

The NT as Contextual Theology

My title for this talk sounds very ambitious. I cannot give a comprehensive overview of how the NT itself is a work of contextualizing the gospel. But I do want to begin with one very basic point: Contextualization is not a new idea. We have today a heightened awareness of cultural diversity and difference, that makes the task of contextualizing the message of the gospel seem very urgent and important. But contextualizing the gospel, that is stating the Christian message in a way that addresses the uniqueness of various cultures, is something as old as the gospel itself. We are not inventing a new idea, but rediscovering one that is at the very heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ. I think one of the keys to opening up the NT and rediscovering its power is to realize that the entire NT is an exercise in contextualizing the gospel.

Instead of being comprehensive, I will limit myself to two main points that I will address by focusing on two parts of the biblical witness. First I will try to paint an overall picture of the task of translation that the church faced from its very beginning, second I will look at the specific task that we have set for this conference, the question of reconstructing the person in a post-Soviet context.

I want to begin with the Acts account of the day of Pentecost. The surprising events that led to the Messiah suffering a shameful, humiliating execution on the cross, have been followed by the triumphant victory of God by raising Jesus from the dead. So now what? Where do we go? What does this all mean? The disciples had their own idea of what next. They asked in Acts 1:6, "Will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" Jesus gives them a whole new agenda by telling them that after they receive the Spirit they shall be witnesses to the gospel in Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Then when they are all together on the Jewish festival of Pentecost, the wind and fire of God comes upon them, and they began to speak in other languages. Devout Jews from many nations were present and marveled because each of them heard these Galileans proclaiming God's deeds of power in their own languages.

This is the first time the gospel of Jesus Christ is being publicly proclaimed, and on this initial occasion it is proclaimed in all the various languages of those present. Two conclusions follow from this. First, there is no mother tongue for the gospel. There is no original language in which the gospel is originally proclaimed and then subsequently translated. While those of us who went to seminary invested a lot of time and energy learning Koine Greek, that investment did not bring us closer to God! Second, the gospel is meant to be translated. I'm sure that among Christians there is no disagreement on this. This is in sharp contrast to Islam with its insistence that Allah spoke Arabic, therefore only the original is the word of God. What Christians sometimes do not realize is the radical implications of this necessity for translation. All of us who have learned a second language, learn very quickly that translation is not simply finding

different words to say the same thing. Here Islam has a valid insight. Any time you translate words with deep spiritual or emotional meaning, the meaning shifts in significant ways. You end up saying less, or communicating a different shade of meaning, or, sometimes you end up saying more. Language is not merely the words we use to communicate, it is a complex system of signs and meanings which are windows into a whole cultural system, with its distinctive ways of naming and experiencing life. So from the very beginning of the church's mission, the Spirit empowers his witnesses to translate the message, not simply into different words, but into different systems of thought and life.

There is an enduring myth, dear to evangelicals, that behind these different translations there is a pure, unchanging, eternally true gospel which hovers above all cultures to which we can return to get our bearings. But this idea is more a product of our Greek and rationalist heritage than of the gospel. Yes, there is an original word of God. But that original word is the message of the incarnation. God became a 1st century Jew! The gospel itself is that God entered history in a specific cultural form to redeem the world.

Let's think about the task of translation. OK, its use your imagination time. You are a 1st century Jew, one of the early believers in the crucified and risen Messiah. And you have been commissioned to take the gospel to, oh let's say, Athens. Now in the original Palestinian Jewish context the big issue was is Jesus the Messiah? 'Messiah' was a word that was loaded with not only intellectual, but deep emotional meaning. If you walked into a room and announced that you were the Messiah you would get a reaction!

So you make your journey to Athens, raise your voice in the public square and loudly announce, "I have good news! The Messiah has come and his name is Jesus!" What reaction would you get? Probably just a question. "What is a Messiah?" Then what? You could explain what a Messiah is and then make your announcement again, but I doubt if you would get much of a reaction. So here is the challenge of contextualization. How do you proclaim Jesus using words that already have powerful intellectual and emotional meaning to your audience? How can you name the gospel so that call forth either a response—either hostility, or faith? So you face two challenges. How can I be reasonably true to the original message, and, how can I translate it in a way that speaks the gospel into the intellectual and cultural world of Athenians in a way that calls forth a meaningful response?

But the task of translation is not a purely linguistic one. Contextualization always involves discernment about what practices are most consistent with the gospel message. The most divisive issue in the life of the early church was not some big debate about Christology, but a disagreement about circumcision. It was this issue that motivated Paul to think through the meaning of the cross and come up with his great

doctrine that the cross means that believers are free from the law. Notice: Paul did not first get his theology straight (we are saved by grace not by works of the law) and then discover, “that means Gentiles don’t have to be circumcised”. It happened the other way around. He confronted the divisive debate about circumcision. He observed in his own ministry that uncircumcised Gentiles were coming to Christ and receiving the Holy Spirit, then went back to the core of the Christian faith and came to see that this new practice was in fact rooted in the cross itself.

When Mennonite missionaries first went to East Africa back in the 1920s, they took with them their dress codes from back in Pennsylvania. As part of their commitment to a simple life, and rejecting worldly fashions, Mennonite men had rejected the modern suit and tie and still wore a closed jacket like men had worn before the suit and tie fashion. So, when East Africans came to faith in Christ, guess what the missionaries required the new converts to wear? To their credit, it did not take long to figure out that these heavy dark suits made no sense in a tropical climate. Then, guess what some of them figured out next? If this dress code is not essential to Christian living in Africa, maybe its not really required back in Pennsylvania. Crossing cultural boundaries enables believers to look back at their own practices and test which are truly essential expressions of Christian faith, and which are simply cultural practices that though they may have been meaningful at one time, have now outlived their usefulness. What starts as a meaningful expression of Christian living in one time and place, when transferred into another can become a meaningless and arbitrary burden.

But, I can hear some minds asking, isn’t Jesus Christ the same, yesterday, today and forever? Of course he is! But when people recite this text, what they are often saying is *the church* the same yesterday, today and forever. Or *us* the same yesterday, today and forever. Jesus Christ never changes, he is always calling us into the world of ever changing culture to be his witnesses. Jesus never changes, so we are always changing.

Speaking of which, I now want to turn more directly to the topic of this conference, reconstructing the post-Soviet person. Here we can find no better example of how to proceed than Jesus himself in his ministry of proclaiming the nearness of the kingdom of God. Jesus came announcing that the kingdom of God was near, but his announcement was not only in words, but in deeds of power that demonstrated the in-breaking power of God’s reign. Jesus demonstrated the power of the kingdom in very personal ways. He heals the sick, he delivers people from demons, he forgives sinners and welcomes those who are social outcasts. But his ministry also takes the form of a powerful criticism of religious and social systems that hold people in bondage. The Pharisaic system of religious and social governance over the people had become an oppressive burden that Jesus named and exposed.

Jesus can be incredibly generous and welcoming in some situations, and terribly harsh and demanding in others. But there is a consistency in all that Jesus' does. The kingdom of God is the power of God that sets people free from all of those things that separate people from God and keep them from enjoying the fullness of life that God intends for His creatures. The message and ministry of Jesus changes relative to the form of bondage that he encounters. One thing that has hindered the redemptive imagination of evangelicals is a one size fits all kind of ministry. All people are sinners doomed for hell. The gospel is God's plan of salvation that opens the doors of heaven. One of the most exciting changes I see on the evangelical landscape is a change from going to people to tell them what their problem is, to actually listening to people as they name their hopes and fears.

A well-known theologian has said, 'a Messiah is always expected and rejected'. Jesus came into a cultural context in which there were already powerful hopes for a Messiah. If there were not this already existing hope no one would have paid any attention to him. But a true Messiah does not simply fulfill people's hopes on their terms, he demands that those hopes be profoundly reshaped. Jesus came to fulfill the hopes of Israel but fulfilled them in a way that shocked and angered a lot of people.

There is one reservation that some people have to contextualization that I think is very valid and needs to be recognized. When we talk about contextualizing the gospel, we do NOT mean fitting the gospel into culture in a nice comfortable, cozy way. As John's Gospel puts it, "he came unto his own" (that is he contextualized his message into 1st century Jewish culture), "but his own did not receive him". There are in all cultures deep personal and social pathologies, strongholds of Satan that keep people from living in the joy and freedom of Christ. To contextualize also means to expose and name those pathologies. But let's give Satan a little credit. Evil is very creative. Different cultures are held captive to Satan in very different ways. Let's claim the truth of Ephesians 6:16 and take up "the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish ALL the flaming arrows of the evil one"!

So as we think about reconstructing the post Soviet person, it seems to me that there are two questions to pursue.

1. What are the distinctive hopes and fears of people in our context and how do we name the gospel in a way that addresses those hopes and fears? To contextualize the gospel means to proclaim the gospel in a way that speaks into and addresses the powerful hopes and fears that people already have. To address those hopes and fears does not mean to meet them on their own terms. If someone's hope is for a new BMW, we hardly want to say and Jesus is here to

get it for you. But we might say Jesus has come to make you wealthier than you can ever have imagined.

Here the post-Soviet context presents us with a difficult challenge. So many people seem to have lost any sense of hope, or any sense that life has meaning beyond the issues of day to day survival. How do we awaken in people that sense of longing for something? You know I would much rather have a student who was a passionate atheist, than one who was simply totally indifferent to the issue. Or we find people whose sense of hope is only expressed in purely materialistic ways. After I paid my electric bill last month I found myself hoping for lower electric rates! How do we awaken the spirits of people in whom it seems the human spirit itself is almost extinguished? (Moscow experience)

2. What are the personal and social pathologies that cut people off from fellowship with God, and the fullness of life that God intends for His children? The economic failure of the Soviet experiment is obvious for all to see. But what is far more devastating and much harder to repair is what it did to the human spirit and to the sense of human community. How can we name those pathologies in a loving and constructive way, so that people can see the damage and begin to hope and dream about a fuller, richer life?
3. To contextualize the gospel may also mean to be aware of the unique cultural goods in a people. How do we nurture and build on these unique strengths of personal character and social structure that we find in most every cultural context?

Contextualization is not a process that we must engage in only when we cross into a new cultural and linguistic setting. We live in a world that is changing so quickly, that we must speak of re-contextualizing the gospel for each generation. I tell my students, you are growing up in a different world than that of your parents. One of the challenges facing churches here is how to move beyond forms of ministry and church life that were forged in the Soviet times, and develop forms of ministry and outreach that reflect the new social and economic realities of a post-Soviet world.

One final word on the task of contextualization. Contextualization is not primarily an intellectual task or a task for theologians. It is not primarily a linguistic task. It is the work of the whole people of God. If we want people to dream and hope again, if we want people to become aware of personal and social sicknesses that limit their lives, we need communities of people who embody and live out authentic freedom in Christ. We need healthy families, we need youth who know how to enjoy life without pursuing immoral and destructive pleasures, we need men who are spiritually alive (but still men), and we

need communities—people who live in trusting, mutually-supportive relationships. The existence of new communities who testify to the power of the gospel by how they live may be the most powerful form of witness for our culture today.

How do name the gospel in a way that powerfully connects with the hopes and fears of people in this transitional post-Soviet society?

How do we name and expose the personal and social pathologies are uniquely products of the Soviet era? And more importantly, how do we as Christian communities model healed and liberated ways of living? And, what are the unique cultural customs and practices that we find here, and how to nurture and strengthen these?

May the Holy Spirit empower us all to sing a new song, but sing it in a way that our neighbors can hear it and maybe even sing along!