

Contextualization of the Gospel. Towards an Evangelical Approach in the Light of Scripture and the Church Fathers. Andrew J. Prince. Eugene, Oregon: WIPF & Stock, 2017. Australian College of Theology Monograph Series (ed. Graeme Chatfield).

Prince's study of contextualisation focuses on two sets of speeches:

1. Speeches to Jews and Gentiles in Acts
2. Speeches by John Chrysostom

From his analysis of these speeches Prince derives various principles. After each one I indicate the source(s) from which Prince derives the principle: A (Acts) or C (Chrysostom).

The Principles

1. The early establishment of common ground provides a platform for the gospel to be heard (A, C).
2. For contextualisation to be effective, the gospel needs to be explained in ways that engage the worldview of the target audience (A, C).
3. Faith in Jesus Christ does not necessarily mean social dislocation (A).
4. There is no fixed presentation of the gospel as contextual sensitivity requires flexibility (A, C).
5. There is a core content to the gospel, which is for all cultures (A, C).
6. Cultural pressure must not lead to a dampening down of the challenging demands of discipleship (A).
7. Existing cultural terms can be used and imbued with new meaning in the light of the gospel (A).
8. Culture is both positive and flawed and needs redemption through the gospel (A).
9. Contextualisation is best achieved in the context of relationship (C).
10. Scripture is both the starting point and controlling rubric of contextualisation (C).
11. Every facet of life and witness needs to be contextualised, not just selected facets (C).
12. Practising the rites and activities of both Christianity and another religion is syncretistic, a denial of the freedom which the death of Christ wrought, and a denial of the gospel itself (C).
13. Contextualisation leads to transformation in the hearers' self-perception of their identity (C).
14. Access to the word of God in one's native language facilitates the contextual communication of the gospel (C).
15. Contextualisation of the gospel can only take place in the context of mission (C).

It is Prince's contention "that a missiological methodology that is governed by Scripture, while also drawing from the church fathers, the social sciences, and practical theology is not only consistent with the nature of evangelicalism but also consistent with the nature of missiology itself" (224). The main concern Prince seeks to address in this book is that "the contextualization debate has been predominantly informed by insights gained from the social sciences (particularly anthropology), and practical theology, with comparatively few contributions from Scripture or the writings of the church fathers" (224).

Prince identifies many explicit and implicit contextual principles from a thorough investigation of the literature since 1972. He then engages in a limited examination of the Bible, namely speeches in the book of Acts, by way of seeking to discover how the early church contextualised the gospel to their respective audiences. In the process he identifies eight contextual principles that the early church used. He acknowledges that these principles are illustrative rather than exhaustive. Prince reassesses contextual principles identified through his literature search in the light of these eight

principles, presupposing the primacy of Scripture: “Contextual principles and practices derived from any source outside of Scripture (e.g. church fathers, social sciences, and practical theology) are secondary and subservient to those found in Scripture” (4).

Prince maintains that “the works of the church fathers can legitimately be used to inform contemporary issues of Christian witness and practice.” He justifies an analysis of six homilies of John Chrysostom on the grounds that (1) his theology of Scripture is consistent with that of evangelicalism; (2) his understanding of the gospel can be clearly established and substantially coheres with an evangelical understanding; (3) his cultural milieu and worldview bears some correspond to 21st century mission contexts; and (4) he has a significant interest in mission.

Prince recognises that his definition of the gospel is critical to his thesis, “the message of God’s good news centered on the birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ and the implications of that message for daily life” (14). The limitation of this definition is the phrase “for daily life”, given that the work of Christ has implications of cosmic significance (see, for example, Colossians 1) and not merely for daily life.

Prince observes that the area of Muslim evangelism is currently the most prominent for the contextualisation debate (60). He notes that a good deal of what has been written on this concerns the issue of when contextualisation goes too far and becomes syncretism and that this issue remains unresolved. This literature has largely been written by practitioners with the primary data source being that of practical experience and anthropological perspectives, with “proportionately little attention given to biblical data” and with a complete ignoring of the writings of the church fathers: “Where the Bible has been used to support a position the author has often just referred to a few texts but failed to argue extensively from Scripture” (66).

In his setting out of the eight principles he derives from his analysis of speeches in Acts Prince especially interacts with this debate. His third principle – “faith in Jesus Christ does not necessarily mean social dislocation” – leads him to conclude with respect to Muslim Background Believers (MBBs): “While the distinctive demands of the gospel are to be proclaimed and embodied, there are many cultural elements that can be retained or adapted that avoid syncretism” (109).

He also applies Principle #6 (see above) to this debate: “This principle challenges some of the principles advocated by Phil Parshall, along with various proponents of the Insider Movement, such as Rick Brown and Rebecca Lewis, who are open to MBB retaining Muslim practices and customs. The distinctive challenging demands of the gospel are to be both verbally proclaimed and embodied in the life of the believer” (111). The temptation to dampen down some of the challenging demands of the gospel due to cultural pressure must be resisted.

Further, Prince points out the relevance of Principle #7 to this same debate: “Christian gatherings of Muslim background believers may well be able to incorporate Muslim terms into their liturgy, while imbuing them with different theological understanding, without the contextual practice drifting into the realm of syncretism” (111-112). Prince critiques Parshall for overemphasising the role of meaning over form, but agrees that “there is potential at least for some of the cultural forms he suggests (for example, mode of dress, removing shoes upon entering a place of worship, and lifting up hands during prayer) to be used by MBBs” (112).

This is a helpful book which whets the appetite for a much more thorough analysis of biblical material, while also encouraging positive interaction with the writings of relevant church fathers.