THE DANGER OF SYNCRETISM IN MISSION CONTEXTUALIZATION

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This article focuses on Biblical approach in avoiding syncretism in mission contextualization. The danger of syncretism occurs as the Gospel goes deep further in the remote areas. Significance Biblical background of contextualization solves the ongoing problem. The objectives of this study are to clarify, describe, and analyze basic foundation of contextualization in order to avoid syncretistic approach in evangelism. Jesus’ method in Galilee ministry is one of the best examples. Biblical background of contextualization is found in the Old and New Testament. The characteristic of Jesus’ ministry gives solid foundation of contextualization.

Key words: contextualization, gospel, syncretism, culture, galilee ministry, Luke 4, salvation.

1. Introduction

Contextualization is a Biblical approach used throughout the New Testament to communicate the gospel. It has been used by missionaries all over the world with great success. However, this concept of evangelism in Christian world is facing error known as syncretism. It also creates cultural distortion.

The problem is raised by the fact that Christianity was introduced by western missionaries hindered by language and cultural boundaries. It is important to contextualize based on the Bible. It eludes contradiction with cultural background of the people. Syncretism is a threat in the contextualizing mission of the Church. It is a danger of blending the truth and error in evangelism. Moreover, the danger of syncretism is to contextualize the truth. To solve the problem, some questions might be asked. What is the best method of contextualization? What is the Bible method of contextualization? How to avoid the danger of syncretism in evangelism? Is it shown in Jesus’ ministry?

A careful study of Biblical contextualization is substantial for three reasons. First, it is hoped that Biblical method only will clarify the best way of contextualize the gospel. Next,
Seventh-day Adventist puts syncretism as a “threat” and “constant challenge.” Therefore, a careful study in this area will contribute a greater success in the task of the Church proclaiming the gospel.

Last, Seventh-day Adventist regards that a careful study in this area is very important for the leaders, theologians, missiologists, local people, and ministers.

This study will help these individuals having a clear understanding of the core elements of the biblical worldview. It will enable them to distinguish between the truth and error. This study is focused on the Biblical concept of the evangelism in Jesus’ ministry. The best method of contextualization lies in Jesus’ ministry. Jesus’ example in His Ministry is the ultimate source in dealing with culture in the society. Special attention is given in Luke 4:18, 19, as the proclamation of Messiah is broadcast to the gentiles.

2. Biblical Background of Contextualization

The good news of salvation in Jesus Christ is the core of evangelism. Communicating the message of the gospel to the people around the world has been facing great cultural barrier. Further, the Church is tested to do the Great commission in a significant ways and understandable in another cultural background. A statement regarding the essence of contextualization is given by Darrell Whiteman: “Contextualization attempts to communicate the Gospel in word and deed and to establish the church in ways that make sense to people within their local cultural context, presenting Christianity in such a way that it meets people’s deepest needs and penetrates their worldview, thus allowing them to follow Christ and remain within their own culture.

God’s plan of salvation is for everyone. God purpose to save everyone has been well written. It is great basic form of contextualization. Biblical basis for God to reveal Himself will be discussed here. The idea of revealing God and His message to the entire world appears in both the Old and New Testaments. God promises to Abram that he would be a great nation. He would bless him and make his name great. He states “And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed” (Genesis 12:3).

After changing his name to Abraham, God says “Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made thee (Genesis 17:5). Abraham has become God’s channel of blessing to another people. This basic form of being a blessing also occurs in the Israelites task as a nation. God reveals Himself to another people through Israel.

Bible History shows Israelites position among nations that they were to proclaim God to the others. “And he said, It is a light thing that thou shouldest be my servant to raise up the

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9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
12 Ralph D. Winter, “The Highest Priority: Cross-Cultural Evangelism” (book on-line); available from www.capetown2010.com/docs/fau/docs/0213.pdf; Internet; downloaded October 29, 2011. In a short description of the significance of contextualization and mission of the Church, Ralph Says that four out of five people in the world cannot become Christians unless someone crosses cultural and/or language barriers to the culture in a significance way.”
13 Darrell L. Whiteman, “Contextualization: The Theory, the Gap, the Challenge” (article on-line); available from www.spu.edu/depts/theology; internet; accessed November 8, 2011.
14 Scriptures references from this study are from the King James Version.
tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved of Israel: I will also give thee for a light to the Gentiles, that thou mayest be my salvation unto the end of the earth” (Isaiah 49:6).

Cultural Diversity in the New Testament

The foundation of the great commission is for everyone, and everywhere (Matthew 28:19, 20). The New Testament records cultural diversity in the beginning of the early Church development. It is good evidence on how the Church dealt with variety of cultural background. The growing church increased its number by the pouring of the Holy Spirit as recorded in acts 2:41.

Revelation 7:9 tells us that God’s Kingdom full of people with different cultural background and diversity. A better understanding of cultural nature of the gospel is given by Paul in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23: “For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more. And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; To them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law. To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men that I might by all means save some. And this I do for the gospel's sake, that I might be partaker thereof with you.”

Paul gives solid definition of contextualization. It is pure and penetrating every cultural barrier in early Church. Contextualization in different cultural background has a solid foundation in the Bible, although there is no single word of ‘Contextualization’ recorded in it. It is shown in the growing number of the membership, as well as willingness of the disciples going to other areas of mission.

Jesus’ examples in His ministry to the people with different cultural background will be discussed in the next part.

2. Syncretism in Evangelism

Some Christian evangelists have been involved in doing syncretism. Furthermore, they did an approach that is contradicted to biblical truth and church policies. So what is the meaning of syncretism? Definition of syncretism as given by Webster dictionary is “The union of different systems of thought or belief especially in religion or philosophy.” It has been appearing in some areas around the world, and become major concern in evangelism. Here is discussed the kinds of syncretism and the danger of it in the evangelism.

2.1. Cultural Syncretism

Brown states that the Church compromises the culture of the people even in specific matters. It seems that the Church tolerates to the practices of the people as long as they

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17 Ibid.
20 See “Brown.” The example is clearly given, such as the kind of the clothes they are wearing, form of buildings and homes, the way people interact socially, the relationships between the sexes, the way people sit (or stand) during meetings, the way they sing, the instruments they use, the role of literacy. It just a two different worldview merge and create a new
become Christian. Meanwhile, cultural syncretism can be traced in the practices of the Christian Churches.\textsuperscript{21} It can be seen in the form of playing cards Santa Claus, Easter eggs, etc. Some Christian Churches did it to avoid contradiction between the church and the people in some cultural places.\textsuperscript{22} Ignorance in this particular traditions would take the direction into disbelieve one and another. Moreover, Rheenen says that over emphasis on the cultural context lead to syncretism.\textsuperscript{23} The result is people tend to believe that the church does not belong to the community.

2.2. Doctrinal Syncretism

It is a surprise that the practice of syncretism has been done by some theologian. They took part in mixing the truth.\textsuperscript{24} A fact recorded in Africa regarding this action led by a theologian, John Mbiti.\textsuperscript{25} He says that the phenomenon which Westerners called ‘ancestor worship’ is not worship in a true form. The acts of giving food and drink to ancestral spirits are only symbols of communion, fellowship and remembrance. To fail to remember the dead in this way is, in effect, to excommunicate them and deprive them of that which is needful for another existence.\textsuperscript{26}

\textsuperscript{21} David Johnson, “Christmas Traditions” (article on-line) available at www.factmonster.com/spotchristmas2.html; internet; accessed November 1, 2011.
\textsuperscript{22} Odilile Ayodele, “Religious Syncretism” (article on-line); available from http://odilileayodele.suite101.com/religious-syncretism-a70001; internet; accessed 1 October 2011.
\textsuperscript{23} See, Van Rheenen, “Contextualization and Syncretism: Navigating Cultural Currents” (book on-line); available from www.missiology.org.EMS; internet.
\textsuperscript{24} Carlos Martin, “Christianity among Traditional Religion” (Adventist International Institute of Advance Studies, Silang Cavite, Philippines, 1996), 163.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{26} See, Carlos Martin, “Biblical and Organizational Models for Contextualization among Muslims” (article on-line) available from http://210.101.116.28/W_kiss61/1s700021_pv.pdf; Internet; Downloaded May 25, 2011.
3. Avoiding Syncretism in Evangelism

The Bible alone is the best source of evangelism methods. It is well recorded in the New Testament Church. Primarily, they focused on the unity of the Church. Basic principle in doing contextualization is to lead people to Christ and not Christianity.

3.1. Good News for Everyone

Jesus reveals Himself as Messiah in a multicultural background in Israel. He entered a Synagogue and begun His ministry as Messiah (Luke 4:18, 19). These verses have been used by the theologians as the foundation of evangelism. Jesus entire ministry was focused on the multicultural group the poor, and oppressed people in the society. Furthermore, it is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy of Isaiah 61:1, 2. The history of Galilee shows that the area was not purely Jewish people. It contained with people from different countries, even languages. Jesus proclaimed the gospel first time in gentiles’ majority area.

3.2. Cultural Boundaries Breaking

One of the main aspects of Jesus’ proclamation of Messiah is cultural boundaries breaking. The good news of salvation penetrates everywhere. He entered areas considered as enemy for the Jews. He talked with the oppressed people in the society. The gap between Jew and Gentiles has been erased by Jesus in His ministry. The nature of Gospel is to break even the densest culture in the world and the core of it is salvation for everyone.

3.2.1. Mingle with the People

Luke and the other gospel are given so much attention of Jesus and his ministry. Jesus mingled with the people whom needy and oppressed in the society furthermore, Bock says that in the ministry of Jesus he was serving as a Servant-Messiah. Regarding the ministry of Jesus, Ellen G. White says that ‘no distinction on account of nationality, race, or caste, is recognized by God. He is the Maker of all mankind. All men are of one family by creation, and all are one through redemption... His love is so broad, so deep, so full, that it penetrates everywhere.’

3.2.2. Reach Samaritan People


Jorn Barger, “Historical Jesus FAQ” (article on-line) available at http://www.robotwisdom.com/science/jesus.html; internet; accessed November 2, 2011. Additional information really helps in understanding the background of Galilee. Barger says that Galilee had hosted a mix of Jews and gentiles (Aramaeans, Itureans, Phoenicians, and Greeks, some with anti-Semitic tendencies) until annexed by Aristobulus I in 103 BC and forcibly converted to Judaism.

David J. Bosch. *Transforming mission* (New York: Orbis Book, 1999), 90, Furthermore, he says that the agape love of Jesus to the oppressed people has reached through the boundaries between Jews and Gentiles.

Ibid.

Ibid.


Jesus did not only work in Galilee, He also entered forbidden area for Jewish people. Samaritans and Jews were against each other. There was a wide cultural background dispute between both Jews and Samaritan. Hatred prevented them to worship together. Cultural background was also in great differences. However, Jesus went there, talked to a Samaritan woman, stayed in their city, and drew the people to be His followers (John 4).

No cultural barrier for the good news of Salvation. Jesus’ ministry in Samaria is the evidence of it. It was shown in Jesus’ conversation with a Samaritan woman. Ellen G. White says that ‘This woman, though so sinful, was still in a more favorable condition to become an heir of Christ’s kingdom than those of the Jews who made exalted professions of piety, yet trusted their salvation to the observance of outward forms and ceremonies.’

3.3. Meaning, Method, and Model

If the option has been given, people tend to choose local beliefs and culture rather than new spiritual beliefs. It happens in an attempt to contextualize the truth. Local cultural beliefs and the truth are merging together. Most of Christian Churches, aware or not, are playing a part in it. On the other hand, Hasselgrave gives solution to handle syncretism. It is to contextualize only the meaning, method, model, and not the truth. Further, these suggestions seem greatly work in some cultural areas.

3.4. Conversion

The focus of doing contextualization is to bring the people experience conversion regardless the similarities, doctrinal believes, worldviews, and the way of life. Conversion leads the people to Christ. On the other hand, conversion in Africa and Asia come in pairs and families instead of individuals. The work of the Holy Spirit will lead to Jesus. John says “Howbeit when He, the Spirit of truth, is come, He will guide you into all truth: for He shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever He shall hear, that shall He speak: and He will shew you things to come (John 16: 13).” Ephesians conversion is a solid example. Ellen White regards Ephesians conversion as follows: “By burning their books on magic, the Ephesian converts showed that the things in which they had once delighted they now abhorred. It was by and through magic that they had especially offended God and imperiled their souls; and it was

38 Daniel Botkin “Syncretism A Blending of Paganism and Truth” (article on-line) available from www.biblesabbath.org/tss/515/truth.html; internet; accessed October 1, 2011. He says that Pagan customs were adapted and modified in Christian worship. Much that exists in Christianity today is nothing more than white-washed, baptized paganism. This is especially obvious in the Roman Catholic Church, which freely admits that many of its extra-Biblical traditions were borrowed from pagan idol worship. More emphasis is on the Sunday keeping with strong evidences from the history.
39 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
42 Jonathan Dodson, Conversion and Contextualization (article on-line); available from http://www.qideas.org/blog/conversion-and-contextualization.aspx; internet; accessed October 2, 2011
against magic that they showed such indignation. Thus they gave evidence of true conversion.”

3.5. Critical Contextualization

Critical contextualization is supported by Seventh-day Adventist Church.\textsuperscript{44} It was suggested by Paul Hiebert.\textsuperscript{45} He gave four steps to do critical contextualization. First, uncritical gathering and analyzing of all traditional customs and beliefs in the issue at hand. Next, Critical Bible study related to the issue. Third, evaluation of the customs in light of new Biblical understandings with the Bible as the guide. Fourth, focus on application and practice of the new practice or belief while giving freedom (encouragement) to experiment. Evaluation has to be given and making adjustments as needed.\textsuperscript{46}

4. Summary and Conclusion

To sum up, contextualization effectively works in the evangelism. To avoid syncretism, the Church should use Biblical method only. Jesus’ proclamation of Messiah in Galilee territorial would be a good example in contextualizing without syncretism. Furthermore, in Jesus’ ministry He mingled with everybody. The nature of the gospel is boundaries breaking, as shown in the ministry of Jesus.

Conversion leads people to Jesus. There is no syncretism in experiencing true conversion. The Holy Spirit will lead to the truth that is Jesus Christ. Contextualization brings harmony in the Church even though there is diversity in the cultural background. It leads to the unity in Church.

Last, critical contextualization is in a front line against syncretism. Bible is the final authority for every respected culture. Things to contextualize are the meanings, methods, and the models. It should be done in a proper way, not over emphasis on the culture.

\textsuperscript{43} Ellen White, \textit{Act of the Apostle} (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911), 288.
\textsuperscript{44} See, Seventh-day Adventist Church, “Guidelines for Engaging in Global Mission” (article on-line); available from http://www.adventist.org/beliefs/guidelines/main-guide7.html; internet; accessed October 2, 2011.
\textsuperscript{46} See, “Priest.”
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___________. Christianity among Traditional Religion. Adventist International Institute of
Advance Studies, Silang Cavite, Philippines, 1996.


