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BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES FOR CONTEXTUALIZED MINISTRY

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“Why do you segregate your students?” This was the question that I was asked by a new student who had attended our weekly Cru meeting for the first time that night. He knew that our Epic₁ and Destino₂ ministries were meeting on campus in different rooms and wondered why we were not all one bigger, “unified” group. Before I could respond, another student who was listening quickly jumped into the conversation by adding, “Yeah, I’ve been wondering that too.”

To be honest, I was not completely prepared for the question. After all, we had started Epic, Destino, Impact₃, and Bridges₄ several years before. I thought for sure our students understood what we were trying to do and that they had bought into the paradigm of multiple movements in contextualized settings. I could understand the new person maybe not totally getting it, but the other student was one of our regular attendees and an up and coming leader.

The truth is that the idea of contextualized ministry had become normalized to me but it had not become universally accepted by all of our students. The perception for many of them was that we were segregating students based on their ethnic heritage. To them this was inherently wrong and unfair. How could we, as a group that follows Jesus and espouses His values, actively be separating students simply because of their racial background? It was unthinkable.

My first response was to refute the idea that we are in any way segregating students. Segregation is when

you put a person in a group, not based on their own preferences, but based on your desire to maintain some kind of ethnic purity. Rather than segregating, our desire is to give students a choice to be involved in a group that meets their cultural preferences yet maintains our ministry distinctives and values. We don’t tell Asian American students that they must get involved in Epic. Neither do we tell them that if they want to be involved in our missional purposes and objectives that they must join Cru, a group that is predominantly white culturally.

With Epic, Asian Americans have a choice of where they want to belong - a choice regarding which community to live out their faith.

Though I’ve logically explained this to many people, I’ve found that my answers haven’t always satisfied. For some, contextualized ministry seems to violate the Scriptures and their ideal that the church should be unified. To separate the races seems counter-intuitive to what the church is about and to what the Bible teaches.

Is it true? Does the idea of contextualized ministry violate some fundamental principles of Scripture? Or is there some Biblical precedence for contextualized ministry? Does the Bible give us any insight into this issue? What does the Bible really say?

GOD IS THE AUTHOR OF CULTURE AND HE HAS A PURPOSE FOR EACH CULTURE



First of all, we should recognize that God is the creator of culture. It was His idea from the beginning. Four times in the book of Genesis, God gives man the directive to “be fruitful and multiply.” He gives this command to Adam (Gen 1.28) and he also gives the command to Noah after the flood (Gen 8.17; 9.1, 6).

Why does He give this command? Quite simply, God’s desire is that the earth would be filled with people who worship Him and glorify Him.

In Genesis 11, there is a critical moment, where everyone is gathered in one place on the Shinar Plain and they purpose to build a tower in order to make a name for themselves. God’s response was to confuse their languages and scatter them so that His ultimate purposes (that the earth be filled with people who worship and glorify Him) could be fulfilled.

The fulfillment of God’s ultimate purposes can be seen in the book of Revelation when John sees “a great multitude...from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne...” (Rev. 7.9). God’s purpose is that each culture would be redeemed to become a reflection of His glory. At the throne of God, there will not just be people of different colors worshiping God as some kind of colorful mosaic. Instead, there will be a vast array of different cultures representing every people group of the world, all reflecting God’s grace and glory in a unique way.

Our goal then, should not be just to reconcile people of color to God, but to participate with God in His purpose of redeeming whole cultures for His glorification.

GO AND MAKE DISCIPLES

There are two passages that clearly indicate that the scope of the mission for the church is the world.

In Matthew 28.18-20, Jesus, in His last words to His disciples, told them to “Go and make disciples of *all the nations*.” The Greek word that is translated “nations” does not refer to political kingdoms or geographical regions. Instead, the word might better be translated as “people groups.” A people group is a distinct entity that is often characterized by social, linguistic or *cultural* factors.

In Acts 1.8, Jesus tells His disciples, “you will receive power when the Spirit has come upon you and you will be my witnesses both in Jerusalem and in all

Judea and Samaria and *even to the remotest parts of the earth*.”

Though the church was commanded to go to the world, it’s clear that the early church didn’t go, but remained pretty much localized in Jerusalem. Finally, in Acts 8, Stephen is stoned and a great persecution arose and the church was scattered.

This persecution caused the church to be scattered to the nations. However, the gospel still didn’t spread to the nations.

Acts 11.19 says that “those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose in connection with Stephen made their way to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one *except to Jews alone*.”

God’s desire was that the gospel would go to the nations, yet the early church didn’t spread beyond the borders of Jerusalem. Finally, when a persecution scattered believers to the ends of the known earth, they shared the gospel with Jews only. Many in the early church neglected to step out across cultural boundaries to share the gospel with others who were not like them.

I think that we often respond in the same ways as the early church. Instead of “going” to others with the gospel, we expect others to come to us and we end up sharing the gospel only with those with whom we’re comfortable.

God’s charge is for us to go to the nations and take the gospel to them and make disciples. We are fortunate to have “the nations”, represented by varying cultural groups, right here in our backyard. Reaching out contextually is biblical because it represents God’s mandate to “go” and take the gospel to the nations.

DIFFERENT CULTURES IN THE EARLY CHURCH

In American Christianity, it has become popular to desire an idealized view of unity that usually includes one large group that incorporates all the races and cultures. This is usually understood to be the view of unity that is spoken of in the Bible.

Yet, it’s clear that different cultures existed in the early church.

In Acts 6, there was a problem that arose that required



the attention of the Apostles themselves.

This passage is usually used to show the need for servant leaders (deacons) to help minister in the church. Yet if we dig deeper, I think there is a principle involved that relates to our discussion of contextualized ministry.

The text says that a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. Instead of focusing on what the complaint was or how the problem was solved, it's interesting to note who the parties were that were involved in this dispute.

Essentially, you have two different groups. They shared the same religious values (Judaism), but they congregated around their cultural values and preferences. One group represented native Jews, those who were Jewish not only religiously, but culturally as well. The other group represented those who were Jewish religiously but were Greek in their cultural heritage.

If you look at the situation, there is nothing that indicates that the Apostles saw this "separation" of cultures as problematic. Neither is there any indication that they saw this as some violation of unity. Instead, the Apostles appeared to respect the cultural differences that existed and they developed a solution that respected those cultural preferences.

In our dominant culture of American Christianity, we sometimes neglect to respect the cultural differences that exist in other groups. Too often, we expect others to come and join our group and become a part of the culture that we've created. This seems to satisfy our view of unity. However, I believe this concept of unity is more influenced by our society than the Bible.

EMPOWERING OTHERS TO LEAD

There's another aspect to this situation that's often overlooked. And that relates to leadership. Contrary to what we might expect, the Apostles chose seven culturally Greek men to become the leaders of this food distribution program. Not only did the apostles not seem as interested as we might be to try to integrate the two distinct cultural factions within the group, but they actually empowered members from

that group to lead in the solution to their complaint.

This is important as it relates to reaching students of varying cultural and ethnic identities. Sometimes, students who are not part of the dominant culture don't feel the same freedom to lead, as do those who are a part of the dominant culture. Therefore, when we plant movements within each distinct culture on campus, we're actually empowering students to lead – students who might not otherwise have felt the freedom to lead.

MINISTERING CROSS-CULTURALLY

Scripture is clear that we're not to convert people to our cultural preferences but we're to convert them to faith in Jesus while allowing them to preserve their own cultural values.

A biblical example is found in the book of Galatians where some people were saying that people needed to observe Jewish customs in addition to accepting the gospel message. In essence, they were telling the Galatians that they needed to be culturally Jewish while accepting Jesus as their Savior. Paul explicitly rejects this and calls it legalism.

Specifically, a group of Jewish believers were demanding that Gentiles be circumcised and observe the customs of Moses in order to be truly saved. Paul denies that this is necessary. In Galatians 2.3, he states that Titus, a Gentile, was not circumcised because it was not necessary theologically. To require him to observe the customs of Moses would have been to add legalistic requirements to the gospel.

Yet Paul, in Acts 21.26, goes to the Temple and observes the Jewish customs. Why does he do this if it isn't necessary to be saved? It's simply because Paul is Jewish and this is part of the Jewish custom for worship. It wasn't necessary for Paul to do but he does it as an act of worship, not as an act of absolution.

Intuitively, we know these ideas to be true. For when we go overseas, we're careful to adapt to the culture of the host country and we seek ways to adapt the gospel message to their cultural context without expecting them to adopt our western cultural preferences.

Yet when it comes to ministering cross-culturally here in America, we frequently place cultural demands on people that Paul explicitly rejects as legalism. Now it's true that we're not explicitly telling people



that they need to observe Jewish rituals in addition to accepting Jesus in order to be saved, but when we require people of other cultures to come to us and adapt to our culture in order to be a part of the church or group, the end result is the same. We unconsciously can send the following message:

Adapt to our cultural preferences and forsake your own cultural preferences or else you are not “really” following the Biblical view of unity and discipleship.

DO WHATEVER IT TAKES

Paul relays an important missiological principle in 1 Corinthians 9. He says in verse 22, “I have become all things to all men, that I may by all means save some.”

If we’re going to reach people who are different culturally than we are, we need to adapt culturally to them. Paul said that “to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law, though not being myself under the Law, that I might win those who are under the Law; to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, that I might win those who are without law.”

Those who question the validity of contextualized movements often fail to recognize this principle that we’re to become like those whom we’re reaching in order to see them won to Christ.

This is the heart of true missions – going to another culture, becoming like them in order to plant the gospel within their community and see some won to the Savior. Campus Crusade for Christ is a missionary organization that has as its stated mission the fulfillment of the Great Commission. Therefore, if we’re to see people of different cultures in our own communities come to faith, we must not only be willing to go to them, but we must be willing to become like them in order to win them. This is what we mean when we talk about crossing a cultural boundary to minister to others. It means we’re giving up our cultural preferences in deference to their cultural preferences so that we might win their trust and plant the seeds of the gospel within their culture and community.

Often we don’t share Paul’s attitude to do whatever it takes to see others won to the gospel. But this is what is required. We cannot simply be content to wait for

others to come to us and see that we are different. Nor can we assume that because we all live in one country or the same community that we are all alike and share the same cultural values.

We live in a society that is incredibly diverse culturally. We’re called to be ambassadors, not merely representatives. Therefore, we must cross cultural boundaries and reach out to others within their own cultural context.

CONCLUSION

So is it Biblical to contextualize our ministry efforts? Does the Bible speak in favor of our contextualized ministry approach or does it speak against it?

It seems clear that God is the creator of all the nations and the author of each culture and that we’re to go to the nations instead of expecting them to come to us. It’s also evident that different cultures existed within the church and the Apostles did not see that as a problem or as something that needed to be changed.

In addition, by going to other cultures with the gospel, we’re empowering others to step up and lead without being under the authority and power of the dominant culture.

Furthermore, the Bible clearly teaches that we’re to take the gospel to others without importing our cultural preferences.

Lastly, we’re to do whatever it takes to see others come to Christ. This means we’re to cross cultural boundaries and become like those whom we’re seeking to win.

With these principles in mind, there can be no doubt that the concept of contextualized ministries is not only Biblical but strategic as well.

QUESTIONS

1. What has been your attitude or view toward contextualized ministry in the past?
2. What have been your reasons for being in favor of or against the idea of contextualized ministry?
3. Which of the Biblical principles shared in favor of contextualized ministry is most compelling to you? Why?



4. What efforts have you made or are you currently making to reach those on your campus who are culturally different and are not likely to come to your main group?

5. Do you think that your view of Biblical unity and contextualization has been affected by the culture of our society? How? In what ways?

NOTES

¹ Epic is our ministry to the Asian American community on campus.

² Destino is our outreach ministry to Latino Students.

³ Impact is our ministry to students of African descent.

⁴ Bridges is our outreach ministry to International students.

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