EVANGELICAL AGNOSTICISM: CRAFTING A DIFFERENT GOSPEL

KEITH E. EITEL

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Keith E. Eitel
Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary
Fort Worth, TX
keitheitel@pobox.com

It [the International Committee of the World Missionary Conference] should from the beginning be precluded from handling matters which are concerned with the doctrinal or ecclesiastical differences of the various denominations. This being assured, it would be desirable that it should be as widely representative as possible. Yet it should be a purely consultative and advisory association, exercising no authority but such as would accrue to it through the intrinsic value of the services that it may be able to render.[1]

There had been dramatic, lengthy, and unifying discussions surrounding the development of the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh that summer of 1910. Each delegate or representative sensed a moving together around a common cause spurred onward by apparent opportunities unsurpassed in Christian history. Commissions formed studies of matters arising from a century of Protestant missionary work during the height of the colonialist era. There was a palpable desire to see the historic branches of Christianity coalesce around the cause and causes of God's grand commission to His church, which He had left in the world to complete the task. The apparent urgency of these pragmatic realities seemed to overwhelm beliefs, thus distinctions between the various Christian groups were diminished.

Delegates discussed extensively two paths to unity. One contingency of delegates advocated forming organic unions on various levels by emphasizing only the common core of Christian beliefs as they then were willing to itemize, but not define, as a cluster of convictions. Instead they would form a kind of ideological commonwealth and agree to "recognize

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[1]World Missionary Conference, 1910, *Report of Commission VIII: Co-Operation and the Promotion of Unity* (Edinburgh: World Missionary Conference, 1910), 147.

the ministry, ordinances, and discipline of the others, and members might be freely transferred from one to the other."The other contingency wanted to hold the idea of unity in creative tension by maintaining distinctive denominational beliefs and independence, essentially opting to try to cooperate in missionary activities while holding dearly their own distinct beliefs. The second group reasoned that "recognition of the ordinances and ministry of all the bodies comprising it [a federated union] is impossible without such disloyal compromise."[2]

The delegates concluded that the best way to retain the enthusiasm of cooperation generated by one of the most significant gathering of believers in Christian history was to take an intermediary step. Rather than form a continuing organization tasked with finding organic ways of maintaining cooperation, the conference opted to form a continuation committee to study how union can best hold together and move ahead in seizing the day for missionary advance. The drama of the resolution's climax was evident according to one eyewitness account.

> Then—
> "The motion has been moved and seconded: those in favour of it say Aye!"
> A roar: "Aye!" short as the monosyllable itself, but with a volume like a Handel chorus.
> "Contrary, No!"
> A silence, as voluminous as the former sound.
> "The motion is carried unanimously."[3]

Indeed, it was felt that the momentum amassed during those days in Scotland's United Free Church Assembly Hall was too much to turn back. The 1910 meeting "led to the establishment of the International Missionary Conference ."[4] However, "it was not until 1961 that the IMC joined together with the WCC (World Council of Churches) by becoming its Division of World Mission and Evangelism."[5]

Was there an idealistic sentiment that won the day at the 1910 World Missionary Conference? Was union without defined doctrinal moorings a workable idea? A century later Christians world-wide are in the midst of posing similar, and in some instances, the exact same questions. Global

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[2]Ibid., 134–36.

[3]W.H.T. Gairdner, *Echoes From Edinburgh, 1910: An Account and Interpretation of the World Missionary Conference* (London: Fleming H. Revell, 1910), 209.

[4]Mark A. Noll, *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 271; World Missionary Conference, *Report of Commission VIII Co-Operation and the Promotion of Unity*, 147.

[5]See the article by David J. Hesselgrave above, 123.

enthusiasm for completing the task of world missions at such a momentous juncture in history was and is real enough to tempt participants to move past the biblical and theological foundations required prior even to engaging the task. While unity centered pragmatism at nearly all costs eventually won the day in 1910, is it time now to rethink our theological identities and test the security of our tether to biblical truth? Unity for the sake of missions is possible and perhaps even a realistic aim within the framework of oneness of mind about what is spiritually true and revealed by God as being so. Yet, is it possible, given fallen human nature, to expect that the very reasons to do missions will not be affected by theological crosscurrents, which in time will erode a biblical basis for missions?

Now, nearly 100 years later, perhaps we can glean from the past and consider the present in light of an emerging future. The purpose of this article is to summarize selected trends that impact missionary theology, contextualization methods, and practices today. It will note major shifts in our understanding of truth, theology, and missiology, as well as attempt to analyze contextualization problems now faced. Finally, a way forward is proposed as contemporary Christians encounter a similar emerging sense of urgency and opportunity for fulfilling the Great Commission. We should also recognize the possibility that in our urgency to unify with other Christians and become relevant to a non-Christian world, which seems so "agnostic" or skeptical about absolute religious truth claims, we may have adopted inappropriate theological methods. Some methods may help us succeed in being relevant while also doing precisely what Paul warned the Galatians against so long ago when they countenanced, and perhaps helped create, "a different gospel" (Gal 1:6).

Milestones Ahead

In 2010 other missions related meetings are scheduled to commemorate moments past and present. Edinburgh and Cape Town will be the sites for meetings scheduled and designed to look back at the 1910 event, as well as push forward with a reinvigorated missions momentum.[6] The faces of Christians are different today than a century ago. They are much more majority-world oriented, and less Western. They are more passionate in their spiritual service, and less formal. Also, they are more globally connected, and less isolationist.[7] How do we interpret the Bible,

[6]"Edinburgh 2010," http://www.edinburgh2010.org/ (Accessed 28 February 2008); "The Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization—Cape Town 2010," http://www.lausanne.org/cape-town-2010/cape-town-2010.html (Accessed 28 February 2008).

[7]See the analyses provided in Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming Global Christianity*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); and idem, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South* (New York: Oxford University

an ancient yet always refreshing text, in a broadband era? Does it have relevance to life even now, two millennia after its most recent records? How do we pose questions, seek solutions, and exhibit salt and light in the midst of global crises using an ancient truth source? The descriptions of how planners are shaping agendas for these two meetings reflect current thought on these kinds of issues.

Two different meetings to commemorate one historic reality indicate that there have been changes in the creative tensions that were designed to hold Christians together in 1910. In 1948 the World Council of Churches (WCC) tied together sentiments flowing from the 1910 sessions. Yet, in the 1960s Evangelicals raised concerns regarding various emphases of Christendom's global movements. Eventually, their concerns led to the formation of the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelism (LCWE). Its first meeting was held in 1974. Concerns over the imbalances within the WCC toward social aspects of the gospel generated a desire to swing the pendulum back and reignite Christians of common concerns around the cause of global evangelism. Now both traditions have matured and entered a new century poised for further development. Each tradition is posing questions for the post-modern world from different convictional assumptions. Consider these explanations from both the Edinburgh and Lausanne plans for 2010:

> [Edinburgh 2010] will explore the theological meaning of religious plurality reflecting on how it bears on Christian soteriology and missiology and address questions of conversion, proselytisation, dialogue and encounter. . . . Studies undertaken under this commission will as much as possible be conducted together with or in consultation with representatives of other faiths.[8]

> [Lausanne 2010:] The claim that Jesus is the truth must be demonstrated in the Christian praxis of attending to human pain and meeting human needs. The truth-claim of Christ as Lord cannot be reduced to a set of dogmatic statements that one defends. Jesus cannot be reduced to a dogma. The belief proposition that in the person of Jesus we see the incarnation of Truth is manifested in the praxis of good works. We in the church do not need to be apologetic in making truth-claims concerning Jesus Christ, seeing that all religions distinguish

Press, 2006).

[8]"2. Christian mission among other faiths," http://www.edinburgh2010.org/en/study-themes/2-christian-mission-among-other-faiths.html (Accessed 28 February 2008).

themselves on the basis of their distinctive truth-claims. We maintain that we do not need to relinquish our truth-claims in order to enter into dialogue with people of other faiths.[9]

Although they stem from differing traditions of stated conviction, the two traditions now reflect similar concerns and evidence post-modern skepticism regarding the nature of religious truth, the Bible as the uniquely true source of that truth, and the methodologies for mining that truth.

So here we are, at this juncture in history, needing a guiding word from God while toying with the tensions of cultural relativism. The choice is between absolute truth or relative truths. This is the choice before us. And yet another way is surfacing, according to the evidence above. A middle way is emerging. This middle way makes the odd claim, on the one hand, that the Bible is true Truth, Christ is uniquely the only way of salvation, and His Church is tasked to engage the world with the only true message of this salvation, while affirming simultaneously, on the other hand, pluralism and cultural relativism. The middle way makes an odd attempt to hold these contradictory beliefs together. How did we arrive at this place? World affairs, philosophical assumptions, and globalizing realities have shifted like tectonic plates causing eruptions of major proportions that have left their imprint on human religious sensitivities, including Christian ones. They are reflected in the planning for the 2010 events. Perhaps it is best to propose a different way than that offered by either Edinburgh or Lausanne.

Building Blocks

It is difficult to specify single causes for ideological trends in general and much less so for philosophical or theological ones. There is a confluence of happenings as the academy's ideas are translated out onto the streets and embodied in activities in the flow of human events. A couple of global wars (three, if you include the Cold War), numerous lesser military conflicts, and genocidal crises, as well as new diseases, famines, and natural disasters all flow together to make humanity realize the tentativeness of existence. In one sense, such things make us seek. When humans look for meaning or purpose to existence, they are left with limited logical possibilities.

If humanity is alone in the universe, part of a closed system, then the law of the jungle reigns with no hope for meaning of any lasting

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[9]"The Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization–Limuru Pointers: Following Jesus in Our Broken World," http://www.lausanne.org/issue-theology/limuru-pointers.html (Accessed 28 February 2008). This session was not specifically stated as being a design group for the Cape Town 2010 event, but it was a gathering of the Theology Work Group, which naturally informs and feeds the Lausanne community's thinking.

consequence, just power. Or, perhaps there is a cyclical aspect to human existence, which then only delays the same conclusion of our aloneness in the face of an impersonal supra-existence that virtually never ceases. With such a paradigm, we are left asking, again, where is relevant hope? But, there is yet another likelihood, namely that there is a Creator.[10] Hope is embedded in the realization that this Creator has made Himself known, revealed His nature, persons, and character in various ways through nature, or existence itself, as well as through special events. Those events are authenticated by a combination of proposals with corresponding validations. It is a rich and profound proposal that God became man, that the Creator allowed Himself to experience human existence. The proposal is only words, however, unless there are acts of validation. The historical evidences for the resurrection of Jesus Christ, for example, make His claims more than mere words.[11] The consummate act of validation in time as humans now experience it will be the return of Christ. At that time, all arguments will cease, all philosophers will be silenced, and all armies and governments will disband in the face of His triumphant return.

These lines of thought are the building blocks of biblical hope. They are reasonable realities but not derived from inductive human reason that constructs truths out of human experiences, or at least when and where they have been so they are usually corrupted. Instead, it is a form of deduction or faith-based reaction to God's revelation that guides and curbs human reason to make the building blocks reasonable and foundational to theistic Christian knowledge. It is deduction, because God first proposes His existence, and humanity then supposes, or has faith, in agreement with God's reality.[12] Special revelation is God breaking into human existence and making Himself manifest in living form by the life of Jesus Christ, which is made known today by the Scriptures. These are in complementary relationship. The substance of reality is formed by God and known through His revelation. Humans learn to believe their way toward greater or increased levels of understanding His true truth in the interplay of human experience subordinated to Scripture. Doctrinal formation or theology is

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[10]Certainly there are numerous assumptions made here. Suffice it to say at this point that argumentation is available to substantiate said assumptions. One well reasoned presentation is Winfried Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths: A Christian Introduction To World Religions* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998). One might add the concept of annihilation to this string of possibilities but in one sense it is a variation of the first model.

[11]C.S. Lewis comes to mind as one source to correlate the case for the uniqueness of Christ's claims. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity: With a New Introduction, of the Three Books, The Case for Christianity, Christian Behavior, and Beyond Personality* (New York: Macmillan, 1976).

[12]Romans 1:18–32 and 1 Corinthians 15:1–32 provide bases for this set of convictions.

the result. His truth is static and unchanging in keeping with His nature, but human understanding is progressive in that God's Holy Spirit illuminates the text of written revelation. The gospel message, Christ's commission to "go," to be gospel bearers: all draw their significance from this divine drama lived out within the framework of His revelation.

Why then does Paul warn of "a different Gospel"? Perhaps because dangers persist that methods could emerge and shift emphasis to uncritical prioritization of experience, revered traditions or even fallen human wisdom. The egalitarian model of truth is evidence of idolatry, "suppressing the truth in unrighteousness." Here is precisely where Christians that take the words of Christ seriously and desire to engage the world with the good news of the gospel sometimes go awry. Subtly, perhaps without notice, well meaning Christians can and often do, shift from a faith response in relation to God's truth to relying on human experience as the dominant (or even more pernicious is viewing it as equal) element in interpreting and responding to God's premises. How is the gospel defined, communicated, and made relevant to others, especially those of cultures other than our own? What roles do experience and reflection play in the drama?

Trends in theological formation have emerged, especially during the decade of the 1990s, which seem to evidence this subtle but dangerous shift that allows human experience to drive or set the conditions for the conversations God has with humans and the response of human minds to His revelation. By inserting human experience into the primary seat, we may have in one sense functionally presumed for ourselves the role of the Creator and abdicated the status of creation. Stan Grenz, noting changes or shifts between the modern and postmodern modes of thinking suggested that, "Whatever may eventually characterize the postmodern mind, it will be an *outlook toward ourselves and the world* chastened by the realism thrust upon us by the experiences of a century of failure and unmet expectations."[13]

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[13]Stanley Grenz and Roger E Olson, *20th Century Theology: God & The World In A Transitional Age* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 314 (emphasis mine). Grenz and Olson trace the shifts in twentieth century theology from a classic balance between the transcendent and the immanent views of God in relation to creation to an imbalance toward transcendence via the works of Karl Barth and others influenced by Neo-Orthodoxy. With closure of the modern ways of thinking and the groping toward new meaning, postmoderns, the authors suggest, will need to overcome pessimism of the contemporary scene and strike a balance for relevant Christian thought by pulling the pendulum back toward immanence. Looking "toward ourselves" is a curious but telling twist of phrase.

A Look Back

The most immediate taproot of today's religious skepticism and shift toward anthropocentric theological methods is the strain of thought already noticed in the 1970s.

> Without persuasive epistemic credentials, Christianity will be assimilated to the historical approach prevalent in the modern intellectual world where all events are set in the context of developmental contingency and any claim to finality and absolute uniqueness is leveled.[14]

Yet this view is too rationalistic, modern, and tethered for postmodern temperaments. Grenz, after critiquing modern thought forms similar to those that Carl F.H. Henry espoused above, said, "Whatever else it may prove to be, postmodernity is the questioning of these theses. Postmodern thinkers have given up the assumptions that reason has no limitations, that knowledge is inherently good and that we can solve all our problems. . . . The watchword of postmodernity is holism—the desire to put back together what modernity has torn asunder."[15] Against the tide of modernity, Grenz built a reactionary system for theological thought heavily influenced by Wolfhart Pannenberg, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and George A. Lindbeck, resulting in a non-foundational approach to Christian theology. Grenz described the contours of this new evangelical approach to theologizing, as summarized here:

1. The *sola scriptura* principle of the Reformation failed, due to the Enlightenment use of reason that led to the text being an "object of the scholar's exegetical and systematizing prowess. The postmodern situation has laid bare the foundationalist presuppositions laying behind this modernist program."
2. By relying on the work of the Holy Spirit, the Bible, then, becomes the "norming norm in theology," allowing the text to become "the instrumentality of the Spirit".
3. The "Spirit performs the illocutionary act of addressing us."

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[14]Carl F.H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 6 vols. (Waco: Word, 1976), 1:213.

[15]Stanley J. Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the 21st Century* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993), 15.

4. Believers are challenged and undergo a transforming of "our present on the basis of the past and in accordance with a vision of the future."

5. Theologizing, then, intends "to assist the people of God in hearing the Spirit's voice speaking through the text, so that we can live as God's people—as inhabitants of God's eschatological world—in the present."

6. In relation to church tradition, these theological dynamics shift "confessions of faith" to the role of a "witness to the fact that Christians in every generation read the text through the lenses provided by a particular hermeneutical context. And tradition indicates that luminaries of the past have an ongoing role in the contemporary theological conversation."[16]

People are connected and interconnected. The ways they relate to one another form into cultures or sets of connectedness. As individuals experience revelation they do so in communities or subcultures that relate to surrounding cultures. Believing communities provide a traditional "trajectory" or pathway to hermeneutical "reference points" that guide our theological understanding. The communal discovery of truth provides a corrective as together we theologize and engage in an "authentic 'performance' of the Christian faith as it is 'scored' [as in a symphony] in Scripture." Cultures within which the community of the faithful exist and discover truth through their traditions provide "meaning-making" structures. "A theology that is culturally relevant seeks to articulate Christian beliefs in a manner that is understandable to the people within the wider society in which the church ministers." Grenz leaves the reader with the clear impression that the truth of Scripture is somehow not true until or unless it is mixed with individual experiences, formed by hermeneutical traditions, and related to the meaning structures within a culture. He thereby appears to make God's true truth contingent upon human experience, rendering it a "theology from below."[17]

Henry's foresight has become reality through Grenz's sophisticated set of philosophical and linguistic assumptions. Theological discourse has shifted from the pursuit of God's truth to the projection of human experiences. The prevailing tone of postmodern thought translated into Christian theology is skeptical or agnostic about God's ability to reveal Himself in retrievable and comprehendible ways. This elaborate system

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[16]Stanley J. Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 206–08.

[17]Stanley J. Grenz, "How Do We Know What to Believe?" in *Essentials of Christian Theology*, ed. William C. Placher (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 28–31.

seems to reflect a type of "neo-Barthianism" in that revelation is shifted from the explicit rendering of the text itself to the contexts of human experiences.[18]

A Look Out

Since the contexts into which the gospel pushes out are numerous and vastly different, missionaries usually encounter the friction of gospel communication as a front line action. Missionary models and methods undergo shifts and transformations as theological methodologies change and sometimes vice versa. The two are integrally interdependent. As theological inquiry goes, so goes missiological methods, particularly contextualization processes designed to make the gospel relevant in new settings.

David J. Bosch, South African missiologist, published a piece that is proving to be a vital link between modern and post-modern forms of missiology. There is a fundamental element in his missiological technique that bears on this discussion. In the final segment of his work, he laid out the contours of "an emerging ecumenical missionary paradigm." He portrayed the interplay of context and text as a dynamic living reality. Crossing cultural lines with static forms of theology already applied to prior contexts is a moot process, he concluded, because it was not true that applied "Western theology had universal validity."[19] Bosch argued for a contextualization model that viewed things quite differently. "Contextualization, on the other hand, suggests the experimental and contingent nature of all theology. Contextual theologians therefore, rightly, refrain from writing 'systematic theologies' where everything fits into an all-encompassing and eternally valid system." Yet, likely in anticipation of the error of relativism, he cautioned against an "infinite number of contextual and often mutually exclusive theologies."[20] Somewhere in between these opposite poles is where relevant, contingent theologizing happened for Bosch. He crafted a term for making absolute relevant and contingent

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[18]Karl Barth's shift of revelation's location from the text to the moment of "encounter" when it only then becomes revelation within subjective humanity is a significant parallel in this discussion. See an interesting recent analysis of Barth's exegetical method. Ross McGowan Wright, "Karl Barth's Academic Lectures on Ephesians, Göttingen, 1921–1922: An Original Translation, Annotation, and Analysis" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of St. Andrews, 2006), 51. Herein the author notes Barth's own impressions of his exegetical method as "nothing more than the application of Kierkegaard's 'infinite qualitative distinction between God and humanity,' the 'relentless, elastic application of the dialectical method' until the Word is revealed in the words.'"

[19]David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 427.

[20]Ibid.

theologies. These would be "contextualism," or "universalizing one's own theological position, making it applicable to everybody and demanding that others submit to it. . . . A new imperialism in theology then simply replaces the old."[21]

At least seventeen years have passed since Bosch noticed these trends and issued this caution. Unfortunately, the methodological ideal is apparently undermined by his theological assumptions. The ideal would be a vital living theology that relates well to a given context full of rich biblical meaning and performing a prophetic function in the given context. Yet, when beginning with a skeptical approach to the biblical text—whereby one presupposes that the original meanings the inspired authors had when writing would be either irretrievable or not meaningful in the multifaceted settings of believers today—starts the process off in an avalanche of experientialism. The modern hearer tends to ignore the spade work required to delve into the original languages, historical analyses and cultural settings of the past in order to acquire the original meanings and then apply them to a myriad of new lifestyles in our post-modern world. If those original meanings are abandoned or ignored, then the default is to project human cultural values and experiences into the place of biblical meanings. Then there is another oddity that manifests itself: Contemporary hearers end up viewing their own cultural systems as absolute and submit Scripture to their own designer theologies or customized theologies. Thus, a mirroring affect takes place: We hold a mirror up to our own experience and absolutize what we see.

Dean Flemming continues along the same line, holding the two extremes and respective cautions in tension. He accepts the epistemological skepticism inherent in both Grenz and Bosch when he claims, "*All* theology is *contextual* theology, from the creeds of the early church to the modern 'Four Spiritual Laws.' All theologizing is done from a particular location and perspective whether we are conscious of it or not. Contextualized theology is not just desirable; it is the only way theology can be done." Yet, he also acknowledges, "Theological reflection that is context or culture-driven rather than rooted in Scripture runs a high risk of moving beyond the limits of acceptable diversity."[22] Flemming again sees the problems, but adopts a methodology that begins with the assumption that original meanings of Scripture are always tainted and cannot be objectively understood or transferred to the modern or postmodern contexts. Abandoning a basic hermeneutical principle, that words effectively convey truth, seems to lead

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[21]Ibid., 428.
[22]Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2005), 298, 304.

to the very polar opposite reality that Bosch and Flemming themselves caution us to avoid.

The nexus of the problem is apparently in that foundational presupposition that original biblical truths are locked in history woven into a web of doubt. This casts aspersions on the idea that true truth is somehow universally valid. D.A. Carson laments this predicament when he characterizes Grenz's theological method as playing to postmodern epistemological entrapments. "Moreover, all human articulation is necessarily within the bounds of some culture or other, and can thus truly be said to be a social construct. But to run from this fair observation to the insistence that it is improper to talk about objective truth, or about human knowledge of truth, is merely a reflection of being hoodwinked by that one untenable antithesis." In noting the mirroring affect mentioned above, he continues and concludes with a pithy question, "How can the grammar of discourse of the community properly ground the grammar of discourse of the community?"[23] Hence, here is the contradiction in terms stated clearly: Without retrievable objective biblical truth the grammar or experiential values of the given community assert themselves over the whole conversation and mirror communal values as absolute.

Missiological methods have followed this discussion and evangelicals have attempted to bridge the breach. One that provided a great deal of balancing influence was offered by Paul G. Hiebert. In one of his final writings he attempted to shape the contours of a missionary mediatory role in crafting global theology that bears relevance on local levels yet is true to a metatheology, a theology transcending any given culture. He knew that the contextualization debates led to numerous and often extreme localized theologies. Yet, he noted, "without external objective criteria to determine whether accurate communication has taken place, the gospel becomes whatever people believe it to be. Moreover, this view denies the importance of our common humanity and history and of a divine cosmic story. It reduces everything to momentary personal experiences that, in the end, are transient and meaningless." Here Hiebert notes the relativistic dangers of not anchoring theology in the true truth of the Bible. However, then even Hiebert yielded, to some extent, to the prevailing epistemological trends, when he noted that a "requisite in a metatheology is to differentiate between God's revelation as recorded in Scripture and

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[23]D.A. Carson, "Domesticating the Gospel: A Review of Grenz's Renewing the Center," in *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times,* eds. Millard J. Erickson, Paul Kjoss Helseth, and Justin Taylor (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), 47, 51. Carson's use of the grammar analogy is a reference to George Lindbeck's linguistic analogies for theological methodology and for discovering religious language to determine religious truths.

human understandings expressed in theologies."[24] I would not conclude that Hiebert here concedes that no true truth is available, but he does show evidence that a quest for a metatheology requires a wedge between external objective biblical truth and mere interpretations. If the original textual meaning is what the inspired authors stated as truth, and applied to their respective contexts, then the old distinction between meaning and application that homiliticians have always advocated when exegeting the Bible and then applying its meaning to a contemporary setting has even more significance when searching for a way forward beyond the need to be relevant at the expense of undermining the idea of retrievable and absolute biblical truth.[25]

A Look Forward

Before a viable biblical form of contextualization is possible, one must construct a platform for thinking theologically based on the given forms of theology stated in the text. Theological certitude is suspect in our brave new postmodern world. Relativism reigns as absolute, as contradictory as that may sound. David F. Wells notes that the affirmation of true truth as "a profession about objective truth of God and his self-disclosure in the space-time world has become most awkward in academia because of its continuing attachment to Enlightenment habits." Attaching theological inquiry to any framework, philosophical or otherwise, that is not embedded in and determined by the text of Scripture itself undermines any objectively true foundations for theological confession. When severed from the text, "it finds its subject matter anywhere along a line that runs from Eastern spirituality to radical politics to feminist ideology to environmental concerns. . . . At a single stroke, confession is eviscerated and reflection reduced mainly to thought about one's self."[26]

So how do we approach the biblical text in such a way as to guard against the encroachments of our own space-time experiences that tend to force some sort of reading of ourselves into the biblical text rather than the biblical text informing, shaping, and transforming us? The grounding element is a hermeneutical spiral whereby we approach the text recognizing Christ's lordship over us and seeking to know and understand Him as the living Word more perfectly through the written Word and be conformed

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[24]Paul G. Hiebert, "The Missionary as Mediator of Global Theologizing," in *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity,* eds Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 293, 306.

[25]Grant R. Osborne, "Preaching the Gospels: Methodology and Contextualization," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 27 (March 1984): 34.

[26]David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 100–101.

to Him. Our pre-understandings ought always to be subjected to the critiquing authority of the text. If such are in contradiction to the text, the believer is tethered to the text and bound by conscience to submit to the teaching of the text.[27]

Three key elements drive the balance between the human and divine conjunction in the hermeneutical process that keeps Scripture dominant in the dynamic drama. First, because the text is dominant, then the grammar, history, and cultural settings, and contexts are essential to determining the original meanings and implications of the text. Without this, one will by default resort to reading into the text experiential pre-understandings and actually invert the process, subtly making human experience dominant and all the while calling the resultant interpretation "biblical." Second, the principle of scriptural harmony aids in safeguarding against the same undesirable outcome just stated. This forces us to again tether ourselves to the text by requiring our interpretations to square with the larger teachings of the text by comparing and contrasting a particular passage with parallel themes or contexts elsewhere in Scripture. Obscure passages should yield to more lucid ones to clarify meaning. Finally, scriptural truth is universally applicable and pragmatically true. Specific applications may vary in differing times and places, but the universal core of truth is transferrable or exportable to other cultures and times. We must "unshell" these truths from their "immediate settings" and "reapply them."[28] In the final analysis, if the interpreter's

> exegetical procedure is challenged, he defends it from his hermeneutic; if his hermeneutic is challenged, he defends it from his doctrine of biblical authority; if his doctrine of biblical authority is challenged, he defends it from biblical texts by exegesis, synthesis, and application. At no point does he decline to accept challenges to his present view of things, but at every point he meets them by renewed theological exegesis of relevant passages in light of the questions that have been asked.[29]

As believers connect to one another and blend into Christian communities and local churches, they compare and contrast interpretations of the text, banter thoughts and reflections around, analyze and synthesize theological thought into core affirmations that clarify and magnify the

[27]J.I. Packer, "Infallible Scripture and the Role of Hermeneutics," in *Scripture and Truth*, ed. D.A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 348–49. Cf. the contextualization model established by Osborne, "Preaching the Gospels," 34.

[28]Ibid., 351.

[29]Ibid., 349.

text of Scripture itself. They then hold each other mutually accountable for the implications and applications that would derive from the text as relevant for their particular context. Some church traditions are more prone to biblical fidelity than others. Free Church traditions lend themselves more openly to affirm belief and the lordship of Christ with an open heart freely disposed to adhere to His will than do some that require hierarchies of interpretation as more authoritative than others. The Free Church tradition of Pilgrim Marpeck, for example, exhibits a biblically dominant theological process. Malcolm Yarnell concludes, "At the theological headwaters of the believers' church movement stands his theological method. Its foundation is a complete yieldedness to Christ in covenantal discipleship. The ground principles are Christocentrism, the coinherent work of the Word and the Spirit, fidelity to the biblical order against human invention, and a covenantal community interpreting and living out the Word."[30] How then would these, or similar convictions, work themselves out as contextualization of Christian thought designed to convey biblical meaning to settings other than those of the original hearers and to engage multifaceted cross-cultural settings?

Biblically Balanced Contextualization

Simply stated, a biblical fidelity will tether the interpreter to the text, keeping it dominant in the entire contextualization process so that the text criticizes prophetically any given culture rather than the culture domineering and letting the interpreter's personal or cultural value system usurp the procedures and blatantly or subtly shifting the mirrored experience into the place of what the Bible actually says. The latter methodology results in culture, or human experience, criticizing the Bible and reading conclusions into Scripture to justify cultural conditioning. Osborne suggests three practical stages to be followed carefully for a biblically balanced contextualization process:

1. The connection between meaning and significance—i.e., the necessity of delineating the original meaning of the text and then its application to the present context.
2. The determination of cultural and supracultural elements in the text.

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[30]Malcolm B. Yarnell III, *The Formation of Christian Doctrine* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2007), 106. Yarnell cogently compares and contrasts the Free Church traditions to those that would be hierarchical in nature and finds the latter lacking the appropriate groundwork to construct a biblical theological method.

3. The separation between form and content, with the contextualization occurring at the former level.[31]

This approach, when connected to the concept of a hermeneutical spiral, as stated by Packer above, provides necessary safeguards to vouchsafe the Bible's original meanings and to allow the careful cultural observer to apply it to modern issues and cultural settings. As Osborne notes, "Divine revelation thus is perceived as both static and dynamic, both propositional and relational. The dictates of Scripture are allowed to challenge and then transform the receptor culture."[32]

In one sense, all believers should be moving gradually toward a unified meaning as determined by the text itself and simultaneously diversifying applications to individualized and unique contexts. The net effect is what Hesselgrave terms a "prophetic accommodational" form of contextualization.[33] Scripture, though ancient, still speaks with the prophetic voice of days of old and does so as it relates to our modern issues and contexts.

Conclusion

Ancient mariners hugged continental coastlines to avoid drifting out into deep waters that were not navigable given their technological capabilities. The astrolabe changed that. It enabled them to determine their position on the face of the earth in relation to the fixed position of star formations at night. Once they determined their position, they could maneuver themselves to the points of interest on their horizons. Used properly they would not be lost at sea again.

2010 will be a monumental year in that it marks a century of missiological practice that has evolved since the 1910 Edinburgh conference, where theological convictions were sacrificed on the modernistic altar of cooperative unity. This form of theological "DNA" would only be valid in so far as a general form of theological conviction could be held in common,

[31]Osborne, "Preaching the Gospels," 34.

[32]Ibid., 35.

[33]David J. Hesselgrave, "The Three Horizons: Culture, Integration, and Communication," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48 (1985): 450. Hesselgrave detailed his views of contextualization in "Contextualization and Revelational Epistemology," in *Hermeneutics and Inerrancy,* eds. Earl Radmacher and Robert Preuss (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 693–738; and later in concert with Edward Römmen, in Hesselgrave and Römmen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989). Of particular help is the latter book's treatment of the connection between theological presuppositions and the working out of contextualization models. Underlying this framework is also the hermeneutical backgrounds to said theological methods and ultimately underlying philosophical assumptions regarding the nature of revelation and religious knowledge.

which was not the case even then. In the century since, more shifts and eruptions have transpired in theological inquiry, and Christian churches have dotted the face of the globe. Where are we located? How can we determine true truth in a sea of relativity? Perhaps it is best to come full circle and fix our gaze on the inerrant truth, a "faith once delivered to the saints" (Jude 3), and then engage the text by "rightly dividing the word of truth" (2 Tim 2:15). So, like the astrolabe for those of old, we should reorient ourselves and move on through these times with confidence in God's Word. Otherwise, we may find ourselves adrift, continuing to raise doubts about the veracity of God's Word, or more pernicious yet, affirming His Word while practicing forms of theological inquiry that undermine it and shift the basis of absolute truth to fickle fluid human experiences and preferences. Such skepticism turns even evangelicals into "agnostics" of sorts, in that they functionally cannot know true truth. The cataclysmic effect of biblical doubt is the formation of yet a different gospel. Paul's warning to the Galatians rings true in this increasingly postmodern world.