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**CONTEXTUALIZING THEOLOGY
IN THE CARIBBEAN¹**

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Introduction

Regardless of his theological persuasion, denomination affiliation, geographical location, or area of expertise, the Bible College administrator or instructor in the Caribbean could hardly have failed to have encountered the term “contextualization.” Having come in vogue merely seven years ago, this topic is certainly foremost in recent missiological as well as theological discussions. A study of this issue is not merely an instructive exercise because of its contemporaneity, but a vital necessity since it addresses itself not only to methodology but to the very heart of the Gospel itself. (Without wishing to be presumptuous or facetious, the persons most equipped to deal with this issue are committed, capable, trained, Spirit-filled national church leaders, pastors, and theologians, some of whom are present at this conference).¹

The purpose of this paper is fourfold. Firstly, it is intended to orient those who are unfamiliar with the concept and the main issues involved in this discussion. Thus, such factors as the importance, difficulties, emphases, critical issues, risks, criteria, guidelines, categories, and Biblical examples of contextualization will be highlighted. Secondly, this paper attempts to begin to lay a basis for further work in this area by Caribbean Evangelicals. The present dearth of literature on this subject produced by Caribbean Evangelicals is unfortunate but understandable, since this issue is not only a relatively new concept but there are relatively few Evangelicals with the commitments, capability, training and/or time to carefully address themselves to this issue. The vital question may not be “Is it necessary?” but more pragmatically “Is it contextualization a top priority issue in the Caribbean Church?” And if so “Who is qualified to undertake this responsibility?”

¹See excerpt of a personal letter from Aharon Sapsezian to F. Ross Kinsler in: F. Ross Kinsler, “Mission and Context: The Current Debate about Contextualization,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 14 (January 1978):24.

Thirdly, this paper attempts to suggest beginning strategy for dealing with this issue in the Caribbean. Finally, to concretize the discussion several theological and practical issues which relate to the concept of contextualization will be suggested for further exploration. Thus, because of its orientational and foundational nature the emphasis of this paper will be on breadth rather than depth, a survey of the lay of the land rather than intense prospecting at a particular site.

The limitations and adverse conditions under which this paper labours are many, but hopefully not sever enough to make it completely worthless. As already mentioned, the dearth (or absence) of literature written on this subject by Evangelicals, together with inadequate library holdings (which characterize the majority of Bible College libraries in the Caribbean) make careful, thorough research somewhat frustrating. The significant works, if available, are either written from a liberal perspective or from a North American missionary standpoint. In the latter case, even though articles have been written by Third World theologians, the orientation is primarily North American since the majority of these nationals have received their theological education there.

Practically, because of pastoral responsibilities in a local church as well as teaching obligations in a Bible College the writer has not found sufficient time to do full justice to this profound subject. In addition the author's youth, relative inexperience, and lack of exposure also pose a credibility question. Finally, because of the author's lack of first hand knowledge of the rest of the Caribbean the paper may more appropriately be entitled: "Contextualizing Theology in Jamaica," although there will be several points of contact because of our similar social, cultural, economic, political, and religious heritage. Before embarking on this study it must be made clear that this paper is not intended for the average Caribbean lay person but for the theologian, Bible College administrator and/or instructor, church leader, pastor, and/or the thinking layperson.

History of the Word

The historical origin of the word "contextualization" as it is currently used in theological and missiological circles, may be traced to the publication in October 1972 of *Ministry in Context: The Third Mandate Programme of the Theological Education Fund 1970-1977*² which centred around this concept. In some ways the focus on "contextualization" as a way towards reform in theological education is understandable, for even in the call for "advance" in the First Mandate (1958-1964) a supplementary statement that the Theological Education Fund should seek "to develop and strengthen indigenous theological education" revealed a growing skepticism as to whether the use of Western standards as the frame of reference would necessarily strengthen indigenous theological education.³ The call for "Rethink" in the Second Mandate (1965-1969) revealed a more explicit concern reflected in their definition of excellence to be sought in theological education, the aim being defined in terms of using

² Theological Education Fund, *Ministry in Context: The Third Mandate Programme of the Theological Education Fund 1970-1977* (Bromley, Kent: Theological Education Fund, 1972).

³ Shoki Coe, "In Search of Renewal in Theological Education," *Theological Education* 9 (Summer 1973):235.

“resources so as to help teachers and students to a deeper understanding of the Gospel in the context of the particular cultural and religious setting of the church.”⁴ Thus, non-evangelicals have been advocates of contextualization earlier and more prominently than Evangelicals. On a whole, Evangelicals have been either reluctant, tardy, or superficial in addressing themselves to the contextualization discussion. The International Congress on World Evangelization held at Lausanne in July 1974 was one of the first places where this subject received some attention.⁵ However, these treatments tended to reflect Evangelical shallowness as Harvie Conn astutely observes. His critique on Kato’s presentation is that “Abstracting the message of the Gospel from its form Kato’s argument concentrates largely on the expressions of the culture in worship – liturgy, dress, ecclesiastical services. It seems to take little cognizance of the shift from indigenization to contextualization, and especially to the heart of the contextualization debate – the Gospel in interaction with the culture.”⁶ The relative immaturity exhibited by Evangelicals in this area may be due to such factors as the isolation of missions from theology and theological reflection, North American cultural pragmatism, and the fear of liberal constructions. However, committed Evangelicals from the Third World have recognized not only the weakness in this area but also the necessity for engaging in the task of contextualization. For example, Emilio Antonio Nunez of Guatemala admits that “a serious effort in contextualization is only beginning among us.... We are far behind in the training of leaders capable of carrying out contextualization: leaders rooted deeply in the Word of God and fully identified with their own culture, leaders who know well the *text* and the *context*...”⁷ As far as this writer knows there has not yet been a definitive Evangelical response from the Caribbean addressing itself to this issue.

Definition

What really does the word “contextualization” mean and imply? Depending on the circles in which one moves, this term may mean different things to different people. For example, the Theological Education Fund Report describes contextualization as including all that is implied in indigenization but also takes into account the processes of secularity, technology, and struggle for human justice, which characterize the historical movement of nations in the Third World.”⁸ While agreeing that this term expresses a deeper concept than indigenization, Kato understands the term to mean “making concepts or ideals relevant in a given situation. In reference to Christian practices, it is an effort to express the never changing Word of God in ever changing modes for relevance.”⁹ In a study group on contextualization at Lausanne in 1974 (the discussion framed in the missiological context of the evangelization of the world), the following four definitions emerged:

⁴ Theological Education Fund, *Ministry in Context*, pp.12-13.

⁵ See Byang H. Kato, “The Gospel, Cultural Context and Religious Syncretism,” and M. Bradshaw and P. Savage, “The Gospel, Contextualization and Syncretism Report,” in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, ed. J. D. Douglas (Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 1975), pp 1216-28.

⁶ Harvie M. Conn, “Contextualization: Where Do We Begin?” in *Evangelicals and Liberation*, ed. Carl E. Amerding (Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 1977), p.97.

⁷ Emilio Antonio Nunez, “Contextualization – Latin American Theology,” *Latin American Pulse* 40 (February 1976):6.

⁸Theological Education Fund, *Ministry in Context*, p. 20.

⁹ Kato, “The Gospel,” p. 1217.

- (1) The identification of the Gospel form, its cultural clothing
- (2) The communication of the Gospel in pertinent, meaningful cultural forms both external (e.g., Liturgical garments) and thought forms (eg., Time-space dimensions)
- (3) The communication that spoke to the issues and needs of the person and his society.
- (4) The meaningful and honest response made by that person in cultural and societal context under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.¹⁰

In the opinion of the author, apart from being vague and incomprehensible to the average reader, the first definition (in theory as well as practice) represents a capitulation to humanistic patterns of ethnology-sociology heavily overlaid on a smattering of Scripture. On the other hand, contextualization cannot merely be reduced to “a simple category of the effective communication of the content of the Gospel to the cultural context.”¹¹ Knapp’s definition of the word is perhaps the most satisfactory one encountered thus far. He defines contextualization as follows: “Contextualization in the dynamic process through which the church continually challenges and/or incorporates – transforms elements of the cultural and social milieu of which it is an integral part in its daily struggle to be obedient to the Lord Jesus Christ in its life and mission in the world.”¹²

Relationship to Indigenization

In defending the use of the word “contextualization” Shoki Coe, general director of the Theological Education Fund and probably the first to give it its original meaning claims that “We try to convey all that is implied in the familiar term *indigenization*, yet seek to press beyond for a more dynamic concept which is open to change and which is also future – oriented.”¹³ In essence, the liberal spokesmen for contextualization are saying that there is need to explore not only the anthropological and religious dimensions of culture (which indigenization emphasizes) but also the social and economic dimensions of each situation in order to discover the full, significance of the Gospel in that situation. Norman Ericson’s explanation of the distinction between indigenization and contextualization is somewhat simplistic but helpful. He claims that: “The difference seems to be a matter of chronology and degree. Indigenization was an early effort in (newly?) evangelized nations to utilize the nationals and to incorporate certain native cultural forms which were virtually consistent with Western Christianity. But contextualization is a later breakthrough aiming to adopt the

¹⁰ Bradshaw and Savage, “The Gospel”, p. 1226.

¹¹ Conn, “Where do We Begin?” p. 104.

¹² Stephen Knapp, “Contextualizing and its Implications for U. S. Evangelical Churches and Missions,” (Abington, Pa.: Partnership in Mission, 1976) p. 15.

¹³ Shoki Coe, “Contextualizing Theology,” in *Mission Trends No. 3: Third World Theologies*, eds. Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky (New York: Paulist Press, 1976; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), p. 21.

new culture *in toto*.”¹⁴ On the other hand, other Evangelicals such as James Oliver Buswell III see the distinction between the two terms as merely semantical.¹⁵ It seems most appropriate at this point to stress the fact that the word “contextualization” has different connotations to different people.

Aspects of Contextualization

Practically and simplistically, as a general rule of thumb, when the non-evangelical theologian uses the term “contextualization” he is primarily dealing with the content of the Gospel, whereas when the Evangelical theologian uses this term he is probably applying it to the methodology of presenting the Gospel. Thus, the non-evangelical’s use of the word, “indigenization is virtually synonymous to the Evangelical’s use of the word “contextualization”. For example, Kato speaks of contextualization in terms of such things as liturgy, dress, language, church service, and any other form of expression of the Gospel truth¹⁶ while the non-evangelical would identify this as indigenization. It is quite understandable that the Evangelical should place the emphasis on methodology, for it is inherently assumed that the content of the Gospel message remains unchanged. This issue will be dealt with later in the paper when the essence of the Gospel is considered.

The Foci of Contextualization

In the contextualization discussion at least three emphases are evident.

- (1) Focus on the indigenous theologian. This emphasis is illustrated by Von Allmen who claims that “no true” indigenization of contextualization’ can take place (merely) because foreigners, the ‘missionaries,’ suggest it; on the contrary, true indigenization takes place only because the ‘indigenous’ church has itself become truly missionary, with or without the blessing of the missionaries.”¹⁷ This tends to be the focus of Caribbean theologians in the established churches.
- (2) Focus on the missionary communicator. This emphasis highlights the problems of cross-cultural communication which face the missionary. This approach is illustrated by Nicholls who explains contextualization as “the translation of the unchanging content of the Gospel of the Kingdom into verbal form meaningful to peoples in their separate cultures and within their particular existential situations.”¹⁸

¹⁴ Norman R. Ericson, “Reply” in *Theology and Mission*, ed. David J. Hesselgrave (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), p. 121.

¹⁵ James O. Buswell III, “Contextualization: Theory, Tradition and Method,” in *Theology and Mission*, ed. David J. Hesselgrave (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), pp. 93-94.

¹⁶ Kato, “The Gospel,” p. 1217-18.

¹⁷ Daniel von Allmen, “The Birth of Theology,” *International Review of Mission* 64 (January 1975):39.

¹⁸ Bruce Nicholls, “Theological Education and Evangelization Report,” in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, ed. J. D. Douglas (Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 1975), p. 647.

- (3) Focus on the target population. This perspective is the obverse side of the previous focus, emphasizing not the missionary communicator but the target population which is receiving the Gospel dressed in unfamiliar cultural context. A careful examination will indicate that since communication involves both the communication and the recipients, the latter two foci are inseparable. These two foci would probably be in the minds of Caribbean Evangelical theologians who are well acquainted with the term “contextualization”.

The Necessity of Contextualization

Regardless of one’s understanding of this term, the overwhelming majority of theologians and missiologists see contextualization as a vital necessity.¹⁹ As noted by Ericson, “Contextualization has been at all points a concomitant of the divine communication to man... singularly expressed in the incarnation.”²⁰

Objections to Contextualization

Although the majority of informed Evangelicals see contextualization (as they understand it) as an imperative, some are bound to raise either theological or practical objections. In the first category of objections some may claim that since the Gospel is timeless, universal, and unchanging, there is absolutely no need for this exercise. However, it may be argued that although the essence of the Gospel remains the same the modes of expression are not inspired or sacrosanct. In a similar vein, the objection that “what was good for Paul and Silas is good enough for me” betrays not only an elevation of tradition to the level of Scripture (a charge which Protestants often level against Roman Catholics), but also an irrational, insecure desire to preserve the comfortable status quo at all costs even if this cannot be defended on Scriptural grounds. Some so-called practical objections would be that this exercise is either a complete waste of valuable time and resources or that it does not edify the church. However, if we are guilty of presenting an emasculated, distorted, or tradition-bound Gospel which is heavily laden with alien superficial trappings and/or presented in an archaic, anachronistic manner it is incumbent on us to be engaged in the processes of decontextualization and recontextualization.

Explanations for Failure to Contextualize

Reasons for failure to contextualize are legion. Ericson suggests the following six reasons why Evangelicals have often failed to contextualize:

- (1) The characteristic emphasis on the unity of Scripture
- (2) The single-minded way in which Evangelicals view and use the canonical literature

¹⁹ E. G. See Theological Education Funds, *Ministry in Context*, p. 19 and Kato, “The Gospel,” p. 1217.

²⁰ Norman R. Ericson, “Implications from the New Testament for Contextualization,” in *Theology and Mission*, ed. David J. Hesselgrave (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 197), p. 85.

- (3) Contextual studies of the New Testament have been minimal
- (4) The effort to abstract and absolutize the teachings of the Bible
- (5) Simplistic implementation of Evangelism
- (6) Lack of emphasis upon Hermeneutic²¹

Principalizing E. W. Fashold-Luke's²² reasons for the failure of West African Churches to produce relevant and meaningful theologies for their peoples, the additional reasons may be appended:

- (7) third World Churches are churches without theologies and theological concern
- (8) Little or no attempt has been made to train theologians
- (9) The few trained theologians have received their training in Western cultural situations
- (10) Western missionaries came from theological backgrounds where aspects of discontinuity between Christianity and every culture were stressed to the exclusion of the aspects of continuity with local cultures.

Finally, Buswell suggests that one reason for the failure to relinquish the church to indigenous cultural forms and leadership is

- (11) Strong feelings of insecurity which assail the missionary in an unfamiliar cultural context which leads him to structure things in familiar cultural forms.²³
- (12)

Difficulties in Contextualization

It would be foolhardy o enthusiastically plunge into the process of contextualization without first noting the obstacles which stand in the way. The following six are suggested by the author:

- (1) The missionary himself is/was too involved in the process
- (2) The underestimation of the ability of the nationals by the missionaries or the nationals themselves
- (3) The people for whom it is intended are no longer there
- (4) The non-homogenous and diverse nature of the native population
- (5) The native theologians have received a Western oriented education which leave them open to the danger of being either unable to principalize or unprepared to cope
- (6) The delicate and difficult task of identifying the negotiables from the non-negotiables, the valid from the invalid.

²¹Norman R. Ericson, "Implications from the New Testament for Contextualization," in *Theology and Mission*, ed. David J. Hesselgrave (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 197), p. 71-73.

²² E. W. Fashole-Luke, "The Quest for African Christian Theologies," in *Mission Trends* No. 3, eds. Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas f. Stransky (New York: Paulist Press, 1976; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), pp. 137-38.

²³Buswell, "Contextualization," pp. 101-2.

The Essence of the Gospel

In the process of contextualization the question arises as to whether there is an unchanging, unalterable frame of reference. For the Evangelical, there is an essential core which is independent of any culture. This core of truth which cannot be tampered with, is that the transcendent, immanent God has spoken definitely through Jesus Christ who has effected eternal salvation through His life, death and resurrection (cf. 1 Corinthians 15: 3-11). This body of truth called the Gospel must be declared with a view to appropriation, if one is to be faithful in communicating the Gospel. How then is the content of the Gospel related to theology and contextualization?

Theology and Contextualization

On careful reflection, it is apparent that the scope of contextualization is bounded by the parameters of one's theology. The writer has identified at least four different approaches to theology.

- (1) The 'Accommodational Approach' considers prevailing customs and religious practices in the country and attempts to adopt or adapt those which are appropriate and consistent with the Gospel. This is by no means an easy task for the process of evaluation is indeed a delicate one requiring people who are committed to their God and His Word, willing to investigate carefully the religious, sociological, anthropological and ethnological factors. This approach could lead to valid or invalid accommodations. For example, Don Richardson's principle of redemptive analogy described in *Peace Child*²⁴ appears to be a valid one, but an attempt to teach the doctrine of the Trinity using the Korean mythology of creation²⁵ appears invalid.
- (2) The 'Situational Approach' exemplified by liberation theologians as well as a good number of Caribbean theologians in the established churches attempts to formulate theology after reflecting on one's experience in life. Although the attempt to make one's faith relevant is commendable, this approach is fraught with at least two major dangers - (1) the danger of starting from the sinful human situation rather than the Word of God and (2) the danger of political analyses taking precedence over Biblical theology.
- (3) The 'Perpendicular Approach' exemplified by many Evangelicals and perhaps by the majority of Evangelicals in the Caribbean emphasizes the priority of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and the vital necessity of proclaiming the Gospel message. While this emphasis is commendable, it often leads to rejection, disparagement, disregard, or insensitivity of certain cultures (whether they be one's own or not). Furthermore, this betrays a lack of awareness of the cultural aspects of Christianity. In this approach, contextualization is either unknown, ignored, minimized, or even resisted.

²⁴ Don Richardson, *Peace Child* (Glendale, California: Gospel Light Publications, 1974), passim.

²⁵ See Sung Bum Yun, "Tang-Gun Mythology in Vestigium Trinitatis," *Christian Thought* (October 1963): 16.

- (4) The fourth approach which the writer would like to term the Biblical Approach attempts to incorporate all the positive aspects of the other three approaches.

From somewhat of a difference perspective Robert Moore identifies and explains three different types of theologies which have evolved over the course of history – (1) The Theology of Absorption (2) The Theology of Imposition and (3) The Theology of Imitation and suggests that the task of Caribbean theology is in one sense a Theology of Exploration.²⁶

As noted by Charles H. Kraft, “theologizing is meant to be relevant,” and it is most unfortunate when an unsuitable theological system is adopted by or imposed upon those of another culture or subculture. This misfortune often takes place when (1) a given approach to theology is regarded as highly prestigious and/or (2) proponents of that theological system claim that their system is not only correct but also supracultural and/of (3) the proponents have the power to impose their system on others.²⁷

As logical and ideal as it may sound, the task of identifying the supracultural content of Christianity from its forms and expressions in a culture (whether it be ours or not) is by no means an easy one. Furthermore, identification is only the first step, the next step being the attempt to disengage the supra cultural from the cultural. In explaining the present state of affairs, Buswell, a North American admits that

Political power and technological progress were fused with Christian piety into an inevitably ethnocentric, if benevolent, ethos. All ‘uncivilized’ societies were appraised by the power – progress – piety ethos as inferior *on all counts*.²⁸

Unfortunately, this missionary mentality, which showed flagrant disregard for the receiving culture which was not theirs, is still with us today, yea even among nationals.

As to North America’s role in the contextualization discussion it is ironical that although it has been the most prolific in producing literature on contextualization it is perhaps culturally the least suited for this task because of its specialization, isolationism, superiority complex, and ignorance of other peoples.

The Nature of the Quest

Although there is only one Gospel the nature of the quest for contextualizing theology is to translate the one faith of Jesus Christ to suit the tongue, style, genius, character and culture of the particular society.

Several critical issues emerge in this quest for contextualization. The first, which concerns its scope recognizes that contextualization is not merely concerned with the communication of the Gospel (i.e. Methodology), but with the nature of the Gospel itself. This fact is recognized

²⁶Robert Moore, “The Historical Basis of Theological Reflection,” in *Troubling of the Waters*, ed. Idris Hamid (San Fernando, Trinidad: Rahaman Printery, 1973), pp. 39-42.

²⁷Charles M. Kraft, “The Contextualization of Theology,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 14 (January 1978): 35.

²⁸Buswell, “Contextualization”, p. 104.

not only by non-evangelicals but by a growing number of Evangelicals. For example, F. Ross Kinsler notes the record number of missionaries being sent by the United States to Third World countries and finds this difficult to reconcile with their over consumption of material wealth.²⁹

A second major issue concerns the procedure in contextualization. As already mentioned the 'Situational Approach' looks at the Biblical text from the standpoint of its *Sitz Im Leben*. However, the dangers inherent in this approach are that human experiences may become normative rather than the Word of God and the message may become relativistic, existential, and situational. A much safer approach is to look at one's situation from the standpoint of the text realizing that any theology which is truly Biblical must take shape within the cultures and problems of the people of God in every place. Because the term 'Biblical Theology' may be nebulous, confusing, ambiguous, and/or abused, the writer suggests the term 'Contextualizing Theology' as an alternative in this situation.

A third crucial issue focuses upon the question of syncretism. The following are some of the definitions used or given at the International Congress on World Evangelization at Lausanne in 1974:

- (1) A fruit cocktail of religions (John Scott)³⁰
- (2) Any form of religion in which elements from more than one original religious tradition are combined (Eric Sharpe)³¹
- (3) The sort of accommodation to the cultural values of a people that results in a mixture of Biblical truth and ethnic religion (Bruce Nicholls)³²
- (4) Occurs when critical and basic elements of the Gospel are lost in the process of contextualization and are replaced by religious elements from the receiving culture (M. Bradshaw and P. Savage)³³

From these definitions, it is quite clear that this term carries pejorative implications with Evangelicals. Kato's reasons for growing syncretistic tendencies in Africa are instructive in showing its sources and causes. They are as follows: (1) the prevailing wind of religious relativism in the older churches (2) the crying need for universal solidarity in the world (3) political awareness which carries with it a search for ideological identity (4) emotional concerns for ancestors who died before the advent of Christianity (5) cultural revolution which calls for a return to socio-religio-cultural way of life (6) inadequate Biblical teaching (7) the African's love to get along well with everybody (8) liberal Christianity (9) the study of comparative religions without the effort to assert the uniqueness of Christianity and (10) the genuine desire to make Christianity truly African has not been matched with the power of discernment not to tamper with the Word of God.³⁴

²⁹ Ross Kinsler, "Mission and Context," p. 26.

³⁰ Kato, "The Gospel," p. 1218.

³¹ *ibid*

³² Nicholls, "Theological Education," p. 647

³³ Bradshaw and Savage, "The Gospel," p. 1227.

³⁴ Kato, "The Gospel," pp. 1218-18.

Thus there is always the risk of syncretism when experimentation is done (on words, concepts, and customs) to express Christian meaning. However, Kraft asserts that the greatest risk of syncretism comes “from those who try like the Pharisees and Judaizers to preserve the foreign expressions of God’s message.”³⁵

Finally, a fourth important issue (which may be classified as a risk) involves the overly-zealous Evangelical enamoured by the concept of contextualizing theology. This may lead to a superficial analysis of Biblical data, religious systems, sociology, anthropology and ethnology which may in turn lead to “a capitulation to humanistic patterns overlaid on the Scriptures.”³⁶

Criteria for Contextualization

The following five criteria, put in question form are suggested by the writer in evaluating contextualization, the first three criteria dealing with the theological aspect and the last two dealing with the methodological aspect. [NL 1-5]

- (1) Has the Biblical message penetrated and adopted the cultural forms and stood in judgment upon them?
- (2) Have the insights from Scripture as well as religion, sociology, anthropology, and ethnology been carefully applied?
- (3) Has the core of the Gospel been retained?
- (4) Has the meaning been accurately conveyed?
- (5) Has the communication (whether verbal or behavioural) been effective?

Controls for Contextualization

What guarantee does one have that an attempt at contextualization will be valid? While this “validity guarantee” is not totally assured, the following three controls have been suggested by Ericson:

- (1) The commandments of the Lord (1 Corinthians 7:10; cf. 7:25)
- (2) The counsel of the Holy Spirit given to the faithful, mature Christian (1 Cor 7:25; cf. 7:40)
- (3) The corrective force of the divine Word.³⁷

Categories of Contextualization

At this point it may be obvious to some that the concept of contextualization may be broken down into different kinds, and as Buswell notes, many of them have already had a respectable history, both in missiology and in field applications.³⁸ In addition to Buswell’s three categories: Contextualization of (1) The Witness (2) The Church and its Leadership and

³⁵ Kraft, “Contextualization,” p. 36.

³⁶ Conn, “Where Do We Begin?” pp. 100-1.

³⁷ Ericson, “Implications,” pp. 84-85.

³⁸ Buswell, “Contextualization”, p. 89.

(3) the Word³⁹, the writer would suggest a fourth category: The Contextualization of Theology.

(1) Contextualization of Theology. While it is vigorously held that there is an essential core in the Gospel and that some present formulations such as the doctrines of the Person and Work of Christ, and sin illustrate the supracultural nature of the Christian faith, other present formulations in the Caribbean (which may be explicit or implicit) such as inspiration, divine sovereignty, salvation history, salvation, eschatology, and political systems need to be carefully examined. Admittedly we are at a considerable disadvantage, for the nationals most qualified for this task – pastors and theologians – have been indoctrinated into Western thought patterns. Added to this, is the extreme theological conservatism characteristic of Evangelicals throughout the worlds as well as the great diversity within Evangelicalism in the Caribbean which is a reflection of the diversity within Western Evangelicalism.

On the questions of inspiration, do we need to indiscriminately adopt the position of the extreme rightist John R. Rice, the right winger Harold Lindsell, the middle-of-the-roader Kenneth Kantzer, or the left winger Paul Jewett? Now one is not showing disrespect, discounting the usefulness of this type of research or questioning the commitment, scholarship, and contribution of these men, but do we have to be “mimic-men” merely parroting the beliefs of our Western big brother? This must certainly not be taken as a rejection of tradition or our rich Evangelical heritage but a call to know why we believe what we believe.

With respect to divine sovereignty, it must not be tacitly assumed that political power and economic wealth is automatically or necessarily an indication of divine approbation, or that these peoples are the exclusive agents through whom salvation history is being accomplished. On the salvation issue, the exclusively pietistic and vertical understanding of salvation which creates a sharp dichotomy between the vertical and horizontal dimensions must be identified as unbiblical. It is most encouraging to see that North American Evangelicals are again awakening to the social implications of the Gospel, but what better place is there to experience this reality than in a Third World setting such as the Caribbean?

Vitally related to salvation in its totality is the predominantly other-worldly and futuristic emphasis. While it is true that the blessed hope is something to be anticipated with great excitement, it does not absolve Christians of their present domestic, ecclesiastical and civil responsibilities during their sojourn here on earth.

Finally, in the area of politics (which interests most, if not all West Indians) it must not be assumed that God sanctions either the capitalistic or socialistic form of government.

[Contextualization of the Word.

This category of contextualization deals with translation and ethnotheology, an area in which the Wycliffe Bible translators have been outstanding. The question arises as to the need for a translation of the Bible into the local dialect of the country. One decided advantage is that

³⁹ Ibid., pp. 90-99.

Creole patois is used by the majority of nationals "to convey emotive experience, to hand down local customs, for proverbs and wise sayings on intimate occasions and even in religious ceremonies."⁴⁰ Thus the verbal patois may be most effective in communicating Biblical truth. However, the disadvantages of the written patois outweigh the advantages. Not only is this a massive undertaking for able, available national linguists but the fact that the local dialect is not standardized and the primary people for whom it is intended either cannot read it or have passed away, militates against such an undertaking. Besides not only is English (or French) well understood by the majority of the populace, but the local dialect is very close to it.

Contextualization of the Witness

In Buswell's scheme this deals with making the Gospel message intelligible in the idiom of the language and culture of the receivers. The writer sees this kind of contextualization as inextricably bound up with the next category, one emphasizing the presentation of the Gospel in terms of a traditional culture, the other emphasizing the response. Hence, a discussion on both these categories will follow.

[B] Contextualization of the Church and its Leadership. As already mentioned, this deals with the issue of indigenization. As this runs the whole gamut of church life, only a few areas which are relevant to the Caribbean church setting will be mentioned. For example, in the areas of both evangelistic and expository preaching are we indiscriminately and unthinkingly adopting the methodology and style of the North American evangelist or British expositor without any regard for any possible difference in contexts? Do we always need to proclaim the Gospel or edify the saints only in the King's English regardless of the audience? Is there any place for using local customs, practices, and folklore to illustrate spiritual truth?⁴⁰

On the question of church liturgy are we guilty of perpetuating irrelevant and anachronistic forms of worship totally uncharacteristic of our people? Are we in need of a radically new theology of worship as Knolly Clarke suggests?⁴¹ With respect of music, do we consciously or unconsciously believe that our music is inferior to the North American or British brand? Is there any place for Calypso or Reggae music in the church? In a related area is there room for expression of worship in art form of dance (cf. II Samuel 6:16)? In our celebration of the Eucharist have we lost the joyfulness and spontaneity of this occasion because of unemotional (and well-meaning) missionaries have squelched our emotions, telling us how unreliable and unspiritual it is to openly display our emotions?

On the subject of dress, is the jacket and tie the only acceptable mode of dress that God approves of in the church? Or is the cooler, more comfortable, and less expensive bush jacket

⁴⁰ Knolly Clarke, "Liturgy and Culture in the Caribbean," in *Troubling of the Waters*, ed. Idris Hamid (San Fernando, Trinidad: Rahaman Printery, 1973) p. 154.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

just as acceptable to God? Is the wearing of pants suits to church by women really unbiblical?

In relation to theological education, is our Bible College curriculum and system of training men for the ministry relevant and appropriate to the Caribbean? Finally, on practical issues such as Sunday cricket and common-law relationships is our position based on mere traditional formulations or on a sound Biblical and theological base?

A word of advice. While the method is important for the effective communication of God's truth it must be borne in mind that the message and method are inseparable and that the message takes precedence. Therefore we need to be careful about majoring on the minors.

[A] The New Testament and Contextualization

It is most important to note that the dynamic of the New Testament literature "rather than being an abstraction of principles, ideas or dogmatics . . . is a treasury of the experiences of the early church."⁴² Thus, it is not surprising that examples of contextualization may be found within the New Testament itself. For example, when the theological question arose as to the place of circumcision in the salvation of the Gentiles, the decision of the Jerusalem Council did not forbid Jewish Christians from continuing to practice circumcision or compel Gentile Christians to observe this custom.⁴³ Hence the principle of contextualization, used by the New Testament is a valid one.

Strategy for Contextualization

Now that the necessity for contextualization has been established, the nature of the quest stated; the criteria outlined, and the controls suggested, what ought to be the course of action. The writer suggest that a vigorous but not overly-enthusiastic pursuit be made of the interpretation of the Bible in context by competent, well-equipped, Spirit-filled Biblical scholars, preferably nationals. This pursuit is by no means an easy task for anyone as the basic hermeneutical issue of determining the descriptive (what the Bible reports) from the prescriptive (what the Bible teaches) is continually at stake.

In addition to expertise and commitment to the Bible, a knowledge of other religions (in the context), sociology, anthropology, and ethnology will prove most beneficial in the contextualization process. In pursuing this process of contextualization the two extremes ought to be avoided. Undue conservatism leads to inertia and hence to a faith encumbered with strange cultural trappings, local or foreign. Undue ardor leads to carelessness and hence to mistakes such as adulteration of the Gospel by syncretism of secularism. However, the writer sees no option but to begin or continue the pursuit both in the major areas of theology as well as methodology.

The process of contextualization is twofold, for "authentic contextualization must be open constantly to the painful, process of de-contextualization, for the sake of de-contextualization,

⁴² Ericson, "Implications," p. 71.

⁴³Ericson's examples of contextualization from I Corinthians 5: 1-8; Colossians 3: 18-4:1 and Matthew 18: 15-17; Corinthians 5: 3-5; Philippians 4: 2-3 are somewhat questionable.

for the sake of re-contextualization.”⁴⁴ Although obvious to some it must be stated that “theology” as abstracted statement is not theology, for the purpose of theology is not merely a right conceptual understanding but right praxis.

Problems of Contextualization in the Caribbean

Although many of the general problems of contextualization were encountered implicitly or explicitly in the sections: Objections to Contextualization, Explanation for Failure to Contextualize and Difficulties in Contextualization, the writer has identified eight major problems facing the Caribbean churches with respect to contextualization. They are as follows: (1) Gross ignorance regarding the concept of contextualization (2) Sheer apathy (3) A simplistic brand of Christianity which disregards culture (4) An other-worldly, futuristic oriented Christianity which renounces everything in the world (5) Heavy financial support from North America and hence the operation of the inverse Golden Rule (i.e. He who has the gold makes the rules) (6) Lack of qualified, committed, Spirit-filled men familiar with the context (7) The tendency toward ‘A Theology of Imitation’ as a result of the copy-cat mentality among the Christians of the Caribbean (8) The non-homogeneity or diversity of peoples even on the same island due to religious, racial, educational, social or economic factors.

However, despite these major obstacles, if contextualization is seen as an imperative inherent in the Gospel, there is no alternative but to go on. In conclusion, it must be remembered that the purpose of contextualization is not the producing of new theologies but theologizing in such a way that reflection leads to praxis.

⁴⁴ Coe, “Contextualizing Theology,” p. 24.