transforming power of the gospel. By that I mean not living by external standards or codes through personal or other human resources; but rather living through the dynamic power of the gospel at work in us through the power of God in his Spirit. When this occurs, people will see our love and kindness, our honesty and integrity, our compassion and generosity, our grace, humility, and forgiving spirit—in short, our Christlikeness. They want to see that we have made this story our story—not by mere mental or cognitive assent; but by seeing that we are living out the story, and that it has changed (and is changing) who we are, what we value, the way we think, talk, and behave.

As to the second issue, Christian teaching (like any other dogma) becomes a coercive "metanarrative" when we institutionalize it—when we impose *a form of religion* on people, or when we say, A Christian must do this; or, A Christian must not do that. Whenever Christianity has been reduced to rules and forms, *we have lost the grace of the gospel and concealed its universal relevance behind the particularity of a form*. This is what it means to practice the form of godliness and deny its power (as Paul wrote to Timothy). We usurp the power of God through grace, energized by the Spirit in the person's heart, with the power of the human being or human institution by controlling rules and requirements imposed from without.

Sadly, the church through the ages has often done that. Even today, many forms of Christian denominationalism (including evangelicalism) have fallen into that trap—requiring believers to do certain things, behave and dress in particularly defined ways, thus creating a form of godliness, but by formalism and legalism usurping and mitigating the gospel's transforming power. Outward forms of Christianity to which we must adhere or with which we are expected to comply are not the gospel. They pressure us to conform, but they do not and cannot transform our lives, leaving us to our own futile devices to manage our lives, and our own paltry resources to reform ourselves by our own efforts.

The gospel of grace is not controlling or coercive. It invites people to enter the stream of grace and blessing through Jesus Christ, which God extends to all humanity. Nor does our story squeeze people of diverse backgrounds and personality into uniformity. The gospel is a story of human solidarity—in Christ; but at the same time, it is a story where the whole spectrum of human culture and the diversity of individual human character and personality are honored and enhanced by the redemptive, indwelling presence of Jesus.

Living out the Gospel: Transformational Discipleship

The gospel, however, is not just a story for telling; it is a story to live by. It is a story we need to tell again and again, reminding ourselves at every moment and turn of events in our lives that we live by grace and walk by faith. This re-telling of the gospel to others (and to ourselves) leads to transformational discipleship which addresses the deep heart issues that lie at the core of a person. It is never simply the business of taking people through X number of steps to be followed, or imparting a body of teaching to be learned.

One of the first things to be said is that transformational discipleship does not occur in isolation or in a vacuum, it occurs in community. A disciple of Jesus Christ needs intercourse with other believers. The growth of disciples depends on the mutual stimulus, challenge, edification, love and support of other disciples. This is the clear teaching of the New Testament.⁵² Sadly, our forms of church and, indeed, of discipleship do not often foster this. But more than that, we sometimes fail to incorporate new believers into Christian community in a distinct and meaningful way.

Jim Courson, a missionary in Taiwan, looked at research and concluded that failure to incorporate new believers in a clear and meaningful process (a rite of passage) was the reason for low retention rate of Taiwanese converts.⁵³ The church, as Walls reminds us, needs to be a place where we belong; a community where we feel at home, and it is therefore necessary to enable new disciples to feel they belong through conscious acts of incorporation and inclusion.

Perhaps, furthermore, we have much to learn about discipleship *in* community which is proactive as it pursues issues associated with *corporate discipleship* such as Paul expounds in Ephesians 4 and 5. In other words, it is necessary to identify and deal with those things which are destructive of community and therefore of the context of discipleship; and at the same time, to learn and assume the behavior which fosters community. At the heart of the gospel is the whole business of restored relationships, removed barriers and a life together. The gospel addresses these relationships to bring about changes characterized by love, tolerance, forgiveness, peace and unity.

The key to all of this is the business of what Paul calls “learning Christ”.⁵⁴ This discipleship is a transforming *process*, not a conversion event, which involves *un*learning the ungodly worldview with its tacit values and beliefs, and learning the Christly worldview which leads to transformed behavior. In this process, two things are happening.

First of all, the individual person is incorporated into a community which is constrained in its corporate behavior by a biblical, Christ-oriented worldview, which is as much tacit as it is conscious or explicit. Missionaries have observed that when youth leave the social

⁵² For example, Ephesians 4:11-16; 1 Corinthians 11-14; Hebrews 10:23-25.

⁵³ Jim Courson, “Deepening the Bonds of Christian Community: Applying Rite of Passage Structure to the Discipling Process in Taiwan” in *Missiology: An International Review*, Vol. XXVI. No. 3, July 1998. Courson drew on Allen Swanson, *Mending the Nets: Taiwan Church Growth and Loss in the 1980's* (1986) based on his Doctor of Ministry dissertation for Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota, entitled: “The Church in Taiwan: A Cross-Sectional Study in Patterns of Growth and Decline; Patterns of Evangelism—Conversion, Alienation and the Problem of Integration.”

⁵⁴ Ephesians 4:20.

context of a face-to-face society to seek education or employment in an urban center, that the acknowledged and unarticulated social constraints of that society no longer guide or control their behavior; they are without map and compass in their new environment. Conversely, by incorporation into a community which is vitally centered on a common corpus of teaching, beliefs and values, an individual gradually acquires the governing worldview and values and also learns to conform to the requirements of social mores, restraints and obligations of reciprocal relationships. In other words, the Christian community plays a role in discipleship by virtue of its social dynamic and function.

Secondly, in this process, the disciples not only begin to *learn consciously* what is being taught, but begin to *absorb unconsciously* into their worldview and value system what is observed and presumed in the behavior of the community members around them. This is the process a child experiences as it grows—observing behavior and its consequences; participating in and learning the skills of the society; listening and learning the spoken language as well as the meaning of symbols and rituals; hearing the corporate and personal stories iterated again and again. In so doing, the child learns and understands language and symbols, conventions and customs, values and beliefs. It is the same process in which a good missionary engages as he or she consciously strives to learn and understand the language, customs and beliefs of the society, and simultaneously seeks “to become a surrogate member of the community participating in its life over a period of time, assimilating its patterns of thought and behaviour”⁵⁵ in an essentially intuitive manner.

Personal instruction is certainly part of the process, but transference of beliefs and values requires more than this kind of teaching, whether formal or non-formal. “Our words... become infinitely richer when imparted by the whole personal participation of human encounter.”⁵⁶ Thus the social context of Christian community provides an essential dynamic to the process of discipleship in the gospel.

The gospel not only brings us to *saving* faith in Jesus Christ, it also becomes, under the Spirit of God, the *transforming* power which will address our pride and prejudices; our false beliefs about ourselves and about God; our idolatries and our sin patterns learned and established from birth onwards. It is able to bring God’s healing and forgiveness to our unconfessed guilt and hidden shame; it exposes the falsity of every proud hope we have of self-reformation and reminds us that our life is wholly dependent on God’s grace in Christ; it zooms in on the futile lies we have framed in order to protect ourselves from present fears and past hurts and turns our hearts to find their refuge and healing in communion with Christ; it unveils the idols we set up in place of God and teaches us dependence on his grace; it discloses the deceitfulness of tacitly held beliefs and values we have learned unconsciously from our history and culture, and which keep us captive to darkness, and it sets us free to enjoy his life, his fellowship and enables us to be fully human again.

⁵⁵ Trevor Hart, *Faith Thinking: The Dynamics of Christian Theology*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois. 1995:186

⁵⁶ John C. Puddefoot, “Indwelling: Formal and Non-Formal Elements in Faith and Life” in Thomas F. Torrance, editor, *Belief in Science and in Christian Life: The Relevance of Michael Polanyi’s Thought for Christian faith and Life*. Wipf & Stock Publishers, Eugene, Oregon. 1998:43. This quotation comes from a passage dealing with discipleship.

The gospel not only gives us hope for future salvation, it also becomes a dynamic for living in the present *through* the forgiveness and redemption already brought by Christ, and *towards* (and in the light shining backwards from) the future hope of eternal salvation. The milieu of this learning process is trusting fellowship and worship of the Christian community which is the body of Christ.

Conclusion

Contextualization of the gospel requires communication of and effective discipleship of people in the particularity of their social and personal histories; in light of the ethos and worldview of the culture and the time in history in which they live; and with regard to and within the setting of their personal relationships, and social networks and structures.

Contextualization of the gospel respects but also inevitably transforms the place, the history and the relationships of the disciples. It will affect how they live in the world and how they steward its resources; it will redeem their history past, transform their present and give a different vision for their future. Gospel-enabled conversion of a people will change the course of history. It will redeem their humanity. It will transform their local society. It will also incorporate them into the universal community of the people of God by inclusion in a particular, local fellowship. It will make them into a worshipping community—not conformed to some objective form imported from another time, place and culture; but shaped by their own particularities, given voice in their own language, illustrated with their own metaphors, rooted in their own soil and in light of their own history with God.

What this means is that contextual discipleship of this nature is the key to how we plant or establish the church, whether in some place and culture other than our own, or within the subtleties and complexities of emerging postmodern culture in the western world.

Appendix

This article deals mainly with the third and fourth phases of critical contextualization developed by Paul Hiebert and outlined by Hiebert, Shaw and Tiénoú,⁵⁷ and which I have diagrammed below.

| Four Steps in Critical Contextualization | | | | | |
|--|--|--|---|--|--|
| Appropriate responses | Step 1 | Step 2 | Step 3 | Step 4 | Result |
| Religious Beliefs, Practice and Behavior in Religions, Folk Religions and Culture | <p>Phenomenological Analysis</p> <p>Study of a culture: its categories, assumptions, and logic used to organize its world.</p> | <p>Ontological Reflection</p> <p>Test the "truth claims" of the culture's beliefs and values. (A bicultural approach by missionary and new believers)</p> | <p>Critical Evaluation</p> <p>Self-evaluation of existing beliefs, values, and customs (social, religious, and personal)</p> | <p>Missiological Transformation</p> <p>Practical application of Biblical teaching to specific life and behavioral issues and contexts in the culture.</p> | <p>Critical Contextualization</p> |
| Inappropriate Responses | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Denial and condemnation of Old Beliefs and Practices ➤ Uncritical acceptance of Old Beliefs and Practices | | | | <p>Syncretism</p> |

Based on Hiebert, Shaw and Tiénoú in *Understanding Folk Religion*, Baker 1999

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⁵⁷ Paul Hiebert, R. Daniel Shaw and Tite Tiénoú, *Understanding Folk Religion: A Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices*. Baker Books, Grand rapids, Michigan, 1999:21-29.