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THE CONTEXTUALIZATION OF CHRISTIANITY: SOME NEW TESTAMENT ANTECEDENTS.

Rev. Dr. Joseph Osei-Bonsu

In many African and other Third World countries today various attempts are being made to de-westernize Christianity and to express the Christian message and mode of worship in forms that seriously take into account the cultural contexts of the peoples concerned. One term used to describe such a process today is "Contextualization". Coined by the Theological Education Fund in 1972, the term "Contextualization" is used to express the process and practice of relating the gospel message to a people's concrete life situation or cultural context.

This article seeks to demonstrate that even though the term "Contextualization" may be new, the idea is not new to the New Testament and that there are several examples of Contextualization in the NT. It tries to show how the early church adapted itself to its non-Jewish environment as Christianity moved from its Palestinian matrix into Gentile lands. It also seeks to show how some of the NT writers made use of ideas and philosophical categories from the Graeco-Roman world in the expression of the gospel message.

I

Mk 10:1-12 and 1 Cor 7:10-15 as Examples of Contextualization

Both Mk 10:11-12 and 1 Cor 7:10-15 deal with the prohibition of divorce, and the forms of the prohibition as found in these two passages indicate the influence of Graeco-Roman culture on the original Jewish formulation.

Mk 10:11-12

Mk 10:11-12 reads: "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another, commits adultery *against her*; and if *she divorces her husband* and marries another, she commits adultery" (emphasis mine).

The idea of a man committing adultery against his wife does not conform with Jewish practice according to which it was the man who had the right to divorce the woman.¹ The phrase is almost certainly a Marcan addition made in a non-Jewish environment. This interpretation finds support in v. 12 which speaks of the woman's right to divorce her husband. This is certainly a Marcan extension of the original saying, made to suit the Graeco-Roman context,² in which women were allowed to divorce their husbands.

1 See e.g. m. Yeb. 14.1: "The man that divorces is not like to the woman that is divorced; for a woman is put away with her consent or without it, but a husband can put away his wife only with his own consent" (H. Danby, *The Mishnah* (Oxford, 1933) 240. However, it seems that in the Jewish military colony at Elephantine in Egypt in the fifth century, women could divorce their husbands (cf. J.A. Fitzmyer, "A Re-Study of an Elephantine Aramaic Contract (AP 15)", in *Near Eastern Studies in Honor of W.F. Albright* (ed. H. Goedicke; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1971) 137-68.

2 See the complaint of Seneca on this issue: "Is there any woman that blushes at divorce now that certain illustrious and noble ladies reckon their years, not by the number of consuls, but by the number of their husbands, and leave home in order to marry, and marry in order to be divorced?" (*Benef.* 3.16.2; Loeb, III, 155).

We note by contrast that the Lucan form (Lk 16:18) is cast entirely from the Jewish point of view where only the man could divorce the woman (cf. Dt 24:1-4).

1 Cor 7:10-15

In 1 Cor 7:10 Paul says that "a wife must not separate (*χωρισθῆναι*) from her husband". The verb is an aorist passive, but the passive of this verb often functions as a middle when used of divorce,³ i.e. "be separated from" = "separate oneself from". Thus the use of this verb does not necessarily imply that the husband is the initiator of the action. Divorce could come about in one of two ways: either the man sent his wife away (*ἀφιέτο*, v.12), or either of them left the other ("separate oneself from"). It seems that here in 1 Cor. 7.10-11 we have a case of the latter, i.e. the woman separating herself from the man. The woman's right to divorce the man is stated again in v. 13 where the verb "divorce" (*ἀφιέναι*) is used.

We should, however, note that such an action on the part of the woman was generally not the practice among Jews. Among the Jews, as we have seen, it was the man who had the right to initiate divorce proceedings, and for almost any reason whatsoever. But in the Graeco-Roman world women could divorce their husbands. Thus Paul's form of the prohibition of divorce, which is the earliest attested prohibition, was formulated in the context of the Graeco-Roman

3 See W. Bauer, W.F. Arndt, F.W. Gingrich, F. Danker, Greek- English Lexicon of the New Testament, 2nd ed. (Chicago, 1979) s.v. p. 890.

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culture.

II

The Council of Jerusalem

One problem that the early church faced was the question of Gentiles who became Christians and their relation to the law. Were they to be required to keep the Law just like the Jewish Christians? Were they to undergo circumcision as required by the Law (Acts 7:8)? To compound the problem, there was an influx of Pharisees into the Church of Jerusalem (Acts 15:5), and they insisted on the need for Gentile converts to observe the whole law.

Another problem that the early church had to come to terms with was how Jewish Christians who observed the Mosaic law could associate with Gentile Christians who did not observe this law and were therefore considered ritually unclean. Did Jewish Christians have to be defiled in their daily association with them and whenever they met for the "breaking of bread"? This latter problem is not mentioned explicitly at the beginning of Acts 15; however, it is clear from Gal 2:11-14 that it was an important issue in the early church, and the decision of the Council (Acts 15:20) was meant to deal with it.

The Council made a distinction between what is essential to Christianity and what is not. As Peter maintains, obedience to the whole Torah and the observance of circumcision are not necessary for salvation. Faith in God in the case of the Gentiles seems to be adequate. Thus the Council does not demand circumcision and obedience to the whole law.

However, the Council stipulated that the Gentiles were to abstain from certain things that the Jews found repulsive. First, there were the pollutions of idols, i.e. meat offered in sacrifice to idols and then eaten

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during a temple feast or sold later in a shop. Secondly, there was to be abstention from unchastity or πορνεία, which is generally taken to refer to illicit sexual relations and marriage within the forbidden degrees of kinship prohibited in Lev 18:6-18. Thirdly, there was to be abstention from meat killed by strangling, a method of killing animals that meant that the blood was not drained but remained in the meat. Fourthly, there was to be abstention from blood itself.

But if the Gentiles had to abstain from the things mentioned above, it was simply for the sake of promoting good relations between them and the Jews, and not because these things were intrinsically evil. The Council thus took into account the *cultural context* of the Gentiles and did not impose circumcision on them since this was a purely Jewish practice and was not essential for salvation.

III

ACTS 17

In Acts 17 Paul, as presented by Luke, saw the need to use pagan philosophical categories to establish points of contact with the Athenians. Thus even though his basic message was to a large extent drawn from the OT and from the life, death and resurrection of Christ, Paul found it necessary to use pagan ideas in order to reach his pagan audience.

Paul begins his speech by praising the Athenians for being "very religious" (δαισιδαίμονεστέροι). The Greek word could be used in a positive sense or in a derogatory fashion. It is most likely that Paul meant it in a good sense in order to establish some rapport with his audience.

Paul speaks of how he had been looking at the various objects of worship in the city and had found an

altar with the inscription "To an unknown god". He took advantage of this to tell them about "the unknown God".

Was it Paul's intention to say by means of this inscription that the Athenians had always worshipped the one true God unknowingly? This is unlikely. We should note that the inscription does not read "To *the* unknown god" but "To *an* unknown god". Moreover, Paul does not say "*Him* whom you worship", but rather "*what* you worship". But even if they did not know the one true God, the inscription "expresses a hunch, a vague notion that the reality of God, his deity, is to be found beyond all pagan cults, temples, and religious efforts".⁴

Paul then proclaims his message of the unknown God who created the universe and everything in it, and who is therefore Lord of heaven and earth (vv. 24-25). In these verses we have a mixture of Jewish and Greek thought. Paul's language recalls the OT description of God (Gen 1:1; 3:14; Isa 42:5). The verb "to make/create" (ποιέω) is also used by Greek writers about creation (cf. Plato, *Timaeus* 28c, 76c; Epictetus, 1V.7.6).

Paul goes on to say that God does not live in shrines made by humankind nor is God served by human hands as though he needed anything. Here again we find Jewish and Greek elements. In Judaism we find an attack on the false localization of God in the Temple (Isa 66:1-2; *Sibylline Oracles* 4.8). A similar idea is found among the Greeks. Influenced by Stoic pantheistic ideas, Plutarch can assert: "It is a doctrine of Zeno: 'One should not build temples for gods'" (*Moralia* 1034B).

4 G.A. Krodel, *Acts*, (Minneapolis, 1986) 331.

The idea of God's self-sufficiency is found in the Jewish tradition where it is said that God needs neither sacrifice nor prayer (Ps 50:8-13; 2 Macc 14:35; 3 Macc 2:9f.). Paul's statement that God is not served by human hands is something that would have been acceptable to the Athenian intelligentsia. The notion of God's self-sufficiency (αὐτάρκεια) is found in the Greek philosophical tradition (e.g. Plutarch, *Moralia* 1052D; see also Plato *Timaeus* 33d, 34b).

Paul says that it is God who gives to all humankind "life and breath and everything". Paul's language here is based on Isa 42:5, but Luke has changed "spirit" to "life". At the same time he has made use of the triad of life and breath and everything from current usage.

After describing God Paul goes on in v. 26 to speak of the way in which he has created mankind. The phrase ἐξ ἑνὸς πᾶν ἔθνος ἀνθρώπων is ambiguous. There may be a reference to Adam, but the Jews were not the only people who believed that mankind came from a primal person. Probably Luke has intentionally left the phrase vague to cater for Greek ideas as well. Stoic philosophy also affirmed the unity of mankind.

In vv. 27-28 Paul says that God is "not far from each one of us". There are close parallels in Greek writings, the closest being in Dio Chrysostom's *Olympic Oration* (*Discourses*, X11, 27-28). In Stoicism, however, God's nearness was understood in an impersonal, intellectual sense. For the OT God was near to his worshippers in spite of his transcendence and greatness (Jer 23:23f.).

Paul continues with the statement "in him (i.e. God) we live and move and have our being". This statement is unparalleled in the NT. What is the origin of this quotation? A Syriac writer called Isho'dad (ninth century) quoted a passage in which

Minos of Crete speaks to his father Zeus and attacked the belief of the Cretans that Zeus was buried on the island: "They fashioned a tomb for thee, O holy and high -- the Cretans, always liars, evil beasts, slow bellies! But thou art not dead; thou art risen and alive for ever, for in thee we live and move and have our being".⁵ In Titus 1:12 we find the second line of this saying ("the Cretans, always liars, evil beasts, slow bellies") and Clement of Alexandria attributes it to Epimenides of Crete. This would seem to be Paul's source.

The words "we live" (ζῶμεν), "we have our being" (ἔσμεν), and especially "we move" (κινούμεθα) recall Stoic ideas. However, the Stoics in general spoke of God permeating all things and human reason, and not of humans living "in" God. But since it was their belief that humankind and God were virtually identical,⁶ too much weight should not be placed on this point. The whole expression can be understood monotheistically or polytheistically. A Jew could take it monotheistically along the lines of Ps. 139. But the OT idea of God's omnipresence does not adequately account for this expression. The language is Stoic, but it is unlikely that Luke meant it to be understood in a polytheistic sense. This view is ruled out by vv. 23f. where monotheism is in mind. Here the Lucan Paul seems to be accommodating himself to the language of his audience.

The words that follow are: "even as some of your poets have said 'For we are indeed his offspring'" (τοῦ

5 See I.H. Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles*, (Grand Rapids, 1980) 288-89.

6 S.G. Wilson, *The Gentiles and the Gentile Mission in Luke-Acts* (Cambridge, 1973) 207.

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γὰρ καὶ γένος ἔσμεν). The words "for we are indeed his offspring" are a quotation from a poem by Aratus of Soli who also had lived in Tarsus (3rd century B.C.). Since in the same verse we hear of "poets" (plural), the author may also have had in mind a line from the hymn to Zeus by the Stoic Cleanthes: "To call upon you is proper for all mortals, for we are your offspring" (*Fragment 537*).

In connection with the citation of a pagan poet, G.A. Krodel comments aptly:

It strikes us as odd that we find a quotation from a pagan "poet" at the place where synagogue sermons would cite the Old Testament. Within the context of his biblical theological presuppositions, Luke could acknowledge that truth exists also outside of the Bible, without accepting the pantheistic content (context?) in which the Aratus citation originated.

In vv. 30-31 Paul talks about the resurrection and judgment which God will bring about through Christ. This was something that was new to his Greek audience.

It is quite clear from the foregoing that Paul made use of Greek philosophical categories in expressing OT ideas of God and creation as well as the message of the life, death and resurrection of Christ.

7 G.A. Krodel, *Acts*, 336.

Contextualization and the Eschatology of 1-2 Thessalonians

A good example of contextualization in the early church is provided by 1 and 2 Thessalonians where Paul takes up dominical tradition and hellenizes it and then takes Jewish tradition and christianizes it.

The first example of hellenization is the use made by Paul of the word "parousia". Though this word was employed in the gospel tradition in connection with the coming of Christ (cf. e.g. Mt 24:3, 27, 37, 39), it is Paul who uses it in a technical way that betrays the influence of contemporary Hellenistic ideas. The word parousia was normally used for an ordinary arrival, coming, or presence. But it was often used to refer to the coming of the emperor, king or some other important dignitary to visit a city. Such an arrival was accompanied by acclamation, shouting, applause, the wearing of colourful clothing, the wearing and presentation of crowns, and other expressions of joy.

Gundry¹⁰ draws attention to words and phrases in the Thessalonian correspondence which indicate that Paul must have had in mind the special parousia of a king. When the term first occurs in 1 Thess 2:19-20 the words used with it include "hope", "joy", a "crown

8 See R.H. Gundry, "The Hellenization of Dominical Tradition and Christianization of Jewish Tradition in the Eschatology of 1-2 Thessalonians", *NTS* 33 (1987) 161-78.

9 See E. Peterson, ἀπάντησις, TDNT 1, (1964) 380-1; A. Oepke, παρουσία, πάριμι, TDNT 5 (1967) 860.

10 Gundry, "Hellenization", 162-63.

of exultation", "glory". The parousia is said to be a parousia of Jesus our Lord. The Greek word for "Lord", κυρίως, found also in 1 Thess 3:13, was the word used for "emperor". This word was used very often in the first and second centuries for the emperor, and thus it is likely that when the Thessalonians read this word along with the other words and phrases that accompany it, they would have compared the coming of Jesus with that of the emperor.

In 1 Thess 3:13 the Lord is accompanied by "all his holy ones". This most likely refers to an angelic army, as in Zech 14:5 which Paul refers to in 2 Thess 1:7. The angelic army seems to take the place of the soldiers that would accompany an emperor on such a visit. 1 Thess 4:15-17 speaks of the fanfare that accompanies the coming of Christ: the shout of command, the sounding of God's trumpet, and the voice of an archangel. All three motifs are stereotyped expressions which occur frequently in OT theophanies and depictions of the day of the Lord.

1 Thess 4:16b speaks of the resurrection of the dead in Christ, followed by the rapture of the living. Those who experience the rapture are to meet the Lord (εἰς ἀπάντησιν τοῦ κυρίου). The word ἀπάντησις was used technically in the Greek world for the meeting of dignitaries by citizens outside the city gates. The dignitaries thus met¹¹ would be escorted by the citizens back into the city. Some scholars think that the word is used in a similar way here, so that the faithful leave¹² their earthly city to escort the coming Lord to earth. Other scholars think that they escort

11 Josephus, *Ant.* II, 327f.

12 So e.g. W. Foerster, TDNT, I, 165-66; I.H. Marshall, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, (NCB Grand Rapids, 1983) 124-25; Gundry, "Hellen-ization", 166-67.

the Lord to heaven.¹³ But the text does not give any indication as to the final destination; neither does it imply that they stay in the air. Paul concludes by saying that the living and the resurrected "will always be with the Lord forever". Gundry¹⁴ suggests that this phrase may have been influenced by the Greek notion of being "with the gods" and that Paul may have adapted it for his readers.

Paul thus makes use of the Greek idea of parousia and links it with Jewish apocalyptic ideas and the dominical tradition about the return of Jesus. He did this in order to correct the mistaken idea in Thessalonica that the return of Christ would not involve the deceased. The deceased are raised and they accompany Christ in his parousia. Thus they will not be at a disadvantage.

The Christianization of Jewish Tradition

Gundry¹⁵ has also shown how Paul has christianized the Jewish notion of the day of the Lord. The idea of the day of the Lord was an important element in the prophetic preaching. Paul was the first person to identify the day of the Lord with the

13 See e.g. E. von Dobschütz, *Die Thessalonicher-Briefe*, (Meyer, 7th ed., Göttingen, 1909) 198-99; J.E. Frame, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles of St. Paul to the Thessalonians*, (ICC, Edinburgh, 1912) 176; P. Ellingworth, "Which way are we going?...1 Thess 4:14b", *Bible Translator* 25 (1974) 426- 31.

14 Gundry, "Hellenization", 168.

15 Gundry, "Hellenization", 169-72.

parousia of the Lord (1 Thess 5:1-11). A number of points give support to this view.¹⁶ (1) The expression "the parousia of the Lord" (4:15) is paralleled by "the day of the Lord" in 5:2. (2) "The times and the seasons" in 5:1 refers to the coming of Christ mentioned in chapter 4. (3) In the dominical tradition the coming of the Son of Man will be characterized by suddenness and surprise (Mk 13:35-36; Mt 24:37-51; 25:13; Lk 12:39-46; 17:26-27, 34-35; 21:34-35). Paul applies these notions of suddenness and surprise to the coming of the Lord. (4) Paul uses "the day of the Lord" interchangeably with "the parousia of our Lord Jesus Christ" in 2 Thess 2:1-2. Further evidence of the christianization of the Jewish concept of the day of the Lord is found in the fact that Paul later added Christological terms to the stereotyped expression: "the day of the Lord" becomes "the day of our Lord Jesus [Christ]" (1 Cor 1:8) "the day of our Lord Jesus" (2 Cor 1:14), "the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil 1:6), and "the day of Christ" (Phil 1:10; 2.16).

V

Colossians

Another example of contextualization is shown in the case where Paul was in debate with Christian heretics and was prepared to take over their terminology and apply it to Jesus in what H. Chadwick¹⁷ has called a "disinfected" use. We find some examples of this in Colossians, where the terms "fullness" and

16 Gundry, "Hellenization", 169-70.

17 H. Chadwick, "All things to all men", *NTS* 1 (1954-55) 261-72; cf. I.H. Marshall, "Culture and the New Testament", in J. Stott and R.T. Coote (eds.) *Gospel and Culture* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1979) 33.

"head" may have been used by heretical teachers in their own way, but Paul was quite prepared to adopt them and reapply them to Christ in his own way.

The so-called "Colossian heresy", with which Paul deals in the letter to the Colossians, was the product of both Jewish and pagan influences.¹⁸ The Jewish component of the Colossian syncretism is clear from the references to observing suggested days, seasons, circumcision, and other Jewish practices (2:16-17). In some strands of Judaism there was a strong belief in the power and the role of angels in mediation (cf. Dn 10:21; 12:1).

Forming part of the pagan influence in this syncretism was the belief that certain "elements of the world" (τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου, 2:8, 20), or angelic beings, were in control of the universe. These "elements of the world" were a series of intermediaries between God and the universe. Each of these "elements" was believed to possess part of the "fullness" (πλήρωμα) of the Godhead" (cf. 1:19; 2:9). They were believed to be the cause of creation (cf. 1:15-17). Various spheres of the earth as well as human destinies were under their control. All this recalls the pagan idea of an ordered and controlled world in which the main duty of the human person was to find out his or her destinies and try to conform to them. The devotees of this kind of syncretism saw the need to acquire knowledge (γνώσις) of these angelic beings in order to be able to propitiate them.

18 Cf. J.A. Grassi, "The Letter to the Colossians", in R.E. Brown, J.A. Fitzmyer, and R.E. Murphy (eds.), *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, (Geoffrey Chapman:London, 1974) 334-35.

Such a belief imperilled the unique position of Christ who might be regarded as one of many mediators between God and the world. Paul did not question the existence of these angelic beings. However, he stated that the "fullness" (πλήρωμα) of the Godhead was not shared by God with these angelic beings. All the fullness of God and his power resided in Christ (1:19; 2:3, 9). By his death on the cross Christ had won a victory over all these elemental spirits who were believed to control the universe (2:15). Making use of the Old Testament concept of wisdom, Paul said that the whole universe had been created and directed by God's "wisdom" from the beginning. Now we have a full revelation of this wisdom in Christ (1:15-20). Paul was prepared to admit the existence of these "principalities and powers" that the heretics spoke of, but he said that they were all created by Christ and that Christ was superior to them in every regard. Thus Paul's view of Jesus was influenced by his encounter with these gnostics.

V1

1 CORINTHIANS

A few examples can be cited from 1 Corinthians to show how Paul made use of a number of ideas and expressions that were current in his day to express the Christian message.¹⁹

In 1 Cor 1:3 Paul refers to God as "father". The use of the term "father" of God or of deity was common in the Hellenistic world, and the Corinthians would

19 On this, see B.Y. Quarshie, "St. Paul and the Culture of the Gentiles: First Corinthians and Some Methodological Issues", (Ph.D dissertation, Princeton Theological Seminary, 1987), especially 183ff.

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have been familiar with it. Zeus, the head of the Greek pantheon, was known as "the father of men".

When Paul appeals for unity in the Corinthian Church threatened with factionalism, his appeal is couched in language "current in Greek political and social thought".²⁰ His appeal to all "to be in agreement" (τό αὐτὸ λέγειν) and to have "no dissensions but be united" makes use of phrases that had been employed in similar contexts of divisiveness by such people as Aristotle²¹ and Thucydides.²²

"Demonstration" (ἀπόδειξις, 2:4), which Paul uses to stress the manner of his initial preaching in Corinth, was a technical term known and used in rhetoric in the Greek world.²³

In discussing the Corinthians' claim to maturity or perfection Paul uses terms that can be found in various contexts of the Gentile world. For example, "explore" (ἔρευνᾶν) can be traced back to classical Greek and is found in both religious and philosophical writings.²⁴

Paul also used the "like by like" principle here: a person's spirit is what knows that person's thoughts

20 J. Moffatt, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, n.d.) 9.

21 Aristotle, *Politics*, 3.3.3.

22 Thucydides, *Hist.*, 5.31.6

23 Plato, *Timaeus*, 40e; Epictetus, *Diss.*, 1.24.8; cf. also 4 Macc. 3:19.

24 It is found in Pindar, Sophocles and Plato, *Leg.*, 821a; *Ap.*, 23b.

(2:11). This was a common principle found in Stoicism, the whole ancient philosophy, as well as Gnosticism and even the mysteries.²⁵

In discussing the influence of immorality on the Corinthian church in the affair of the incestuous man (1 Cor 5), Paul cites a common proverb: "A little leaven leavens the whole lump" (5:6). This was a proverb that was known among the Gentiles of Paul's time. They also knew that the effects of leaven could be destruction and defilement.²⁶ Paul likewise uses "leaven" as a metaphor for the corruptive influence of evil (cf. Gal 5:9), and combines this with the Jewish custom of destroying all leaven in preparation for the Paschal festival, during which only unleavened bread was allowed (Exod 12:15-16; 13:7). Incorporated in Christ, who has become for his followers "holiness and redemption" (1:30), believers individually are unleavened. Paul exhorts them as a community to rid themselves of the old leaven, i.e. to clean out the wicked.

When he discusses sexual promiscuity, Paul uses catalogues of vices (5:10-11; 6:9-10; cf. 2 Cor 12:20-21; for a catalogue of virtues, see 2 Cor 6:6-7). The use of "catalogues of vices and virtues" has a long history.²⁷ It was used very often by the Stoics and in popular philosophy, and would have been familiar to the Corinthians.²⁸

25 See Conzelmann, *I Corinthians*, 65-66. Conzelmann indicates that Paul's usage here has some marks of Jewish influence also.

26 Plutarch, *Quaest. Rom.*, 289f.

27 Plato, *Gorgias*, 525a.

28 For the evidence of the use of catalogues of virtues and vices in the ancient world, see Conzelmann's

It is generally agreed by scholars that when Paul claims to impart wisdom among the mature or the perfect (τοῖς τελείοις, 2:6), he is actually borrowing the language of the Corinthians.²⁹ Though cautious in his conclusions, H.A.A. Kennedy²⁹ has demonstrated that Paul's usage of τελείος is best understood in the light of Hellenistic usage. The term features prominently in the mystery religions, and this most likely provides the background against which Paul would have been understood in Corinth.³⁰

Paul is in agreement with the Corinthians in their definition of maturity. The mature or perfect person is a spiritual person (πνευματικός), a person who possesses the Spirit and has the gifts of the spirit, a person who is not ψυχικός, fleshly, natural, or unspiritual (2:14-15; 3:1). But, whereas the Corinthians regard themselves as mature, perfect and spiritual, in Paul's estimation they are unspiritual, fleshly, babes or children in Christ (νηπίοι ἐν Χριστῷ, 3:1; cf. 13:11).

When Paul speaks of the Corinthian Christians as "children in Christ", he understands their spiritual pilgrimage as a growth from childhood into adulthood. We find the same sort of idea in Stoicism in relation to a person's development.³¹ Paul further says that the

excursus on the subject in *1 Corinthians*, 100-101.

29 H.A.A. Kennedy, *Paul and the Mystery Religions* (London, Hodder and Stoughton, n.d.), 130-135.

30 C.K. Barrett, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1968) 69: "...some of Paul's words may have received in Corinth a more gnostic content than he himself gave them".

31 Epictetus, *Ench.*, 51; *idem.*, *Diss.*, 2. 23. 40; 1.

spiritual person has to feed on solid food, while the Corinthians as babes have to feed on milk. This is a metaphor that is found in the mysteries, the mysteries of Attis being an example.³²

Summary and Conclusions

The few passages discussed above show that the NT contains examples of the contextualization of the Christian message in the Gentile environment of the first century A.D. In the prohibition of divorce in Mk 10:11-12 and 1 Cor 7:10-15, Mark and Paul modify the dominical saying in the light of Graeco-Roman custom, according to which women could divorce their husbands. The Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 made a distinction between what is essential to Christianity and what is peripheral to it and can therefore be dispensed with. The observance of circumcision is not necessary for salvation. Faith in God in the case of the Gentiles seems to be adequate.

In the case of the *Areopagitica* in Acts 17 we saw that the Lucan Paul makes use of Greek philosophical categories in the expression of Judaeo-Christian thought. In 1 Corinthians we encounter the same phenomenon of Greek philosophical ideas being used in the articulation of the Christian message. In the same way indigenous concepts should be used to make the Christian message more meaningful to the people in any given cultural context.

In the *Areopagitica* Paul makes use of the inscription to "an unknown god" to talk about "the

4. 18-27.

32 Sallutius, *Περὶ Θεῶν* 4; Seneca, *Epistles* 94.50; Epictetus, *Ench.*, 51.1f.; *Diss.*, 1.4.18-32; Macrobius, *In Somm. Scip.*, 1.12.3.

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unknown God". He also cites pagan poets in his attempt to reach his audience. This shows that the process of contextualization also involves finding points of contact in the given cultural context as starting points to express the message of Christianity. The Colossians passage shows that it may be necessary sometimes in the process of contextualization to adopt and reapply ideas from the indigenous culture, ridding them of all un-Christian traits, and using them for expressing the Christian message.

In the eschatology of 1-2 Thessalonians we find a two-way process, the hellenization of dominical tradition and the christianization of Jewish tradition. This is especially important for modern contextualization. Contextualization involves introducing elements from the indigenous culture into Christianity, making use of thought-forms and concepts pertaining to the given culture; but it also involves Christianizing the indigenous culture, injecting it with Christian values, thereby transforming and reshaping it to produce a new creation.

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