

Faith is Still Important

Emerging nations. Poverty. Neocolonialism. Search for self-identity. Contextualization of Christian theology. The new Asia confronts the missionary with new problems. Asians no longer allow themselves to be led by the white race and Western ideologies.

What is to be the response of Reformed Christians to the issues in theology, economy and politics confronting missions today? In the current discussion on contextualization, even Reformed Christians may be tempted to place parts of the confessions and creeds of the church, and even parts of Scripture., on the altars of relevance and contextualization.

The basis for communicating the Gospel should be an unswerving, uncompromising confidence in God's infallible, revealed Word. Theology must be relevant. It must speak to the needs of the people and their society. But some theological schools in Asia, in their desire to train their students to be prophetic in an exploited or underdeveloped society, attempt to shrink their Biblical core subjects and even downgrade the study of Biblical languages.

In such schools, more courses in socio-economic studies are added. But instead of lowering the requirements for studying Biblical languages, the opposite should be the case. In contextualization, the original Scriptural languages, Hebrew and Greek, are important. It is essential that national pastors are trained to develop skill and knowledge in both the original text and context. A high view of Scripture demands high standards for the ministry. The practice of Scripture interpreting Scripture provides the key for relevant Gospel proclamation in any culture. The national pastor must be trained to let Scripture speak to all of life. When the Sword of the Spirit is no longer forcefully wielded, the deterioration of theology and all other sciences will occur.

A missionary must preach the universal Gospel in the "demonstration of Spirit and power." (I Cor. 2:4) He must speak boldly, persuasively, intelligibly and lovingly to people who are of a different race and culture. He needs to interpret the Gospel in relation to the needs and issues peculiar to the place where he works. In his attempt to reach the lost for the Lord, he must take the superstitions and beliefs of the people seriously. No missionary can assume that ancient beliefs and practices will disappear if ignored.

The late Dr. J.H. Bavinck, who was a missionary in the Dutch East Indies and later professor of missions at the Free University, Amsterdam, wrote, shortly after Second World War, that on the mission fields the young church should express her faith in her own confessions, try to find models for her own architecture, and develop her own form of worship. He said that the one Gospel shines over all nations, and should find its own expression according to the diversity of gifts and talents God has bestowed upon man. In communication of the Gospel we must come to the heart of the matter – that only in the cross of Jesus Christ redemption is found.

Do we find any attempt in Scripture to contextualize? Scripture reveals different ways of presenting the Gospel. John the Baptist found his context at the river Jordan. His message was directed to and understood by the people who heard him preach. On the day of Pentecost, the people heard the Gospel, not only in the words, but also in the expressions and way of thinking that they understood (Acts 2:11). The apostle Paul had to fight a running battle with leaders of the Hebrew church, who felt that the Gentiles had to adopt Hebrew ways. These Christian-Jewish leaders wanted to simply impose Hebrew theological concepts and a Hebrew frame of reference upon new Gentile converts. They were engaged in theological imperialism.

The missionary not only needs a firm confidence in God's inerrant Word, he must also be convinced that the Holy Spirit is The Communicator. A missionary must not shrink from developing every possible skill to facilitate communication, to deepen his understanding of culture, but he must not rely on his own wisdom and talents. It is still true that only the Holy Spirit can open hearts for the Gospel (Acts 16:14), convince man of sin and lead him in the truth of God's Word. The missionary is God's called instrument to spread the good news of salvation. But the Spirit alone is the One who can change lives and meet the deepest needs of 20th century man, whether he belongs to a stone age or to a highly sophisticated Western culture.

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