

Mission: Contextualizing Theology and the Gospel

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INTRODUCTION

Sri Lankan theologian Pieris's explanation of why Christianity is not taking hold in Sri Lanka should interest missionaries. He uses the helicopter theory of religious expansion to explain why Christian missions are not taking hold in Sri Lanka.¹

First, metaphysical, supernatural religion is like a helicopter, while natural religion is a landing pad for supernatural religion to land on the ground. The meeting of the two does not result in a radical conversion from natural to supernatural religion. The "inculturation" that occurs when the two meet has no particular significance other than discovering natural points of contact that supernatural religions insert into natural religions. This theory explains why different religions spread throughout Asia.

Second, the principle of "first come, first served." Buddhism came to Sri Lanka before Christianity. Christianity came to the Philippines before any other metaphysical or supernatural religion. This theory is why Sri Lanka is a Buddhist country and the Philippines is a Christian country today. It is why it was not difficult for Islam to penetrate the Java island's culture in Indonesia, even though there was a natural religion, Tantric Hinduism.

Third, this is the only helicopter that can land in the same place once a helicopter has landed. This theory leads to the conclusion that the Philippines will not become a Buddhist country in the future; similarly, Sri Lanka will not become a Christian country. In other words, there will be no mass conversion from one metaphysical, supernatural religion to another metaphysical, supernatural religion. Only in areas where natural religion predominates can Christianity make a quantum leap forward. For example, Christianity significantly gained converts in some parts of Indonesia (North Sumatra, Ambonia, and Moluccas) because natural religions rather than Islam dominated those areas. However, other parts of Asia will not allow Christianity to sweep through the religious culture of Asia.

Fourth, we cannot rule out the possibility of coercive forces being used to force the grounded helicopter to leave the landing site. In this case, a metaphysical, supernatural religion could displace the existing metaphysical, supernatural religion by exerting sustained political or military pressure over a long period or through demographic change (colonial migration). This helicopter theory, built on

socio-historical observations, explains why colonial Christianity never took deep roots throughout Asia. The point is that Asian cultures, which have absorbed the great religions that make up more than 90 percent of Asia, have left no room for Christ.

Here are a few reasons to answer Pieris's question about why Christianity has not caught on in Asia:

1. Asia already had an established metaphysical and supernatural religion of the same caliber before Christianity arrived.
2. There is a historical sense of victimization in that Christianity was understood and experienced in Asian eyes as a religion as an adjunct to Western colonial power.
3. There is the Christological constraint that the Christ presented by Western Christianity was a European Christ, not an Asian Christ that Asians could accept.
4. The Christ created by Asian theologians was for a privileged few in the elite ruling class, not a Christ who spoke for the people.
5. It points to the failure of Christianity in Asia to understand the needs of the persecuted Asian people and to contextualize them as "our" God.

This Understanding of Pieris Exposes Some Essential Theological Issues.

First, it has a theological liberalism in which Christ is not the Christ of the Bible, but the people themselves, the community body. Second, it has a gnostic Christology, the fusion of subject and object. It eliminates the distinction between Christians and non-Christians and emphasizes the communal body, which is all of us. Christ becomes the body, not the head. The Christ of the Bible, the incarnate Christ with divinity and humanity, is rejected, leaving only the Gnostic Christ. Third, the mission concept with its traditional soteriology is thoroughly denied and rejected. Only healing and prophetic ministry is the true meaning of the mission, and the result of this missionary work is the liberation of the poor and the fulfillment of their aspirations. Fourth, the evangelical proclamation that salvation is found in Jesus Christ alone is an exclusive claim, a vestige of Western colonialism that must be rejected. Christ is to be interpreted as a Gnostic. Therefore the Spirit of Christ can be found in other religions, and dialogue is crucial to fulfilling healing and prophetic missionary work. Fifth, and most importantly, there is no belief that the Bible is the only authoritative word of God, but rather an understanding that the people's voice is the word of God. It paradoxically exposes the failure of Asian theology, as Pieris argues, to be a self-

1. Pieris, Aloysius. (1996). *Fire and Water: Basic Issues in Asian Buddhism and Christianity. Faith Meets Faith*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, p. 66-67.

sustaining theology grounded in biblical orthodoxy based on the foundation of the apostolic creeds. Thus, the subjective role of the Sri Lankan people is crucial for establishing Christianity in Sri Lanka. We also discover the importance of having a contextualized praxis grounded in biblical tradition and the biblical tradition, in which the proper knowledge and interpretation of the Bible as the eternal Word of truth and Christ as revealed in the Bible is grounded in text and context.

KINGDOM OF GOD IDENTITY AND CHRISTIAN MISSION

Charles H. Kraft draws on his own experience to argue that the theological questions posed by Western missionaries are very different from those posed by people on the mission field in the non-Western world. It demonstrates a fundamental disconnect between how missionaries and people in the mission field think.

First, when choosing the Old Testament story of Joseph, the Western missionary emphasizes that Joseph remained loyal to God despite the circumstances that happened to him. In contrast, the African emphasizes that Joseph never forgot his family, no matter how far away they were. Both meanings are legitimate understandings of Joseph, but they show that differences in the cultural background lead to different interpretive emphases. It shows that when God speaks to different cultural groups through the same passage, the passage is interpreted from different angles, each with a focus that is relevant to their culture. Secondly, Western missionaries like the Book of Romans for its logic, while Africans like the books of stories and history in the Bible. The Hellenistic way of thinking influenced Western Christianity and culture, so they liked Romans for their Hellenistic style of argumentation. At the same time, Africans are more likely to hear the Gospel through the Old Testament because their culture is closer to the Hebrew way of thinking. Third, "evil spirits," a topic that was never an issue for Western missionaries and was not taught in seminaries, is emerging as an essential question for Africans.²

These points illustrate the need for a non-Western lens when communicating the Gospel and applying biblical principles to people in non-Western cultures. Just as conversion to Christ brings about a paradigm shift, a radically new interpretation and response to reality, so does it require a change of perspective in the case of the missionary. This change of perspective is not a conversion to Christ but a conversion to a new perception of the nature and work of Jesus Christ to which he was already committed.

While Charles Kraft's challenge for a paradigm

shift for missionaries is primarily directed at Western missionaries, the call for a paradigm shift is still relevant for Asian missionaries, which often imitate and replicate the same Western frame of reference. Implicit in the criticisms from Western mission organizations about not doing "Korean-style missions" is a warning not to do missions with a uniquely Asian framework but instead not to replicate missionary approaches that Western missions have already tried and concluded to be unsuccessful. Implicit in this critique is a call for Korean missions to create their framework and model of non-Western missions and a model of Asian missions.

CONTEXTUALIZING THEOLOGY IN SRI LANKA

What constitutes an appropriate contextual or indigenous approach relevant to developing and advancing Asian theology? Charles R. Taber identifies six conditions that make indigenous contextual theology possible.

(1) Indigenous contextual theology must be formed in the people's language. It is not just in terms of words or grammatical structures but in terms of conceptual categories and symbols that are culturally rooted. (2) The methodology and logic of indigenous contextual theology must be culturally relevant. (3) Indigenous contextual theology must address themes that are relevant to the context. (4) Indigenous contextual theology must use culturally appropriate literary forms and genres. (5) Indigenous contextual theology must arise from within indigenous Christian communities. (6) Indigenous contextual theology should be a "participatory theology" of life and mission that expects the full participation of Indigenous communities, i.e., a theology of involvement and commitment.³

On this basis, Hwa Yung defines the concept of contextualization as follows. "Contextualization is a holistic process in which reflection and action are combined with the indigenous church, in which the meaning of the Christian gospel is appropriately understood from within its own indigenous culture and socio-political and economic realities, and in which the new faith survives according to the cultural type of the local society, on the one hand, and transforms the society and individuals within it, meeting their needs and desires under the guidance of the Bible and the Holy Spirit, on the other hand."⁴ It requires that for theology in Asia to be an indigenous contextual theology, the Asian church must have a process of self-reliant theologizing that is based on the triadic principles of self-reliance, self-revolution, self-governance, and above all, on the church's initiative.

2. Kraft, Charles H. (2005). *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross Cultural Perspective*. Revised 25th anniversary ed. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, p. 9-10.

3. Taber, Charles R. (1978). "The Limits of Indigenization in Theology." *Missiology*. 6(1), p. 67.

4. Yung, Hwa. (2000). *Mangoes or Bananas?* Oxford: Regnum Books, p. 2-4.

1. Three premises for understanding contextualization in theology

In order to discuss theological contextualization, the following points must be made. First, contextualization is rooted in the incarnation. Andrew F. Walls calls contextualization rooted in the incarnation of the “indigenization” principle.⁵ One constant throughout the history of Christianity has been the desire to live as Christians and as members of the society to which they belong and to make the church “feel at home” or “indigenize. This desire to be indigenized is tied to the very essence of the Gospel, and indigenization follows the incarnation itself. When God became man, Christ took on flesh as a member of a particular family, a citizen of a particular nation. He followed the traditions of customs familiar to that nation. Wherever Christ is received by people, and at whatever point in time, he takes on that nationality, society, and culture and sanctifies all that his presence can. Therefore, no group of Christians has the right to impose on another group of Christians, in the name of Christ, a value system for a life determined in another time and space.

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However, the process of indigenization or contextualization has its challenges. Uncritical contextualization runs the risk of leading to relativism. We need to recognize that there is something that transcends the context because we can end up with mutually exclusive local theologies. As John R. Davis points out, “Third World syncretism may ultimately

be more oppressive than First World imperialism.”⁶ Second, it is essential to note that a “pilgrimage” principle is in tension with the “indigenization” principle. Both of these principles are part of the essence of the Gospel. Both reveal that God accepts us as we are and seeks to transform us into what God wants us to be. Therefore, Christians take the pilgrimage principle seriously along with the indigenization principle. The pilgrim principle tells us we have no city on earth to dwell in. It also warns us that to be loyal to Christ is to be detached from the society to which one belongs, for there is no society in this world, Western or Eastern, ancient or modern, that can bring the Word of Christ painlessly into its fabric.⁷ Thus, when we can strike a balanced tension between these two principles, we can hold together the particularity of our situation and the universality of the Gospel without losing either.

Third, it is crucial to clarify the epistemological basis for contextualization. Paul Hibbert has argued that the epistemological basis for the lack of interest in contextualization during the colonial period was the dominance of positivists or pure realists.⁸ During this period, most scientists believed they accurately described the world as it was.⁹ Many missionaries understood theology similarly, assuming that Western theology was adequately well-structured and the absolute truth. Therefore, even though other religions and cultures reflected partial views of truth, the missionary’s task was to transplant the same theology immutable in the mission field. However, many factors, including the development of modern physics and relativity, led to the realization that pure realism was inadequate as an adequate description of reality.

Paul Hibbert argued that an adequate epistemological basis for theology is to be found in ‘critical realism,’ as seen in the similarities with science.¹⁰ Critical realism recognizes the difference between reality and our knowledge of that reality. However, like pure realism, that knowledge can be actual. In critical realism, theories are not pictures of reality but maps and blueprints. Just as many plans are needed to understand a building, many theories are needed to understand reality. This epistemology sees all human knowledge as composed of objective and subjective elements and allows us to understand truth better, even if our perceptions are partial. “We see through dark glasses, but we see nonetheless.”¹¹

6. Davis, John R. (1987). *Poles Apart?* Bangkok: OMF Publication, p. 104.

7. Walls, Andrew F. (1982). “The Gospel as the Prisoner and Liberator of Culture.” *Missionalia*.10(3), p. 98-99.

8. Hiebert, Paul G., and Frances F. Hiebert. (1987). *Case Studies in Missions*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, p. 105.

9. Barbour, Ian G. (1974). *Myths, Models, and Paradigms; a Comparative Study in Science and Religion*. 1st ed. New York: Harper & Row, p. 34.

10. Hiebert, Paul G. (1985). *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, p. 7.

11. Hiebert, Paul G., and Frances F. Hiebert. (1987). *Case Studies in Missions*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, p. 109.

5. Walls, Andrew F. (1982). “The Gospel as the Prisoner and Liberator of Culture.” *Missionalia*.10(3), p. 97.

This view of theology raises the question of how to deal with pluralism within systematic theology. According to Paul Hibbert, pluralism is inevitable if we take history and culture seriously and accept that all theologies are human interpretations of a biblical revelation within particular contexts. However, since critical realism affirms truth in theology, differences in theology must be faced fairly. Sometimes differences in theology can be accepted as complementary because they are statements of different needs and circumstances. It is because they are statements about different needs and situations. However, theological positions contradicting each other cannot be accepted as if the differences were of no consequence.¹² Such epistemological grounding is required for a critical contextualization that holds indigenous and pilgrim principles in proper tension.

2. Contextualizing the Gospel in Sri Lanka

The contextualization of the Gospel is manifested in the mode of revelation by which God presents the Gospel to humans. The Gospel is the good news that God has revealed himself in a way humans can grasp. To fulfill this purpose, the Word, God within the realm of time and space, came into the world in the flesh. We can say that God contextualized himself in Jesus Christ. One of the primary purposes of the incarnation is to reveal God in a human context. It paradoxically implies that it is impossible to understand and communicate the Gospel outside of the local culture of the recipient. However, a fundamental error in the interpretation of the Gospel occurs when the reading of the Bible ignores the original historical context and interprets it only within the reader's context. The assumption that God's Word cannot be rightly understood outside of its original cultural and linguistic context calls for an exegetical task that uses historical methods to build bridges between the interpreter and the biblical authors. However, the conditions for understanding the Word of God are not solved merely by the historical-scientific method of interpretation but more fundamentally by the interpreter's attitude toward God, the interpreter's ecclesiological tradition, and the interpreter's culture.¹³

First, the interpreter's attitude toward God is crucial in understanding the Word. It is because biblical revelation contains historical events and interpretations of those events. Therefore, the study of revelation involves historical inquiry. Revelation also intends to convince people of their sins and God's grace. As a result, people are brought into a personal fellowship with God. In other words, to fully understand revelation, it is not enough for the interpreter to know the initial historical circumstances of the revelation; instead, the interpreter must apply the perspective of the biblical author, the same perspective that the author has in communion with

12. Hibbert, Paul G. (1985). *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, p. 16.

13. Wright, Christopher J. H. (2000). "Interpreting the Bible among the World Religions." *Themelios*. 25(3), 35-54.

God. Just as there is an initial *Sitz im Leben* (a life situation), there is also a situation of faith that the interpreter must take on fully. Religious knowledge thus consists of historical, metaphysical, ethical, and personal dimensions, i.e., objective truth and the subjectivity and emotion of personal engagement, which are also epistemological elements.

Second, the ecclesiological tradition of the interpreter is a crucial factor in understanding the Word. If the purpose of God's revelation is not the creation of a book (the Bible) but the formation of a people, the church, who are the recipients of the Word, then we cannot ignore the history of biblical interpretation, which is the history of how the church has understood the written Word through the centuries. Often, however, tradition assumes the function of an exegetical control that guards the interpreter in hearing the message of Scripture. This attitude is the starting point of the doctrinal character that gives rise to many denominations.

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Third, the interpretive understanding of the Word is constrained by the culture of the interpreter. The interpreter does not live in a vacuum but in a concrete historical space, a culture that gives rise to the interpreter's language, patterns of thought and behavior, emotional responses, values, interests, and goals. Thus, the Word of God comes to him within the interpreter's cultural framework. Knowledge of God can only be understood when the Word is incarnated in the interpreter's context. It calls for a correction of the attitude of Western theology, which has a rationalistic mentality that tries to understand the Gospel only as a system of truth and to treat it only scientifically and objectively, divorced from the element of personal commitment. The concept of absolute objectivity is impossible. We must not ignore that there is a gap between the revealed Gospel and the interpretation of that Gospel because the interpreter is always in the position of interpreting as a fallen being. Every interpretation is influenced by the cultural context in which the interpreter is fundamentally constrained.

In summary, the knowledge of God based on the Bible is proper through exegesis, but it is not complete. Consequently, we must recognize that theology is not absolute, but we must also recognize that theology must be true. Just as no culture can fully fulfill God's purposes, the Gospel cannot be fully incarnated in any

culture. The Gospel always transcends culture, even though the Gospel has profoundly influenced culture.

3. The Gospel in Sri Lanka in the Non-Western World

To what extent has the expansion of the Gospel been accomplished through the incarnation of the Gospel? Can Christians state that the Gospel is a universal message with unrestricted relevance to the non-Western world? These questions are raised. It is commonly pointed out that the church in the non-Western world is a church without theology. However, there is inevitably theology wherever the Gospel of salvation in Christ Jesus is preached. If the Gospel is not theological, it is not the Gospel. Theology is not contemplative from an ivory tower but an expression of God's understanding of actual questions from the field. However, the way we bring God's understanding into our understanding is strictly from the Bible, God's only revelation. Outside of the Bible, we cannot rightly understand God's will for the practical questions of life, so theology cannot be thought of apart from the Bible as the only means of revealing God's will and revelation.

The question is whether our understanding of the Bible is clothed in a cultural garb that is acceptable to the context in which we live: the principle that God's Word is immutable and that God's Word is communicated in a way that makes its message relevant to the context of our lives. The non-Western world has unique questions, and relevant answers must come from the infallible Word of God. The confession of the absoluteness and uniqueness of God's Word presupposes that the Gospel in the non-Western world must be universal in understanding eternal truths that transcend time and culture. The Gospel in the non-Western world cannot be different from the Western world but must have a universal unity that stands on the foundation of apostolic confession. As the missionary Apostle Paul understood it, the basis for the unity of Jewish and Gentile Christians in Christ and their access to God in the one Spirit is that they are "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets" (Eph. 2:20).

Where is the justification for the term gospel in the non-Western world? The justification arises from the need to build hermeneutical and homiletical bridges between the Word passed down from the foundation of the apostles and prophets and its relevance to us today. The Gospel, the Word of God, is the same eternal truth yesterday and today to Jews and Gentiles alike. However, the place of the hearer of this eternal truth is different in time, space, and life circumstances - yesterday and today, Jew and Gentile. The biblical writers recognized this distinction.

For example, in Acts 13:32, the apostle Paul points out that "David served God's purpose in his generation." 1 Chronicles 12:32 speaks of a leader who "understood the times and knew what Israel should do" (The man of Issachar understood the times

and knew what Israel should do). The importance of knowing the place and time in which the Gospel is witnessed is confirmed by Luther's words. "If you preach the Gospel in all aspects except the issues with deal specifically with your times -you are not preaching all the Gospel." In order to build a bridge that bridges the gap between then and now, we need to go through a four-step process: Exegesis (Observation and Interpretation), Implication, Contextualization, and Personalization. A diagram of the above discussion is shown below.

TABLE 1: Modern Applications Of Biblical Texts¹⁴

Bible Texts	Application	People's needs
The Word of God		World
Past Revelations	Changing lives	The current world
Then		Now
Interpretation	Implications	Personalization
Annotators		Communicators

The Message Bible points out that Jesus also "presented his message to them, fitting the stories to their experience and maturity (Mark 4:33)." So what the Gospel in the non-Western world requires is sufficient contextualization of the Gospel within the culture of the non-Western world. Without this contextualization, Christianity will always be constrained in Asia and Africa as a racial religion of the West. Without the contextualization of the Gospel in the soil of the non-Western world, Christianity does not take root in the reality of the people of the non-Western world deeply enough to generate creative thought; that is, the church skims the surface of the history of the non-Western world, but fails to generate a sense of uniqueness in the minds of the people of the non-Western world that is "mine" or "ours" and has a process of identification. Even though it has been 450 years since Christianity was introduced to Sri Lanka, it is still considered a Western religion in the minds of the Sri Lankan people and has failed to create a sense of belonging to us. In this respect, the decision of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 becomes a monumental event in contextualizing the Gospel that breaks the limits and perceptions of the Gospel as belonging to the Jews and provides a new framework of perception that the Gospel belongs to the Gentiles.

4. Contextualizing the Gospel in Culture

If the Gospel is not contextualized, God's Word becomes a message that only skims the surface of our lives. Therefore, the incarnation of the Gospel in culture becomes a critical missionary issue. Regarding the nature of culture, Aram points out three important facts.

First, culture is the self-expression of a group of people in time and space. Culture is an expression of life, a way of being oneself concerning others and nature. Culture is the total of language, traditions, beliefs, institutions, and customs that strongly bind a community. Culture is also a complex entity

14. Warren, Rick. (2001). *Purpose-Driven Preaching*. p. 6-7.

encompassing spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional qualities. A people's ethos, or self-identity, is expressed through their culture. Therefore, culture and religion have a strong internal cohesion. Most societies express their identity through culture and religion and find comfort in them. For example, in Judaism, Islam, and Hinduism, the founding culture is seen as a divine model for encountering ultimate reality - an absolute model culture. In Christianity, however, culture has only instrumental and transitional values. In Christianity, culture is a variable model.¹⁵

Andrew Walls makes three points about the impact of Christianity's attitude toward the variable value of culture on missionary history.¹⁶ First, it makes Christianity's progress in the world not continuous but recurrent. Areas that once came under Islamic influence have remained Islamic, while areas that were once the heartland of Christianity are no longer so. The Christian communities there have been weakened or extinguished. In the words of revelation, the candlestick has been moved. However, the weakening of Christianity in the heartland does not mean that the witness of Christianity in the world has weakened. The church in Jerusalem at the center scattered to the four winds, but the mission to the Hellenized world, initiated by the church in Antioch at the periphery, spread the Gospel farther afield. In other words, the decline of Christianity's center led to its growth at the periphery. Thus, Christianity has no permanent core holy place comparable to Islam's Mecca. No one country or culture can claim a monopoly on the Christian faith. There is no permanent Christian state and no single, exclusive form of Christian culture. At different times in history, the initiative of Christian missions in different parts of the world has been passed back and forth like a relay race.

Second, Christianity has existed across cultural boundaries. The survival and continued growth of the Christian faith are due to its ability to cross cultural boundaries. Christianity survived and grew because it crossed Jewish cultural boundaries into the Greek world, and when the Jerusalem church died out, new Greek-speaking churches were established that included Gentiles. Christianity survives by spreading across cultural and linguistic boundaries. With the process of mission across cultural and linguistic boundaries, Christianity would continue and thrive.

Third, Jesus Christ took on the culture of this world to build His church. The early church developed a thoroughly Jewish way of being and living as a Christian. However, church leaders at the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 concluded that circumcision and obedience to legalistic teachings based on Jewish culture were unnecessary. As Greeks, those who

15. Aram, I. (1999). "The Incarnation of the Gospel in Cultures: A Missionary Event." *New Directions in Mission & Evangelization* 3. Orbis Books: Scherer, James A. & Bevens, Stephen B. ed., p.30.

16. Walls, Andrew F. (2001). "Rethinking Mission: New Directions for a New Century." A lecturing paper for the Centennial Memorial International Mission Conference at Chang Shin University, Korea.

accepted Jesus Christ and became Christians had to discover for themselves, under the guidance and illumination of the Holy Spirit, how to live out their Christian identity as Greeks. Living in a society with Hellenic characteristics differs from living with Jewish characteristics. When Ephesians was written, there were only two primary cultures within Christianity, two Christian ways of life, one Jewish and one Hellenic. However, now there is a much wider variety of Christian ways of life. Therefore, an essential part of missionary work is to help and encourage the development of different Christian lifestyles in different world cultures under the guidance and illumination of the Holy Spirit. At the same time, it is vital to help those who live different Christian lifestyles to recognize and coexist with each other as members of the same body of Christ.

Aram points out that the second characteristic of culture is that it is not a fixed, static thing but a dynamic force. The modern world is moving toward a single dominant culture. Today, the emergence of a new internationalized monoculture threatens humanity and everything in creation. The development of modern new science and market economy has led to a new internationalized culture built on profit, quantitative growth, and exploitation. Western culture is dominated by economic materialism based on cost and utility value. The culture of economic materialism is supported by growth-oriented values that ignore human dignity and the integrity of creation. These new values have excluded Christian values, spreading an antithetical ethic to the Gospel and perpetuating a sentiment that absolutizes anthropocentric values over theocratic ones. By refusing to accept human finitude and increasing awareness of self-fulfillment, the culture expresses a Tower of Babel mentality of forgetting dependence and trust in ultimate reality. The secularism, materialism, and technocracy of an anthropocentric culture are dehumanizing contradictions.

Third, Aram points out local indigenous cultures struggle to affirm their self-identity through their structures and value systems. The contact between local indigenous and internationalized cultures encourages attempts to find meaning through countercultural paradigms manifesting neo-fascism, religious fundamentalism, extremism, mysticism, and fanaticism. It also destroys socio-ethical foundations by embracing ethical relativism, leading society to non-integration and self-destruction.

The question posed by the crisis manifested in the above cultural characteristics is not about the relationship between the Gospel and culture but rather the presence of the Gospel itself above culture. How do we proclaim the Gospel amid a culture of fear, despair, violence, and death? How can the Gospel provide freedom, renewal, and transformation through life-giving action?

The Gospel is Jesus Christ, not a written book. The

Gospel is a living encounter between God and man. It is the beginning of a new man and a new world. However, the Gospel becomes relevant and gains credibility when communicated to people through their own culture. The Word was incarnated in the context of a given culture. Therefore, the Word must be re-incarnated within a particular culture, and each reincarnation within a culture must find an appropriate human response. Thus, the Gospel must be received, experienced, affirmed, and proclaimed through culture. Culture plays an essential role in the dialog between God and man. The claim that the Gospel must be incarnated in culture requires a presupposed understanding that the Gospel must be experienced and expressed in different ways at different times.

The incarnation of the Gospel does not preclude the Gospel from maintaining its universality in any time or place. However, its authenticity is recognized by the universality of the Gospel. When the universality of the Gospel and the distinctive particularities of a culture are not mutually exclusive but combined, the Gospel can fully communicate the true meaning of the incarnation. The Gospel makes its presence known in culture, but this does not make it subordinate to culture; rather, it transcends culture. The Gospel has a transcultural character that transforms culture. It means equating the Gospel with any culture on earth misrepresents its nature. Christ meets us in our cultural context, which is unique. Christ is proclaimed through particular cultural shapes and forms. In other words, the Gospel is affirmed through culture, not in culture. A culture is merely a tool, a framework, a context in which the Gospel is embodied. Historically, during the imperialist colonial period, missions focused on the text and ignored the context. In the post-colonial era, missions focused on the context and ignored the text. The mission field testifies that contextualization of the Gospel cannot fully occur when one extreme is emphasized, and the other is ignored. In gospel contextualization, there is a tension between emphasizing people and forgetting the Gospel and emphasizing the Gospel and losing people. At one extreme, an obsession with contextualizing the Gospel can lead to a loss of the Gospel, but there is also a tension that if the Gospel is not contextualized, people will not hear the Gospel. The source of this tension is that biblical revelation contains a mix of cultural and human elements and transcultural and divine elements. Orthodox theology emphasizes the transcultural divine elements in biblical revelation, seeking apostolic contextualization and taking a didactic approach to teaching truth. Liberalism emphasizes biblical revelation's cultural and human elements, resulting in a syncretistic contextualization, and takes a dialogical approach to seek the truth. Neo-orthodoxy and neo-liberalism take a dialectical approach to truth discovery, seeking prophetic contextualization by emphasizing the transcultural divine and cultural human elements.

In the tension between the transcultural nature of biblical revelation and cultural elements, Paul Hiebert emphasized the need to be critical of the process of contextualization. Critical contextualization is a consideration of context-sensitive appropriateness alongside a commitment to preserving the purity of the Gospel. The importance of critical contextualization is that it provides a safeguard against the dangers inherent in contextualization. Contextualization itself is an ongoing process. The world in which people live is constantly changing and raising new questions. Our understanding of the Gospel and its application to our lives is only partial, so we must continue to study and grow spiritually to arrive at a complete understanding of the truth. Critical contextualization takes the Bible seriously as the norm for faith and life, meaning contextualized practices must be grounded in Scripture. Every practice must measure its legitimacy against the standard of biblical revelation alone. Second, the revelation-based approach of critical contextualization recognizes the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers to lead them to God. Third, within critical contextualization, the church acts as a hermeneutical community, meaning that the communal nature of the church as a hermeneutical community not only extends to the church in every culture but also connects it to the church in every age.¹⁷

When critical contextualization is not fully achieved, two reactions occur. The first is a rejection of contextualization, where the Gospel is rejected from the outset as something foreign and not our own, or where old beliefs, rituals, and practices are allowed to operate within, creating syncretism. The second is uncritical contextualization, an uncritical acceptance of the old, immediately creating syncretism. In the face of these dangers, critical contextualization achieves contextualization by gathering information about the old beliefs, rituals, stories, songs, customs, art, and music, studying the biblical teaching about the event, evaluating the old in the light of the biblical teaching, and creating a new contextualized Christian practice. Proper contextualization requires a deep understanding of the historical and cultural context of the Christian message and the culture in which it is communicated. It involves knowledge of the external meaning of cultural forms and the implicit theological presuppositions of those cultural forms.¹⁸

Without a proper understanding of critical contextualization, a Korean missionary preaching the Gospel in South Asia risks conveying something unrelated and foreign that is Asian in appearance but completely different. The Asian missionary falls into the error of conveying Western theological questions and frameworks that are Asian in appearance but Western in content. When critical contextualization is

17. Hiebert, Paul G. (1994). *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*. Michigan: Baker books. P.91

18. Hiebert, Paul G. (1984). "Critical Contextualization in Missiology." *Missiology: An International Review*. X11(3).p.290-291.

lacking, the message homegrown Christians convey to their people falls into the same error of conveying an uncontextualized message. In other words, even if Christianity in Asia can be categorized into two groups, ecumenical and evangelical, the problem with these two groups is that the lack of a clear sense of a Christianity that is deeply rooted in Asian culture, a Kingdom identity in Christ, is a hindrance to the expansion of Christian mission.

CONCLUSION

Fruits common to the subtropical Asian region are the banana and the mango. The banana is a fruit of unknown origin, while the mango is an authentic Asian fruit. A ripe banana has a yellowish skin with a white center. Mangoes, on the other hand, are the same golden color on the outside and inside. Inherent in the contrast between bananas and mangoes is an analogy. Asian theology since World War II has been more like a banana than a mango: yellow on the outside, white on the inside. Today, however, the growth and meteoric rise of the church across Asia is a marvel to the West. The Christian world in the 21st century has shifted its center of gravity to the non-Western church. However, the problem is that Asian Christianity still does not have a clear sense of its identity. The unilateral dominance of Western culture in modern history has had a profound impact on the development of Christianity in the non-Western world. As a result, Asian Christians have lost confidence in their own culture and history and the absoluteness of the Gospel of Christ in a pluralistic world, partly by adopting Enlightenment norms that deny objective truth in religious belief. It is a severe problem in Sri Lanka's church and mission history.

The themes of the theology and mission of the Church in Sri Lanka for the future are apparent. The contextualization between Walls's "pilgrimage principle" and the "indigenous principle" calls for a double restoration of confidence: confidence in the Gospel and one's culture and history. Without this, Christianity will never be fully incarnated on Sri Lankan soil. Our theological and missional need is to be more mango and less banana. When this is done, the Church in Sri Lanka will be able to proclaim the Gospel in word and deed with greater pastoral relevance and missionary fruitfulness.

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