

A missiological study into the need and importance for Reformed Baptists to engage in deliberate Biblical contextualisation in urban, post-modern South Africa

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It all starts here TM

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Thanks to the living God for His goodness in calling me to the Gospel of His Son, for bringing me into His church, and for giving me a wonderful wife in Moekie, and two fine boys in Nick and Mike. Sheer grace!

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Soli Deo Gloria!

ABSTRACT

Postmodernism and urbanisation pose significant challenges and opportunities to Christian witness in the West. In South Africa, Reformed Baptists are battling to engage with and reach new generations with the Gospel. While the reasons may be many and varied; one could be inadequate and unbiblical views of contextualisation.

While South African Reformed Baptists are passionately committed to biblical truth and orthodoxy, they appear to be negligent in the matter of faithful biblical contextualisation. Reformed Baptist pastors appear to be slow to take cognisance of and adjust to the unique challenges and opportunities that postmodernism and urbanisation present to Gospel ministry.

Contextualisation is a thoroughly biblical concept and practise. God's inspired Word (both Old and New Testaments) is manifestly receptor orientated. The incarnation, and the preaching and missionary praxis of the apostles, causes us to conclude that it is impossible to have a high regard for Scripture, and be negligent or dismissive of contextualisation. A commitment to Scripture and to the glory of God ought to both fuel and govern all aspects of Christian ministry all the time.

Contextualisation is no simple matter — it is fraught with dangers and complexities: over contextualisation leads to an eroding of fundamental Gospel truth; under contextualisation results in a rigid, one size fits all approach. Both errors result in syncretism.

South Africa's postmodern, urban context needs to be carefully considered. Contextualisation should be done intentionally. Moreover it must be governed by Scriptural parameters and should be in step with robust, historical theology. The historic Christian Gospel must be contended for, and it must be faithfully contextualised in our day and place. This means adopting the stance of a cross cultural missionary in "our own" culture and environment.

Key terms:

Contextualisation

Postmodernism

Urbanisation

Reformed Baptists

OPSOMMING

Postmodernisme en verstedeliking bied unieke uitdagings en geleenthede vir die bediening van die Christelike evangelie in die Weste. In Suid-Afrika sukkel Gereformeerde Baptiste om die nuwe generasie met die evangelie te bereik. Terwyl die redes hiervoor talryk en veelsoortig mag wees, kan een rede wees dat daar onvoldoende en onskriftuurlike sienings van kontekstualisering bestaan.

Alhoewel Suid-Afrikaanse Gereformeerde Baptiste geesdriftig toegewyd is aan Bybelse waarheid en ortodoksie, wil dit voorkom asof hulle nalatig is met die saak van Skrifgetroue kontekstualisering. Dit wil voorkom asof die Gereformeerde Baptiste predikante traag is om behoorlik kennis te neem van en die bediening van die evangelie aan te pas by die unieke uitdagings en geleenthede wat postmodernisme en verstedeliking vir die bediening van die evangelie bied.

Kontekstualisering is 'n grondige Bybels verantwoorde begrip en praktyk. God se geïnspireerde Woord (beide die Ou en Nuwe Testament) is hoofsaaklik ontvanger gerig. Die vleeswording van Christus, die verkondiging van die Woord en die sendingpraktyk van die apostels lei daartoe dat ons die afleiding kan maak dat dit onmoontlik is om sowel 'n hoë agting vir die Heilige Skrif te hê en tegelyk 'n nalatige of neerhalende houding teenoor kontekstualisering in te neem. 'n Toegewydheid aan die gesag van die Heilige Skrif en die eer van God behoort alle aspekte van die bediening van die evangelie van Jesus Christus aan te wakker en te beheers.

Kontekstualisering is egter geen eenvoudige saak nie – dit gaan gepaard met gevare en kompleksiteite. Oor-kontekstualisering lei tot die afwatering van die fundamentele waarheid van die Evangelie en onder-kontekstualisering lei tot 'n rigiede, “een-grootte-pas-almal” benadering. Beide hierdie afwykings lei tot sinkretisme.

Suid-Afrika se postmoderne, stedelike konteks moet sorgvuldig in ag geneem word. Kontekstualisering behoort doelgerig toegepas te word. Die grense moet deur die Skrif bepaal word en terselfdertyd moet dit in lyn wees met die algemeen aanvarde histories Christelike tradisie. Daar moet ywer wees vir getrouheid aan die evangelie en terselfdertyd moet dit sorgvuldig gekontekstualiseer word om die mense in ons huidige tydsgewrig, omgewing en lewenswyse effektief en verstaanbaar te bereik. Dit beteken dat ons die gesigspunte en praktyke van 'n transkulturele sendeling in “ons eie” kultuur behoort na te volg.

Sleutelwoorde:

Kontekstualisering

Postmodernisme

Verstedeliking
Gereformeerde Baptiste

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ABBREVIATIONS

ANE Ancient Near East

EE3 Evangelism Explosion 3

NT New Testament

OT Old Testament

TGC The Gospel Coalition

WCC World Council of Churches

BIBLICAL QUOTATIONS: All biblical quotations are taken from the New International Version unless otherwise indicated.

CHAPTER 1: BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

“... As the Father has sent me, I am sending you” declared Jesus (John 20:21). His words constitute a clear mandate to the Church to reach out to the unbelieving world through incarnational ministry. In 1 Peter 2:9, the inspired author challenges all his readers to understand why God in His sovereign grace has made them His “chosen race, royal priesthood, holy nation, a people belonging to God;” namely that they “may declare the praises of him who called you [them] out of darkness into his wonderful light.” The Lausanne Covenant sums up this dynamic with this statement: “The one eternal God, Creator and Lord of the world, Father, Son and Holy Spirit ... has been *calling out from* the world a people for himself, and *sending his people back into the world* to be his servants, for the extension of his kingdom, the building up of Christ’s body, and the glory of his name” (Stott 2009:12; *emphasis mine*). Goheen (2011: 191-193) affirms that God’s people are chosen by Him for the sake of the world. The church is called to be an instrument of God’s redemption in the midst of the world and for the sake of the world.

Like many evangelical churches in the West, Reformed Baptists in South Africa appear to be struggling to fulfil this mandate. An inadequate understanding of contextualisation and the inappropriate practice of contextualisation could well be hampering their effective witness. This dissertation will analyse the history and meaning of the term, investigate current Reformed Baptist attitudes towards contextualisation, present a biblical case for intentional contextualisation and provide the core components of responsible, authentic contextualisation. The scope of this dissertation involves the convergence and inter-relationship of the following key themes:

- (i) Reformed Baptist ministry in South Africa.
- (ii) The South African contemporary context — being postmodern and increasingly urban.
- (iii) The importance of appropriate, intentional contextualisation.

The aim of this chapter is to set the scene and articulate the problem by describing and considering the most salient points of each of these three themes.

1.1 Reformed Baptist Ministry in South Africa: Battling to Reach New Generations

This researcher has moved in Reformed Baptist circles for about 25 years. The Reformed Baptists in South Africa are not a separate denomination but a group of likeminded churches, pastors and missionaries. Many are members of the Baptist Union of South Africa; while some are completely independent of any denominational body. There are presently two main forums where Reformed Baptists meet for fellowship and instruction. The Spurgeon's Fraternal is a bi-annual pastors conference where Reformed Baptists (usually between 15 to 35 pastors) get together for fellowship, teaching and prayer. Sola 5¹ is a grouping of likeminded churches who seek to advance the Gospel of sovereign grace and biblical faithfulness. Established in 2005, this group is not only comprised of South Africans. There are affiliated churches in Namibia, Zambia, Malawi and Zimbabwe. At present there are 29 churches in membership, of which 17 are South African. However, there are considerably more churches and pastors who attend the Sola 5 meetings. Aucamp (2011:234) considers Sola 5 to be a good example of what Baptist denominationalism should look like in practice. He asserts that it provides substantial improvements to critical weaknesses in the Baptist Union of South Africa (like growing doctrinal diversity) by affording opportunity for common identity and meaningful cohesion (2011:228). A number of the Reformed Baptist churches are confessional — holding to the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith² (also known as the second London Confession of Faith). The others are not strongly confessional — but are strongly Reformed, being committed to a very high view of the Bible, God centeredness and Reformed soteriology.

Of all the Southern African Reformed Baptist churches, Kabatwa Baptist in Zambia enjoys the highest profile. It is pastored by Dr Conrad Mbewe — whom some have called the “Spurgeon” of Africa.³ This church has been active in planting Reformed churches and evangelistic outreach.⁴ There is a fair degree of co-operation and interaction between the different Reformed Baptist pastors and churches outside of these two forums.

It seems that Reformed Baptists are struggling to impact and come to terms with an increasing postmodern and urbanised South Africa. It needs to be stressed that this is not a unique problem facing South African Reformed Baptists, but it is a widespread challenge facing the church in the West. Al Mohler, an influential Reformed Baptist from the USA has just brought out a book (2015) entitled, “A Guide to Church Revitalization” in which he addresses the

¹ As in the five “solas” of the Reformation. See <http://sola5.org/> for details of member churches and conferences.

² This can be accessed at <http://www.vor.org/truth/1689/1689bc00.html>.

³ As in this online article: <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/conrad-mbewe-the-african-spurgeon>

⁴ See the Kabatwa Baptist webpage at <http://www.kabatwabaptistchurch.org/>.

spiritual and numerical decline of conservative evangelical churches in the US. A number of important theological publications stress that conservative evangelical churches are struggling to reach postmoderns in the urbanised West. Roxburgh and Boren make this point in their 2009 book, "The Missional Church: What it is, why it matters, and how to become one." They affirm that the West must be considered a mission field. Hastings argues the same point in his 2012 book, "Missional God, Missional Church: Hope for re-evangelising the West" as does Carson in his important work, "The Gagging of God: Christianity confronts pluralism" (1996).

This researcher observes that though Reformed Baptist pastors are passionate about theological orthodoxy and doctrinal correctness, there seems to be little interest in understanding the times and thinking patterns of the day. There is a disregard for context — South Africa is largely postmodern and highly urbanised. There appears to be a significant "disconnect" between ministry and the world. Little attention is given to understanding the world and thinking patterns of the people outside of the church.

In preliminary research a number of Skype interviews have been conducted with Reformed Baptist pastors to try and gauge the current state of health of the churches. Smith (2008:238) affirms the value of conducting interviews for doing descriptive research in that it allows for more dialogue and further clarification than surveys or questionnaires. These five pastors were chosen because of their experience, their geographical location and their active organisational involvement in Sola 5 and Spurgeon's fraternals. They were asked to comment on what they perceive to be the strengths and weaknesses of Reformed Baptist ministry in South Africa.⁵

Perceived Strengths:

- (i) Sound, orthodox theology. (Specifically a high view of Scripture, God-centeredness and a commitment to the 5 Solas.)

⁵ These five pastors are named and quoted with permission. Access the audio recordings at:

<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/mtrozxmwpixoy3/AABFiMUV6UkxqB3QyxwzlpDwa?dl=0>

Errol Wagner: the most experienced Reformed Baptist pastor, having being involved since 1972; he has pastored churches in KZN, Johannesburg and George. He has been very involved with the formation of both Sola 5 and Spurgeon's pastors fraternal. Lance Laughton: Area co-ordinator of Baptist Northern Association, with responsibility for overseeing the work in Gauteng, Limpopo, Mpumalanga and North West. His brief includes all the BNA churches, not merely the Reformed ones, but here he comments only on Reformed Baptist churches. Peter Sammons: has been involved with Reformed Baptist ministry since 1979, currently pastoring in Germiston. He organises the Spurgeon's pastors fraternal in Gauteng. Angus McKee: a Reformed Baptist pastor of 25 years' experience, currently pastoring in the Eastern Cape. Jason Labuschagne: pastors a Reformed Baptist church in Cape Town and organises the Spurgeon's fraternal in Cape Town.

- (ii) Good, biblical (mostly expository) preaching.
- (iii) There are far more Baptists committed to Reformed theology than there were 30 years ago.
- (iv) The Reformed Baptists are having a positive impact on the other Baptist churches within the Baptist Union; and are having an influence beyond Baptist circles.
- (v) The formation and effective functioning of Sola 5.
- (vi) Reformed Baptists enjoy greater profile and credibility than they did in previous decades.
- (vii) A steady rise of Reformed truth among the black churches.
- (viii) Meaningful fellowship between different pastors and churches within Reformed Baptist circles.

Perceived Weaknesses:

- (i) Loss of evangelistic edge, lack of intentional evangelism. All the pastors mentioned this.
- (ii) Very little growth in membership numerically. All the pastors made this point. Laughton mentioned that the lack of membership growth in Sola 5 churches was cause for concern. Wagner stated that only one overtly Reformed Baptist church was actually growing numerically. McKee mentioned that the churches are not nearly keeping pace with population explosion and urbanisation. Most of the churches are characterised by ageing memberships. Younger generations are not being effectively reached.
- (iii) A lack of understanding of where people are at, a lack of understanding of the times.
- (iv) Preaching is aimed at the converted and mature, not at the unconverted.
- (v) A lack of understanding and appreciation of biblical theology.
- (vi) An isolationist, inward looking “laager” mentality. A tendency to live in the past and be happy with our small groups.
- (vii) Strict adherence to the 1689 Confession of Faith may limit scope in gaining new members. McKee cautioned that we must be careful not to turn away people for the wrong reasons — “because we are weird.”

- (viii) A lack of vision. It is significant that over the last 5 years there appear to have been only two new churches planted: one in Johannesburg that appears to be effective in reaching university students, and another in Bloemfontein that appears to be struggling in terms of conversion growth.
- (ix) An apparent lack of a missional mindset and approach.

(There was consensus that the non-South African Sola 5 churches were generally in a far better state of spiritual health in terms of numerical growth and the planting of new churches than their South African counterparts.)

Wagner seemed the most concerned about the present state of affairs. He mentioned John Piper's South African visit to speak at the Rezolution Conference in September, 2012. Piper, recently retired from pastoral ministry is one of the most prominent Reformed Baptists in the world today. Thousands of people (mostly under 40) turned up at the Sandton Convention Centre and enthusiastically listened to his ministry for two days. The expectation was that he had given Reformed Baptists significant profile and credibility. Yet there was no discernible difference in the churches after the conference. The people went back to their non-Reformed Baptist churches.

Lance Laughton posted a Facebook blog on 18 June 2015, entitled, Revitalising a Declining Church, where he lamented the fact that he is approached by Baptist churches (not all Reformed churches) that are struggling, facing dwindling memberships and closure. He said that this state of affairs "was becoming all too common" (Laughton: 2015).

An evaluation of their strengths and weaknesses reveals that Reformed Baptists are very concerned about theological orthodoxy (which is essential); but appear to be negligent of evangelistic fervour and engagement with the unbelieving world. To use NT language, there is a strong commitment to contending for the faith (Jude 3); but there seems to be an absence of evangelistic fervour, "becoming all things to all men to win some" (1 Cor 9:22). The proposed programme of the Sola 5 Annual Conference, to be hosted by Goodwood Baptist, 3-6 September 2015 is illustrative of this.⁶ The theme is "Common Ground — Founding the heart of Sola 5" (sic) and there are six sessions scheduled:

- (i) God centeredness: Our Common Passion for the glory of God.
- (ii) Doctrines of Grace: Our Common Delight in the Doctrines of Grace.
- (iii) Authority: Our Common Submission to the three spheres of human government.

⁶ This official schedule of topics was received via email from Errol Wagner.

- (iv) Inter-Dependence: Our Common Commitment to the Local Church.
- (v) Discipline: Our Common Commitment to Holiness.
- (vi) Unity: Our Common Commitment to the Universal Church.

The main theme at the 2015 Gauteng Spurgeon's fraternal (19-21 October, Vaal Dam) indicates the same tendency.⁷ The discussions will centre on a covenantal versus a dispensational understanding of the Bible. It is this researcher's view that these programmes are fundamentally unbalanced. While these are all hugely important subjects that warrant study and discussion, they all represent "contending for the faith" — they are all aimed at re-enforcing doctrine that is already largely accepted. It is also incredibly inward looking. There is a complete absence of an understanding of context, evangelistic fervour and methodology, and challenges facing the contemporary church. It is all about re-enforcing belief, not outreach.

Thus it appears that Reformed Baptists face a number of very significant challenges: There is an apparent numerical decline in many churches. Spiritual stagnation, a lack of evangelistic impetus, insularity and a latent consumer mindset in congregations are some of the challenges facing Reformed Baptists. Many of those who formally join Reformed Baptist congregations are joining as believers from other churches.⁸ Some are disillusioned with charismatic excess and theological superficiality. Others are concerned about spiritual stagnation and theological liberalism. These people join Reformed churches because of their commitment to biblical truth and robust theological orthodoxy. While it is commendable that people find a spiritual home in Reformed churches, it must be noted that this is not real Kingdom growth. It is transfer growth — it is fundamentally a change of local church membership. Significantly it indicates that Reformed Baptists are not at the cutting edge of reaching this generation with the Gospel. They appear to be struggling to reach the urbanised postmoderns. Empirical research gleaned from questionnaires (chapter 4) shows this alarming statistic: by far the majority of Reformed Baptist churches have had less than ten conversions over the last five years. In view of population growth this is cause for concern.

When lamenting the state of the churches and the apparent lack of impact a Reformed pastor would typically say: "We are just called to be faithful. God is sovereign and He grows His church." While this is a true statement, it can sometimes be misused as the ultimate "get-out-of-

⁷ The official theme was received from Peter Sammons via email.

⁸ I have come to this opinion after analysing the membership tendencies of the churches I have pastored — Knysna and Cambridge (East London); and subsequently deliberating with other pastors whose experience has been similar. Prof Flip Buys has commented in an unpublished statement that after preaching at Constantia Park Baptist (in Pretoria) he learned that it seems that nearly 50 percent of their membership had come from Dutch Reformed churches. Research via questionnaires (presented in chapter 4) and interviews indicates that there is alarmingly little conversion growth.

jail-free card!” It seems that those who make this statement unwittingly redefine the faithfulness to which God calls Christian pastors. For many, Gospel faithfulness means earnestly contending for the faith and ensuring that nothing but the truth is preached. Pastors must be hyper vigilant about heresy, maintain pure doctrine and ensure that their people are well grounded in the faith. This is essential and must always be maintained. But this is not the sum total of the faithfulness to which God calls Christian pastors and missionaries. This is a kind of “in house” faithfulness — it is practised within the confines the church and it is directed toward those who are churchied. There is an apparent failure to realise that unbelievers are communicating with a different worldview, culture and language.

However, the living God calls the church to a robust, comprehensive Gospel faithfulness. The Gospel calls us to a radical commitment to the world in which we live. We are called to be faithful in preserving the faith AND in penetrating the world; we must contend for the faith AND contextualise the Gospel faithfully. A faithful, Gospel centred church must live in the missiological tension between 1 Cor 9:22 (contextualising) and Jude 3 and Gal 1:6-10 (contending). Failure to engage the world around us in a manner and language which they can understand with the unchanging truth of God’s gospel amounts to unfaithfulness to our mandate.

Just as cross cultural missionaries have to learn a new language and become conversant with a different worldview and culture, so Reformed Baptist churches will have to learn to connect with and communicate effectively with postmodern, unchurched urbanites.

1.2 The South African Context: The realities of Postmodernity and Urbanisation

1.2.1 Postmodernity

Western society and culture is not homogenous — it defies an exact, simple and neat categorisation. Yet there is little doubt that we are increasingly post Christian and postmodern. Flemming (2006:315), a contemporary missiologist writes:

“The context for articulating and embodying the gospel, particularly in Western societies, is in the throes of a seismic shift. It is not only more global; it is also increasingly post-modern. One of the profound challenges facing the church in the current generation is how to come to grips with the transition from a twentieth-century world dominated by modernism, with its faith in radical individualism, rational and objective knowledge, and scientific progress, to a post-modern world that questions the entire project.”

1.2.1.1 The salient features of religious postmodernism

Wells (2005:61) points out that there is a certain irony in trying to define postmodernism — for that in itself is a very un-postmodern thing to do. However, he gives the following underlying

motifs of contemporary postmodernism in his important work, "Above All Pow'rs: Christ in a Postmodern world" (2005:61-164):

- (i) The supreme place given to the autonomous self. In this respect, postmodernism follows modernity. Carson (1996:133) asserts the same point: "Postmodernism as a whole is characterised by astonishing hubris, by a focus on the self that is awesomely God-defying." There is no authority outside and above each person.
- (ii) A lack of any comprehensive worldview. It involves a radical fragmentation of life and a denial of any narrative which connects the events of life into a single form of meaning. Postmodernism is marked by a lack of coherence — there is no longer any centre to reality. Life's meaning cannot really be evaluated, because meaning has disintegrated.
- (iii) Truth (i.e. Having an understanding of reality that corresponds to what is out there) is not possible, because human reason has its biases and presuppositions. This results in a rejection of all truth claims and a rejection of doctrine; and the rise of relativism. Truth claims are for the individual, not the public; truth is private — not for the universe (yet, paradoxically many Westerners still have a very high view of scientific knowledge — even though postmodern philosophy is sceptical of it).
- (iv) There is no purpose. The belief that there is purpose written into creation has died with postmodernism. This results in nihilism, meaninglessness, feelings of profound alienation and hopelessness.
- (v) Despite this, many postmoderns are profoundly spiritual. Wells (2005:109) speaks of an "explosion of personalised spiritualities." He identifies a stream of spirituality that began taking place in the 1960's. It is anti-institutional and dismissive of doctrine and formal structures. Moreover it is deeply privatised, incredibly individualistic and has a therapeutic *modus operandi* (2005:96).

Wells (2005:152) summarises postmodern spirituality in this manner:

"With its individualism, its wholly privatised understanding, its therapeutic interest, its mystical bent, its experimental habits, its opposition to the truth as something which mediates the nature of an unchanging spiritual realm, its anti institutional bias, its tilt towards the east, its construction of reality, its can-do spirit, it is something that is emerging from the very heart of the postmodern world. This is ... the postmodern soul."

D.A. Carson (1996:557) argues that the fundamental characteristic of postmodernism is an absolute denial of objective truth (an absolute denial of absolutes!), and subsequently the impossibility of an objective stance on anything. Postmoderns are generally biblically ignorant

and illiterate, they reject claims of absolute truth, and they are relativistic in outlook and engage happily with the pluralistic mood of the age. They are disparaging of propositional truth and tend to prefer narrative. Our Western culture is marked by consumerism, materialism, hedonism, technocracy, cynicism and individualism, contends Hastings (2012:47). Flemming (2006:316) identifies the lack of any unifying story, historical nostalgia, spiritual hunger, mystery and the glorification of doubt as some of the key characteristics of post-modern people.

1.2.1.2 The challenges and opportunities that postmodernism presents

Carson, probably the leading Reformed Baptist theologian has written a very illuminating article entitled “The Dangers and Delights of Postmodernism.” He argues that Christians should not adopt either modern or postmodern epistemology. Both make true claims, both are seriously flawed. Significantly, this accords with the doctrines of depravity and common grace, which shall be referred to later in this dissertation. He lists the following strengths of postmodernism:

- (i) postmodernism tellingly criticises modernism’s autonomy and “checks its considerable arrogance” (2003:115).
- (ii) It is far more sensitive than modernism to the deep and undeniable differences that characterise people of different races, languages, culture and gender.
- (iii) Postmodernism shows that there is more to knowing than rationality, proofs, evidences and linear thought. Postmoderns are usually more impressed by the authenticity of relationships than by the cleverness of linear argument.
- (iv) It is implicitly religiously pluralistic. Clearly this is not a Christian position. However the point is that many of the NT documents speak much more immediately and prophetically to our situation than they did to Western Christians half a century ago.

Carson warns that we should not be naïve about postmodernism’s deep and varied weaknesses:

- (i) It greatly and habitually exaggerates the difficulties we have in communicating with each other.
- (ii) It pushes the claim that all knowing is subjective by regularly presenting a faulty and manipulative thesis: we can either know things fully, or cannot know at all.
- (iii) When applied to doctrine and morals, “it does more to loosen the constraints of living with integrity and with self-denying concern for others ... than any other single

development in the past century” (2003:116). In its more radical form, it destroys the notion of objective truth.

- (iv) After correctly challenging the arrogance of modernist epistemology, postmodernism displays its own brand of “stunning arrogance” (2003:117).

Carson’s point is that Christians should neither idolise nor demonise either modernism or postmodernism. Both are founded on profoundly idolatrous assumptions and both make some valuable, helpful observations. This is a crucially important point. Reformational Christians who are justifiably critical of imbibing postmodern assumptions and views, may not realise that their own views have been deeply influenced by modernism — a system and worldview which is also deeply flawed.

Reformed evangelicals should appreciate that postmodernism affords the church unique opportunities for ministry. Ravi Zacharias, a leading contemporary apologist says that postmodernism presents the Christian church with unique windows of opportunity to communicate the gospel (2000:26-28). He cites five positive opportunities that postmodernism presents to the church:

- (i) Postmodernism has cleared the playing field, in the sense that all disciplines have lost their final authority, including the world of “empirical” science.
- (ii) Despite the failings of modernism and materialism the yearnings for spiritual meaning and experience are greater than ever.
- (iii) There is just enough of the modern worldview left so that reason still has a point of entry. But this must be used cautiously.
- (iv) There is a tremendous search for community, which should culminate in the community of believers. It is the worshipping community that binds the diversity of our culture and backgrounds.
- (v) Our time is marked by self-indulgent pleasure; yet people are grappling with a pervading sense of meaninglessness. Wells makes the same point, saying that “meaninglessness, bewilderment, nihilism and a pervasive sense of inner disorientation marks the postmodern spirit” (2005:192-193). These five realities are excellent contact points for Gospel truth which Reformed South African pastors should carefully note.

1.2.1.3 The postmodern religious climate in contemporary South Africa

Wells, Flemming and Carson write from a North American perspective. The question is to what degree are urban South African centres characterised by postmodernism? There is general consensus that because of globalisation, the West is substantially postmodern. Carson (1996:538) defines globalisation as “the changes brought about in almost any discipline owing to the fact that the various parts of the world are demonstrably more interdependent than they have ever been ...” He goes on to say that the combination of extraordinary worldwide mobility and almost instantaneous communication has shrunk our world (1996:539). This means that South African culture and worldview cannot be isolated from the rest of the Western world. Research (presented in chapter 4) will demonstrate that the majority of Reformed Baptist pastors consider their South African context as substantially postmodern. Pastors from other Reformed groups concur. South Africa is lagging behind the hardcore postmodernism of Europe, but there is no doubt that we are moving in the same direction. Through rapidly advancing technology (such as the Internet — with its access to masses of information, the popularity of TV and the immediacy of communication) we share fundamental characteristics with Western urban culture, particularly America.

Contemporary South African culture and society reflects all of the features of postmodernism as described by Wells and Carson above.

- (i) Pre-occupation with self: Individualism is rampant in popular South African culture. This is seen in TV advertisements where viewers are enticed to think of themselves only. Slogans such as, “Go on, you deserve it!” and “Image is everything!” are part and parcel of the advertising industry. Popular South African magazines like *Cosmopolitan* and *Men’s Health* exalt the individual and the individual’s right to beauty, success and happiness.
- (ii) Moral relativism: Statistics of sexual activity and drug use among teens makes for disturbing reading. According to a 2011 report in *Moneyweb*, 43% of teens between 15 and 19 had engaged in intercourse.⁹ According to an online SABC News report (25 March 2015), 20,000 learners fell pregnant during in 2014; 223 were primary school learners. The concept of moral absolutes is on the decline.
- (iii) Pluralism: there is no objective truth. The mantra, “If it’s true for you, and works for you is all that matters” is common in our society — and it oozes pure

⁹ This can be found online at <http://www.moneyweb.co.za/archive/sa-youth-are-sexually-active-at-a-very-young-age/>.

postmodernism. Highly popular TV shows like Oprah have played a significant part in spreading a privatised, therapeutic, self centred spirituality.¹⁰

- (iv) Biblical illiteracy: Christian teachers in public schools lament the fact that their learners generally have very little knowledge of the Bible. While some Bible stories are known, they are known in an isolated sense — apart from the grand narrative of the Bible.
- (v) Feelings of alienation, loneliness, longing for community. According to an SABC News YouTube video clip (8 September 2014), “the rapid increase in the levels of alcohol and drug abuse in South Africa over the past decade has seen the age of first experimentation with drugs dropping to ten and below.”¹¹ The reasons for the alarming drug usage statistics are many and various. But it is argued that one cause is “the decline of traditional and social relationships” and subsequent feelings of loneliness and alienation (Karen Thomson: 14 August 2013). With the immense popularity of Facebook and Instagram, more and more people have mere “cyber acquaintances” or “virtual friends” and this could well be adding to the sense of alienation and loneliness (Chang: News 24 Online, 2015-08-05).
- (vi) While there appears to be a lack of appetite when it comes to orthodox Christianity, evidence suggests that many South Africans consider themselves deeply spiritual. The designation, “Spiritual, not religious” is becoming increasingly familiar. On popular Internet dating sites, large numbers of people are calling themselves, “spiritual, not religious.”¹² This speaks of a privatised, subjective spirituality.

It is very difficult to capture any one context with exactness. Context is multifaceted, complex and constantly on the run. One writer calls culture a “moving target” (Timmis 2009:24). It is this researcher’s perception that East London, the city where he is involved in Christian ministry, is probably one of the most conservative, traditional cities in South Africa. There is still some semblance of Christian influence — there remains something of a Christian “hangover.” For example, Bible reading and Christian prayer are still permitted in some of the local schools; and the local newspapers afford prominence to stories relating to Christian seasons and holidays. However, younger people are hugely ignorant of the Bible, cynical of “organised religion,” and relativism and pluralism reigns. This is borne out by local Christian schoolteachers who lament the moral laxity, biblical ignorance and existential angst of the young people. A local high

¹⁰ See her webpage at <http://www.oprah.com/index.html>

¹¹ See the clip at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8zHSioLjhJk>

¹² For example, see the Thunderbolt Dating site at <http://dating.thunderboltcity.com/s/> and Dating Buzz at www.datingbuzz.co.za/Online-Dating

school has had to come to terms with the pupils agitating to permit homosexual couples at their matric farewell dance.

While South African urban cultures are not identical and monochrome, the prevailing worldview is thoroughly postmodern. However, South African postmodernism is unlike the hardcore postmodernism of Europe. Rather it is more akin to the Bible belt culture of the USA. There are pockets of Christian nominalism that have been hybridised with postmodernism thinking. This point will be demonstrated in chapter 4.

Therefore it is imperative that Gospel communicators in South Africa come to understand and acquaint themselves with the salient features of postmodernism in order to effectively reach new, unchurched generations. For the settled pastor in an urban or suburban environment this means understanding a whole new culture and worldview and faithfully and deliberately contextualising the ministry of the Gospel to reach them. It calls for a carefully considered change in thinking and praxis. This research shows an alarming and very significant anomaly. Baptist cross cultural missionaries give great attention to contextualisation, yet pastors in urban pastorates of their “own culture” are far more tentative and even cautious of contextualisation. It may be argued that the reasons are obvious — cross cultural missionaries are by definition working in a foreign culture and need to understand the culture to faithfully translate the gospel in ways in which the recipients can understand and does not distort biblical truth. However, pastors in settled urban or suburban contexts give far less attention to contextualisation; for the assumption is that they share the same culture and worldview and speak the same language. This is a devastatingly wrong assumption. Increasing postmodernism means we do not share the same worldview. This key point will be explored in the dissertation.

1.2.2 The reality and challenges of rapidly increasing urbanisation in South Africa

Urbanisation also poses great challenges and unique opportunities to Christian mission. According to statistics released from the United Nations, in 1800 only three percent of the human population lived in cities. By 1900 this had increased to 14 percent, by 1960 it was up to 30 percent and according to 2014 figures, 54 percent of the world’s total population live in cities. The United Nations (2014:1) anticipates that by 2050 the world will be 90 percent urbanised. We are rapidly becoming a city planet.

In his article, “The Challenge of the Cities” Greenway (2009:559) contends that cities are the new frontiers of Christian missions. He argues that to neglect cities would be strategically short sighted, because “as the cities go, the world goes.” Cities are centres of political power, economic activity, communication, scientific research, academic institutions, and moral and religious influence.

South Africa is ahead of the curve: according to the 2013 census figures, South Africa is two thirds urbanised.¹³ Bakke (2002:29) points out that our generation is “living in the largest migration in history” and he adds that the evangelical church is generally poorly prepared for it. We are facing hyper-urbanisation! In view of these staggering realities the Christian church ought to understand the unique challenges of urban ministry and emphasise and support relevant urban ministry.

Getting these demographics understood and acknowledged is in itself a challenge. In South African Baptist circles there seems to be a reticence to face up to the challenge of urbanisation. Our cities are growing at incredible rates, yet there seems to be apathy in understanding the demographics and strategising accordingly. This is borne out by the fact that according to the Skype interviews, in the last five years Reformed Baptists have only planted two churches in urban areas. Al Mohler (a leading Reformed Baptist from the USA) warns, “If the Christian church does not learn new models of urban ministry we will find ourselves on the outside looking in” (2010:1). He proceeds to say that there really is no choice — the gospel must call a new generation of committed Christians into the teeming cities. Our ministry models must become increasingly urbanised. This is a considerable challenge, for a biblical urbanised Gospel ministry must be a contextualised ministry.

Although there tends to be a middle class bias against the city (as discussed in Keller 2012:158-160), urbanisation should not be discounted as bad news. It should be understood theologically (under the providence of God, He is bringing the nations to the cities) and missiologically (we have a unique opportunity and responsibility for mission right where most of us are living). Keller points out that there are a number of people groups who are generally difficult to reach, that are most effectively reached in cities. This would include younger people (who are attracted to the rhythms of urban life), the cultural elites (movers and shakers), foreigners and poor people.

1.3 The Need for Intentional, Biblical Contextualisation

This researcher has utilised Keller’s (2012:90) definition of sound contextualisation as his underlying definition in this dissertation:

“Sound contextualisation means translating and adapting the communication and ministry of the gospel to a particular culture without compromising the essence and particulars of the gospel itself. The great missionary task is to express the gospel message to a new culture that avoids making the message unnecessarily alien to that culture, yet without removing or obscuring the scandal and offense of biblical truth.”

This definition affirms:

¹³ See www.southafrica.info/news/urbanisation-240113.

- (i) the objectivity and supremacy of biblical truth
- (ii) the priority of the Gospel
- (iii) the necessity of being receptor sensitive
- (iv) the importance of being both affirming and prophetic towards culture
- (v) a comprehensive approach — contextualisation concerns not only verbal declaration, but the overall ministry of the Gospel

Contextualisation is a growing global concern in missiology and church planting. The Willowbank Report¹⁴ strongly affirms the place and importance of contextualisation. It opens with these words: “The process of communicating the Gospel cannot be isolated from the human culture from which it comes, or from that in which it is to be proclaimed.” It concludes like this: “It is essential, therefore, that all churches contextualise the gospel in order to share it effectively in their own culture” (Lausanne Occasional Paper 2 1978:pp 1, 23). There can be no doubt about the importance and significance of contextualisation. Whiteman (1997:2) affirms that contextualisation is one of the most pressing issues in mission today. It is not a fad that will simply disappear when another “hot topic” comes along. Flemming (2005:25) puts it forthrightly, “The contextualisation of the Gospel is inherent to the mission of the church.”

The theological understanding and praxis of the Apostle Paul may seem paradoxical. In Galatians 1:6-9 we see him contending for the Gospel. In very strong language he affirms the reality of one, true, objective, eternal and unchanging Gospel. He is totally unyielding, firm and dogmatic on this. His approach is, “This is the truth, and if you dare tamper with it may you be eternally cursed!” There is one true Gospel that must be understood, defended and promoted at all costs.

Yet in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, where he speaks of his own ministry and strategy we note that Paul is extremely flexible and adaptable. His method of sharing the good news is clearly contextually determined. There is no “one size fits all” gospel presentation. He is receptor orientated. This is Paul contextualising the ministry of the gospel. Both contending and contextualising constitute faithful Gospel ministry.

Consequently all Christian communicators are called to a dual fidelity. Pastors are called to be faithful to the unchanging, objective message of the Gospel, once for all delivered to the saints.

¹⁴ The Willowbank Report is one of the occasional papers prepared by leading evangelicals at the Lausanne Congress on World Evangelisation. It was held in Willowbank, Bermuda in 1978, and deals with the crucially important subject of Gospel and Culture. It is regarded as an important statement on this subject from an evangelical perspective.

The inspired, authoritative text is unchanging. Pastors and Bible teachers are also called to be faithful to the particular people and context in which the Gospel is communicated, so the Gospel may be faithfully communicated in that culture. Context is a dynamic and ever mutating reality.

This researcher would suggest that an argument to motivate the importance and need for contextualisation is somewhat fallacious. All Biblical communication is by nature contextualised. There is no such thing as a cultureless presentation of biblical truth. D.A. Carson (2002:47), a prominent Reformed Baptist theologian, affirms that “no truth which human beings may articulate can ever be articulated in a culture transcending way.” Therefore there can be no single presentation of the Gospel that transcends time, place and people. As soon as we choose words or idioms we are packaging the truth in a certain way. The issue is not whether to contextualise or not. Contextualisation is always a given. The issue is; are we contextualising faithfully, deliberately and wisely? Are we contextualising within biblical parameters? Are we being faithful to the unchanging, authoritative Word AND to changing time, people and worldview?

Having pointed out the inevitability of contextualisation, we must stress that it is a very challenging and demanding undertaking. We must note Gilliland’s (1989:12) sober warning: “Contextualisation is a delicate enterprise if ever there was one. The evangelist stands on a razor’s edge. Fall to the right and you will end up in a rigid obscurantism. Slip to the left and you will end up in a rudderless syncretism. No word in the Christian lexicon is as fraught with difficulty, danger and opportunity as contextualisation.” Keller (2012:92) warns of the dangers of contextualising and points out that that it makes some people in conservative theological circles nervous. He asserts it should make people nervous, as many present day Universalists were once evangelicals who gradually and increasingly gave the values of a culture preference over the authority of Scripture.

In a similar vein, Hastings (2012:17) argues that the two primary ways that the church has been rendered ineffective is through cultural disconnection — failure of churches to connect with the people in context; and indiscriminate enculturation — when the church fails to challenge the culture and becomes like the culture. This is a very serious statement: he is stating that the church’s witness is being undermined by contextualisation going wrong. Keller (2012:87) affirms the same point; calling the two errors under and over contextualisation. There is ample evidence of both errors in church history and in the contemporary church. There appear to be streams within the Emerging church movement, who, highly sensitised to their context, have over contextualised the Gospel and have fallen into syncretism. In the fog of postmodernism, objective truth and doctrine has been jettisoned, and vagueness and relativism is being

glorified. So argues D.A. Carson in his important 2005 work, "Becoming conversant with the Emerging church."

But the converse can also be seen. There are those from a fundamentalist background who tacitly advocate a "one size fits all" Gospel message and thus under-contextualise the Gospel. They seem to naively (and perhaps arrogantly) believe that the way that they received the Gospel is the only way of communicating it. They seem to believe that contextualisation is incompatible with robust, Reformed, historical theology. This researcher remembers being at a ministers' fraternal where a senior colleague said the following, "The Bible says nothing about postmodernism. It says a lot about sin!" This was in response to a question about how to reach postmodern people. This is simplistic, naïve and theologically dangerous. Contextualisation does not call communicators to be soft on sin — but it does call us to take the specific context of the hearer very seriously. Not only did the pastor seem to suggest that his own understanding of the Bible was context-less, but he was denying that in the New Testament apostolic preaching great emphasis was placed on context.¹⁵ The end result would be a rigid, culturally bound conservatism. Or to use Hastings's terminology, it leads to "rigid obscurantism" (2012:17).

Lidorio (2011:12) contends that an absence of a biblical theology of contextualisation has "given birth to two disastrous consequences in the world missionary movement: religious syncretism and evangelical nominalism." He argues that a lack of contextualisation leads to a weak understanding of the biblical message, which can lead people to an interest in the Gospel, but leave them not genuinely converted. This is a very noteworthy comment, for it shall be noted that nominalism is a major challenge facing Gospel communicators in South Africa.

Contextualisation remains something of a controversial and emotive term in some Reformed, conservative circles. Because the term is relatively modern, some have regarded it as a dangerous novelty and viewed it with great suspicion. Many Reformed Baptists are extremely cautious and suspicious of contextualisation. The concerns and criticisms of those opposed to contextualisation shall be considered and evaluated in the course of this dissertation. This student concurs with D.A. Carson (1996:97) who asserts that while we must be aware of the abuses of certain forms of contextualisation, "we cannot reasonably doubt the importance of the phenomenon". Contextualisation remains a huge challenge to the church in every time and place.

¹⁵ It goes deeper than this. My colleague seems to ignore the doctrine of total depravity in that he overlooks the fact that sin has very possibly skewed his own understanding of the Gospel. Moreover he is denying the doctrine of common grace which affirms that there may well be elements of gospel truth in other cultures that could be embraced and become part of a biblical worldview.

All this to demonstrate that contextualisation has been and continues to be a massive challenge facing the Christian church. The writers of the Willowbank Report were spot on! There is simply no way it can be ignored. Reformed Baptists must allow their theology and praxis of contextualisation to be challenged and reformed according to Scripture.

While this study focuses on Reformed Baptist ministry in South Africa, its relevance is much broader than this. The Christian church in the West is struggling to reach contemporary postmoderns. On the right there are those who are fundamentalist in orientation. They are zealous for faithful orthodoxy and pure doctrine, but are somewhat blind to their own enculturation and tend to promote a “canned” presentation of the Gospel. On the left there are those in the Emerging stream who are passionate about authentically engaging with postmoderns. However in the process they sacrifice truth on the altar of pragmatism, relevance and expediency, argues Carson (2005:186-187).¹⁶ These realities and tensions are part and parcel of a number of mainline denominations.

1.4 Central Theoretical Argument

Reformed Baptists should engage in deliberate, biblical contextualisation in urban, postmodern South Africa.

1.5 Aims and Objectives

- (i) To discuss postmodernism and urbanisation as critical realities facing Gospel ministry in South Africa.
- (ii) To carefully define biblical contextualisation, and discuss its history and usage.
- (iii) To build a robust biblical-theological argument for deliberate contextualisation, thereby demonstrating that intentional contextualisation is an outworking of solid, orthodox theology — not a contradiction or compromise with liberal theology.
- (iv) To identify and critically discuss prevailing attitudes and practices of Reformed Baptists on contextualisation.
- (v) To outline characteristics of sound, faithful orthodox contextualisation.
- (vi) To evaluate and respond to those who are critical or dismissive of all notions of contextualisation.

¹⁶ Carson goes on to argue that this movement is in danger of conforming to postmodern culture and abandoning the truth claims of the gospel altogether.

- (vii) To demonstrate that Reformed Baptist pastors should take up the stance and praxis of cross-cultural missionaries in urban South Africa.
- (viii) To provide principles and a framework for a way forward for intentional contextualisation for Reformed Baptists in postmodern, urban South Africa.

1.6 Methodology

This research is undertaken from the perspective of one who is theologically Reformed and evangelical.

The dissertation includes the following lines of research:

- (i) Questionnaires were sent to Reformed Baptist pastors and missionaries in South Africa. Their understanding of contextualisation, how much significance they attach to it, their degree of intentionality and their reservations or objections have been identified and evaluated. Skype interviews with a number of Reformed Baptist pastors have been conducted to try and ascertain the general health of their churches and the churches in their regions.
- (ii) Investigation has been conducted to identify where South African Reformed Baptists fit into the contemporary evangelical contextualisation debate. The views of prominent evangelical theologians, pastors and missiologists, viz. Kraft (1978, 1999), Hesselgrave (1984,1991), Hiebert (1983,1987), Flemming (2006), Moreau (2012) and McArthur (2014) are considered and evaluated. This is done mainly through literature study. The books, sermons, articles and blogs of the most internationally influential Reformed Baptist pastors and theologians have been evaluated for their understanding of contextualisation. This includes the work of Carson (1984, 1987, 1996, 2003, 2010), Piper (2007, 2008, 2011), Dever (2000, 2012), Stetzer (2010), Platt (2013) and Mohler (2012, 2015).
- (iii) A compelling theological-Scriptural argument for deliberate Biblical contextualisation is presented.
- (iv) Furthermore, the fundamental building blocks of what would constitute a model of careful, biblical contextualisation will be discussed and presented.

CHAPTER 2: CONTEXTUALISATION: HISTORY, DEFINITIONS AND CURRENT EVANGELICAL USAGE OF THE TERM

The aim in this chapter is to explore the history of the term, its different range of meanings and in so doing to grasp the controversy around its usage in conservative evangelical circles. We differentiate between the concept of contextualisation and the term which describes the concept. As a theological concept this researcher would contend that contextualisation goes back to the self-revelation of the eternal God, and has been part of the interpretative task of God's people throughout history. Furthermore contextualisation is both inevitable and unavoidable. However, as a theological term, it is relatively new and carries a fair amount of unhelpful baggage and undesirable connotations. Carson (1996:539) has written that contextualisation is a "slippery term, with diverse connotations, depending very much on who is using it."

2.1 The history of the term

Early last century tension had developed between "mother/sending churches" and "younger indigenous churches" over control, organisation and adaptation to the local context (Willowbank 1978:15-16). Older missionaries had planted churches in foreign soil and maintained control of them, using the native people in assisting roles only. Often the local people were explicitly encouraged to completely adopt Western culture. This tension was alleviated to a large extent by the adoption of the indigenisation approach which was championed by Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson. This approach affirmed the "three selfs" of new church development: new churches should be self-governing, self-propagating and self-supporting. The indigenous church movement encouraged missionaries to see themselves as temporary workers who were to do the initial evangelising and discipling work, and then turn the churches over to indigenous, national leadership, thereby enabling the local, national peoples to lead their churches as quickly as possible. It would also ensure that new churches would worship and minister in native forms, music, culture and language. The indigenisation approach was an immensely important and significant step forward in our understanding of Christian mission (Moreau 2012:122-123).

It is believed that the term contextualisation was first used in 1972 by a Taiwanese born man, Shoki Coe, who was a leading figure in the formation of the WCC. In its original context, contextualisation took the indigenisation principle a step further. Coe, who was principal of Tainan Theological College, argued that something more than the empowering of the national leaders was required. His observation and experience was that missionaries still gave the local leaders forms of church ministry — ways of expressing and formulating the Gospel and

organising churches that were thoroughly Western. His concern was that national believers were not being encouraged to think creatively about how to evangelise and structure churches in their own cultures. Coe added a fourth self; indigenous churches should be self-theologising. Aharon Sapsezain writes, “Shoki and I began to use this word sometime in February 1972 ... The discussions in the house around these two words, ‘contextuality’ and ‘contextualisation’ were that we should go beyond the older notion of ‘indigenization,’ in the sense that theology would take into account certain aspects of the culture which had been hitherto neglected, such as the social and economic dimensions” (quoted in Engle 1983:88).

The concept of contextualisation was brought into focus at a WCC consultation on “Dogmatic or Contextual Theology” in 1971. The 1972-1973 Committee on World Missions and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches (Bangkok) focused on the “theological imperialism” of the West and provided a platform for affirming the right of every Christian and every church to cultural identity. This conference called the non-Western churches to formulate their own response to God’s calling “in theology, a liturgy, a praxis, a form of community, rooted in their own culture.” The WCC confronted at a theoretical level the need for a church that was indigenous to the receiving culture (Moreau 2012:129-131).

At the Lausanne Conference on World Evangelism, 1974, the prominent African theologian Byang Kato said of contextualisation:

“This is a new term imported into theology to express a deeper concept than indigenisation ever does. We understand the term to mean making concepts or ideals relevant in a given situation. In reference to Christian practices, it is an effort to express the never changing Word of God in ever changing modes of relevance. Since the Gospel message is inspired but the mode of its expression is not, contextualisation of the modes of expression is not only right but necessary” (quoted in Engle 1983:88).

It is imperative to note that very early on the term was used in a thoroughly evangelical sense: Kato both affirmed the inspiration and authority of the Scriptures and recognised the impossibility of a Gospel presentation devoid of cultural attachments. While liberal Christians were using the term in one sense, early on evangelicals took the term and infused it with distinctly evangelical meaning.

In theologically liberal circles the term had a different meaning, demonstrated Keller (2012:90-91). The Theological Education Fund of the WCC was the first group to use this new term and incorporate it within its mission. There were soon serious concerns about the term and its usage. Following the existential theology of Rudolf Bultmann and Ernst Kasemann, theologians affiliated to the WCC insisted that the New Testament itself was adapted to a Greek worldview and did not have abiding validity. It was affirmed that Christians were free to determine in whatever way that fit their particular culture the “inner thrust of the Christian revelation” and

adapt or discard the rest. In this manner the authority of Scripture and the normative function of the Bible were undermined. Keller (2012:91) has pointed out the deep irony inherent in the usage of the term. Initially the call for contextualisation was intended to allow national churches to do theological reflection without having extrabiblical, Western thinking imposed on them. However, much of what the ecumenical WCC Theological Education Fund propagated was profoundly shaped by Western thinking. Contextualisation based on the view of a non-authoritative Bible stems from the views of modern Western theologians who themselves endorsed the Enlightenment's scepticism about the miraculous and supernatural. "So Christianity was over-adapted to a culture, not the conservative culture of 19th century missionaries, but the liberal culture of 20th century Western academia" (Keller 2102:91).

Because the new term went beyond the "indigenization approach," and because of the WCC usage of the term, many evangelicals have been cautious or even highly suspicious of the term. (This is demonstrated in the following chapter.) The Lausanne Consultation on Gospel and Culture met at Willowbank, Bermuda in 1978, producing the Willowbank Report, and a number of related papers. The authors of these documents make clear statements about their commitment to the inspiration, authority and normative nature of Scripture (Willowbank 1978:3-5). We should note the opening paragraph (1978:1): "The process of communicating the gospel cannot be isolated from the human culture from which it comes, or from that in which it is to be proclaimed" and closing words (1978:23) of this document, "It is essential, therefore, that all churches contextualise the gospel in order to share it effectively in their own culture." We must observe that by 1978 leading evangelicals from across the globe were asserting that contextualisation is an essential part of Gospel ministry!

2.2 Liberal versus Evangelical understanding

Carson (1996:540) helpfully points out the essential differences between the liberal and evangelical or conservative use of the term. He states that there are two basic approaches that are quite distinct. The first recognises and insists upon the sufficiency and authority of God's self-disclosure in Scripture, but also recognises that all attempts to interpret Scripture are culture-laden efforts undertaken by sinners and therefore liable to distortion. It is not so arrogant as to think that one group of Christians of a particular time and place has a perfect, objective grasp of all Biblical truth and its application. It appreciates that contextualisation is the logical extension of indigenisation.

The second emphasises the priority of context, with the result that the text of Scripture is slowly domesticated to serve contemporary agendas. Beginning with the presupposition that interpreters inevitably interpret texts from the context of their own culture, "praxis" becomes the hermeneutical control. De Vries (2005:5) points out that there is presently a broad spectrum of

contextual theologies; from Latin American liberation theologies (Gutierrez), to emerging African theologies (Kwame Bediako), and even Feminist and white male Anglo Saxon theologies. The fundamental criterion of contextual theology is the extent to which its understanding of the Gospel leads people to Christ. De Vries' questions are pertinent: Who defines "Jesus," "Gospel," "theology" and "mission"? (2005:5)

In subsequent decades evangelical theologians and missiologists have developed different nuances in their understanding of contextualisation and its application. Evangelicals have basically rejected the liberal understanding of contextualisation and invested it with their own meaning, affirms Hesselgrave (1991:138). He affirms that though there are some who find the term ambiguous and misleading, "most conservative evangelicals take the approach of redefining the term and redirecting the method." He adds that there is not yet a commonly accepted definition of the word "contextualisation" in evangelical circles (1989:35). Hesselgrave (1991:143) defines contextualisation as

"the attempt to communicate the message of the person, works, word and will of God in a way that is faithful to God's revelation, especially as it is put forth in holy Scriptures; and that is meaningful to the respondents in their respective cultural and existential contexts. Contextualisation is both verbal and non-verbal and has to do with theologising, Bible translation, interpretation and application, incarnational lifestyle, Christian instruction, church planting and growth, church organisation, worship style — indeed with all of those activities involved in the carrying out of the Great Commission."

In the most recent exhaustive survey of evangelical contextualisation models, Moreau (2012:136) gives the following definition:

"The process whereby Christians adapt the forms, content and praxis of the Christian faith so as to communicate it to the minds and hearts of the people with other cultural backgrounds. The goal is to make the Christian faith as a whole — not only the message but also the means of living out of our faith in the local setting — understandable."

2.3 Features of Evangelical Contextualisation

There is no consensus today among evangelicals on an exact, precise definition of contextualisation. Although Engle (1983:90) suggests that there are "as many nuances of meaning as there are people who employ the term", there is broad agreement that the following constitute the essential characteristics of contextualisation. These are six key characteristics of evangelical contextualisation, gleaned from the writings of Carson (1996:537-553), Hesselgrave (1991:131-144), Keller (2012:89-133), Moreau (2012:103-141) and Hiebert (1984:104-111):

- (i) A commitment to the authority of Scripture and the priority of the Gospel; and consequently responsible, orthodox methods of biblical interpretation and application.

- (ii) A commitment to sacrificially entering into, studying and understanding the target culture and its people, values, history and worldview. As such, contextualisation should be a two-way process.
- (iii) A commitment to a balanced view of culture and society: aspects of culture should be affirmed and appreciated, because of common grace. Aspects of culture should be confronted and challenged because of the fall and the pervasiveness of sin. The gospel communicator should not fail in being prophetic.
- (iv) A commitment to being comprehensive: it is not just the message that is contextualised, but the church as a whole needs to be contextualised, i.e. its organisational structure, worship, liturgy, language, music, discipling programmes and emotional atmosphere. Contextualisation extends far beyond narrow evangelistic strategies.
- (v) A commitment to being dynamic: because culture is non static and ever-mutating, faithful Christian ministry requires ongoing re-evaluation and adjustment of approaches.
- (vi) A commitment to Interdisciplinary research. Insights from anthropology, sociology, history, economics, psychology and linguistics should be harnessed.

Having surveyed the somewhat dubious and chequered history of the term, and given its relative novelty, and its range of meaning, it is not surprising that some Reformed, conservative evangelicals (including Reformed Baptists in South Africa) have been suspicious of the term contextualisation. There is a sense in which this suspicion is understandable, indeed warranted.

2.4 The fundamental issue

This historical overview of the term brings us directly to the fundamental issues in contextualisation. Probably THE fundamental issue in contextualisation is Scripture or Culture: which is ultimate and authoritative? The liberal approach to contextualisation (WCC) assumes that both the text (Bible) and the context (culture) are relative and equally authoritative. Through a dialectical process in which the text and context are brought into relationship to each other, the communicator searches for the particular form of Christian truth (note small t) that fits the culture for the time being. The result is that virtually any part of the Christian faith can be rejected or radically re-interpreted and filled with new content. In the name of this type of contextualisation, a church has the very real potential to make radical changes to historic Christian belief and praxis. The answer to the ultimate authority question is Scripture, most

clearly and emphatically. This researcher (like his Reformed Baptist colleagues) believes that the Bible is God's Word and is inspired, infallible, authoritative, sufficient and trustworthy. As such it must always be our rule and authority in all matters of doctrine, mission and life (1689 Baptist Statement of Faith, Article 1:1, pg 1). The Bible must critique everything else — including our own culture and our own cultural assumptions that we are largely blind to. From a Reformational perspective we should be extremely sceptical of any missiologist or theologian who is not committed to this fundamental principle of faith. We shall return to the important questions of contextualisation and hermeneutics later in the study, but we need to affirm the primacy of unchanging Scripture over changing contexts up front.

Secondly, is there such a thing as a context-less presentation of the Gospel? Does a trans-cultural gospel message or gospel presentation exist? Is it possible or desirable to identify the “one size fits all” Gospel presentation? The answer is a clear and most emphatic no! Conservative evangelicals have noted this. Carson (1984:19) asserts that “every truth from God comes to us in cultural guise: even the language used and the symbols adopted are cultural expressions. No human being living in time and speaking any language can ever be entirely culture-free about anything.” Keller (2012:93) also affirms that there is “no culture-transcending way to express the truths of the gospel ... there is nonetheless only one true gospel.” This researcher would not only be critical and suspicious of any missiologist not holding to orthodox views of Scripture but would be similarly extremely sceptical of any missiologist or theologian who was not candid about the fact that there is no such thing as a gospel presentation that is universally applicable, and that we all tend to think that the way the gospel was packaged when we believed it, is the only God given way of communicating this precious truth. Flemming (2006:296) affirms, “Any attempt to reduce the gospel to a set of pre-fabricated formulations that can be carried about and unpacked for all situations runs contrary to both the spirit of the New Testament and the nature of Christian mission.” As such it is appropriate (and there is a great deal of biblical precedent) to be receptor focused and receptor sensitised in Christian ministry.

In the rest of this study the research will demonstrate that while Reformed Baptists are committed to the first truth, there is a possibility that they may be blind to, or naïve about the second. We shall return to some of the key issues that this question raises in a subsequent chapter, for example, the very real dangers of syncretism and hyper-fundamentalism.

CHAPTER 3: CONTEMPORARY EVANGELICAL CONTEXTUALISATION: A BIRD'S EYE VIEW

Moreau (2012:19) points out that literature on contextualisation has “exploded” over the last two decades. The huge volume of writing, thinking and experimentation is indicative of its great importance in mission. Contextualisation remains a term encumbered with much baggage. The aim in this chapter is to get something of a bird's eye view of the current evangelical landscape in regard to contextualisation and to specifically locate and discuss the position of influential Reformed Baptists.

3.1 The Travis Contextualisation Scale

John Travis (a *pseudonym*, 1998:407-408) developed a useful tool for measuring the degree of contextualisation in a given context, commonly called the Travis scale. Though developed in the context of ministry in the Muslim world, it is now being used globally. It is a tool used for defining six types of “Christ-centred communities” (“C”) in the Muslim context. Travis came up with a six step spectrum to describe the types of gatherings of those who follow Christ in Muslim settings.

The six types in the spectrum are differentiated by language, culture, worship forms, degree of freedom to worship with others and religious identity. All confess Jesus as Lord and share belief in the core elements of the Gospel. The spectrum attempts to address the enormous diversity which exists in Muslim contexts in terms of ethnicity, history, traditions, language, culture and theology. The aim is to assist church planters and Muslim background believers to identify what type of Christ-centred communities may draw the most people from the target group to Christ and best fit in a given context. This scale is now the standard that evangelicals use to indicate what type of Christian community they prefer.

C1: Nothing is changed or adapted to the new context. The church reflects Western culture; there is a huge chasm between the church and the local Muslim community. It is basically a “cut and paste” approach; Christianity is exported and re-planted in its language and forms. Language and forms used are foreign to those in the receiving culture.

C2: Similar to C1 in form, but the mother tongue of the local culture is used. Hymnals are translated. Religious language used is still foreign. The cultural gap between the target culture and the culture of the missionary is still very significant.

C3: Contextualisation goes beyond language into some forms of the local culture. Insider language and religiously neutral insider cultural forms are embraced. Indigenous forms

including dress, music and diet are utilised. Church buildings are built according to the local style.¹⁷

C4: Insider language and biblically permissible local forms and practices are utilised. In a Muslim context this would include praying with hands raised, keeping the fast, abstaining from pork and alcohol and using Islamic dress. Contextualised Christ-centred communities use the mother tongue and biblically acceptable local forms. Pratt, in his 2013 TGC presentation says that many Western Christians are functionally C4, in that we take Christmas and infuse it with Christian truth. C4 believers in the Muslim world would identify themselves as “followers of *Isa* the Messiah.” Here the follower of Christ would be known as a strange type of Christian.

C5: Insider movements: These believers remain legally and socially within the community of Islam — similar to the contemporary Messianic Jewish movement. These believers are told that they are still Muslims and that Christ completes their faith. They are perceived as strange Muslims. C5 believers meet regularly with one another and share their faith with the unsaved.

C6: They are underground or secret followers of Christ with little or no community because of suffering under totalitarian regimes. They are usually silent about their faith. C6 believers are perceived as Muslims by the Muslim community. The fundamental difference between C6 and C5 is that C6 believers keep their faith in Christ a secret, whereas C5 believers make their faith known.

Reformed Baptists (like Pratt, 2013 and Stetzer, 2010) would typically assess the Travis scale in the following way:

- (i) C1 and C2 represent under-contextualisation, which is to be avoided. There is significant under adaptation to the local context.
- (ii) C3 and C4 represent contextualisation within biblically balanced and biblically warranted parameters.
- (iii) C5 and C6 represent over-contextualisation and compromise which is extremely dangerous and which is to be avoided. It shall be noted that some Reformed Baptists have reacted strongly and critically to contextualisation because of a C5-C6 approach.

¹⁷ In C1-C3, the new converts are called and known as Christians.

3.2 A Contemporary Evangelical Contextualisation Continuum

The purpose here is to schematically represent and discuss the contemporary contextualisation scene. Attention shall be given to where Reformed Baptists and those that are influential among them are positioned. Kraft, Hesselgrave and Hiebert are not Reformed Baptists — but their views will be briefly considered and discussed because of their importance and contribution in this field. Note diagram 1 on page 44.

In the previous chapter it was noted that for the evangelical, contextualisation involves the interplay between the unchanging, authoritative Bible and a changing context. The study in this chapter summarises the contemporary scene on the basis of how much importance is placed on these two factors. We shall move from one pole (or extreme) to another: from an evangelical relativism (with questionable commitment to the authority of Scripture, and a high commitment to receiving culture) to a rigid fundamentalism (with a high commitment to Scripture and an inflexible approach to faithfully translating the Gospel message to a receiving culture); from a high/over-appreciation of common grace and general revelation on the left, the research will take us to an-under appreciation of common grace on the right. We move from what we could call over-contextualisation on the left, to under-contextualisation on the right.

3.2.1 Charles Kraft

Kraft is a key representative of “evangelical relativism” — my term, as far as I know. This position is strong on being flexible to the sensitivities of recipient culture, but weak on the authority of Scripture. Fuller Theological Seminary has graduated more missiologists than any other American seminary (Moreau 2012:149). Thousands of students have studied under Kraft and learned the concept of dynamic equivalence. His views as documented in the book he edited and made a significant contribution to, “Appropriate Christianity” (Kraft 2005) and in his article “Culture, Worldview and Contextualisation” (1999:410-415) shall be discussed. Kraft distinguishes sharply between the form and meaning of the text. He contends that literal translation can obscure meaning and argues that readability and understanding are more important than the preservation of the original grammatical structure. For Kraft (2005:168), equivalence should be in impact, and should change as cultures change. Equivalence should be focused on the deeper meanings of the text. In using this term Kraft’s goal is to “see expressed in the lives of the receptors the meanings taught in Scripture.”

The Willowbank contributors give cautious approval to the dynamic equivalence approach (1978:3-4) but differ from Kraft on a number of key points:

- (i) For Kraft, revelation is best understood as a process not a product. God must activate meaning in someone before revelation can be said to have occurred. For

Kraft, the informational content of revelation (which he maintains is important) must be distinguished from the dynamic process. Learning is best done by self discovery rather than impartation of knowledge. Since God does not change, Kraft argues that the process of revelation today is no different from what it was for the biblical authors (2005:59). Revelation is “in the dynamic interaction within that world (in which we live) that the impactful, life transforming revealing activity of God takes place. God must activate “meaning” in someone before revelation can be said to have occurred. Each revelational event is an example of the interaction of the supracultural God and culturally embedded humanity. The Bible is a case book of divinely inspired cases (Kraft 2005:154-158). Understanding today requires the best of the sciences and theology. The goal of a dynamic equivalence approach is the transformation of lives — individuals and groups. Meaning is information and personalisation.

It is this researcher’s view that Kraft’s understanding of revelation is highly problematic and represents a significant departure from an orthodox evangelicalism. Kraft’s views remove an important foundation for the evangelical commitment to a closed canon. If revelation does not include the content and is identical today as originally given in biblical times, on what basis can we say that today’s revelation “is not equal in all respects to that of the Biblical writers?” To place ourselves on the same revelatory level as the Apostle Paul is theologically very dangerous and puts us on a very slippery slope. Furthermore, because revelation is a process rather than a product, general and special revelation are not qualitatively different. Kraft’s views on revelation also have serious hermeneutical consequences. He is dismissive of tools built on static dissection of knowledge, such as grammatical-historical exegesis. Furthermore Kraft seems to be confusing the doctrine of revelation — which is complete, with what the reformers called “illumination” — which is the subjective work of the Spirit within the heart of the reader as he or she reads Scripture.

- (ii) Culture is neither good nor bad, but neutral. In his paper, “Culture, Worldview and Contextualisation” (2009:410-415), Kraft laments the fact that the church has “continually reverted to the assumption that becoming Christian means becoming like us culturally. If we should take a scriptural approach, we should adapt ourselves and our presentation of God’s message to the culture of the receiving people.” Agreed — these are valid points. Yet in his theology of culture, he says nothing about sin. There are aspects of all human cultures that should be affirmed because of common grace. But there are certainly aspects of culture that need to be critiqued and wisely and directly confronted, because of the Fall. His

understanding of culture lacks a Romans 1:18-34 orientation which is a very serious deficiency.

- (iii) Kraft seems to be aware of the dangers of syncretism. However, he argues that fear of syncretism may be the major reason that evangelicals refrain from, or do not go far enough in contextualisation. “Too much fear can be paralysing” (1978:35). This may well be true of many conservative evangelicals. But the answer does not lie in veering towards relativism and over-contextualisation.

While Kraft’s views should be studied and understood, it is this researcher’s conviction that his model of contextualisation should not be followed by Reformed Baptists in South Africa. With his questionable views on revelation and sin, his position can be at best described as “very broadly” evangelical.

3.2.2 David J. Hesselgrave

Hesselgrave was a missionary in Japan for twelve years, and then served as professor emeritus of the School of World Missions at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. His views as expounded in his book, “Communicating Christ Cross Culturally” (1978) and articles “Great Commission Contextualisation” (1995b) and “Contextualisation that is authentic and relevant” (1995a) are considered below.

- (i) He contends for a contextualisation that balances faithfulness to Scripture with meaningfulness to the receiving audience. He insists upon God’s self revelation in Scripture as being the ultimate authority. The adequacy of any contextualisation model must be measured by the degree to which it faithfully reflects the meaning of the biblical texts. “Scripture itself as the Word of God written constitutes the most authentic and effective instrument of contextualisation. This is because the Divine Author has so ordered history and so inspired certain human authors that the cultural settings, languages, literary genres, events and actions of the Bible — as well as the meaning of the text itself — bear the stamp of what I call “transculturality” (1995b:139).
- (ii) Contextualisation is both verbal and nonverbal, and has to do with theologising, Bible translation and interpretation, evangelism, instruction, incarnational lifestyle, organisation and worship. In other words, he calls for a comprehensive contextualisation.
- (iii) He advocates a “three-culture model” of contextualisation. This gives attention to the original text and context in which the Scriptures were penned, the context in

which they were explained and received, and the recontextualisation of the message to communicate it effectively to respondents in their own culture. In his model, these three stages/realities reflect: Revelation — God's revelation of His truth in language. Interpretation — the hearer comes to understand the intended meaning of the text. Authenticity is a matter of interpreting the texts in such a way as to arrive, as closely as possible, at the intent of the author through the application of sound hermeneutical principles. Third, application involves two steps — the interpreter formulates the logical implications of his understanding of the text for the culture in which it is to be received and lived out; then the interpreter consciously decides to accept the validity of the text's claim or to reject it (Hesselgrave 1995a:115).

- (iv) For Hesselgrave, acceptable contextualisation “is a direct result of ascertaining the meaning of the biblical text, consciously submitting to its authority, and applying or appropriating that meaning in a given situation” (1995a:116).
- (v) Having established that the Bible is our final authority, he writes that there is no one right way of doing contextualisation. The Gospel communicator will have to pay careful attention to these seven features of the receiving culture: their worldviews, cognitive processes, linguistic forms, behavioural patterns, communication media, social structures, motivational sources (Hesselgrave 1978: 193-631).

Hesselgrave can be read with profit by Reformed Baptists. He has contributed to the discussion on contextualisation by stressing the normative role of the Bible, by advocating responsible hermeneutics, by exhibiting great evangelistic urgency and by showing wise flexibility toward receiving culture.

3.2.3 Paul Hiebert

Hiebert was an anthropologist/missiologist and one time colleague of Hesselgrave's at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. He developed an approach which he has called “Critical Contextualisation” (1984:287-296). He takes what may be called a common sense approach to language — called critical realism. Meaning is to be found in the mental image of the Word user and the outer reality to which the Word refers. It avoids two extremes; it opposes the view that meaning is found only in persons and that one therefore has to “get into the head” of the message source to discover its meaning. This would lead to over contextualisation. But it also avoids the other extreme: the notion that meaning is inherent in the signs and forms themselves. This leads to under contextualisation, by making certain forms of the receiving culture inherently evil and by insisting on behaviour or practice without enquiring into their meanings in the receiving culture. Critical realism insists that meaning is to be found in the

relationship between signs/forms and reality; that is discoverable by a careful examination of context, and that the people of the receiving culture must be involved in the process. His model involves a four step process:

- (i) Exegesis of culture: the local culture must be studied and understood in depth. Traditional beliefs and local customs should be analysed for the sake of understanding, not to be affirmed or judged at this stage.
- (ii) Exegesis of Scripture and the hermeneutical bridge: the Scriptures must be studied as they relate to the questions at hand. Scriptural truth must be brought to bear on the questions raised in step 1. This must be done from a “metacultural” framework that will enable the translation of the biblical message into the “cognitive, effective, and evaluative dimensions of another culture.” The Bible must be understood as originally intended; otherwise the recipients will get a distorted view of the Gospel.
- (iii) Critical response: the recipient people have to corporately evaluate their own customs in the light of their new biblical understanding, and to make decisions regarding their response to their newly formed truths. The Gospel is not merely about information dissemination, but it is a message to be obeyed and demands a response.
- (iv) New contextualised practices: after the community have analysed their old customs in the light of Scripture they need to be guided to arrange the practices they have chosen into a new ritual/liturgy that expresses Christian truth and meaning. It will be Christian in that it explicitly seeks to express biblical teaching. It will also be contextual, for it has been formed by the church.

Hiebert is aware of the dangers of syncretism. He affirms that contextualisation ought to be an ongoing process, as the world in which people live is always changing. He affirms the following checks against syncretism:

- (i) Critical contextualisation takes the Bible very seriously as the rule of faith and life. All contextualisation must be biblically based.
- (ii) The role of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers is recognised.
- (iii) The church is to be a hermeneutical community. The corporate nature of the church as a community of interpretation extends not only to the church in every culture, but also to the church in all ages.

- (iv) There is growing discussion among evangelical theologians from different cultures, and hopefully a growing consensus on key points. Theologians can often detect the cultural biases of others better than they see their own.

Hiebert's work on contextualisation is also very valuable. Part of his worth is that he writes from an anthropological background, with strongly orthodox theological convictions. (The point was made in the previous chapter that contextualisation ought to be an interdisciplinary study.) He affirms the supremacy of Scripture, is keenly aware of the pitfalls of syncretism, proposes responsible hermeneutics, and stresses the role of the Christian community and the Spirit in evangelism and discipleship.

3.2.4 Ed Stetzer

Stetzer is a North American author, church planter, pastor and missiologist with a Reformed Baptist church background. He serves as Visiting Professor of Research and Methodology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity Seminary and as Research Professor at South-Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary. He has written much on contextualisation and has made the following fundamental points in a series of articles in Christianity Today (21 June 2010-18 October 2010), entitled "Calling for Contextualisation."

- (i) He strongly and clearly affirms the normative and authoritative role of Scripture.
- (ii) He calls for the necessity of a biblical theology of culture. He says, "It's odd to hear people say we should not worry about culture. It's like a fish saying we should not worry about water! You LIVE in that water."
- (iii) The Christian pastor/missionary is called to both contend for the gospel and contextualise the Gospel.
- (iv) The goal of contextualisation is clear, faithful proclamation and healthy, biblical churches.
- (v) Contextualisation is a given. It will always happen — either poorly or well.
- (vi) Significantly, he points out that North American churches are often forbidden from doing the very things they require international missionaries to do i.e. To consider their culture, its idols and to find bridges to that culture, and seek to contextualise their church to that culture. This researcher is finding a similar anomaly among Reformed Baptists in South Africa which will be considered in chapter 4.

- (vii) The church ought to develop a carefully balanced theology of the world: being both radically committed to and engaged in, yet decisively separate and distinct from the world.
- (viii) The examples he uses to illustrate the Travis scale are pertinent. He calls C1 communities ... “obscurantist” ... “These people will say, ‘I don’t believe in contextualisation’ while wearing a suit that became popular 50 years ago, singing music that became popular 100 years ago, on an instrument that became popular 300 years ago, in a church with furniture that became popular 600 years ago.” Stetzer calls C6 communities syncretistic. He identifies the popular American preachers of prosperity and “feelgood” therapy as syncretistic, saying they no longer communicate a discernible Gospel. Stetzer himself would affirm a C4 approach.
- (ix) Gospel centred, biblically faithful churches ought to be culturally relevant. However cultural relevance is not the goal. Faithful Gospel proclamation which results in the establishment of healthy, God glorifying churches is the great goal.

Stetzer has made a considerable contribution to the discussion and debate around Biblically sound contextualisation. While demonstrating orthodox, conservative theology, he clearly sees the problems of both over and under contextualisation. Moreover he writes from an urban, Western context. South African Baptists can learn from him.

3.2.5 Zane Pratt

Pratt is a Reformed Baptist missiologist/church planter who ministered in the Muslim world. He is presently a lecturer at the Billy Graham School of Missions. In an address given to TGC (Together for the Gospel coalition) in 2013, he outlined the broad contours of his approach in contextualisation:

- (i) He holds to a very high, orthodox view of Scripture and insists that all contextualisation must be within the parameters of Scripture.
- (ii) All churches and all Gospel communication is contextualised; either well or badly. It is naïve to think that contextualisation can be avoided. Every church claiming to be following the early church model in Acts is radically different from the church in Acts.
- (iii) We tend to take ourselves as the standard in contextualisation. We need to go back a step further and try to disentangle that which is Biblical from our cultural expression of it. We need to keep in mind the difference between form and function. For example, is it valid to try and find a contemporary contextual expression for a

“holy kiss?” He would answer yes — any greeting custom that authentically conveys sincere friendship would be suitable. Should we try and find a more culturally acceptable form of baptism, like getting believers to change their clothes in a formal ceremony? No, because the form of baptism is significant as a picture of the Gospel.

- (iv) The point of contextualisation is not to make Christianity comfortable, nor to soften the message of the Gospel. The aim is clarity.
- (v) The Gospel confronts and challenges every culture, including our own. If people are to be offended we are to ensure that it is caused by the scandal of the cross, not our own strange customs or traditions.
- (vi) The Gospel messenger should identify with the recipient people by putting down roots in the community and by being lifelong learners of culture and language. Freedoms that may be hindrances to the Gospel should be given up. But there should never be adaptation to the local culture that violates Scripture.
- (vii) New believers should remain in their culture and develop indigenous styles of worship. They should be pointed to the Bible, not the missionary expert. They should make a clear identity of belonging to Christ (contra C5 and C6 communities) and should take responsibility for the Great Commission from the outset.

Pratt’s views are helpful and may be described as responsible, orthodox evangelical contextualisation, with a particular focus on the urban context.

3.2.6 D.A. Carson

Carson is a Reformed Baptist theologian who enjoys widespread acceptability among conservative, Reformed Baptists across the globe. He enjoys the profile of being regarded as possibly the foremost Reformed evangelical theologian in the English speaking world today. He is more of a theoretician than an active missionary or evangelist, but his work is important as he deals with assumptions, trends and theological undergirding. He does not posit a model, but included are some of his salient views on contextualisation as found in his work, “The Gagging of God” (1996:537-553).

- (i) There is objective truth; humans can know objective truth, not exhaustively and absolutely, but truly.

- (ii) Contextualisation takes the indigenous principle one step further — churches should think through their theology in their own context, thus contextualising it.
- (iii) Cultural change and cultural differences demand fresh theological reflection and publication.
- (iv) It would be arrogant to assume that all biblical and theological reflection has been accurately and exhaustively accomplished by one group of Christians (us!).
- (v) Carson is very strong on the once-for-all truthfulness and authority of God's self disclosure in Scripture, but is also aware that all attempts to interpret Scripture are culture-laden efforts undertaken by sinners, and therefore subject to distortion.

It is difficult and perhaps artificial to place these “middle” theologians on exact positions in this continuum. This is a matter of degrees, balance and emphasis. The different models, theologies and approaches are finely nuanced. They all affirm the authority and priority of Scripture, and the need to understand the recipient culture. They are put in these positions on the basis of the emphasis of their views. Their emphases are to some extent contextually determined, and must be understood as such. For example, D.A. Carson spends a great deal of time in affirming the authority and sufficiency of God's self revelation in the Scriptures. He spends comparatively less time on understanding recipient culture. This is not necessarily because he is “weak” on this matter, but because he is reacting to postmodern tendencies (and elements of the emerging church) which require a stress on objective truth.

It is this researcher's conviction that both D.A. Carson and Ed Stetzer are under-utilised and under-appreciated when it comes to the subject of contextualisation in Reformed Baptist circles. They have done a great deal of valuable work on contextualisation; albeit it from slightly different situations and for different purposes. The work of both these writers ought to be read, digested, discussed and carefully put into practise. The work of each complements the other. Carson is excellent in providing theological and epistemological undergirding, dealing with presuppositions and is generally cautious. Stetzer is very helpful in a theology of praxis in contemporary urban environments and is generally more adventuresome than Carson.

3.2.7 John Piper

Until his recent retirement, Piper was pastor of preaching and vision of Bethlehem Baptist in Minneapolis, Minnesota, US. His webpage, *Desiring God*, has over 10000 sermons (according to the home page), articles, blogposts and conference papers. Incredibly, there is only one title of a sermon or article with the word contextualisation in it. It is a very brief 2008 article entitled, “Preaching as concept creation; Not just contextualisation”. Piper contends that we must work to

bring about conceptual change in the minds of unbelievers. A new framework must be created for interpreting the world and this is God's doing. He affirms that concept creation is harder than contextualisation, but even more crucial. However, surely concept creation falls within the parameters of contextualisation? Was that not Paul's strategy in Acts 17 — to posit a new worldview through which to interpret the world and reality? This will be considered in chapter 5.

In a 2007 You Tube video clip, Piper has a four minute section entitled, "Don't contextualise the Gospel." He makes the following points:

- (i) People make missions too complicated.
- (ii) The Gospel is universally relevant to all, "with barely any contextualisation."
- (iii) People need to understand: a) in Adam all have sinned and die, b) in Christ they can be righteous and live, c) justification by faith must be understood.
- (iv) He stresses that the Bible challenges all cultures; his own American culture included.

In a 1996 sermon on one of the classical contextualisation texts, 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 (Becoming all things to all men to save some), Piper does not use the word contextualisation. He interprets Paul's thinking as removing unnecessary offence so as to win people to Christ.

In a statement in "Biblical Missiology" (December 2011) called "John Piper's Church takes a stand on Contextualisation," Bethlehem Baptist Church issued a strong warning against over — contextualisation in Muslim evangelism. The background to this statement is the growing Muslim population and increase in Mosques in the Twin Cities over the last two decades. There is a call for Christians to be bold and winsome in their gospel engagement with Muslim people. The gist of the statement amounts to a strong warning on the "unbiblicalness" of Insider movements, C5 contextualisation.

The statement affirms that contextualisation of the Gospel message across cultures is both biblical and necessary. It gives basic boundaries for Bethlehem Baptist pastors and evangelists for ministry among Muslims. Followers of Christ among Muslims should not: recite the Muslim creed; continue to participate in prayers in the Mosque; identify themselves as Muslims in terms of their faith commitment; or remove or replace "Father" and "Son of God" in translating the biblical revelation of God and Jesus Christ in any language. This warning against over-contextualisation is appropriate, essential and commendable. Christian missionaries need to be highly sensitised to the perils of over-contextualisation.

However, given the fact that Piper and Bethlehem Baptist are both known for their commitment to missions¹⁸ — both locally and abroad — this scarcity and fundamentally negative take on contextualisation is particularly intriguing. However, the fact that he has hardly written on the subject does not mean that he has not pursued active contextualisation in his ministry. There are strong indications that he has sought comprehensive contextualisation. For example, when he took up the pastorate in Minneapolis, he deliberately and strategically chose to live in a poorer part of the city — thereby identifying with the poor and demonstrating an incarnational approach to ministry (Piper 2011:38). He is also acutely aware of the changing demographics of American cities, particularly his city of Minneapolis which indicates his desire to understand and communicate appropriately to his hearers. One of his chapters in his 2011 book, “Bloodlines” is entitled: Global Shifting and the New Face of the church” (2011:51-58). When it comes to the appointment of new pastoral staff, Bethlehem Baptist has a policy of appointing suitably biblically qualified and able men who are from various ethnicities. This is part of a plan to develop intentional racial diversity (2011:258-259). These are indicators that in practise, Piper gives attention to deliberate contextualisation.

3.2.8 Mark Dever

Like Piper, Dever is a Reformed Baptist who has an international ministry through his writing and conference speaking. He is senior pastor at Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington DC and founder of 9Marks¹⁹. Dever has been to South Africa several times and addressed pastors’ conferences. Again, there is a severe scarcity of material when it comes to the theme of contextualisation. A search on the 9Marks website reveals not a single sermon, article, blog or conference paper with the word “contextualisation” in the title. In a January 2015 article, “Why are so many people today talking about contextualisation?” he makes the following points:

- (i) Contextualisation runs the risk of marketing the gospel by catering to the needs and tastes of a subculture; just as any other product is marketed.
- (ii) Biblical contextualisation (as in 1 Corinthians 9:1-23) has to do with avoiding cultural practices that offend others. It is not about dressing up the church; it is more about abstaining from practices that cause others offence.
- (iii) Contextualisation also includes adapting whatever cultural practices are necessary to communicate the Gospel effectively to other cultures.

¹⁸ He has written a modern best seller on Missions: “Let the Nations be Glad” (first published in 1993 and reprinted several times since) and Bethlehem Baptist are vigorous supporters of missions.

¹⁹ See their website at 9marks.org/

The title of this article is somewhat mystifying. It can be empirically shown that Reformed Baptists are NOT talking much about contextualisation. However, it would be wrong to deduce that Dever gives no attention to the concept of contextualisation. In his article “Communicating Sin in a Postmodern World” (2000:138-151), he shows a thorough awareness and understanding of his postmodern context in Washington DC. Furthermore he makes a number of relevant suggestions regarding how to communicate the gospel in that context.

3.2.9 Al Mohler

Dever chaired a panel discussion of key leaders of TGC on contextualisation, in April 2012. Called “Contextualisation: Lost in Translation,” the panel included Dr Al Mohler, another leading Reformed Baptist who is currently President of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. Mohler, on the whole was cautious about contextualisation. He affirmed that:

- (i) All communicators give heed to context.
- (ii) Gospel communicators should always strive to be winsome, and not offend people for the wrong reasons.
- (iii) Doctrinal convictions or standards of biblical morality can never be compromised in the name of contextualisation.
- (iv) He affirms that the Gospel is both alien to every culture, and hugely relevant to every culture.
- (v) His view is that contextualisation is essentially about effective Gospel communication. He does not hold to comprehensive contextualisation.
- (vi) He is ambivalent on the statement that contextualisation requires an exegesis of culture. His concern is where this might lead to.
- (vii) He warns against the real dangers of over-contextualisation, Insider Movements and so called anonymous Christians.
- (viii) Part of his caution with contextualisation is that it comes from the world of missiological study and discussion.

3.2.10 Summary of Reformed Baptist Views

To summarise and clarify the views of the prominent and influential Baptists Piper, Dever and Mohler, the following is apparent:

- (i) They have not written or preached on the subject much — there is an obvious scarcity of material from them. While missiologists are doing a great deal of research on contextualisation, Reformed pastors appear to be doing far less. It comes across that contextualisation is something that must be done “there” — not “here.”
- (ii) Where they do interact with the concept of contextualisation, they demonstrate a superficial and inadequate understanding of the subject.
- (iii) There appears to be a dislike of the term “contextualisation,” yet there is an appreciation and acknowledgment of concepts and realities that are inherent to contextualisation.
- (iv) They tend to define and interpret in terms of *what it is not*, not in terms of *what it actually is* or *what should happen*. However the inspired biblical record shows that contextualisation is significantly more than avoiding culturally offensive habits or practices.
- (v) They tend to understand contextualisation in terms of a “worst case scenario” — C5 and C6 contextualisation.
- (vi) They are very aware of the dangers of over-contextualisation, and are correct in pointing these out.

3.2.11 John McArthur

McArthur serves as pastor-teacher at Grace Community Church. His position belongs on the right of the continuum. Though not a Baptist (GCC is independent), he could be called baptistic in outlook. Through his preaching, writing and radio ministry he has had an enormous impact on conservative evangelicalism as a whole, and Baptist pastors in particular. McArthur is cautious, suspicious and critical of contextualisation. His views are outlined in a series of blogs on the Grace to You website in 2014. In these blogs he works through Pauls’ teaching in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 and makes several strong statements about contextualisation:

- (i) McArthur is highly critical of any approach that is pragmatic and appears to pander to the needs of people.
- (ii) He stresses that Paul was no man-pleaser (Galatians 1:10) and was stubbornly committed to the truth. He was completely unwilling to remove the offense of the Gospel (Galatians 5:11). He was no pragmatic marketer.

- (iii) Paul's concern was not to change the message, but to sacrifice himself for the sake of the message. Paul is describing in these words his attitude of personal sacrifice.
- (iv) He contests that the Apostle was not making a plea for contextualisation and "was not suggesting that the message be made more acceptable, nor that the role of preaching be replaced by psychology, skits and worldly entertainment."
- (v) In the final blog in the series, "Contextualisation and the corruption of the church" he writes that, "Contextualisation of the Gospel today has infected the church with the spirit of the age. It has opened the door wide for worldliness, shallowness, and in some cases, a crass, party atmosphere. The world now sets the agenda for the church."

At best, McArthur is painting with a very broad brush here. At worst he is creating a straw man. There are many evangelicals who would wholeheartedly affirm his concerns i.e. believers should not take their agenda from the world, nor be people pleasers; rather they must be unflinchingly committed to the Bible, and be drastically different from the world. But biblical contextualisation does not deny these things, it affirms them. Contextualisation is not about softening or changing the message, it is about clarity, as Pratt has stressed. Whiteman (1997:2) has written that "good contextualisation offends people for the right reasons. Bad contextualisation or the lack of it altogether, offends them for the wrong reasons." The pervasiveness of sin means that there will always be things that we have to challenge and oppose in culture, and common grace means that there will be things that can be embraced and celebrated. While Mc Arthur stresses that in 1 Corinthians 9 Paul is talking about his own attitude of sacrifice — not adapting the message — he is ignoring the record of Paul's preaching and ministry in Acts, where it will be shown that the "packaging" of the Gospel was clearly contextually determined.

3.2.12 B.M. Madany

His "Statement of Missionary Concern" (A caucus on biblically Informed Missions, Four Brooks Centre, Pennsylvania, July 9-11, 1985) and "Pauline Missiology" are further examples of blanket opposition to contextualisation. In his introduction Madany (a Presbyterian) writes, "As a result of the new theory of mission called Contextualisation, a meeting of Biblically informed Christians and missionaries was held ..." Herewith his central concerns and reservations:

- (i) Madany sets out his underlying theological assumptions i.e. The uniqueness of the Christian faith, the integrity of the Gospel, the sufficiency and authority of the Bible and the sovereignty of God in saving sinners.

- (ii) He argues that the uniqueness of Christianity is being compromised by contextualisation which “increasingly places cultural considerations above Biblical ones.”
- (iii) He bemoans the fact that missiology has welcomed contextualisation and sees it being indicative of the devaluing of “true” theology.
- (iv) He is particularly critical of the Fuller/ Kraft approach, specifically their use of the dynamic equivalence model.
- (v) He asserts that that the biblical message must be furthered by biblical methods.
- (vi) He enthusiastically endorses the old, tried and tested strategy of William Carey, and affirms that we “should sit at the feet of the Apostle Paul and drink deeply from his teachings.”
- (vii) He denies the validity of any multi-disciplinary approach to contextualisation.

This researcher would definitely agree that there are real dangers involved in contextualisation and would affirm all of Madany's theological assumptions. But he would assert that these convictions do not preclude deliberate, biblical contextualisation, but necessitates it! Some of Madany's comments appear to be profoundly ironic. He calls cross-cultural Gospel communicators to copy the methods of Carey, yet Carey is an excellent example of Gospel contextualisation. Carey had a great respect for Indian culture, yet he spoke out against harmful practices such as infanticide. He refused to simply import Western practices. His goal was to build a robust indigenous church by means of native preachers. His work in Bible translation and linguistics was outstanding, according to Tucker (1983:121).

And then Madany calls us to follow Paul. Indeed we should — and this would drive the pastor or evangelist to the faithful, deliberate, prayerful contextualisation of the unchanging Gospel. He insinuates that contextualisation is incompatible with robust, conservative, historical, orthodox theology. It would be appropriate to respond by affirming that it is conservative, Bible believing, God glorifying theology which is the basis and fuel of contextualisation.

This writer has engaged pastorally with believers who have held to, or been influenced by this very rigid evangelicalism. On a number of occasions he has been challenged or questioned by “King James only” people. These are people, who have come from independent Baptist church backgrounds (often churches planted by Americans in South Africa) who insist that the AV is the only Bible translation that could ever be considered accurate and reliable. Ironically, these have been South African people whose home language is not English. They struggle with

contemporary English, yet have been taught that church shall be conducted in King James only. When believers are instructed that they are to learn a version of the Bible that is a dialect of their second language which is over 400 years old, there has been a failure in contextualisation.

There are a couple of well known evangelistic programmes which fall into this category. One example is called “The Four Spiritual Laws” which was developed by Crusade for Christ and used on campus ministry in the Western world. Another example, even more rigid, would be The Way of the Master²⁰. This is a US based evangelism ministry founded in 2002 and headed up by Kirk Cameron and Ray Comfort. The foundational theology is excellent: to move from sin to grace; from the problem to the solution. However, the approach is terribly canned, stereotyped, and even “corny” and can appear trivial. Is not the title misleading: THE way of the Master? Their subtitle reads, “Seek and save the lost the way Jesus did” but in chapter 5 we shall contend that the Son of God did certainly not have a canned, stereotyped approach to evangelism.

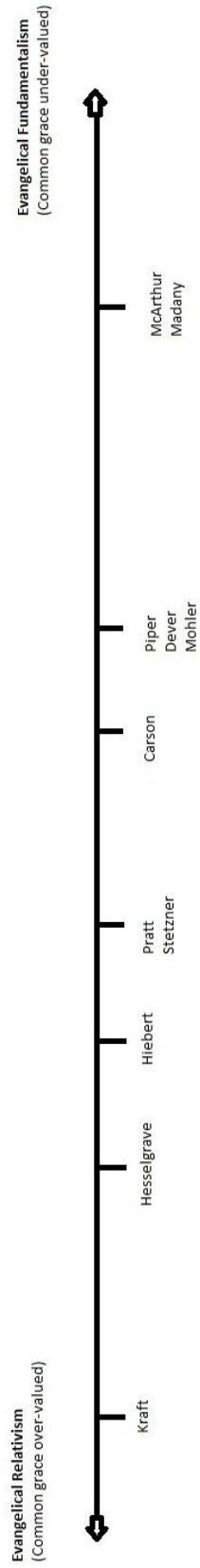
As one studies this evangelical spectrum, one detects a certain blindness or bias in the attitude and praxis of certain Reformed Baptists. This bias is not unique to Reformed Baptists. Research will show that among Reformed Baptists in South Africa there is agreement that the left side of the spectrum is extremely dangerous. Any kind of relativism must be avoided and the prominence of Scripture needs to be affirmed. However, there seems to be the idea that to swing to the right of the pendulum is acceptable and far less dangerous. Research will indicate that a tendency to move towards the far right appears to be the default mode of many Reformed Baptists.

As one looks at this continuum, and those who have made significant contributions to the discussion on biblical contextualisation, we must note that they are virtually all theologians or missiologists who write from a cross-cultural situation. There is significantly less material available on contextualisation from the Western urban context. This researcher contends that this is an omission or blind spot that must be addressed if the Gospel is to make inroads into the burgeoning cities of South Africa.

Of course, having said all of this, the crucial question remains: Where would the Lord Jesus Christ be on this continuum? Where would the Apostle Paul fit? These crucial matters will be considered in the next chapter.

²⁰ Their material can be accessed at: www.wayofthemaster.com

A contemporary Evangelical Contextualisation Continuum



CHAPTER 4: SOUTH AFRICAN REFORMED BAPTISTS AND CONTEXTUALISATION: CONTEMPORARY UNDERSTANDING, ATTITUDES AND PRAXIS

Identifying and evaluating the contemporary understanding and approach of Reformed Baptists to contextualisation is essential to this dissertation. Two questionnaires were sent out via email to South African Reformed Baptist pastors and missionaries to try and identify and evaluate their position on contextualisation. These questionnaires did not ask for simple yes/no answers or agree/disagree responses, but required thoughtful explanation and motivation. (See both questionnaires in the appendix.)

4.1 The Scope and Purpose of the Questionnaires

This researcher has followed Smith (2008:226-247) and Vyhmeister (2001:151-161) in setting up the questionnaires, getting an appropriate sample group, analysing and interpreting the data, and drawing some conclusions. Smith (2008:247) affirms that descriptive research is a valuable ministry tool for developing an accurate portrait of a present reality to lay a platform for diagnosing causes and prescribing cures. It seeks to examine a problem and uses data from questionnaires, surveys and interviews to form the conclusions and recommendations of a study. The main aim of descriptive research is to describe the data and characteristics about the problem or issue being studied i.e. to make reality known (Vyhmeister 2001:151). The information that is gained can either be quantitative (numbers and percentages); or it can be qualitative (including the why along with the what and how many). This research has included both quantitative and qualitative components. Vyhmeister (2001:126) states that it is quite legitimate to draw conclusions and take decisions based on descriptive research, as does Smith (2008:248). However, Smith warns of the danger that the data gleaned is susceptible to the distortion of bias into the research.

The first questionnaire (sent in August 2014) was aimed at specifically identifying and assessing South African Reformed Baptist views on Tim Keller's theology and model of contextualisation. However it did ask some generally pertinent questions that are relevant in this study i.e. How important is contextualisation in your ministry right now? Have you conducted neighbourhood research in your city/town /suburb? What form did it take? Do you have any significant concerns or reservations about the concept or practice of gospel contextualisation? ²¹

²¹ These questionnaires can be accessed via this link:

<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/mycy9nb5aranep6/AACDk2-k-Ew2MI2JnZSOC8dLa?dl=0>

The second was sent out in early 2015. In addition to Reformed Baptists, this questionnaire was also sent to pastors of the Gereformeerde Kerke in Suid Afrika (Reformed Churches in South Africa, RCSA)²², and five pastors from Acts 29, an international church planting network that is starting work in South Africa.²³ The Acts 29 network is currently headed up by Matt Chandler, a Baptist with strong Reformed convictions from Texas, in the USA. Reformed Baptists, the RCSA and Acts 29 share a number of significant theological commonalities: an unyielding commitment to the authority of Scripture; a God-centred Gospel; historic theological orthodoxy; a fear of modern gimmickry and compromise; and the doctrines of sovereign grace. The purpose of these other groups is to function as a control group for the sake of comparison and contrast — to determine if there are any significant differences between Reformed Baptists and other Reformed evangelical groups in South Africa.

This questionnaire asked the respondents to define their understanding of contextualisation, indicate their level of commitment to the Bible and the context of their hearers, their attitude to contextualisation and the current spiritual state of their congregation in terms of spiritual growth and vitality.

Questionnaires were sent to Reformed Baptist pastors in settled urban pastorates (apart from one pastor in a new church plant context), but three long-term cross cultural missionaries were also questioned as to their understanding, attitudes and approach in contextualisation. The purpose of this was to try and assess if there were any significant differences in approach between pastors in settled urban pastorates and cross cultural missionaries.²⁴

4.2 Findings

The purpose of this section is to summarise the findings, identify trends and make observations concerning Reformed Baptists and their approach to contextualisation. The two questionnaires were responded to by Reformed Baptist pastors in Cape Town, George, East London, Bloemfontein, Mooi River, Pretoria and Johannesburg. The pastors who participated are representative of a wide age group — from youth pastors in their twenties, through middle aged pastors and a few on the verge of retirement from fulltime Christian ministry. Some pastors responded to both questionnaires — a total of 26 Reformed Baptist pastors gave feedback via the two questionnaires.

²² See the GKSA webpage at <http://www.gksa.org.za/>

²³ See the Acts 29 webpage at <http://www.acts29.com/>

²⁴ The GKSA questionnaires can be accessed via this link:

<https://www.dropbox.com/lfqOQ1zIYNRMtJwIBmIDpOp>

The Reformed Baptist questionnaires can be accessed via this link:

<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/owazuftg41530n6/AAA63LP5Gv3jsejooJVuFHgEa?dl=0> .

The Acts 29 questionnaires can be accessed via this link:

<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/zzshja3kykn1vzz/AADy2X5J60zXQOmJWalgZSmfa?dl=0>

4.2.1 Anomaly between cross cultural missionaries and urban pastors

The first questionnaire was sent to 30 Reformed Baptist pastors and missionaries and elicited a response of 12. According to Smith (2008:240), the response rate of questionnaires is usually between 30-50 percent. Results indicated that there appears to be a notable contrast between the approach of pastors in settled urban churches and cross-cultural missionaries. Clearly, the cross cultural missionaries who responded attach more importance to deliberate, careful contextualisation. Pastors were asked to place a numerical value to the importance they afford contextualisation in their present ministry. Of the responses, only two (16 %) considered contextualisation as vitally important in their current ministry. However, one respondent, a long term cross-cultural missionary wrote, "... surely this is fundamental to being a minister of the Gospel today? Contextualisation has never been a dirty word for me. It is the bread and butter of Gospel communication and missions." He went on to ask, "Why ... do we put so much effort into language and culture learning? Why then put any less effort into studying your particular context, whatever it may be?" This is a very pertinent question and needs careful consideration from Reformed Baptist pastors.

4.2.2 Reformed Baptists and intentional neighbourhood research

Only three of the twelve respondents (25%) had conducted intentional, organised neighbourhood research in order to better understand their context. While this is a low percentage, it does not necessarily indicate a disregard of context. Four (33%) other pastors indicated that informal research also has great value, such as talking to people naturally, by being led into "divine encounters," by "keeping an ear on the ground," and by being involved in society.

4.2.3 Reservations about contextualisation

This question elicited a substantial response. One pastor cautioned against anything that could degenerate into syncretism; and highlighted the "Emerging Church" and "Seeker sensitive" approaches as examples of contextualisation gone wrong. Another said that both liberalism (over-contextualisation, removing the offensive or challenging parts) and hyper-conservatism (under-contextualisation, failing to adapt because of preferred tradition and style) must be avoided. There was a general concern that the message of the Gospel must never be compromised. Another senior pastor wrote, "The church cannot become a disco session to win young people, or adopt sensational methods to attract." Another pastor in a large Johannesburg church wrote, "There is always potential for compromise. ... There is a healthy tension between relevance and timelessness; between being accessible and transcendent; by being in the world but not of the world. We must have both and keep re-evaluating which side

of the fence we are falling off on.” A missionary responded to this question by warning that the “new hermeneutic” must be avoided at all costs, and warned of going down the same path as the Emerging church movement. Overall they seem to be more than adequately sensitised to some of the dangers involved in contextualisation.

4.2.4 Definitions and attitudes towards contextualisation

In questionnaire 2, the pastors were asked to define contextualisation and indicate how much emphasis they put on the Word of God, and how much they considered their immediate context in their preaching and ministry. (17 Reformed Baptist pastors responded; 8 pastors from RCSA and 5 from Acts 29 network.) It is significant that all the respondents indicated the supreme importance of biblical faithfulness by giving it a value of ten out of ten. This is commendable; indeed as Reformational believers it is essential.

In defining contextualisation, all the Baptist respondents gave answers that fall into a typical evangelical understanding of the term. The primacy of Scripture as revealed and unchanging truth was emphasised, and the necessity of understanding context was appreciated. One respondent defined contextualisation as, “being able to represent the timeless truths of Scripture in a way that is compatible with current culture. Pastors must be students of Scripture and culture.” And another, “Presenting the truth of God’s word and the gospel in a manner that is understandable in the culture into which it is being presented.” Another, “the application of unchanging revealed truth from the Scriptures into the different contexts of the world,” yet another, “meeting non Christians where they are, not where I am.” Another, “communicating the unchanging message of the Gospel (and indeed the whole Bible) in such a way that the particular listening audience can understand it.” One younger pastor wrote candidly of the inevitability and dynamic nature of contextualisation, “The Gospel is not tied to any specific culture. Whether we like it or not, we are all products of a particular culture. For this reason contextualising the gospel is an ongoing thing.”

Almost all the pastors confined contextualisation to the verbal proclamation of the Gospel, stressing the necessity to use language and idiom which their hearers can understand and identify with. Though reference was made to 1 Cor 9 in a number of responses, they said little about contextualisation as a lifestyle, nor about comprehensive contextualisation which should affect the ministry and structure of the whole church, not just the preaching of the truth. However one respondent (from Acts 29) said that the Christian communicator should make himself like those he reaches, adopt a disposition of servanthood, by removing unnecessary obstacles to the Gospel. Another Reformed Baptist pastor defined contextualisation as “seeking to incarnate the Gospel in the culture, setting and circumstances so that it is clearly understood, without diluting its essential meaning.”

It is this researcher's opinion that though the Baptist response was accurate and helpful, the Acts 29 pastors were more robust in their definitions. One of their pastors wrote, "Contextualisation is the practice of making the Gospel heard in the specific context in which it is spoken. This is done by the speaker as he takes into account the audience's culture, language, worldview, traditions, biases etc, and ... Communicating the unchanging, uncompromised message of the gospel to the audience so that it can be clearly understood." Another Acts 29 pastor put it like this: "It is the attempt to bring God's never changing Word into an ever changing world. It originates from a burden to proclaim the full and final Word of God to a particular audience in a particular context ... in categories that help them better understand. In many ways it is simply the messenger striving to mimic Jesus, the Ultimate Messenger." It must be observed that these Acts 29 pastors all see themselves as church planters, who are deliberately endeavouring to reach and impact lost people. In her book, "Quality Research Papers" Vyhmeister cautions that descriptive research cannot establish a causal relationship between variables (2001:229). She does affirm that tentative observations can be made. Accordingly, there appears to be a link between deliberate church planting and deliberate contextualisation; whereas in established churches there may well be a tendency to minimise the importance of contextualisation.

One GKSA minister said: "I believe that the Bible principles cannot be changed whatsoever ... the Bible cannot be changed and our confessions cannot be changed." While this is true, he failed to articulate what contextualisation is and his statement shows a misunderstanding of biblical contextualisation.

None of the Baptist respondents indicated that they were opposed to, critical or suspicious of contextualisation. They all (but one) chose to define their approach to the subject as careful or deliberate. One pastor (5%) said he was enthusiastic towards contextualisation. As far as the Baptist pastors deliberately considering the situation of their hearers in preparing and preaching the Bible, there was an equal response between those who said: often, mostly and always — five pastors. Two indicated that they sometimes considered the situation of their hearers. The Acts 29 group were most enthusiastic about contextualisation.

4.2.5 Dominant worldviews in urban South Africa

In the question about the prevailing worldview of the people in their area of ministry: what was very noteworthy was the very high number of pastors who identified the prevailing worldview as being "nominal Christian." Respondents were permitted to tick more than one box — every responding Baptist pastor ministering in South Africa indicated that "nominal Christian" was the prevailing worldview in their area of ministry. This pattern was similarly reflected among the Acts 29 and GKSA pastors. One GKSA pastor wrote of "an almost unmovable nominal

Christianity.” Significantly, Lidorio (2011:11) argues that it is an absence of biblical contextualisation that has given birth to nominalism and syncretism. After nominalism, twelve Baptist pastors (67%) indicated postmodernism as the prevailing worldview of the area in which they served. Of course nominalism and postmodernism are not mutually exclusive categories. It could be quite legitimate to categorise many South African urban contexts as nominal Christian — postmodern. There is every reason to believe that many nominal Christians have been largely influenced by postmodernism.

4.2.6 Health and growth of South African Reformed Baptist churches

The final two questions were aimed at getting an idea of the numerical growth and general spiritual health of the churches. Pastors were asked to indicate conversion growth in their churches over the last five years — as opposed to transfer growth from other churches, or biological growth from within. In their responses the pastors emphasised that these were approximate figures: 0 to 10 conversions over the last five years: nine churches (three pastors indicated zero conversions); 11-20 conversions: four churches; 21-50 conversions three churches; 51-100 conversions: one church. One pastor indicated that it was impossible to answer this question. Conversion growth among the GKSA group was lowest. Two of their pastors (25%) indicated zero conversions in the past 5 years; the highest figure being 25. The Acts 29 pastors indicated markedly higher figures of conversion growth: 10, 10, 70, 80 and 100.

These figures would seemingly indicate that the responding Reformed Baptist churches in South Africa are not presently characterised by significant conversion growth. When one considers the huge population growth in South African urban centres, coupled with the fact that these churches are simultaneously losing members through natural attrition such as member relocation and death, these figures are particularly disturbing. Indeed, these churches are losing ground. (It must be noted that this researcher only received a fifty percent return from the second questionnaire he sent out. His strong — but empirically unprovable concern — is that the actual situation may be more dire than this. This view is based on the concern that the most “inward looking” and enculturated Baptist churches did not respond to the questionnaire.)

A further factor which indicates a seemingly introspective mindset and approach among Reformed Baptists is their apparent slowness to recognise the need of planting new churches in the burgeoning cities of South Africa. Of the twelve churches who responded to the first questionnaire, eight had not been involved in any kind of church planting exercise.

Spiritual growth and health of churches is very difficult to evaluate. However, the impression of those pastoring these churches is significant. In terms of their evaluation of spiritual health and growth in their churches, two Baptist pastors indicated zero spiritual growth, the majority were

cautiously encouraged by the spiritual tone and growth of their churches (eleven pastors) and four were very positive about the spiritual growth of their churches. Their assessment was based on increasing numbers being involved in Bible studies, members going on mission trips, members becoming more involved in community projects, people more hungry for the Word, people being more hospitable, greater love and unity within the church, and greater openness to visitors. The GKSA were slightly more positive. All their respondents were cautiously optimistic about the state of their churches, apart from two who were very positive. Of the three groups, the Acts 29 were most positive concerning the spiritual state of their churches, and gave the most detailed justification for their estimation.

4.3 Conclusions

There are helpful trends to be noted and observations to be made. While appreciating that data from descriptive research is susceptible to distortion (Vhymeister 2001:228), the following noteworthy trends and points were gleaned from the questionnaires:

- (i) Reformed Baptists seem to understand contextualisation in a typically theologically conservative, evangelical way.
- (ii) They tend to restrict its meaning to the task of verbally communicating the Gospel. With two exceptions, very little was said about contextualisation in a more comprehensive sense. Reformed Baptists need to be cautious of understanding contextualisation in a restrictive sense, i.e. purely as an evangelistic technique or strategy.
- (iii) They are committed to the supreme place of Scripture, and appear very aware of the dangers of theological compromise.
- (iv) While most of the pastors ascribed importance to contextualisation, only two Reformed Baptists indicated that it was a “vital” aspect of their ministry. This is in contrast to Paul’s attitude in 1 Cor 9:19-23.
- (v) Reformed Baptist missionaries serving in cross-cultural contexts (trained in the same seminaries as those in urban pastorates) seemingly attach more importance to deliberate contextualisation than their colleagues in settled pastorates. There appears to be the assumption from these pastors that they understand (and perhaps even share) the worldview of their urban neighbours. This researcher considers this to be a devastatingly wrong assumption.

- (vi) There did not appear to be any fundamental differences in the approach or attitudes of the other two groups consulted. There did however, appear to be differences in emphasis. The GKSA seemed most cautious in their approach, and the five Acts 29 pastors seemed the most deliberate and enthusiastic about contextualisation.
- (vii) There was complete unanimity that the prevailing worldview in which these pastors serve was “nominal Christian.” The next most common designation was “postmodern.” Most (67%) indicated nominal Christian and postmodern. This is hugely significant for Reformed ministry in South Africa. The responses indicate that the South African urban context may be adequately defined as predominantly “nominal Christian-postmodern.”
- (viii) There has apparently been no substantial conversion growth occurring in these Reformed Baptist churches over the last five years. Given the growth of the population and dramatic urbanisation, this is cause for concern.
- (ix) Most of the pastors stated that there were indications that there was a reasonable degree of spiritual health and vitality in their churches. Two Baptist pastors appeared to be highly despondent about the spiritual state of their congregations.

This study has shown that Reformed Baptists (like other Reformed Christians) are justifiably cautious about contextualisation. Yet just as cross cultural missionaries have to learn a new language and become conversant with a different worldview and culture, so Reformed Baptist churches will have to learn to connect with and communicate effectively with postmodern, nominal, relativistic and unchurched urbanites.

Reformed Baptists should take cognisance of Carson’s (1996:470) highly pertinent challenge:

“Churches that are faithful to the apostolic gospel are also sometimes the ones that are loyal to a culture becoming increasingly passé. In such circumstances, cultural conservatism can easily be mistaken for theological conservatism, for theological orthodoxy. In our age of confusing pluralism and postmodernism, it is easy to suppose that retrenchment and conservative courses on every conceivable axis are the only responsible for those who want to remain faithful to the Gospel ... Such a course is neither wise nor prophetic. Sometimes it is not even faithful. The church may slip back into a defensive, conservative modernism that is fundamentally ill-equipped to address postmodernism”

Carson’s words are particularly challenging as he is widely regarded as the champion of conservative, Reformed, evangelical orthodoxy in the English speaking world. In chapter 6 this researcher will provide a reflection on possible answers and recommendations for the way forward for Reformed Baptists and other Reformed churches in South Africa.

CHAPTER 5: THE BIBLICAL-THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION FOR DELIBERATE, CAREFUL CONTEXTUALISATION.

The purpose of this chapter is twofold:

- (a) To give a clear, comprehensive and compelling biblical-theological argument for careful, deliberate biblical contextualisation. The aim is to show the biblical basis for contextualisation.
- (b) To do this while keeping in mind the reservations and concerns of some Reformed Baptist pastors and missionaries. In this way this chapter becomes an apologetic aimed at challenging the assumptions and views of these pastors.

After describing the fundamental theological principles which undergird contextualisation, the more explicit teaching of the NT will be considered.

5.1 Theological Foundations

In chapter 2 the history of the term “contextualisation” and its subsequent development was outlined: from its dubious beginnings to its current usage in contemporary evangelicalism. However we have not started early enough. We need to go way back to before the deliberations of the World Council of Churches last century; go back to before the Protestant Reformation; back to the early church and before. We need to go back to the Scripture itself and the God who authored Scripture. God is a God who by sheer necessity of grace “had” to contextualise.

Though the term is new, the concept of contextualisation is ancient, and is bound up with the nature and purposes of the triune God. In this regard the term contextualisation is much like the term “Trinity.” Though not an explicitly biblical term, “Trinity” is a profoundly important theological term, perhaps the most important term in the Christian lexicon. Yet the word was coined by Tertullian (c150-225) after the close of the NT canon (Walker 1968:66). Its definition, meaning and scope were clarified after considerable debate and discussion in church councils — it is an extra-biblical word describing an inherently biblical concept and reality. The biblical basis for the trinity does not depend on simple proof texting but on the interplay of many theological truths and texts. Yet no evangelical Christian would ever doubt its importance. The term “contextualisation” is similar. While contextualisation does not occupy nearly as prominent a place as the trinity does, the point is that like trinity, contextualisation is not an explicitly

biblical word and has no simple, explicit, proof texting system for support. Yet this chapter aims to show that there can be little debate that it encapsulates vital biblical-theological truth.

5.1.1 Calvin's Principle of Divine Accommodation

Sometimes called “condescension,” accommodation is a fundamental principle underlying all of God’s revelation to man. It essentially means that God speaks to us in a form and manner which is suited to the capacity of the hearer’s understanding. Though it was John Calvin (1509-1561) who championed the term, the concept did not originate with him. Tinker (2004:327) shows that the concept goes as far back as Clement of Alexandria (150-215); and Tertullian and Origen also made reference to the concept. For Calvin, the “necessity” of accommodation rests on two fundamental theological realities:

- (i) the nature of God: the living and true God is transcendent, pure, infinite, glorious. So he says in Inst. I. 13. 1: “Surely, his infinity ought to make us afraid to measure him by our own senses” (1983:110).
- (ii) the nature of man: in contrast, man is small, finite. Even pre-fall man was in this state. Now there is the additional, monumental problem of our rebellion against God and the resultant spiritual blindness.

Subsequently any dealings with God cannot come from the initiative of man, but must come from the gracious initiative of the living God. For Calvin and his Reformational descendants (for example Bavinck, 2004: 158-159), it is the vast chasm between God and man that necessitates divine accommodation. God is infinite, we are finite; God is outside of time, we are time-bound; it is impossible for us to reach God ourselves. Yet if God wishes to communicate with those that bear His image, he must, of necessity, lower Himself to our level so that we can come to know Him personally. Bavinck wrote, “A deep chasm separates God’s being from that of all creatures. It is a mark of God’s greatness that he can condescend to the level of his creatures and that, though transcendent, he can dwell immanently in all created beings” (2004:159). Thus He enters our world, He speaks and acts in ways that make sense to man — He condescends to meet us in our own situation. Engle (1983:89) states that the issue of contextualisation was introduced at the moment Adam first experienced personhood. The infinite God created finite man and then communicated with him in “finite ways.”

Significantly, the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith (7.1) affirms this very point: “The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience to Him as their Creator, yet they could never have attained the reward of life except by some voluntary condescension on God’s part, and this He has been pleased to express in

the form of a covenant” (Masters undated: 5). The Westminster Confession (7.1) affirms the same point — using virtually the same terminology.

Calvin likens this divine “descent” to the way a nurse will speak to a child, condescending to our “ignorance” and thus “prattling” to us in a rough and popular style. Calvin famously said that God “lisps” to us as nurses speak with young children (Inst. 1.13.1; 1983:110). Throughout Calvin’s thought we see this logic repeated: man does not have the capacity to know God as He is in Himself. Scripture talks about God communicating with man and man understanding something of God. Therefore God has lowered Himself to man’s capacity. Accommodation implies that we can never have exhaustive knowledge of divine matters, but we can have true and sufficient knowledge. God accommodates Himself to human ideas and social conventions, but never in contradiction to His character, only to enhance communication with His people. His purpose is not merely to inform—since the barrier of our sinful rebellion has made that futile. Rather, knowledge of God consists of knowing Him personally.

Contextualisation and accommodation are not identical terms. Accommodation in Calvin’s usage refers to what God alone has done in sovereign grace: revealing Himself through His Word and the incarnation of His Son. Contextualisation is the task of the Christian communicator who works from an authoritative revelation — the closed and complete canon of Scripture. Although contextualisation and accommodation are not identical concepts, we can see a considerable deal of overlap in the two terms:

- (i) Both require intentional action on the part of the communicator.
- (ii) Both are receptor orientated.
- (iii) Both seek to address people in their immediate context. Both appeal to the ideas, thought forms, illustrations, history, habits and culture of the hearer.
- (iv) Both aim for clarity in understanding.
- (v) The absence of both results in the absence of true, saving knowledge of God.

5.1.2 The Bible is a thoroughly contextualised document

This is the logical and necessary consequence of the reality of divine accommodation. God’s gracious self-revelation in the Scriptures is earthed in a particular context, time and place. For God to speak at a certain time and place He enters their world, He speaks and acts in ways that make sense to the immediate hearers. The term “Word of God” does not imply disconnectedness to its environment. In fact, the incarnation teaches us the very opposite

(Wedgeworth 2015:2). Both as a whole, and in all its parts, the Bible is a thoroughly contextualised book.

5.1.2.1 The Old Testament: a contextualised document

Glasser (1989:33) contends that the OT is “replete with evidence that God continually used a contextualising process in his progressive self-disclosure of himself to his people.” Revelation came through historical events (God’s mighty deeds), experience and prophetic exposition (1989:42). All the OT writers were culturally conditioned; yet what they wrote within the canon of the OT “never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God, as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit (2 Pet 1:21).

- (i) Revelation and history: the OT contains the record of God’s mighty acts over more than a thousand years of history; coupled with specific revelations of their meaning. One of the unique characteristics of God’s OT disclosure of Himself is the relation between this revelation and human history. God’s self-revelation in the OT is enfleshed in historical events — God has not been indifferent to culture. All the writers of the OT were culturally conditioned: they wrote in Hebrew and Aramaic and reflected the way of life of their people and time. Israel’s salvation history took place in a variety of ancient cultures: they were nomads, slaves, desert wanderers, a loose federation, citizens of a kingdom, exiles and a minority people. The changing historical and cultural situation became the context in which God disclosed Himself to them. Each successive stage of OT revelation was an expression of the historical realities of the context. All OT revelation was context specific (Glasser 1989:34-36).
- (ii) Revelation and the nature of God: The God of the OT was not merely a single, omnipotent Creator, but the One who is the Source of all being. He is utterly unique (Isaiah 40:18-31). *EI* was the basic word for deity in the ancient Semitic world of the near East. This was the name for the supreme god of the Canaanite pantheon and appeared regularly in fourteenth BC Ugaritic literature. The Israelites appropriated it and invested it with new meaning — yet insisted on the uniqueness and supremacy of God. (Much like the translators of the Septuagint appropriated the word “*Theos*” from the Greek pantheon and transformed it.) In the OT *EI* is often joined with compounds that speak in terms of place or a divine attribute.²⁵ (Glasser 1989:36-37).

²⁵ For example, *EI Olan* – the everlasting God (Gen 21:23); *EI Elyon* – God Most High (Gen 14:18); *EI Shaddai* – God Almighty (Gen 17:1; 35:1).

- (iii) The concept of the Covenant: It could be argued that the concept of the covenant forms the backbone of not only the OT, but the entire Bible. The most potent evidence of contextualisation in the OT is “the manner in which God deliberately and repeatedly shaped the disclosure of Himself to his people by using the widely known phenomenon of the covenant” (Glasser 1989:40). Kline, in his important work, “The Treaty of the Great King,” argues that of all the forms of Biblical literature, the covenant is the most basic (1975:27). He emphasises the remarkable parallels between ANE treaties (especially Hittite treaties) and the covenantal structure of the OT.

Fensham (1986:240-243) affirms that treaty making pervades almost the entire history of the ANE, and maintains that the treaty relationships among foreign nations was well known to Israelites. The covenant was well known throughout the ANE: there was a formal agreement between a local god and his people. Each arose in a particular context and historical situation, and dealt with an existential need. The typical non-Biblical covenant of the late second millennium BC in the ANE was an agreement between two parties clothed with solemn and binding force.

Craigie (1983:22-24) cites definite commonalities between the ANE vassal treaty (between a great King or suzerain, and a minor king or vassal) and the structure of the OT covenant:

- (a) Preamble: the Great King is introduced with his titles and attributes.
- (b) Historical prologue: the history of the relationship between the Great King and the vassal's forefathers and the vassal himself is outlined.
- (c) General stipulations: the scope and terms of the agreement are fleshed out and carefully recorded.
- (d) Specific stipulations: details are fleshed out.
- (e) Witnesses: various deities are called to witness the treaty.
- (f) Curses (for disobedience) and blessings (for obedience).
- (g) Even a cursory study of Deuteronomy demonstrates the covenantal structure of the book: Preamble: 1:1-5; Historical prologue: 1:6-4:49; General stipulations chapters 5-9; Specific stipulations chapters 12-26; Blessings and curses chapters 27-28; Witnesses: 30:19; 31:19; 32:1-43.

The crucial point is that when God chose His people, committed Himself to them and called them to certain obligations He did not do it via an entirely new, previously unknown method. He deliberately used the existing theme of covenant — which was known and established in the ANE.

- (iv) The ministry of the prophets: Glasser calls them “masters” of contextualisation (1989:42). Significantly, Fee and Stuart (1993:167) call the prophets “covenant enforcement mediators.” The prophets incarnated God’s message to their hearers. Their messages were communicated verbally or by symbolic actions and were devoid of any ambiguity. Hosea (1:2-9) was commanded to marry an immoral, unfaithful woman. This was a picture of God’s covenant love to a terribly wayward, unfaithful nation. Amos utilised various speech forms: he sang a funeral dirge (5:1-2), argued using the logic of proverbs (3:3-6) and used riddles and comparisons to make his point. (2:9; 3:12; 5:2,7,19) All the prophets employed the language of the times and appealed to the social customs and conventions of the people in bringing God’s word to them.
- (v) Israel’s wisdom literature deals with the basic issues of life which together give order and system to human existence. Glasser asserts that an occasional item of Canaanite poetry was edited and incorporated into the OT canon. He argues that certain psalms (e.g. 19 and 104) could well have come from Canaanite psalmody (1989:47-48). It must be noted that Israel’s wisdom literature contained perspectives that went beyond those of her neighbours. Wisdom is derived from God alone (Prov 3:19; Job 12:13) and Israel recognised that all victories were ultimately attributable to God alone (Prov 21:31).
- (vi) Explicit examples of OT contextualisation: While affirming that the OT is a thoroughly contextualised document, the question of if, and how the OT covenant people of God actually contextualised their message in their day is entirely another matter. This researcher is in agreement with Hesselgrave and Rommen (1989:4) who state that in the OT “we are hard pressed to find examples of cross-cultural communication of a specifically religious message.” Jonah’s ministry in Nineveh is a moot and speculative point: details of his discourse are not given. These authors affirm that Jeremiah 29:4-7 comes closest to a modern evangelical understanding of contextualisation. The prophet urges the Jewish exiles in Babylon to carry on with normal lives (by building homes, planting gardens, eating the produce) and wait patiently for the Lord’s deliverance. But they are also to “seek the peace and prosperity of the city.” Jeremiah is calling them to contribute actively to the general well-being of Babylon. There is no mention of a specific message, but he charges

them to “pray to the LORD for it” (verse 7). This implies that their activity was based to some degree on their unique covenant relationship with God. It would have required them living out their faith in a “culturally understandable, appropriate manner.” (1989:5)

It must also be noted that Israel had a missionary responsibility to strangers, foreigners or aliens. These foreigners were to be subject to many of the same regulations as the Jews themselves — like the Sabbath (Ex 20:10), Day of Atonement (Lev16:29), Passover (Num 9:14), sacrifices (Lev 17:8-9) and worship (2 Chron 6:32-33). There is an explicit statement in Deut 31:12 which calls Israel to teach the foreigners so they may come to know the “greatness” of God. This would have involved some degree of contextualisation. Yet little explicit contextualisation is found in the OT. Hesselgrave and Rommen (1989:6-7) give the following reasons:

- a. God explicitly prohibited Israel from entering covenants with the people of Canaan (Ex 23:20-33); rather they were to drive out all other peoples. This amounted to a form of cultural exclusivism which was designed to preserve Israel’s faith, but was not conducive to contextualisation.
- b. There was a lack of a clearly defined message, in the sense that the message was not as well defined as after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the pouring out of the Spirit.
- c. Because of the ethnocentric orientation of the OT covenant people, Israel seems to have largely ignored any missionary responsibility it had. It would seem that Israel misapplied their own election, interpreting it in terms of privilege rather than responsibility.

It has been noted that throughout OT history, God met with his people where they were (in context) and moved his purposes forward through interaction with them in their varied existential situations. There is substantial solid evidence that (under the inspiration of the Spirit) the OT writers borrowed from extant sources and reconceptualised them, resulting in the fundamental elements of Israel’s faith always being in sharp conflict with that of the nations around them.

5.1.2.2 The New Testament: a contextualised document

Flemming (2006:297) affirms that there is a “delightful diversity” to the New Testament. Yet all of its writings bear witness to God’s salvific action through the coming, ministry, death and resurrection of His Son. Thus both coherence and diversity are affirmed. The Gospel is too rich

and deep to be confined to one formulation or one set of terms or images. A study of any respectable NT Introduction will show to what degree conservative theologians actually consider the NT letters are contextualised to their own immediate audience and world. For example, Guthrie's "New Testament Introduction" (IVP, 1970) is a tome of over a 1000 pages. A survey of the contents pages (1970:5-8) reveals that for each NT book, almost half of the material deals with contextual issues, such as Date, Purpose, Readers, Background, Destination and Occasion. Tenney's NT Survey (Eerdmans, 1987) first discusses the political, social, economic and religious world of the NT (1987:3-128) before investigating the individual books of the NT canon. Having done this, he then spends a great deal of time on contextual concerns of the individual books — such as Origin, Background, Author and Date before he considers Content and Evaluation. These conservative theologians are showing that the inspired NT documents were contextually occasioned and must be understood in their wider and immediate first century context.

The four Gospels give us four different inspired accounts of the same story, each with its own theological interpretation of the Gospel narrative for a specific target audience. Matthew writes for a Jewish audience. His Jewish orientation is reflected in his emphasis on messianic prophecy, kingship, the divine titles of Jesus, and the Aramaisms which characterise his Jewish-Greek language (Guthrie 1985:25-29). Luke addresses both his works to a Gentile named Theophilus, and this suggests a Gentile audience with its universalistic flavour. This is seen in his good *koine* Greek with a rich and varied vocabulary and its emphasis on the universal scope of the Gospel (Guthrie 1985:15-96). Mark apparently is written primarily with a Roman audience in mind — Guthrie calls it the Gospel of action — a Roman Gospel designed for a pragmatic Roman audience (Guthrie 1985:54-62). John seemingly writes an apologetic evangelistic tract for a Greek audience (Guthrie 1985:237-245). Acts is a contextual product in its own right in that it participates in the particular first century cultural and literary world that Luke shares with his readers. Acts is a typical example of ancient Hellenistic writing, and it is likely that his readers would have recognised it as such, argues Flemming (2006:26).

All the NT epistles are "occasional" documents: written to churches or communities facing specific challenges in their witness (Fee and Stuart 1993:143). The NT writers articulate the good news in distinctive ways, with their own styles, vocabularies, perspectives and persuasive styles. They did not invent an entirely new vocabulary to describe and communicate the Christian faith. Even a single author like Paul tailored his theological reflections to the circumstances and pastoral needs of particular churches. Paul was a missionary-pastor who planted churches and wrote pastoral letters to build up converts in their faith in the crucified and risen Christ. Paul does not pen a generic document entitled, "How to be a Christian" or "How to do Church" which could have contained generic Christian truth without reference to a specific

setting. He never divorces the Christian life from the setting in which it is lived. In this sense, all his theology is contextual theology. His letters bear witness to a process of creative and flexible theologising that enables the abiding message of God's redeeming work in Christ to be contextualised in a variety of new ways in new settings:

- (i) Paul's letters brim with language appropriated from the world of his readers. For example, in his letter to the Philippians, Paul uses a term specifically from the world of his readers. Philippi (though in Greece) was a Roman colony — its people were reckoned as Roman citizens, subjects of Caesar. "Their names were on the rolls at Rome; their legal position and privileges were those of Rome itself" (Motyer 2004:92). They were a homeland in miniature; but this was also true of them spiritually as men and women in Christ. So Paul urges his readers to live out their citizenship (πολιτεύεσθε) in "a manner worthy of the Gospel" (Phil 1:27). The apostle redirects the Philippian disciples to a higher, more compelling loyalty. Their first allegiance is no longer to Caesar, but to Christ. In 3:20 he employs a Roman political term, assuring the Philippians that their "citizenship" (τὸ πολίτευμα) is in heaven and they await a Saviour from there. The background to this is that a Roman citizen living as a settler in Philippi would typically say, "Our citizenship is in Rome, where our *kurios* reigns." He draws upon a word with specific meaning and relevance to the Philippians and invests it with Christian truth. Paul similarly co-opted other terms from the language of his readers, like "mystery" (Eph 3:3-6), "wisdom" (1 Cor 1:20-25), and "knowledge" (1 Cor 8:1-2; 10-11).
- (ii) Paul employs a wide range of images and symbols from the cultural setting of his churches in order to communicate Christian truth in a way that his readers could grasp. He uses sporting metaphors that would have been relevant to urban Gentile culture (1 Cor 9:24-27; Gal 2:2; Phil 3:13-14). He deploys military images (1 Cor 4:9; 2 Cor 2:14-16) and religious images that come out of a Jewish heritage, like the church as God's temple (1 Cor 3:16-17; Eph 2:21); and from education he borrows the figure of the pedagogue (Gal 3:23-25).
- (iii) He enlists a number of conventions and institutions of Greco-Roman culture in service of the Gospel, such as the household which was the basic building block of social life in the Hellenistic world, which Paul uses to describe the church (Gal 6:10; Eph 2:19; 1 Tim 3:15) and the institution of slavery (Rom 6:15-18).

To summarise, both as a whole, and in its parts, the NT is obviously and clearly contextualised. There is definite coherence and obvious diversity. The diversity is necessitated by the different contexts of the recipients.

5.1.3 The Incarnation of the Son of God

In Calvin's thought, the most outstanding example of divine accommodation is the incarnation. Again, this is an accommodation of necessity. Calvin reasoned that we cannot know God salvifically unless we are united to Him. And we cannot be united to Him unless He first comes to us, for there is no possibility of us reaching Him. He wrote (Inst.I:13.26): "... certainly for this reason Christ descended to us, to bear us up to the Father, and at the same time to bear us up to himself, inasmuch as he is one with the Father" (1983:158). Gilliland (1989:21) similarly affirms: "The incarnation is the ultimate expression of God's receptor orientated communication." And Glasser states: "All valid contextualisation is but a reflection of the incarnational principle which came to fullness when the Word became flesh" (1989:49).

The key texts for this vital truth are John 1:14, 18 and Phil 2:5-8. The literal translation of John 1:14 would read, "The Word pitched his tabernacle", or "lived in his tabernacle among us." Greek speaking Jews and other readers of the Septuagint would have thought of the *skene* — the tabernacle where God met with His people before the Temple was built. The Message translation (a paraphrase) renders John 1:14 "The Word became flesh and moved into the neighbourhood." He became part of a specific human context as a male Palestinian Jew in a specific time and place. He was thoroughly immersed in Jewish culture, he participated in its celebrations and traditions, he spoke Aramaic with a Galilean accent; he had distinctive physical features and personality traits. John 1:18 is notoriously difficult to translate, but it is legitimate to say that through His incarnation, Jesus explained or "exegeted" (ἐξηγήσατο) the Father to us. Carson points out that the verb, from which we get exegete, also means to tell a story (1991:1270). We could say then that Jesus is the narration of God. Paul describes Jesus' radical identification with humanity as a "self-humbling" or a "self-emptying" (Phil 2:6-8) and emphasises the aspects of condescension and servanthood.

From these texts we can determine that the incarnation of the Son involved and included the following:

- (i) Intentional, divine initiative and action — which includes a surrendering of a previous state.
- (ii) An intensely close identification with humanity — a huge commitment to a receptor group.
- (iii) A stupendous act of condescension/humiliation.
- (iv) A perfect revealing of the Father.
- (v) The supreme act of costly, obedient, sacrificial servanthood.

- (vi) His incarnation was ultimately for the purpose of His death and exaltation.

These elements of Christ's incarnation are crucial, for his incarnation becomes the blueprint for the ministry of his disciples; and by implication the Church of all ages. John records Jesus twice giving his disciples this charge: "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" (John 17:18; 20:21). Consequently, incarnational ministry is regarded as a fundamental part of contextualisation in contemporary evangelical circles. "The incarnation of Jesus makes contextualisation not just a possibility but an obligation" affirms Gilliland (1989:21). The incarnation of the Son of God serves as a key paradigm for a contextualised ministry and theology. Glasser (1989:33) has pointed out that the "stress today is on communicating through incarnation". Subsequently there is much contemporary emphasis put on identifying with people, cultural exegesis, service and lifestyle evangelism.

While this is entirely important and necessary, it is imperative to remain biblically balanced. Horton's caution is timely: "Jesus is a Saviour, not a Symbol. His incarnation is unique and unrepeatable. It cannot be extended, augmented, furthered or realised by us. Jesus did not come to show us how to incarnate ourselves, but to be our incarnate Saviour" (2009:14-18). Chester argues similarly and observes that those who enthusiastically embrace incarnational mission often have a "be" approach rather than a "tell" approach (Chester 2008:1). There is no necessary contradiction here. It is about comprehensive faithfulness: the Christian church must be *and* tell. While the incarnation of the Son is absolutely unique, there can be little doubt, according to His own teaching, that it is to inform and shape our mission in the world (John 17:18; 20:21). However it cannot be separated from His death and resurrection, and cannot be used to justify divorcing "being and doing" from proclamation.

5.2 The NT Basis for Contextualisation

Here we move from fundamental theological principles to specific accounts and examples of New Testament contextualisation. Particular attention will be given to the Acts narrative. There are two important reasons for this: First, in Acts, Luke recounts the inspired story of how the Gospel broke out from its Jewish origins and within a period of four decades had spread to diverse cultures and peoples. Contextualisation of the Gospel was a fundamental part of the spread of the Gospel. Second, there are notable similarities between the challenges facing the fledgling Christian church of the first century and the challenges facing the church in the 21st century. Carson (1996:272) points out that while we cannot draw a straight line from the first century to the 21st century religious world, the world which the early church confronted was profoundly pluralistic and could not be expected to share its values. He writes that we are departing from "the heritage of Judeo-Christian values ... yet we are returning to the pluralistic world that the earliest Christians had to confront ... The earliest Christians confronted their

world from the position of underdog, we tend to confront our world from the position of once favoured mascot who is in the process of becoming the neighbourhood cur, and expend too much of our energy on howls of protesting outrage. We shall be less morbid and despairing if we read the Scripture today and recognise that the challenges of pluralism are not entirely new.” Similarly Flemming (2006:316) writes that the “new world of postmodernity ... with its high level of biblical illiteracy, its greater openness to spirituality, and its religious and philosophical pluralism, is much closer to the world in which the apostles communicated the gospel than was the twentieth-century world.”

5.2.1 The Ministry of Jesus Christ:

The four Gospels recount many evangelistic encounters Jesus had with individuals and groups. The absence of a uniform approach is striking. There is no “canned” or stereotyped Gospel presentation that is regurgitated. He did not have a generic Gospel presentation that He offered to all people. He clearly dealt with people in the specifics of their own situation. There is a sense in which our Lord is utterly unique in this, for only He knew what was really going on in the hearts and lives of his listeners (John 2:24). When He spoke to the Samaritan woman He spoke of Himself as the living water. When He spoke to Nicodemus He insisted on the rebirth (Jn 3:1-6; Jn 4:4-24). A rejection by a wealthy potential disciple initiated a lesson on how difficult it is for the rich to be saved (Mt 19:16-26). The centurion’s request for a long distance healing became an opportunity to consider who are insiders and outsiders in relation to God’s kingdom (Mt 8:5-13).

Jesus spoke differently to the crowds than he did to the religious leaders. He tailored the exposition of the gospel to the situation at hand. Jesus’ message and method were context-specific.

Flemming’s observation (2006:296) is very pertinent: “Any attempt to reduce the gospel to a set of pre-fabricated formulations that can be carried about and unpacked for all situations runs contrary to ... the nature of the NT.” This has significant ramifications for how Reformed Baptists should be trained and go about doing personal evangelism. While evangelistic programmes such as EEIII and the Way of the Master have value, it is essential that they are used with great flexibility that is determined by the context. “The ... gospel story must be told and lived out in flexible forms as it engages new context. Otherwise it will never truly be understood or embodied” (Flemming 2006:297).

When Jesus ministered he used local resources. His teaching on key themes such as the Kingdom, law and righteousness drew upon language, thought categories and rhetorical traditions from the Jewish culture of his day. He communicated with people not in theological

abstractions but through every day, familiar language. Although He brought radically new teaching he did not coin a new language to express it. Instead, He used the earthy images of everyday rural life. Fishing, farming, weeds, wineskins, soil and salt became the “stuff” of his theological activity. His message was clothed in local, culturally conditioned forms. Olyott (a Reformed Baptist) notes how Jesus’ teaching utilised illustrative material from the everyday world of his hearers. “He came from heaven but lived on earth, and he spoke to the men and women of earth in pictures that they could understand” (2005:100). He spoke of sowing wheat, bottling wine, building houses, leavening dough, borrowing from neighbours, lighting lamps and finding treasure. Jesus spoke of the duties of servants, dogs under tables, burglars breaking in, moths destroying garments, children playing, feasts, weddings, court cases and current events. It is the writer’s contention that Reformed Baptists should never desert their commentaries and lexicons in striving for accurate exegesis. However, great care must be taken to ensure that their sermons are not full of dry, technical, commentary language. Textbook language cannot simply be regurgitated — this would be most unlike the preaching of the Son of God.

Jesus never merely entered humanity; He came to challenge and transform the human institutions He entered. He prophetically challenged His Palestinian Jewish culture and evangelised it from within. He confronted the religious and political authorities of his social context (Matt 23); He reshaped the people’s thinking of the law and its observances. He radically redefined notions of purity and impurity (Mk 7:20-23). His teaching was thoroughly counter-cultural. His teaching subverted prevailing attitudes toward wealth and greatness (Mk 10:23-25, 42-45) and challenged the traditions that governed family obligations and divorce (Mt 8:22; 12:46-50; 19:3-12). He scandalised the social norms by touching lepers, eating with tax collectors and sinners, and associating with sinful women (Lk 7:36-50). Jesus’ ministry points the way to “both a radical identification with each culture in all of its specificity and at the same time to a conversion of cultures from within” (Flemming 2006:22-23). This tension between “at-homeness” and prophetic transformation is the consistent pattern of biblical contextualisation.

5.2.2 The coming of the Spirit at Pentecost

Acts chapters 1-5 describe the Christian movement which operated within the ethnic and religious borders of the Jewish people. It must be noted that the church did not intentionally set out to contextualise its message. In these early chapters, the inclusive and transcultural scope of the gospel was not appreciated by the followers of the crucified Messiah in Jerusalem. Hitchen (1992:31-32) points out that the Gospel’s availability to men and women of all cultures was startling news to first-century believers. He argues that central to the Gospel age is the reality that God’s Word can be fully received by people of every different ethnic background. To grapple with this demands contextualisation.

There were early signs that the Gospel would overcome its exclusive identity with Jewish culture. The outpouring of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost is accompanied by the miracle of languages. Jews and proselytes from “every nation under heaven” (Luke names 16 nations) hear the apostles declare the mighty acts of God in their own vernacular (Acts 2:4-11). Flemming (2006:31), contends that this miracle was not purely for the sake of communication, as this audience would have understood Aramaic or Greek. Yet it would have been very striking to the diaspora Jews. The gift of tongues in Acts 2 symbolised that the gospel is not confined to any particular nation or to the Hebrew language. From the very beginning the Gospel was made understandable into the various languages of all people. While we talk of human languages, we would do well to remember that all human languages have come about through the providential supervision of God. Poythress (1999:24) reminds us that “every human language ... is also a divine language, superintended and fashioned by God’s providence and wisdom to be an instrument through which he speaks.” The Spirit was confirming that the Gospel belongs in every culture and language. Pentecost was a great missionary event: it foreshadows the church’s universal witness that moves out from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. Pentecost demonstrates that the Word is able to address all people in the particularity of their own “language of the heart” (Flemming 2006:31). Stott (1991:68) sees the blessing of Pentecost as a deliberate and dramatic reversal of the curse of Babel. At Babel human languages were confused and the nations were scattered; in Jerusalem the language barrier was supernaturally overcome as a sign of the nations gathered together in Christ. At Babel proud humanity tries to ascend to heaven; whereas in Jerusalem heaven humbly descended to earth. At Pentecost, God the Spirit descended and met with a diverse gathering of people within the specifics of their own languages.

5.2.3 Peter’s ministry to Cornelius

These chapters represent a critical moment in the gospel’s progress from the domain of ethnic Israel into the Gentile arena. Marshall (1983:181) states that the sheer length of the account and the fact that it is re-told (Acts 15:7-9) indicates the great importance that Luke attaches to it. Cornelius, the Roman centurion symbolically represents the inclusion of Gentiles into the Christian community (Acts 11:1,18). Yet he is an atypical Gentile — he is a God fearing, devout adherent of the Jewish synagogue. Cornelius and his family and friends function as a natural “bridge” for the progress of the Gospel into Gentile territory.

Stott (1991:186) affirms that the main subject of this narrative is not so much about the conversion of Cornelius as the “conversion” of Peter. Peter’s “conversion” is a thoroughgoing theological and cultural transformation. He is converted to a new vision of what constitutes the people of God, one that includes uncircumcised, non-kosher Gentiles. This is a dramatic change, for it challenges cherished, deep seated cultural values and Jewish ethnocentrism.

Luke stresses God's persistent initiative in these events: it requires interlocking visions (Acts 10:3-16; 11:5-10), angels (10:3-8), trances (Acts 10:10), three distinct hearings of God's command (10:16; 11:10) and the unexpected outpouring of the Spirit (10:44-46).

The Cornelius narrative highlights two significant obstacles that must be removed for the Gospel to be liberated from an exclusive Jewish ethnic and cultural identity. First, there is the soteriological barrier. Peter and his Jewish kin need to understand that God has granted salvation to Gentiles as Gentiles. "Peter discovers that God accepts people as they are, within their concrete national and cultural homes, yet on a basis that transcends any single ethnic identity or practice" (Flemming 2006:37). This is a fundamental insight for a NT perspective on contextualisation. Then there is the equally significant social barrier of table fellowship. Food laws functioned as boundary markers for Jews, separating them from other peoples. Through a vision of a non-kosher picnic, Peter decides to offer hospitality to Gentiles and then to receive it from Cornelius. Eventually Peter concludes that he had received the Spirit's instruction to make no distinction between Jews and Gentiles in his thinking and behaviour (Acts 11:12). Flemming (2006:38) points out that it is very noteworthy that the primary adjustment needed for the gospel to bridge social and religious boundaries comes not from the Gentile "outsiders," but from Jewish "insiders" who must let go of their ethnocentric attitudes and behaviour. This is a key factor in contextualisation, and anticipates Paul's attitude and approach in 1 Cor 9:19-23 where he speaks of his passionate commitment to become like those he was trying to reach in order to "win" them. The way has been opened to preach the Gospel to Gentiles, as cultural Gentiles.

Peter's sermon to the Cornelius entourage (10:34-43) is the centrepiece of the story and functions as a model of evangelistic contextualisation. At a number of points, Peter speaks to the immediate context — a Gentile, God fearing audience:

- (i) He opens and closes by stressing God's impartiality to all people (Acts 10:34, 43).
- (ii) He affirms that Jesus is Lord of all (10:36), which speaks to the inclusion of Gentiles.
- (iii) The theme of Christ as "judge of the living and the dead" (10:42) is an extension of His universal Lordship.
- (iv) There is more detail given of Jesus' earlier life than we find in Peter's Jerusalem sermons. This fits a non-Jewish audience, who would not have been as familiar with these events.
- (v) Peter uses the language of "benefaction" in 10:38 when Jesus is described as one who went around "doing good." The term was used of powerful rulers who

conferred benefits on others, and thus would have spoken with considerable force to a Roman Gentile.

- (vi) Peter's reference to witnesses who "ate and drank" with Jesus is appropriate for a story that concerns itself with hospitality to Gentiles (Acts 10:41, cf. 11:3).
- (vii) In contrast to his earlier sermons (such as his Pentecost sermon, Acts 2:16-41) there are no explicit OT quotes. Peter's use of the OT is clearly contextually determined.

Peter's preaching is clearly contextualised — this is a carefully crafted sermon aimed at persuading Gentiles living on the fringes of Judaism to embrace the call to faith in Christ.

5.2.4 The Jerusalem Council (Acts 15)

Acts 15 is a watershed event in the story of the Gospel's progress from a Jewish context to a universal context. Marshall (1983:242) argues that the discussion regarding the relation of the Gentiles to the law of Moses forms the centre of Acts, both structurally and theologically. It is vital to the study of contextualisation in the NT church for two reasons: it describes a key moment in the encounter between faith in Christ and culture within the life of the early church. Moreover, it recounts possibly the fullest and most significant narrative in the NT of the church doing contextual theology (Flemming 2006:43).

The council was occasioned by the progress of the Gentile mission which was gaining momentum. "The trickle of Gentile conversions was fast becoming a torrent" states Stott (1991:241). The issue was not that Gentiles were being incorporated into the people of God on a large-scale basis; the Jewish leaders did not have objections with Gentiles coming to faith in the Messiah. The key issue was on what basis are Gentiles to be accepted as the people of God? Gentiles were becoming believers and welcomed into fellowship on the basis of baptism without circumcision. Were unbelieving Gentiles to come to Christ via the Law of Moses and circumcision? Did Gentile believers have to become culturally Jewish as a condition of their salvation and as part of their obedience to Christ; or could they be accepted in all their "Gentileness?"

Stott (1991:243) affirms that the issue at hand was immense. The very essence of the gospel was in dispute, with the foundations of the Christian faith (grace alone, faith alone, Christ alone) in danger of being undermined. The stakes were very high. If the Pharisaic position was upheld (circumcision is essential) it would have placed a huge stumbling block in the way of the gospel's future progress to non-Jewish peoples. It would have invalidated the status of the current Gentile converts, and it would declare that God's grace in the provision of His Son and

the gift of the Spirit was not adequate for salvation. The crisis is resolved by three speeches that present a case for God's purpose in accepting uncircumcised Gentiles:

- (i) Peter (15:7-11) recounted the Cornelius story, stressing divine initiative and action. His speech climaxes with the crucial theological insight that the only basis for inclusion for both Jews and Gentiles is by the grace of God.
- (ii) Paul and Barnabas (15:12) talk about their experience of miraculous evidences of God working through them, providing further support of God accepting Gentiles.
- (iii) James' argument (15:13-21) is climactic and definitive. He argued fundamentally from Scripture, which would have been critical for his Jewish audience. Referring to Peter's account, he interpreted it to mean that God has acquired from the Gentiles "a people for His name" (15:14). This is remarkable, because previously in Acts (e.g. 2:47; 3:23; 4:10) as well as in the OT the term people (*laos*) refers to Israel. Here the notion of "people of God" is redefined to include non-Jews. He quotes Amos 9:11-12 because it validates what God is doing in the church. Amos' prophecy, read in the light of the issue at hand means that "all the Gentiles" will be incorporated into the eschatological temple of the new people of God (the Christian church) without having to surrender their Gentile identity (Schnabel 2012:621).

James expresses the decision of the Council in Acts 15:19-29: Gentile believers are bona fide members of God's people on the basis of faith, without having to become Jewish proselytes (Schnabel 2012:655). The Acts 15 deliberations and outcome illustrate several crucial aspects of sound biblical contextualisation:

- (i) There is an unyielding commitment to fundamental Christian truth. The truth of the Gospel is contended for: Luke shows that the truth of the Gospel cannot be compromised. The Pharisaic group are considered to be in serious error (Acts 15:24). Their improper contextualisation threatens to undermine the entire Gentile mission and represent a departure from the Gospel of grace. The truth of the Gospel is compromised when non-essentials (like circumcision) are made essentials. The truth is clearly contended for, clearly articulated and communicated to the wider Christian community (Acts 15:19-21, 22-29, 30).
- (ii) Scripture plays the key role in guiding the Church: the authoritative role of Scripture (Acts 15:13-18) is intertwined with the experience and concrete needs of the community.

- (iii) The sovereign work of the Spirit in the community as the context for creative theologising must be noted: there are numerous references to the action of God or the Spirit within the believing community (15:7-11).
- (iv) The comprehensive scope of sound contextualisation must be noted: Contextualisation goes deeper and broader than evangelistic strategy. Brown (2006:128) comments that the decisions made by the Jerusalem council meant that church life for Greek disciples would be different from church life for Jewish disciples. Each of these believer sub-cultures was appropriate for the cultures in which it was embedded.
- (v) There is compromise on nonessential matters for the sake of unity and fellowship (Acts 15:29a).
- (vi) Yet, contextualisation does not mean that the cultural heritage of the hearers is simply accepted. The Gospel is critical of all cultures. It calls on new believers to abstain from certain practices (15:29b).
- (vii) The role and involvement of the entire community and its leaders must be noted (15:5-6; 12).

5.2.5 Contextualisation in Acts: the preaching of Paul

Acts portrays Paul the evangelist who proclaims the Word of God in diverse settings to diverse groups of unbelievers. Three missionary speeches of Paul will be considered as clear and compelling examples of evangelistic contextualisation.

5.2.5.1 A Synagogue sermon: Acts 13:13-52

When he arrives in Pisidian Antioch, Paul finds a thriving Jewish community. In addition to the Jews, Luke highlights two other groups, “devout proselytes” (Acts 13:43) and “God-fearers” (13:16, 26) — referring to Gentile worshippers who are not full converts to Judaism. The speech is mainly aimed at the Jews (13:17, 32-33), although Paul does single out these non-Jewish sympathisers as part of his audience. The setting for the sermon is the synagogue, the centre of religious and community life, and a “focus of shared identity for Diaspora Jews” (Flemming 2006: 58). It is common ground for the apostle and his audience. His listeners are prepared for the message by their gathering for Sabbath worship and by reading of the Scriptures (13:14-15). Paul speaks to his hearers as fellow Israelites and children of Abraham, and God fearers who have aligned themselves with Abraham’s family (13:16, 26). The audience and setting affirm that this is not a cross-cultural proclamation of the Gospel. Rather,

Paul is speaking as Diaspora Jew to fellow Diaspora Jews within the framework of the Jewish Scriptures.

Paul's message is carefully crafted to persuade an audience of intelligent, Greek speaking Jews. He establishes rapport with his listeners by addressing them formally as "men, Israelites" (13:16). As the sermon progresses he becomes less formal: "men, brothers, "children of Abraham" (13:26,28). This is suggestive of a gradual winning over of his audience. He identifies himself with his audience, as an insider (13:16,27). His speech is brimming with language, themes and quotations from the Septuagint. Moreover, according to Flemming (2006: 59) the speech's structure fits conventional patterns of Greco-Roman rhetoric in having the following features: an introduction (13:16b); a narration (13:17-25); a proposition (13:27-37); and a concluding exhortation (13:38-41). Paul's evangelistic message is clearly targeted — his Antioch address reveals an obvious and masterfully contextualised presentation for its predominantly Jewish audience. He establishes common ground as a point of contact (Acts 13:16). There is a reiteration of God's mighty acts in the history of Israel (Acts 13:17-23). The audience are well acquainted with this history. His focus is on divine initiative and action. Underlying Paul's recital of OT history are a number of shared presuppositions: God has chosen Israel and acted graciously on its behalf; God has chosen David, who pleased God and carried out His plan (13:23); God's promise to bring Israel a Saviour has been fulfilled in David's seed, Jesus of Nazareth. Paul argues that Israel's history has a Christological goal — the coming of the Davidic Messiah is the crucial moment in the history of redemption. Paul's speech to this Sabbath gathering is appropriately replete with Scriptural allusions and quotations. The structure of the message is a recital of OT history that culminates and is fulfilled in the Messiah.

Paul's proclamation centres on the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, as well as confirming testimony from eyewitnesses (13:27-31), which is Scriptural (13:32-37) and brings saving effects (13:38-39). Significantly, the fulfilment motif is mentioned three times (13:23; 13:27 and 13:33).

The sermon climaxes in 13:38-41. Because of God's work in Christ, forgiveness and justification are proclaimed to the hearers. The Gospel brings forgiveness of sins through Jesus. However balancing the announcement of salvation is a powerful, sobering warning to the audience (13:40-41). Paul's message gets a mixed response from the audience. Although Paul shares the same basic culture and much of the same worldview as his audience it is clear that the barriers to faith are still very substantial. Flemming (2006:65) comments: "... a shared cultural experience is no guarantee that our efforts at contextualising the gospel will meet with a positive response."

The fundamental content of Paul's preaching is the apostolic gospel which centres on the person and work of Jesus Christ. When preaching to Jews, Paul incorporates his audience's history, expectations, Scriptures and its culturally accepted methods of interpretation in order to persuasively proclaim the good news. This is the outworking of the strategy he wrote about in 1 Cor 9:19-23, "to the Jews, a Jew ...". However, sound contextualisation is not merely about identification — it also calls for profound transformation, a thorough reshaping of worldview. Paul's message challenges its Jewish hearers' entire way of seeing the world, summoning them to reinterpret their history, to abandon their religious exclusivism and to lay hold of God's offer of forgiveness and eternal life. In short, the Gospel confronts its audience with a new Christian vision and the need for profound change.

5.2.5.2 Preaching to pagans at Lystra: Acts 14:8-20

Here and in Athens (Acts 17) we encounter the only sermons in Acts aimed at pagan Gentiles. Consequently, these two sermons are critical to understanding how the word of the Gospel bridged cultural barriers within early Christian mission.

These hearers are completely different to the synagogue congregation at Antioch. The crowd listening to Paul were made up of the indigenous Lycaonian population, and were probably "common people" — simple, country folk, though Schnabel (2012:605) affirms that many people living in this part of Asia Minor were bilingual — speaking Greek as well as their local dialect. Their worship centred on the local civic cult with its temple outside the city (Acts 14:13) and it is very likely that they had syncretised their own deities with the Greek gods and given them names like Zeus and Hermes (Acts 14:12-13). The setting for his speech is one of the city streets, and it is occasioned by the healing of a man who had been crippled from birth and the misunderstanding of its meaning. The locals understand this healing within their polytheistic religious system. A clash of worldviews was inevitable. For the first time the Gospel addresses a religiously plural environment. The serious misunderstanding²⁶ triggers a swift and strong response from the missionaries (Acts 14:14), which leads to Paul's message.

- (i) He begins by challenging the locals by appealing to truth within their own worldview (14:15). Very significantly, he begins within the framework of general revelation. Then he respectfully responds to their misunderstanding by appealing to a shared humanity, emphasising that he and Barnabas are also only mere mortals. It places

²⁶ Schnabel (2012:608) states that the reaction of the Lystrans can be understood in the context of local traditions. According to local legend, two local gods wandered through the region as humans. Nobody offered them hospitality, until an older couple shared their supplies with them. The couple were rewarded by the gods, while the other people were judged. It is possible that the Lystrans knew the story, and did not want to repeat their mistake.

the Christian missionaries on common ground with the local people as people created in the image of God (14:16).

- (ii) Paul announces that he has come to bring the good news (Acts 14:15) to the people of Lystra. However, it takes a completely different form from his synagogue address in the previous chapter. He omits OT history for the people do not have the background to appreciate such an appeal. He does not treat his listeners as children of the promise, but as children of the creation (14:15). He appeals to general revelation and common grace (14:16-17). Paul's *kerygma* is intensely theological — he stresses the character and activity of God: a) He is the one, true, living God (14:15) — an essential starting off point when addressing people in a context of idolatry and pluralism. b) He is the Creator of all things (14:15). c) He is God of the nations (14:16). d) He has revealed Himself to all peoples, through His general revelation through nature (14:17). e) God is the provider and sustainer of all human life (14:17).
- (iii) Paul calls these Gentiles to leave behind their idols and be converted to the one true God (14:15). This implies the need for thorough repentance. It must again be noted that starting with common ground and endeavouring to identify with the situation of one's hearers does not imply a soft, compromised appeal. Paul calls these Lycaonian people to turn "from these worthless things."

Paul tailors both the emphasis and the expression of his evangelistic preaching to "fit a crowd of rustic Gentile polytheists." He engages their belief system and presuppositions at a fundamental level. "The speech models a context-sensitive approach to unsophisticated pagans ..." (Flemming 2006:71-72). It is a demonstration of 1 Cor 9:21 — Paul becoming like "those not having the law to win those not having the law."

5.2.5.3 The Gospel in Athens

Flemming (2006:73) labels Paul's address to the Athenians as "perhaps the outstanding example of intercultural witness in the NT" and this makes it a pivotal text in the study of NT patterns of contextualisation. The Acts 17 synopsis gives us a paradigmatic case of Paul's approach to an educated pagan audience. Here he can be observed communicating the Gospel with both firmness and flexibility.

Though past its glory days, Athens still symbolised the cultural, intellectual and religious nerve centre of the Greco Roman world (Marshall 1983:283). When the Gospel arrived in Athens, it penetrated the heartland of sophisticated pagan culture. It was a city rife with pagan images and temples. Marshall characterises the religious climate as a "blend of superstitious idolatry

and enlightened philosophy” (1983:281). Paul went to the marketplace (*agora*) and publicly debated the Athenian intellectuals on their own turf (17:17). Luke introduces us to two groups of philosophers, the Epicureans and the Stoics who debated with Paul in the *agora* and later became the target for his address. The immediate setting for the sermon was the Areopagus, the governing council of Athens, to whom Paul is invited to explain his novel teaching.

Stott (1991:280-281) points out that the Epicureans and Stoics were contemporary but rival philosophical systems. The Epicureans considered the gods to be very remote and therefore they took no interest in human affairs. The world exists due to chance; there is no afterlife and no judgement. So humans should pursue pleasure, especially the quiet enjoyment of a life detached from pain, passion and fear. In contrast, the Stoics acknowledged the supreme God in a pantheistic kind of way. The world was determined by fate and humans should pursue duty and resign themselves to live in harmony and reason, and strive to develop self sufficiency. This background information is crucial, for Paul’s address directly challenges the assumptions of these two groups.

The form and style of this speech are “exquisitely adapted to a sophisticated Gentile audience” (Flemming 2006:74). He stood in their midst like a Greek orator and opened with the usual form of address for a speech in Athens (17:22). The sermon is highly rhetorical in structure affirms Schnabel (2012:719). There is an opening exordium, designed to gain a hearing from his listeners (22-23a), a thesis (17:23b) stating the desired goal, the main proof in which he argues his case (24-29) and a concluding exhortation.

His sermon features rhetorical techniques that would have been familiar to the Greeks, for example, the delaying tactic of insinuation. Paul postpones the difficult subject of Jesus’ resurrection to the very end. He first established rapport and a foundation. The speech is also laced with irony. The theme of human ignorance (17:23,30), would not have been missed in this centre of learned intelligentsia. Furthermore, Paul drew upon the language and ideas of his Greek contemporaries, particularly the Stoics to establish points of contact with his hearers. Paul even quoted pagan poets (17:28) to create bridges to his audience without sanctioning the belief system to which they belonged. God is not far off, because as Epimenides wrote, “For in thee we live and move and have our being” (Bruce 1977:242). And as Aratus the Stoic wrote, “for we are also his offspring” (Ibid. 242).

There is no tour of Jewish history. Rather, the point of contact is the religiosity of the Athenians (17:22). Initially Paul took a respectful and conciliatory approach. He highlights a concrete example of their worship that he has observed — an altar to an unknown god (17:23). The Athenians worship of an unknown god served as a springboard for Paul to launch into his evangelistic message about the one true God who can be known because He has revealed

Himself. It also picks up on the theme of knowledge — a very highly prized commodity among the Greeks.

He begins within the framework of understanding of his audience and builds on as much common ground as possible. He did not belittle their religious system, but recognised that there was something genuine in their religious aspirations. Paul's speech relied heavily on the doctrine of general revelation. He utilised the truth of which he wrote in Rom 1:19-20a, *"because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse."*

But there is a limit to this common ground. The Athenians are not "anonymous Christians." Paul is very aware that their present state of ignorance must be corrected by a true knowledge of God through the communication of the Gospel.

As in Lystra, his message is fundamentally theocentric, focusing on God's character, his revelation in nature and his relationship to humanity. (God is Creator of the Universe 17:24; Sustainer of life 17:25; Ruler of all the nations 17:26-27; Father of all human beings 17:28b and God is the Judge of the world 17:30-31.)

This was Paul's approach to people without a biblical heritage. Paul's strategy involves both constructive and corrective engagement of his listeners' beliefs and worldviews. His teaching deliberately challenged the Stoics and Epicureans. The Stoics would have agreed that God was the source of all life; they would have concurred with the notion of providence, that humanity is one and that God is near. But he challenged and corrected their view that God is the all pervasive, impersonal logos. Instead he spoke of a personal Creator God who is transcendent and distinct, both Lord and Judge. Unlike Greek religion, there is separation of the Supreme Being and the creator demiurge (Bruce 1977:240). He affirmed the Epicurean ideas that God is living and can be known and is self sufficient. But he corrected them in proclaiming a God who is actively and intimately involved with the world, a God who is personal and who desires that men should seek Him. And contrary to the Greek ideas of racial superiority, Paul asserted that all descended from one man (Acts 17:26). What he affirmed here would have shocked his prejudiced Greek listeners. The Greeks did not spring up from the Attic soil (Bruce 1977:241), they descended from a common ancestor, along with the rest of humankind (17:26).

Paul's conclusion and climax in 17:30-31 achieves 2 things: It points his hearers to Jesus Christ, whom God raised from the dead, as Judge of the world. While Greeks believed in the

immortality of the soul, the idea of a bodily resurrection was alien to them (Marshall 1983:291). And it calls his listeners to the right course of action. They must repent of their idolatry and be rightly related to God through Christ. It is significant that even in a sermon where he has to do much conceptual groundwork and speaks comparatively little of Christ and the cross; there is a clear call to repentance. Authentic contextualisation does not nullify the offence of the Gospel — the Gospel's offence must stand. Paul's apologetic approach in Athens is to interest, engage and confront (Flemming2006:81).

Paul's approach can be of great value to us in the 21st century. We are increasingly witnessing to biblically illiterate people, sophisticated, postmodern urban people. Lotter and Thompson (2005:695-714) argue that Paul's Athenian ministry can serve as a paradigm for the contemporary church to respond to postmodernity. They affirm that the key similarities between Athens and our times would be the shared pluralism and biblical illiteracy. Reformed Baptists would do well to heed the following lessons Flemming draws out from Acts 17:

- (i) Paul's ministry in Acts 17 was a model of cultural sensitivity and adjustment to his audience. He shows an awareness of their culture and their belief systems. He uses his knowledge to respectfully engage their worldview, drawing upon indigenous language and idiom to communicate the Gospel. Flemming's point is very pertinent: "The genius of Paul's context sensitive preaching in Acts 17 is that he intentionally uses the philosophical language of his audience, not simply to stake out common ground, but in order to transform their worldview" (2006:79). This is a crucial point — he utilises local language and customs not merely to engage and stir up interest, but ultimately to challenge and confront.
- (ii) At the same time Paul refuses to syncretise his message or compromise its truth claims. There are definite non-negotiables to the message that confront the assumptions of his audience: the sovereign lordship of the Creator as Ruler of the nations (which means there are no other gods), the universal need for repentance (which presupposes sin and guilt) and the reality of a future judgment (which implies moral accountability). Moreover, the apostle preaches the supreme revelation of God in Christ, validated by Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Schnabel (2012:748) points out how revolutionary Paul's message was in that "no Athenian would welcome abandoning the temples for which Athens had been famous for hundreds of years or discontinuing the sacrifices that ensured the goodwill of the gods ..."
- (iii) Paul gives us a perspective for contextualising the gospel among people of different religious backgrounds. His *attitude* is significant. Although he is distressed about idolatry, he does not condemn the Athenians. Rather he recognises God's

prevenient grace at work among people of other faiths and worldviews. His *approach* is instructive. Paul is careful to spend time preparing the ground for people who are biblically uninformed. He begins by affirming that which is universal and is shared human experience. General revelation is important in this context. Only after laying out a basic theocentric worldview does he raise the issue of God's particular revelation in Jesus Christ. Paul's *answer* is clear. No longer do the Athenians need to grope blindly in the dark. Paul concludes by giving them the definitive answer to their fear, ignorance and absence of hope — the gospel of Christ.

- (iv) The ultimate aim of Paul's ministry in Athens was to bring the Athenians to the knowledge of Jesus Christ. This is the aim of all biblical contextualisation.
- (v) Paul did not give the Athenians what they wanted to hear — this is not what contextualisation is all about. Reformed evangelicals must note that Paul did not “soft pedal” the Gospel in Athens. At every point his theocentric Gospel presentation challenged and critiqued the cherished views of his listeners. Contextualisation is not about avoiding the offence of the Gospel — it is about presenting the Gospel in categories and language the recipients can understand, and reject. Lidorio's comment is very important: “Contextualising the gospel means translating it in such a way that the Lordship of Christ is not only an abstract principle ... but a life-shaping factor, a basic criterion in every dimension” (2011:21).

5.2.5.4 Comparing the three sermons

A comparison of these three missionary sermons of Paul in Acts reveals the extent to which the proclamation of the gospel is tailored to each audience and context. In Antioch (Acts 13:13-43) Paul is speaking to Bible believers; at Lystra (Acts 14:6-16) he addresses peasant polytheists; and in Athens (Acts 17:16-34) Paul speaks mainly to sophisticated pagans (Keller 2012:112). Lidorio (2011:20) affirms that the target audience, with their own cultural, linguistic and spiritual presuppositions are relevant factors in how we present the Gospel. Paul did not preach Christ the same way to these groups. When Paul spoke to Jews and God fearers he assumed from his listeners a commitment to monotheism, an acceptance of the authority of Scripture and knowledge of the Biblical storyline. He appeals to the history he and his listeners share and then proceeds to reinterpret that story by showing how God's new action in Christ fulfils the ancient promises of their ancestors.

But when Paul communicates the gospel across religious and cultural barriers, we note a strikingly different approach. He carefully prepares the soil, beginning with universal themes

that his audience can identify with: God's creation and care for the world and His nearness and their appetite to know Him. He does not quote Scripture directly, but finds points of contact with their story, which is quite different from the synagogue congregation. Whether speaking to Jews or Gentiles, Paul begins where his audience is at, builds on it and draws them into an encounter with the gospel. Paul's citation of authority varies with the differing contexts. With the Bible believers, he quotes Scripture. With pagans he argues from general revelation and the greatness of God (2012:113). Though he is addressing biblically uninformed Gentiles in both Acts 14 and 17, his approach is still different. In Acts 14 the speech concentrates on themes that would relate well to a crowd of rustic townspeople — God's provision of rain, crops and food. In Acts 17 Paul also appeals to God's action in nature, but this time in the framework of a more sophisticated argument that has touch points with Greek philosophy and poetry. "In each case, Paul's preaching exudes a dynamic, audience-oriented flexibility" (Flemming 2006:85).

Yet there are clear commonalities: each of the sermons is crafted to be rhetorically persuasive; they all herald the content of the "good news" (13:32; 14:15; 17:18). All three present the gospel in the form of what we could call narrative theology — the grand storyline of the Bible. There is substantial groundwork done before Christ is introduced. This is a crucial point for Reformed Baptists to take note of; for it has been pointed out that the lack of a solid biblical theology is a perceived weakness in their theology. There is the proclamation of Jesus Christ. Each address engages and confronts the cherished beliefs of its audience. Keller affirms that in each there is a powerful "epistemological challenge" (2012:113). The listeners are told that their view of God is fundamentally flawed. There is a personal challenge in each in that Paul calls the listeners to repentance. Jews are trying to obey the law and are trapped in works righteousness, the pagans by a more conventional idolatry (2012:113).

These speeches give us a strong biblical case for engaging in careful contextualisation. There can be no doubt that Paul's gospel proclamation was carefully, creatively and intentionally contextualised to the different belief systems, history and culture of his hearers. They remind us that there is no universal, culture-free presentation of the Gospel for everyone. Rather we see Paul "translating and adapting the communication and ministry of the gospel to a particular culture without compromising the essence and particulars of the gospel itself" (as per Keller's definition, 2012:89).

5.2.6 1 Corinthians 9: 19-23: A Key Text

This passage is the most well known "proof-text" for contextualisation. Prior to this section in 1 Cor 8, Paul speaks about the *skandalon* ("stumbling block") and provides as a case study a conflict in the Corinthian church. Jewish believers sometimes bought meat after it had been

used in idol ceremonies. Jews had no qualms about eating this meat, for they knew that idols were non-entities. As former pagans, Gentiles “stumbled” over this practise — they could not eat meat without feeling spiritually defiled (1 Cor 8:7). To see Jewish brothers doing this distressed them.

Paul responds by saying that although the Jews were theologically correct (1 Cor 8:4-5), they were not correct in terms of lifestyle. They should rather refrain from eating meat offered to idols to remove the cultural offence, the stumbling block (1 Cor 8:9-12) from their Gentile brothers and sisters. “Cultural adaptation here is seen as an expression of love” (Keller 2012:110).

At least five vital principles for contextualisation emerge from 1 Cor 9:19-23:

- (i) Paul’s choice to forego his personal freedom — “... I make myself a slave to everyone ...” v19
- (ii) the supremacy of the Gospel in Paul’s ministry — “I do this all for the sake of the gospel ...” v23
- (iii) Paul’s commitment and sensitivity to understanding different kinds of people — “To the Jews ..., to those outside the law, to the weak ...”v20-22
- (iv) Paul’s flexibility of approach to different kinds of people — “To the Jews I became as a Jew ... I have become all things to all people ...” v20, 22
- (v) Paul’s burning desire to see people converted — “that by all possible means I might save some” v22. In this regard Kistemaker (1996:309) writes, “Opponents might accuse Paul of being ineffectual, unstable and changeable. If so they would completely misunderstand his motive. They would fail to see the driving purpose that motivated ... his mission endeavour: to bring the Gospel to as many people as possible.”

Paul’s approach is clearly demonstrated in a number of places in Acts: he had Timothy circumcised “for the sake of the Jews” (16:3); he took a Nazirite vow to “conciliate the Jewish Christian leaders he was going to see in Jerusalem” (Stott 1998:300); and he joined four Nazirites in their purification rites and paid the expenses for the sacrificial offering (Acts 21:23-26). Morris (1987:135) concludes: “The apostle ... adapted himself to the position of his hearers in a whole-hearted determination to win them for Christ.”

Keller (2012:110-111) applies Paul's methodology practically: In areas that the Bible does not specifically address the Christian communicator should be constantly engaged in cultural adaption. This may involve in refraining from certain attitudes or practices to remove unnecessary stumbling blocks from the path of people with culturally framed perceptions. This could include music, clothing, food and other non-essential practices that distract or repulse people from clearly understanding the Gospel. Similarly, we should not elevate relative human cultural norms and make them absolutes. For example, a style of dress should not be absolutised, and it should not be claimed that rhythmic music is less pleasing to God than melodic music, and must therefore be excluded from worship. Keller (2012:111) states that in this sense, contextualisation is an expression of unselfishness — it involves choosing not to privilege yourself or to exercise your full freedom as a believer so people can hear and obey the call of Christ. Yet our teaching must never eliminate the offence, the *skandolon* of the cross (1Cor 1:23). What the Scriptures insist upon can never be soft-pedalled. Biblical contextualisation means causing the right scandal — the one the Gospel presents to all sinners; and removing all the unnecessary ones.

5.3 Contextualisation and the Evangelistic Appeals of the Bible

Keller (2012:114-115) has interacted with Carson's article: "Pastoral Pensees: Motivations to Appeal in our hearers when we preach for conversion" (2010:258–264) in demonstrating the reality of contextualisation in the evangelistic appeals of the Bible. Carson lists a number of motivations that the Bible employs to appeal to unbelievers to believe the Gospel:

- (i) There are appeals to come to God out of fear of judgment and death (Heb 2:14-18; Heb 10:31).
- (ii) There are appeals to come to God for relief from guilt and shame (Gal 3:10-12; Ps 51).
- (iii) Sometimes the appeal is to come to God out of appreciation for the "attractiveness of truth." Commenting on 1 Cor 1:18-19, Carson (2006:262) writes that Paul "holds up the truth for a person to see its beauty and value, like a person holding up a diamond and calling for people to admire it."
- (iv) There are evangelistic appeals based on God's ability to satisfy unfulfilled existential longings. This was Jesus' appeal to the woman in Jn 4, when he offered her "living water." He was offering her inner joy and deep satisfaction to be experienced in the present.

- (v) Sometimes the appeal is to come to God for help with a problem. There are many examples of this in the Gospels. Jesus does not hesitate to give that help, but He also helps people see their sin and their need from rescue from eternal judgment as well (Mk 2:1-12; Lk 17:11-19).
- (vi) The appeal may be to come to God simply out of a desire to be loved. “The person of Christ as depicted in the Gospels is a compellingly attractive person. His humility, tenderness, wisdom, and especially His love and grace draw people like a magnet” (Keller 2012:115).
- (vii) An appeal may be on the basis of hope. Carson (2010:262) puts it like this: “... a desire to be on the side of what is right, of what is from God, of what is Biblical, of what is clean, of what endures.” He cites the personal evangelistic encounters with Christ in Jn 1:19-57 as examples.

There is thus little doubt that the biblical authors use a range of motivations when appealing to their readers to believe and obey the truth. Carson (2010:263-264) makes four theological and pastoral reflections on this survey:

- (i) We do not have the right to choose only one of these motivations and to appeal to it restrictively. (Just as we cannot use only one of the atonement metaphors to comprehend the atonement.)
- (ii) Yet we have the liberty to emphasise one motivation above the others in a particular situation, with a particular audience.
- (iii) The comprehensiveness of our appeal to diverse motivations will reflect the comprehensiveness of our grasp of the Gospel.
- (iv) All of the biblically sanctioned motivations for pursuing God say complementary things about God Himself. Therefore the failure to cover the sweep of motivations ultimately results in diminishing God.

In commenting on Carson’s article, Keller (2102:114) says that “to make any one of these forms of persuasion THE paradigm for gospel communication will lead to fruitlessness in ministry.” He adds that when expounding a particular text, we tend to use our own “pet” motivation, even though the biblical author may not. We have come to Christ through one of these motivations, or we are part of a community that finds one particularly appealing and compelling. People of a conservative temperament may want to stress judgment even more than the Bible, while people of a liberal disposition may want to stress unconditional love more than the Bible does. It is

natural, but dangerous, to use this one motivation exclusively in our appeals to others. Ultimately, it is a failure in contextualisation.

Reformed Baptists have been largely influenced by a book written by Walter Chantry (1970) entitled, "Today's Gospel: Authentic or Synthetic?" Chantry, a Reformed Baptist, expounds the Lord's encounter with the rich young ruler (Matt 19:16-30) and stresses the necessity of preaching the law and the character of God in order to evoke a sense of sin and guilt. He argues that the Lord's method of evangelism was to awaken a sense of sin through the law, and then point people to the grace of the Gospel. He takes this encounter as the blueprint for doing all evangelism. Reformed Baptists who hold to Chantry's views would do well to heed the critique of Carson and Keller. While Chantry's book is helpful in alerting us to the grave dangers of superficial evangelism, easy believism, false conversions and a man-centred Gospel, his insistence that there is only one paradigm for faithful evangelism is reductionist and highly problematic.

This discussion has demonstrated that careful, deliberate contextualisation is not indicative of a departure from biblical truth. Rather it is biblical truth which ought to fuel contextualisation — for one cannot take the Bible seriously and dismiss contextualisation. From the very beginning of God's dealings with humanity, He graciously adapted His methods of communication and revelation to the situation of those He was seeking. His book, authored by His Spirit, is clearly contextualised. The incarnation of His Son could be called the ultimate in contextualisation. The ministry of His Son was obviously and demonstrably receptor sensitive. The ministry of Paul, the most eminent pastor, church planter and missionary of all time was characterised by a zealous commitment to the unchanging gospel, and a great flexibility and versatility in proclaiming that gospel to different contexts. Contextualisation cannot be dismissed.

CHAPTER 6: ESSENTIAL COMPONENTS OF DELIBERATE BIBLICAL CONTEXTUALISATION

The aim in this chapter is to identify and discuss the non-negotiable building blocks that would constitute a theology of contextualisation that would be both acceptable and challenging to Reformed Baptist ministry in South Africa. Some of these factors would be heartily affirmed by Reformed Baptists, others they would find challenging. The purpose here is to both affirm and challenge. Space does not permit an exhaustive study of each; only the salient points will be dealt with. Recommendations will be made to pastors of the Reformed Baptist community in South Africa. This chapter will conclude with a “check” for authentic contextualisation from the book of Galatians.

6.1 A Solid Epistemology

This matter of epistemology is especially important in our postmodern climate where absolute truth claims are rejected and any notion of an over-arching metanarrative is dismissed. There are certain non-negotiables that Christian pastors and missionaries value: There is objective truth outside of us; we affirm that God Himself is ultimate reality, and that He is the ground of all truth, so that truth is objective and absolute. We affirm that God has chosen to reveal Himself in the Scriptures — truth can be conveyed through human language and be understood by people of all races, types and groups.

However, there are different views among evangelicals about the nature and extent of our knowledge. Hiebert explains that there are three fundamental approaches to epistemology (1994:19-51):

- (i) *Instrumentalism*: is the view that all knowledge is subjective, since it is constrained by the perspective of the individual, language and culture. The Bible contains truth, but it is subjective truth constrained by those humans who wrote it. At best, it is only one version of truth among many possibilities. Proponents of this view would go to another culture looking only for truth as seen within that culture, since every culture has its own grasp of the truth, and there is no need to introduce a new version of the truth. Evangelicals reject any contextual model that takes this approach.
- (ii) *Naïve realism*: is the view that knowledge is objective, and we can know reality fully, in all of its fullness. Those who approach contextualisation with this understanding believe that the Bible teaches truth and that they can know biblical truth completely without distortion or imbalance. The resulting contextual model affirms that the only reason to learn the new culture is to find out how to insert or transmit the biblical

truth, since the receiving culture will have little to add to the communicator's understanding of the Bible. Hiebert affirms that this has been the position of evangelicals in the past, and many still continue to hold to it. Moreau (2012:79) affirms that these Bible communicators often convey a type of "epistemological arrogance."

- (iii) *Critical realism*: which Hiebert argues is the most viable of the approaches. Proponents uphold the truth of the Bible and the objectivity of truth. But critical realists recognise our inability to grasp truth without constraints. There is objective truth which is outside of us, it can be known, but we bring our own pre-understanding and sinful biases. Within this category there is a spectrum of views. Hiebert recognises that our grasp of truth is imperfect, but affirms that we can grow in understanding as we check its correspondence to the truth of Scripture. Missionaries who hold to this view would go to another culture and try and work to understand it in an effort to make the Gospel message understandable. But recognising that they do not comprehend the whole message of the Bible in all its scope, richness and balance, they will also be open to discovering new insights from the receptor culture that will help them better understand the Bible. This needs to be done in the context of the "hermeneutical community" (the church) where different people aim to discern and apply the truth of the Scriptures. Goldsmith's important observation should be noted: "Our rock-like assurance in an absolute and unchanging revelation of God must not blind us however to the fallibility of our human understanding of that perfect revelation" (1983:19). Hitchen (1991:41) has similarly stated that God's truth is always greater than our best grasp of it.

David Wells, in his 2005 book: "Above All Earthly Pow'rs: Christ in a Postmodern World" (which is highly acclaimed by Reformed Baptists) argues that the dichotomy which postmodern epistemology wants to force is one between knowing everything exhaustively or knowing nothing at all. Because it would be extremely arrogant to claim what God alone knows, the only option is to accept that our knowledge is so socially conditioned that we are left with no certain knowledge of reality at all (2005:158).

A modern illustration of how underlying epistemology affects theology can be seen in the differing statements of Tim Keller and Brian McClaren. Keller has affirmed several times in his sermons and writings that if somebody thinks that he fully understands the gospel in all its depth, richness and profundity then he certainly has significant gaps in his knowledge and

understanding.²⁷ This is a helpful statement, illustrating a humble orthodoxy that acknowledges that nobody has a perfect grasp of the truth. However, Brian McClaren, a prominent leader in the Emerging church movement goes much further: “I don’t think we’ve got the Gospel right yet ... What does it mean to be saved? None of us have arrived at orthodoxy.”²⁸ This is a typically postmodern statement. He has gone beyond humility — which is a virtue, and is verging on agnosticism. This represents a step into the fog of postmodern epistemology. Carson’s observation is helpful: “Postmodernism gently applied rightly questions the arrogance of modernism; postmodernism ruthlessly applied nurtures a new hubris and deifies agnosticism” (1996:119). Self examination on the part of Reformed Baptists may well reveal that they have been significantly influenced by modernism.

There is no reason for Reformed Baptists to “re-invent the wheel” when it comes to epistemology. D.A. Carson has done excellent work in this field. His work “The Gagging of God” (1996), needs to be studied. His position is that there is objective truth; humans can know objective truth, not exhaustively and absolutely, but increasingly and truly.

6.2 An Appreciation of the Inevitability of Contextualisation

There is no way contextualisation can ever be avoided. Rather than trying to avoid it, it should be done intentionally and carefully. As soon as certain words, illustrations, appeals and systems of logic or reasoning are used we become more accessible to some people and less understandable to others. Keller (2012:92-97) points out a paradox that is easily missed: the fact that we must communicate universal, eternal truth in a particular cultural context does not mean that the truth itself is lost, compromised or less universal. He affirms that there is no one single way to express the Christian faith that is universal for everyone in all cultures. However, though there is no culture-transcending way to express the truths of the Gospel, there is only one true Gospel.

He adds that if you forget that there is no cultureless presentation of the Gospel, you will tend to think that there is only one valid expression of it, and this will result in a rigid, culturally bound conservatism. But if you forget that there is only one true Gospel you will fall into relativism, syncretism and liberalism.

Accordingly Hitchen (1991:30) argues that we cannot choose whether or not we shall contextualise. We can only choose whether we do it well or poorly. We are so much part of our culture, and contextualisation is so much part of living as Christians in our culture for the sake of

²⁷ For example in his sermon, “What is the Gospel?”

[http://sermons2.redeemer.com/sites/sermons2.redeemer.com/files/sermons/RPC-What Is The Gospel.mp3](http://sermons2.redeemer.com/sites/sermons2.redeemer.com/files/sermons/RPC-What%20Is%20The%20Gospel.mp3)

²⁸ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2004/november/12.36.html?start=4>.

the world that we are constantly in the contextualisation process. Carson (1987:250) writes: “While we may speak of a ‘core’ of truths, without believing in which one cannot be a Christian, even this cannot be approached supraculturally”. Martin Goldsmith (1983:20) states it like this: “All theology is contextual. It must be, for all of us interpret the Bible through the spectacles of our philosophical background. And we, then, express our beliefs within the framework of those terms ... All theology, throughout history, has been expressed within the context of current religious and philosophical movements.”

Church history illustrates the inevitability of contextualisation: Evangelicals (and certainly Baptists) often exhibit a “restoration” mentality and approach — they make the case that they are striving to return to the pattern of faith, doctrine and lifestyle of the early church in Acts. In one sense this is highly commendable; in another sense it is extremely naïve. The fact of the matter is that there is no church on earth today that mirrors the church of Acts. There are significant differences in terms of structure, organisation, worship style, emotional atmosphere, liturgy, time, preaching and gender roles. Furthermore, we would have to ask which church in Acts we are trying to pattern ourselves on: Jerusalem? Antioch? Corinth? There is a sense in which those first century churches were themselves contextualised. The fundamental reason why no 21st century church closely resembles a first century church is that contextualisation has occurred. Yet it would certainly be affirmed by all contemporary reformed evangelicals that we hold to the same apostolic gospel and are committed to the same body of truth once delivered to all the saints.

In apparently contradicting this point, Hiebert calls the time period 1800-1950, the era of “non-contextualisation” (1987:104). This was the time of Victorian missions. It must be noted that this was not literally a period of non-contextualisation. It was a period of under-contextualisation. For these missionaries were exporting a type of Christianity that had itself been contextualised to their situation. It was believed that there was nothing in the indigenous culture that could be utilised and built on to bring the Gospel, so it was rejected large-scale and Victorian Christian culture and praxis were exported.

Put plainly, there is no universal presentation of the Gospel for all people. This point would be affirmed by Reformed Baptists, but not always fully appreciated. Reformed, conservative Christians should appreciate this as a fact, and not as something dangerous that leads to relativism and a denial of the Gospel. Reformed Baptists would give mental assent to this point. They need to think more deeply and reflect more carefully through this point.

6.3 An Unflinching Commitment to the Authority and Normative Nature of the Bible and Responsible Hermeneutics

The point has been made that contextualisation involves the dynamic interplay between the unchanging Scriptures and changing contexts. It must be strongly affirmed that this is not a relationship of equals. While it is true that culture must be exegeted and understood; and while it is true that the study of an alien culture will challenge and inform our own theological understanding and appreciation, the Bible is the supreme and final authority. The reformation principle of *Sola Scriptura* must always be held up and practised. This is always imperative, even more so in our postmodern era where doubt is glorified and there is a widespread denial of absolutes. Wells (2005:9) affirms that "... the Word of God is the means by which God accomplishes His saving work in his people, and this is a work that no evangelist and no preacher can do. That is why the dearth of serious, sustained biblical preaching in the Church today is a serious matter. When the Church loses the Word of God it loses the very means by which God does his work."

If the Bible is regarded as a fallible product of human culture then we are locked in an endless interpretive circle that goes back and forth between our culture and the Scriptures. Rather, the Bible has final authority and determines what is acceptable or unacceptable in a given context. De Vries (2005:20-21) has pointed out that the Reformation principle of *Sola Scriptura* does not deny that the Spirit also gives "sanctified wisdom to gather and refine golden nuggets from other sources." Insights from the social sciences, reason, tradition and preunderstandings all can legitimately play a part in the hermeneutical process. Yet Scripture remains the supreme and ultimate authority for theology.

It is imperative that the verbal, plenary inspiration of the Scriptures is affirmed and upheld. It is not merely themes, principles and ideas that are inspired — but the very words that the Spirit chose to reveal these truths. This is not suggesting that only a wooden, literalistic translation of Scripture is permissible. Rather the fact of plenary inspiration of Scripture compels the communicator to consider the words in the original context to ensure faithful communication.

The normative and authoritative nature of the Bible must be accompanied by responsible hermeneutics. As Reformed believers, it is much more appropriate to speak of the hermeneutical spiral, than it is to speak of the hermeneutical circle. If Scripture and culture are equally authoritative then the movement between text and context is an endless circle of change. But if Scripture is the supreme authority then the text-context movement is a spiral moving us toward better understanding of the Word and how it can be communicated and applied in a particular culture (Keller 2012:105).

The grammatico-historical method of interpretation needs to be followed. Padilla (1981:20-21) argues that Scripture must be understood in its original context, and he affirms that the goal is to hear the text as the first listeners did, and identify authorial intention. He affirms the grammatico-historical approach, and then poses this relevant question: Is the grammatico-historical approach not typically Western and consequently not binding upon non-Western cultures? He answers by saying that no interpreter is free to make the text say whatever they want. They must let the Bible speak for itself ... This requires engaging with the horizons of the text via literary context, grammar, vocabulary, and historical background. More significantly, Padilla contends that Western theology has *not* been characterised by a consistent use of the grammatico-historical approach in order to let the Bible speak. It has been a dogmatic approach that has been the dominant factor, by which competing theological systems have muted Scripture (1981:21).

D.A. Carson (1987:218) speaks of three “horizons of understanding” that are integral to responsible, orthodox hermeneutics:

- (i) the biblical documents themselves: the first listeners or readers of Scripture as their perspective is found in the Bible.
- (ii) the interpreter’s horizon: that is us, as we try and understand the Scriptures in our own situation.
- (iii) the horizon of understanding the group being evangelised.

Carson (1984:1) points out that these three horizons all pose challenges to the interpretation and application of Scriptures, particularly as one tries to cross from the second horizon to the third. The missionary must attempt to “fuse his own horizon of understanding with the horizon of understanding the text, and then attempt to bridge the gap between his own horizon of understanding, as it has been informed and instructed by the text, and the horizon of the person or people to whom he ministers”. The challenge of hermeneutics is to transpose the message from its original historical context into the context of the present day hearers so as to produce the same kind of impact on their lives as it did on the original hearers or readers. Carson insists that specific texts must be understood within the context of the whole canon. He argues that recognition of the canon of Scripture implicitly forbids an “atomistic” approach to individual texts.

It must be noted that the church (locally and globally) is a hermeneutical community that functions to test and correct all theology by the Bible. Hiebert (1994:91) states: “We need Christians from other cultures, for they see how our cultural biases have distorted our interpretations of the Scriptures”. Carson affirms that the aim must always be to develop

indigenous, contextualised Christianity that is in “heartly submission to Scripture and growing in its understanding and obedience to God’s Word” (1987:257).

South African Reformed Baptists would strongly affirm *Sola Scriptura* (as clearly shown by qualitative research done) and the necessity of employing orthodox methods of interpretation. This is commendable; it is imperative that this is never compromised. It is also imperative that we let the Bible critique our own understanding and praxis, not just the culture we are taking it to. *Sola Scriptura* and *Semper Reformanda* need to be affirmed and worked out in practise.

6.4 A Commitment to Orthodox, Historic, Evangelical Orthodoxy

It has been shown that contextualisation is a modern term with historical connotations to liberal, dubious theology. It needs to be stressed that all theological reflection, contextualisation and praxis must happen within the parameters of “the faith once delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). It does not follow that a high view of Scripture will lead to reformed evangelicalism. Therefore the fundamental tenets of Reformed evangelicalism need to be understood, re-affirmed, taught and cherished.

Wells (2005:313-314) shows how the contemporary evangelical church, under the influence of postmodernism, has been prone to marginalise and under appreciate the importance and necessity of careful and robust theological reflection. He argues that the church has been “slowly but inexorably stripping itself of its truth, doctrine and discipline.” (This is his central concern in his 1994 work: “No place for truth: or Whatever happened to Evangelical Theology?”) In this way the church has rid itself of the very things that would make it distinctive in this culture and those things that would give it something to proclaim. Reformed evangelicals need to take cognisance of this trend.

Carson (1996:542-547) makes a compelling case for the importance and value of biblical theology over systematic theology. He succinctly defines biblical theology as “an inductive discipline that tracks the Bible’s story line” (1996:542). The most basic plotlines of the biblical narrative would be creation, fall, redemption and new creation. He affirms the place and value of systematic theology, but states that the biblical theologian and systematician live in different worlds. He adds that systematic theology (as currently practised) is inadequate to handle the contemporary challenges from contextualisation and globalisation. It is the atemporal nature of the questions that systematic theology answers that is problematic.

He goes on to say that the systematician begins with a doctrinal confession and then trawls through the Scripture to build support for it. Thinking itself “almost immune from the pressures of postmodernism, it is of all the biblical and theological disciplines most apt to be snookered by it” (1996:543). This is because the topics raised and the categories deployed as one trawls

through the text are only sometimes generated by the text. More likely they are categories of tradition or the “relevant” categories of praxis. They do not adequately address the problems that postmoderns are asking. Furthermore, some cultures battle to think in analytic, abstract categories. Rather, they are drawn to the “poetic, the picturesque, the narrative, the evocative” (1996:544).

Carson (1996:545) proposes that systematic theology must increasingly build on biblical theology. Instead of trawling through Scripture to adduce support for a position, systematic theologians must increasingly build outward from the work of biblical theologians, including genre analysis and from their tracing of the Bible’s story line. This does not mean that systematicians must abandon their interest in atemporal questions and disregard their commitment to interact with historical theology. Rather, it means that “their own worldviews will be so wonderfully steeped in Biblical theology that they will be less likely to put a foot wrong.” Carson (1996:535) insists that the structure of systematic thought, however expressed, must reflect the Bible’s story-line. “Each major strand must be woven into the fabric that finds its climax and ultimate significance in the person and work of Jesus Christ.”

Bauckman’s insight into the value of the Biblical metanarrative is very illuminating. Bauckman (2005:90-94) points out that the biblical story is uniquely suited to address the postmodern context, in that it is a “non-modern” metanarrative. He defines a modern metanarrative as a “totalizing theory which aims to subsume all events, all perspectives and all forms of knowledge in a comprehensive rational explanation.” Such a metanarrative is very neat and tidy. He argues that there is a sense in which the Bible does not have a carefully plotted, single story line, like a conventional novel. He contends that the Bible does have an overall story that encompasses all its other contents, “but this story is not a sort of straitjacket that reduces all else to a narrowly defined conformity” (2005:93). He points out that the Bible is a sprawling collection of narratives, along with much non narrative material, some stretches are told several times, there are little stories in larger ones, some of the material is untidily arranged, and there are fragments that “seem to lead nowhere.” Though there is coherence, it is not a simple, straightforward coherence. In this sense it is ideally suited to postmoderns who understand diversity, tension and apparent contradiction.

Bauckham states: “If the Bible offers a metanarrative, a story of all stories, then we should be able to place our own stories within that grand narrative and find our own perception and experience of the world transformed by the connexion” (2003:12). Rather than standing outside of the story in order to analyse it and apply it, the gospel invites us to become part of the biblical story. Postmoderns reject all overarching narratives as being oppressive and authoritarian. The Gospel should be narrated as the story of a compassionate God, who repeatedly chooses the lowly (1 Cor 1:18-2:3; Phil 2:6-8), centres on the humility and shame of the cross and calls

sinner to repentance. It is also a message of judgment for the impenitent (Acts 17:30, 31). A message for our postmodern culture will invite people to see the world and their own lives through the biblical story and allow that story to reshape their lives.

Carson (2000:384-398) affirms the vital importance of what could be called worldview evangelism and biblical theology. He points out that evangelism in the West has generally consisted of an aggressive, intense presentation of one small part of the Bible's story line, or one small passage of Scripture. Up to just a couple of decades ago our evangelism presupposed that most unbelievers were familiar with the Bible's story line and with the basic content of the Bible. Things are very different now. Not only are Westerners biblically illiterate, but they have developed an array of worldviews — which have been hugely shaped by postmodernism. Evangelism in this postmodern climate means starting “further back” (Carson 2000:386). The good news of what God has done through His Son is incoherent unless it is understood in the context of the grand narrative. A biblically faithful exposition of John 3:16 only makes sense in the context of the Bible's plot line.

The biblical communicator must “find ways into the values, heart, thought patterns ... worldview of those who are being evangelized but must not let that non-Christian worldview domesticate the biblical message. The evangelist must find bridges into the other's frame of reference, or no communication is possible; the evangelist will remain ghettoized” (Carson 2000:287). Carson argues that this approach was modelled by the Apostle Paul in his evangelistic strategy to the intelligent, biblically illiterate Athenians (Acts 17:16-34). His main point is that Paul presents a contrasting worldview to the Athenians. He says that it is “extraordinarily important” to see that Paul has established the framework of the biblical metanarrative *before* he introduces Jesus.

There could be possible conflict here. Reformed Baptists are committed to expository preaching. The two main Reformed Baptist ministerial forums in South Africa, Sola 5 and Spurgeon's Ministers' Fraternal both put a high premium on expository preaching. By definition this involves the systematic, intense, verse by verse, chapter by chapter exposition of Scripture. Moreover, it often means only a couple of verses or a small section of the Bible is covered at one time. But it must be noted that expository preaching and a worldview approach are not mutually exclusive. Carson himself is a strong proponent of expository preaching.²⁹ But it does mean that the preacher will have to go to great lengths to sketch the bigger picture. It also requires the speaker to be more creative and deliberately aim to put the little stories in the context of the grand story which culminates in Christ.

²⁹ For example see his November 2013 article on the TGC website entitled: “6 Reasons not to abandon Expository Preaching.” <http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/6-reasons-not-to-abandon-expository-preaching> — accessed on 5 May 2015.

Reformed Baptists would do well to listen to Carson. Historically Baptists have been far stronger on systematic theology than on biblical theology. Tom Schreiner's recent work: "The King in His Beauty: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testament" (2013), is a tremendous biblical theology that should be studied by Reformed Baptists.³⁰ D.A. Carson's "The God who is there" (2010, Baker Books) is another biblical theology which Reformed Baptists could consult with great benefit to the church.

6.5 A Commitment to the Priority of the Gospel

All ministry and all contextualisation should be fuelled by a passion for God's glory and the priority of the Gospel. To be in line with the New Testament, Reformed Baptist pastors should echo the passion of Paul in 1 Cor 9:16, 23 where he exclaims: "Woe is me if I do not preach the Gospel" and "I do all this for the sake of the Gospel." There should be a concern that it is the true, apostolic Gospel that is being communicated (Gal 1:6-10). If the Gospel is not being faithfully communicated then our Christian witness is fundamentally flawed and seriously defective.

However, what constitutes the Gospel is not a straightforward matter. There are strongly evangelical churches who hold to the authority of Scripture who claim that if there is not an impassioned "altar call" at the conclusion of every worship service the Gospel has not been preached. In this sense, conservative evangelicals are prone to having a reductionist or simplistic view of the Gospel.

Keller (2012:29-52) makes the point that it is essential that our churches understand the Gospel correctly, be shaped by it, and communicate it faithfully. He makes the following points about the Gospel:

- (i) It is good news, not good advice. It is not primarily something we do, but something that has been done for us. Therefore the Gospel is directly related to sovereign grace.
- (ii) It is good news concerning a rescue from deadly peril that has been fully accomplished and provided.
- (iii) Its focus is on God's action in Jesus Christ. It centres on what Jesus Christ has done to restore our relationship with God. At the heart of the gospel is divine substitutionary atonement.

³⁰ Schreiner is professor of New Testament Interpretation at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky.

- (iv) The Gospel has two perennial enemies: legalism and antinomianism. A very sharp distinction between these false doctrines and the gospel is crucial for the life changing power of the Holy Spirit to work.
- (v) Preaching general biblical truth and biblical content is not preaching the Gospel. In this sense it is possible to be “biblical” and yet avoid the Gospel.
- (vi) However, biblical truth, history and doctrine must form the backdrop for the effective preaching of the Gospel. “The more we understand the whole corpus of Biblical doctrine, the more we will understand the Gospel itself — and the more we understand the Gospel, the more we will come to see that this is ... what the Bible is really about” (Keller 2012:32).
- (vii) The Gospel must be understood within the grand narrative of cosmic redemption. Keller uses the four points of Creation, Fall, Redemption and New Creation/Consummation as the critical points of the biblical narrative. The gospel must be tied to the Bible story line and themes. Carson makes the same point very strongly, arguing that Gospel preaching must be in the context of overall story/worldview (Carson 2000:384-398).
- (viii) Because of the bigness of the gospel and the material that relates to it, there is no single way to present the biblical gospel. The Bible does not give one standard outline. “As such the gospel has a supernatural versatility to address the particular hopes, fears, and idols of every culture and person” (Keller 2012:44). The Gospel should not be reduced to a trite, simplistic formula. This has obvious ramifications for Reformed Baptists and for their methods in evangelising.
- (ix) Keller (2012:46-48) makes the point that the gospel affects everything and changes everything. He points out that the Gospel is not the ABC of the faith (for novices), but the A-Z of the faith, for all believers at all times.
- (x) He asserts that because the gospel is endlessly rich and deep, it can handle the burden of being the one “main thing” of a church (2012:36). It can be, and should be preached from all the Scriptural genres, all the stories, all the pages, all the themes and principles of Scripture. The Willowbank Report (1978:7) similarly states that the Bible proclaims the Gospel in many different forms. Like a diamond, it is multi-faceted, having different aspects that appeal to different people in different contexts. It has depths that we have not fathomed, and it “defies every attempt to reduce it to a neat formulation.”

Reformed Baptists would definitely affirm the priority of the Gospel. Care needs to be taken to ensure a truncated Gospel is not communicated. More attention could be given to ensure that all the various facets of the Gospel are preached in a creative, compelling fashion.

6.6 A Commitment to a Biblically Balanced Theology of Culture:

“Culture is the fertile soil of contextualisation” states Flemming (2006: 118). He adds that if we desire to construct a biblical theology of contextualisation, the fascinating question of the interface between gospel and culture must be addressed. This is a huge and complex topic. This study will be confined to the broad contours of the subject.

Vanhoozer (2007:41) puts it like this: “... one’s theology of culture ... will have a decisive bearing on the seriousness and openness with which the church approaches culture: is it a battleground on which to engage the enemy, a classroom in which to learn, a sanctuary in which to worship? Is it beneficial or harmful to our spiritual health? Is the cultural atmosphere polluted and, if so should we flee it or clean it?”

Flemming (2006:125-151) argues that there are four processes involved in Paul’s attitude toward culture. He borrows some of Niebuhr’s insights, from his important work, “Christ and Culture” (1954).

- (i) *Affirming culture*: culture has a theological dimension that is rooted in God’s creation and ongoing commitment to the world. Paul assumes God’s active presence in creation, which includes cultures. In Romans 1 and 2 Paul writes of God’s gracious activity outside of His special revelation to Israel or gospel proclamation: via creation and conscience. Through general revelation and common grace, God has not left Himself without witness in any culture. Paul does not outrightly reject all human cultures as the result of the fall. He affirms cultural particularity and uses it to share the gospel (1 Cor 9:19-23).

“... Paul does not stigmatize the dominant Greco-Roman culture as inherently sinful or something from which Christians should withdraw outright. On the contrary, he seems to recognise the breath of God’s grace in human culture, and as an apostle to the Gentiles, he himself becomes a catalyst for the gospel’s inculturation within it. Paul demonstrates enormous flexibility in making use of the cultural materials that were available to him” (Flemming 2006:134).

- (ii) *Relativising culture*: cultural distinctions are relativised in the light of the Gospel. Paul teaches that what God has achieved through Christ is something radically new and brings an end to the old order of things (Gal 3:28; Col 3:11). Being a new creation in Christ effects a new set of relationships that “largely relativises the major distinctions of human society, whether ethnic, cultural, socioeconomic or gender”

(2006:135). However the relativising of cultures is not the removal of culture. Paul does not anticipate the blending of all Christians into a bland sameness that expunges cultural and social distinction. Paul's delicate dance between cultural particularity and cultural relativity bears implications for the task of contextualising the gospel. "Because no single cultural expression is ultimate, the gospel is free to come to life in a plurality of cultures and circumstances. Yet because God values all cultures and because the gospel cannot be heard in the abstract apart from a cultural home, God must speak to the Jew as a Jew, to the Greek as a Greek ..." (2006:138).

- (iii) *Confronting Culture*: Romans 1 affirms that culture not only provides the locus for God's gracious activity, it is also the "theatre of human sinfulness." (2006:139). All have sinned, all are rebels; therefore all cultures are not neutral conduits for the Gospel — "they are riddled with the cancer of sin" (2006:139). Because all cultures embody human rebellion against God they must be challenged and confronted. "The gospel cannot be good news without prophetically judging the sinful elements of culture and the works of darkness" (Flemming 2006: 140).

In commenting on 1 Cor 1:22-25, Keller makes this pertinent observation: Paul assumes the mixed nature of culture. When evangelising Greeks, he confronted their idol of wisdom. When speaking to Jews, he confronted their idol of power and skill. Yet Greeks who were saved would come to see that the cross was the ultimate in wisdom. Similarly, believing Jews would come to understand that the cross was true power (2012:111-112). Fleming's pertinent warning should be heeded: "in a time when efforts to 'contextualize' are often more successful at accommodating to culture than prophetically judging it, Paul's witness needs to be heard" (2006: 142).

- (iv) *Transforming culture*: Paul affirms that the grace of the gospel opens up the potential for cultures to be reformed and transformed from within. Just as sin has had a comprehensive, holistic effect on culture, so the new creation in Christ should affect culture in a comprehensive way. Cultural transformation should start with individual Christians and communities themselves experiencing the renewal of God's grace. The church is called not to conform to the world, but to be transformed by the renewing of the mind (Rom 12:2). The Philippian letter is important here. Paul (because of the context of the city) employs political language to show that the local believers in a sense have a dual citizenship (Phil 1:27; 3:20). He calls Jesus both Saviour and Lord (2:11). "... the Philippians must reconstruct their colonial and political identity in light of their loyalty to Jesus, the true Lord and Saviour, who

reigns over a counter-empire to that of Caesar” (2006:143). Paul spends much time in his letters on the necessity of transformed moral behaviour and the development of a distinctive Christian ethic. This covers everything from distinctive personal attitudes such as humility, to distinctive family dynamics and distinctive employer-employee relationships.

These four attitudes-affirming, relativising, confronting and transforming culture are not isolated processes. There is overlap and flexibility in how Paul addresses his world in a specific setting. Like Paul, “we must critique our own culture even while remaining in it ... we must be willing to identify with another’s culture without uncritically accommodating to it ... we must let the gospel speak transformingly to that culture without imposing a foreign culture upon it” (Flemming 2006:151).

Vanhoozer (2007:41-44) writes that there are four doctrines that have special bearing on a theology of culture: the incarnation, general revelation, common grace and the *imago Dei* (humankind in the image of God.) This researcher would add that the doctrine of human depravity is also a crucial component in understanding culture.

Keller (2012:108-109), like Flemming, affirms that every culture is a mixed bag of good and bad elements: “every human culture is an extremely complex mixture of brilliant truth, marred half-truths, and overt resistance to the truth. Every culture will have some idolatrous discourse within it. And yet, every culture will have some witness to God’s truth in it.” He states that our attitude toward every human culture should be one of critical enjoyment and a suitable wariness. The expressions of justice, truth, beauty and creativity in every culture should be enjoyed and celebrated. But there must be the sober awareness that it has been drastically distorted and marred by sin, in particular idolatry.

The Lausanne Covenant (2009:43) under section 10 affirms the following about culture: “Culture must always be tested and judged by Scripture. Because men and women are God’s creatures, some of their culture is rich in beauty and goodness. Because they are fallen, all of it is tainted with sin and some of it is demonic. The gospel does not presuppose the superiority of any culture to other ... Missions have, all too frequently, exported with the gospel an alien culture, and churches have sometimes been in bondage to culture rather than Scripture.”

Reformed Baptists need to do more reflection on a balanced theology of culture. The Lausanne Covenant (2009 edition with comprehensive study notes) and the Lausanne supplementary documents (such as The Willowbank Report, Lausanne Occasional paper 2, 1978) would be a good place to start. The Willowbank Report (1978:2) contends that many evangelicals have in the past been overly critical towards culture: “We deplore the pessimism which leads some

Christians to disapprove of active cultural engagement in the world ... Nevertheless naïve optimism is as foolish as dark pessimism. Rather we seek a sober Christian realism” (Willowbank 1978:20). Reformed Baptists should take cognisance of this. Niebuhr’s older book “Christ and Culture” (1954) is worth studying and Keller’s work must be considered (2012:181-243). Carson’s “Christ and Culture Revisited” (2102, Eerdmans) will reward careful reflection especially in our postmodern, increasingly urban contexts.

There is a dire need for Reformed Baptists to understand the times. Reformed evangelicals will need to appreciate that the disconnect or gap between ourselves (church leaders and preachers) and the “average” postmodern/nominal Christian in terms of theological understanding and worldview is massive and growing all the time.

There are contemporary resources available that Reformed Baptists could utilise with some benefit. Mike Cospers’ book, “The Stories we tell” (2005) is very helpful. He notes the tremendous amount of television that westerners watch, and puts it down to our love of stories. He then explores many well-known movies and TV series and demonstrates how they in some respect mirror the bible story line of creation, fall, redemption and new creation. He shows how bridges can be built from the popular stories of our time to the Gospel. In this way the postmodern ethos can become the contact point for exploring the claims of Jesus Christ. Cospers’ approach dovetails with Bauckman, who argues that the biblical story is not only critical of other stories, but also “hospitable” to other stories. “On its way to the kingdom of God it does not abolish all other stories, but brings them all into a relationship to itself ...” (2005:110).

Vanhoozer’s (ed) book, “Everyday Theology: How to read Cultural Texts and Interpret Trends” 2007, is a very useful resource for exegeting popular culture. His point is that all Christians can and should develop a reasonable degree of cultural literacy — that is, the ability to read and interpret the world we live in through the lens of the Bible and Christian faith (2007:11). If all Christians can attain some level of cultural literacy, surely it is a more pressing requirement for those in leadership? After giving his readers tools for cultural exegesis, and examples of cultural exegesis, Van Hoozer (2007:242-243) stresses that the pursuit must not remain an intellectual pursuit. The goal is to live redemptively and wisely in all of life.

Carson (1996:494-495) points out that highlighting and critiquing the moral, intellectual and existential bankruptcy of our pluralistic, postmodern times is a helpful method for heralding the Gospel. There is a profound and bitter emptiness at the hearts of many men and women in western culture. The explanation for this must be traced to its roots in biblical theology.

6.7 A Realistic Grasp of the Dangers Involved in Contextualisation

There needs to be a sober appreciation of the dangers and complexities involved in contextualisation. Three dangers will be highlighted and briefly discussed:

6.7.1 The danger of not contextualising (or thinking you aren't)

Keller makes this point (2012:96-97) and it follows logically from the fact of the inevitability of contextualisation. All gospel ministry is already adapted to a particular culture — so it is imperative to contextualise deliberately and consciously. If we fail to do this, the gospel proclamation will be contextualised to some other culture. This means the gospel ministry will be overadapted to our own culture, and underadapted to the new cultures. Keller points out that contextualisation is difficult for members of socially dominant groups to grasp, for they fail to see how deeply enculturated they are. There is a Chinese proverb that says if you want a definition of water, do not ask a fish (Newbigin 1986:21). There is the danger of being so enculturated that the environment goes totally unobserved. This can lead to the unconscious identification of Christianity with the American way of life. This is a form of syncretism. Nicholls (1979:31) points out how this is found in middle-class, suburban, conservative congregations who are apparently unaware that their lifestyle has more affinity to the principles of consumer capitalism than to the realities of the Scriptures. Failure to see one's own cultural baggage will also result in pastors and missionaries regurgitating the methods and programmes that personally influenced them. They will take them to another part of the world or to a different sub-culture in the city and try and reproduce them there unchanged: "they are contextualising their ministry to themselves, not to the people they want to reach" (Keller 2012:97).

6.7.2 The problem of a canon within a canon

Carson (1984:21-24; 1987:245-246) and Keller (2012:102-103) draw attention to this danger. One of the main ways our biblical understanding remains distorted is through having a "canon within the canon." Some parts of Scripture are regarded as more important than other parts which are ignored or disregarded. While the Protestant church officially accepts a closed canon comprising of 66 books, it invariably shapes its theology by greater reliance on some parts of the canon than on others. Two churches will agree on a common canon, but disagree (implicitly or explicitly) over their respective "canons within the canon." Carson (1984:23) says "the name of the game is reductionism — the taming of Scripture by not letting all of it speak to us." In this way the canon can lose all of its canonical authority and the Bible loses its prophetic bite. "It appears that advocates of a certain kind of contextualisation are aware of the dangers of Scripture plus, but are insufficiently sensitive to the dangers of Scripture minus — the distortion

of the message by preferential removal of those parts of the Bible's message that seem less congenial" (Carson 1987:245).

Carson cites two examples (1984:22-23): a pastor may wish to encourage people to follow his leadership almost without question. This may be because he is a demagogue, or because people naturally reverence leaders. He could quote passages like Heb 13:7 repeatedly, but it is very unlikely that he will use 1 Pet 5:11ff or Matt 20:24-28. This pastor theoretically has a unified canon, but he clearly operates with a canon within a canon. Similarly, many Western Christians do not hear Scriptures when they speak about the poor or justice. Their poorer counterparts would be highly sensitised to the passages that treat poverty and justice.

Keller (2012:103) puts it like this: "Our sociocultural location makes us prone to flatten the teachings of scripture, ignoring some parts and exaggerating others. When we interact with people from other cultures and social settings, we find our particular distortions being challenged. So while gospel communicators should seek to correct their hearers' cultural beliefs with the gospel, it is inevitable that contact with a new culture will also end up correcting the *communicators'* understanding of the gospel."

Carson (1984:23) proposes the following remedy for this problem: We need to listen to other believers, particularly when we do not like what we hear. And we need to let the whole of Scripture speak to us and challenge us. "We need to embark, personally and ecclesiastically, on systematic studies of Scripture that forces us to confront the entire spectrum of Biblical truth, what Paul calls 'the whole counsel of God' "

6.7.3 The dangers of over and under contextualisation

We must note Gilliland's (1989:12) sober warning: "Contextualisation is a delicate enterprise if ever there was one. The evangelist stands on a razor's edge. Fall to the right and you will end up in a rigid obscurantism. Slip to the left and you will end up in a rudderless syncretism." Keller (2012: 119) affirms that we must strive to avoid both "cultural captivity" — the refusal to adapt to new times and new cultures, and syncretism — bringing unbiblical views and practices into our Christianity. The danger of the first is being incomprehensible and irrelevant; the danger of the second is losing our Christian identity, distinctiveness, and the Gospel itself. Syncretism and obscurantism remain great dangers in the church's ministry to the world.

Nicholls (1979:29) defines syncretism as "the attempt to reconcile diverse or conflicting beliefs, or religious practices into a unified system." Missiologist Van Rheeën defines it in this manner: "Syncretism occurs when Christian leaders accommodate, either consciously or unconsciously, to the prevailing plausibility structures or worldviews of their culture" (2006:3). If the church

does not actively seek to remain counter-cultural, the consequences will be devastating (Matt 5:13).

Church history and the contemporary church scene are replete with examples of both errors. There appear to be streams within the Emerging church movement, who, highly sensitised to their context, have over contextualised the Gospel and have fallen into syncretism. In the fog of post modernism, objective truth and doctrine have been jettisoned, and vagueness and relativism are being glorified. This is the burden that Carson addresses in his important book, "Becoming conversant with the Emerging Church" 2005. Similarly, Taylor (2008:7) in his critique of the Emerging Church movement argues that when you criticise the historic orthodox interpretation of the atonement, and pour scorn on the notion of absolute truth, and query the value of propositional truth in the Bible and question traditional sexual ethics you have lost your connection with historic Christianity.

But the converse is also evident. There are those from a fundamentalist background who tacitly advocate a "one size fits all" Gospel message and thus under-contextualise the Gospel. After considering the American church from a missiological perspective, Newbigin showed that it was poorly contextualised and excessively syncretistic. He meant that that American Christians had adopted many elements of the "pagan" worldviews that dominate their society — materialism, individualism, bureaucracy, democracy, comfort, security (1986:1-41). A white, middle class South African evangelical would be quick to point out the syncretism that may be part of African Christian spirituality — where there is worship of Jesus accompanied with ancestor worship and perhaps clandestine visits to the sangoma. They would probably be much slower to recognise the problems of a therapeutic, materialistic, sentimental and individualistic gospel.

Data gathered from the questionnaires and interviews with South African Baptists has demonstrated that there is a keen awareness of the danger that over-contextualisation or syncretism poses. Christians should always be highly sensitised about this grave danger. However, Reformed Baptists would do well to consider the dangers of uncritical under-contextualisation, which could result in obscurantism and a rigid fundamentalism. Part of the solution to these dangers is that the Gospel communicator should be aware of their own cultural baggage and contextualisation must be done deliberately and carefully.

6.8 Galatians: A model for critiquing contextualisation

In his paper, "Culture and the Bible: the question of contextualisation" Hitchen (1991:49-51) uses the letter to the Galatians as a "check" to ensure that we are on track with authentic, biblical contextualisation. This letter wrestles with the classic contextualisation problem: Is accepting the Jewish rite of circumcision, in addition to faith in Christ, essential to salvation? Or

put differently: is one cultural expression of the gospel to be absolutised as the universal norm? Paul's answer is clear and emphatic — each culture has direct access to salvation on the basis of faith in Christ alone, without having to adopt foreign cultural forms to enjoy it. Paul's answer covers the whole letter and in his carefully constructed argument he offers us a series of questions to help us critique all our contextualising. Hitchen poses the following “checks” for contextualisation based on Galatians:

- (i) Does the contextualising cling to and affirm the one-and-only apostolic message? (Gal 1:1-2:11). The uniqueness and the unchanging nature of the gospel are upheld as the standard for every cultural setting.
- (ii) Does the contextualising pass the cultural-equity test? (Gal 2:11-21) Sound contextualisation leads to lifestyle consistency across cultural barriers. The aim is that the hearers “will act in line with the Gospel” 2:14. Do the meanings apply bi-culturally and multi-culturally, specifically in the area of social relations? If not, the contextualisation is inadequate. “In the very process of particularising the method, we must always reflect its universal scope” (Hitchen 1991:49).
- (iii) Does the contextualisation uphold the continuity with the “adoptive heritage of the faith?” (Gal 3:1-18). Is the interpretation in line with the already-received faith in our Abraham/Moses/Christ/Pentecost deposit of the faith? Contextualisation always occurs in the family of the faithful. It must therefore reflect the family heritage.
- (iv) Does the contextualising give proper respect to the previous cultural heritage? (Gal 3:19-4:7). Here Paul does not only define the limits of the value of Jewish religion, but he does it in such a way as to retain a proper respect for its role in society and its preparatory role for the Gospel (3:19-25). Incredibly, he then attributes the same roles to the “*stoicheia*” — the elemental spirits of the universe. The apostle recognises the positive role of “pre-Christian” cultural values.
- (v) Does the contextualisation lead to reversion to previous cultural norms, or on to new life in Christ — as children, not servants? (Gal 3:25-29; 4:4-11). There is always a risk of the contextualisation leading back into legalism and bondage, of either the sending or receiving culture. Respect for traditional religion must in no way be confused with reversion to it. Effective contextualisation discerns the difference.
- (vi) Does the contextualisation enable freedom in Christ to permeate the new culture (Gal 5:16-6:10)? The culture of the bringer of the Gospel must not be imposed on top of the new believers' own faith. This is the fundamental message of the epistle: Christ alone, grace alone, faith alone.

- (vii) Does the contextualising allow the Spirit to transform the personal, social and communal life of the receiving culture (Gal 5:16-6:10)? The real proof of contextualisation is the depth of its transforming effect within the new culture.
- (viii) Does the contextualisation glorify Christ crucified, and incorporate the hearer into the people of God — or does it merely focus on external rituals (Gal 6:11-18)? In this closing paragraph the apostle focuses on loyalty to the cross and demonstrating the new life of God's people.

Hitchen poses these criteria as an integrated test for authentic contextualisation:

- (i) Apostolic loyalty
- (ii) Cultural equity
- (iii) Continuity with the heritage of the faith
- (iv) Respect for cultural heritage
- (v) Not reversion, but new life
- (vi) Freedom within the new culture
- (vii) Transformation of the new culture
- (viii) Glorifying Christ as God's new people

This is no simplistic formula for dealing with all the complexities in contextualisation. But it offers an overall framework. It also highlights the thesis: contextualisation is at the heart of knowing Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. We cannot avoid it. But we can choose whether to do it faithfully or poorly. Lest the church become discouraged by the challenge of the task, she should heed Bauckham's (2005:91-92) reminder that her mission is "God's work before and after it is ours ... God continually makes more of what we do for him than we can make of it ourselves, and God continually prevents the harm and foolishness and failures we would do."

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSIONS AND POSSIBLE FUTURE RESEARCH

7.1 Conclusions

The goal of this research has been to demonstrate that Reformed Baptists should engage in deliberate, biblical contextualisation in urban, postmodern South Africa. Through the course of this investigation the following fundamental points have been made:

- (i) Both qualitative and quantitative research indicates that Reformed Baptists are struggling to reach new generations with the Gospel of Jesus Christ in South Africa.
- (ii) There is no doubt that the context of ministry in South Africa is increasingly urban. In terms of its religious complexion, the research has shown that it may be described as nominal-postmodern. Therefore it is imperative that South African Gospel communicators come to terms with these realities.
- (iii) This researcher has endeavoured to show that intentional biblical contextualisation is always a key component of authentic Gospel ministry. The faithful pastor should live in the missiological tension between contending for the faith and contextualising the ministry of the Word.
- (iv) South African Reformed Baptists (like their counterparts abroad) sometimes display tentative, suspicious or critical attitudes toward contextualisation. Their caution is warranted to some degree in that the term is a relatively new one in evangelical circles, and it has historical links to liberal theology and the World Council of Churches.
- (v) While the term is new, the concept is ancient and must be traced back to the nature and purposes of the triune God. A key part of this dissertation has been to show the substantial theological-Biblical basis for careful, intentional contextualisation. God's method of self disclosure has consistently been to meet people where they are — in the specifics of their own context. The incarnation and ministry of His Son is the supreme example of this. The NT documents and the missiological strategies of the apostles indicate a firm commitment to contextualisation. The research has endeavoured to show that one cannot take the Scriptures seriously, and have a low view of contextualisation (as defined by Keller 2012:89).
- (vi) A Biblical theology of contextualisation would include the following essential elements:

- a. a solid epistemology
 - b. an appreciation of the inevitability of contextualisation
 - c. a very clear commitment to the supremacy and authority of Scripture
 - d. a commitment to historic, evangelical orthodoxy
 - e. a commitment to the priority of the Gospel
 - f. a biblically balanced view of culture
 - g. a realistic view of the dangers of contextualisation
- (vii) While there has been an appropriate stress on the necessity of understanding context and culture, the supremacy of Scripture must be noted. Concerning the centrality of Scripture, Wells' (2005:7) comment is pertinent, "... theology stands or falls with the Word of God, for the Word of God precedes all theological words by creating, arousing and challenging them."
- (viii) Claiming that the West is a mission field is now common; and this researcher has argued similarly. But there is a big gap between the rhetoric and the reality of our attitudes, argue Chester and Timmis (2012:40). Reformed Baptist pastors will need to appreciate that the "disconnect" or gap between themselves (church leaders and preachers) and the "average" postmodern/nominal Christian in terms of theological understanding and worldview is massive and growing all the time. Because the South African urban context is substantially nominal/postmodern, Reformed Baptist pastors should take the stance of cross cultural missionaries. Just as cross cultural missionaries have to learn a new language and become conversant with a different worldview and culture, so Reformed Baptist pastors will have to learn to connect with and communicate effectively with postmodern, relativistic, unchurched urbanites.

7.2 Possible Future Research: Considering Tim Keller's Model of Contextualisation

A case has been made for South African Reformed Baptists to reconsider deliberate, Biblical contextualisation in their endeavours to reach urban postmoderns with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The question now arises as to whether there is a model of contextualisation to follow or learn from in the Reformed Evangelical world. Such a model would have to be founded on the essential building blocks of biblical contextualisation as discussed in chapter 5. Essentially it

would have to be clearly Reformed in theology, yet have a sound methodology in reaching postmoderns. It is this researcher's view that the theology and contextualisation model of Dr Tim Keller and its applicability for South African urban contexts should be considered in further research.

Why does Keller's model of contextualisation merit consideration?

The growing impact of Keller's theology and praxis across the globe.³¹ Keller is pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian church, Manhattan, New York. He planted this church 25 years ago with only a few people. It now has a thriving membership of over 5000 people. He is a prolific and bestselling author. His "Reason for God: Belief in God in an age of Scepticism" (a presuppositional apologetic work aimed at postmoderns) was a New York Times bestseller. This book and his "Prodigal God" have sold well over a million copies. His "Center Church" has made a significant impact in missiological circles across the globe.³² His books have been translated into 15 languages. In the Netherlands, Stephan Paas, a Missiology professor of the Free University of Amsterdam initiated the publication of an adaptation of Keller's "Center Church" with application for the Netherlands.³³ As a conference speaker he is in very high demand. He serves as chairman for the church planting network Redeemer City to City which grew out of the Manhattan ministry. The Redeemer City to City outreach has given birth to urban church planting coalitions and conferences in several cities in Europe, Asia, Australia and Africa. To date this church planting network has been instrumental in launching over 250 churches in 48 global cities.³⁴ Furthermore, Keller is establishing a new seminary in New York in partnership with Reformed Theological Seminary (Jackson, Mississippi) that will prepare students specifically for urban, contextualised Gospel ministry.³⁵

His value lies ***in his ability and commitment to faithfully contextualise the Gospel to postmodern people without sacrificing biblical truth and robust theology.*** Indeed, Keller would argue that we contextualise not because of a commitment to an agenda of pragmatic efficiency. We contextualise because of our commitment to God and His truth. His theology and praxis of contextualisation can be found in his important work, "Center Church" (2012:89-134) and hundreds of his sermons and lectures can be evaluated in terms of contextualisation.

As pointed out above, ***he has the right, acceptable "theological credentials"***. He is clearly and unashamedly Reformed in his theological understanding. Furthermore he is strongly confessional, holding to the Westminster Confession of Faith. (In fact, he has recently produced

³¹ See Keller's short bio at <http://www.timothykeller.com/>

³² http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/847789.Timothy_Keller

³³ <http://www.eo.nl/geloven/nieuws/item/standaardwerk-tim-keller-in-het-nederlands/>

³⁴ <http://www.redeemercitytocity.com/>

³⁵ <http://www.christiantoday.com/article/tim.kellers.church.launches.new.york.bible.college/40896.htm>

a New City Catechism based on the Westminster standards and the Heidelberg Catechism.)³⁶ He enjoys a high profile in Reformed evangelical circles around the world. He is held in the same regard as men such as Don Carson and John Piper, with whom he founded The Gospel Coalition — an international network of God centred, evangelical conservative theologians and pastors.³⁷ My preliminary qualitative research indicates that Keller also enjoys a very high profile among evangelical South African pastors.

Having said this, there are pastors and theologians who are critical and opposed to Keller's views. They consider Keller's theology suspect. Some Baptist pastors are also suspicious of Keller. A 2013 publication, "Engaging with Keller: Thinking through the Theology of an Influential Evangelical" raises concerns about his theology. This publication will need to be assessed and evaluated.

Keller is particularly skilled in reaching postmoderns. There is no part of South Africa that is exactly like Manhattan, but Keller can help Reformed evangelicals in their endeavours to reach postmoderns.

Keller is strongly urban focused. Urbanisation poses great challenges and unique opportunities to Christian mission. In his "Center Church" he devotes four chapters to a theology of the city (Keller 2012:135-180). Furthermore he presented much of this content at the 2010 Lausanne meeting in Cape Town, under the title: "What is God's global urban mission?" His theology of the city is compelling, balanced and finely nuanced. He calls Christians to face up to the challenges and opportunities that urbanisation presents to gospel ministry. "I argue that there is nothing more critical for the evangelical church today than to emphasize and support urban ministry" (2012:162). I would contend that Keller is highly relevant because the future complexion of our country is increasingly urban and post Christian.

Keller is not a theological iconoclast. He is not anti institutional or anti the traditional church. He advocates a healthy, responsible balance between the church as an institution and the church as a dynamic, contemporary movement. He contends that a healthy biblical church should have institutional elements (like inherited traditions) and exhibit movement dynamics (like vision and flexibility.) This is important and significant, for some who endeavour to reach postmoderns are prone to dismiss everything in the established, historical church.³⁸ Keller argues that a healthy church should be centred in the place of tension between being a dynamic organism and a disciplined organisation (2012:342). Redeemer Presbyterian church is

³⁶ <http://www.newcitycatechism.com/home.php>

³⁷ See the TGC website at <http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/>

³⁸ For example, while Hirsch makes valid points in his book, "The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church," he is overly and unnecessarily dismissive of 2000 years of church history in his quest to find "apostolic genius."

flourishing with wealthy, trendy, arty “yuppies” of Manhattan. Yet the preaching of the Word remains the central focus of worship. Moreover, the tone, structure and emotional atmosphere are very traditional. There is no gimmickry. Keller does not propose any tacky, superficial innovation. Rather, in his endeavours to reach New York with the Gospel he is standing firmly on the shoulders of spiritual giants — Reformed theologians of bygone times. It could be argued that a significant part of Redeemer’s success is the fact that under the providence of God, Keller has given much attention to the deliberate, conscious contextualisation of the Gospel.

Keller calls for **contextualisation that is comprehensive and holistic**. His approach calls for thinking carefully about music, worship style and emotional atmosphere. In his preaching and teaching he utilises presuppositional apologetics to challenge the worldview of his listeners. He is strongly missional, stresses Christian vocation in all spheres and strives to equip members to be effective in the workplace.³⁹ He emphasises justice and mercy ministries.⁴⁰ The focus of this particular study has been on the need for Reformed Baptists to become more intentional in terms of Biblical contextualisation. Further research is needed on how it should be done in terms of holistic ministry.

Keller is not an ivory tower theologian; **he is a practitioner**. He is contextualising the unchanging Word of God to thousands of people lost in the fog of postmodernism in New York. There is no gap between theory and practise. His homiletics and hermeneutics can be assessed and evaluated in terms of contextualisation. He has a well documented track record of more than 25 years that can be scrutinised and evaluated. Keller asserts that contextualisation is not negotiable, and that skill in contextualisation is one of the keys to effective ministry in all contexts.

In Keller one sees a commitment to deep theological faithfulness and an unwavering commitment to contextualisation (i.e. firmness and flexibility; contending and contextualisation). This researcher’s contention is that his theological understanding and praxis, specifically his emphasis on the ongoing necessity of biblical contextualisation could be of great value to Reformed pastors in South Africa. While he enjoys a high profile in South African evangelical circles, his strong views on the necessity and priority of deliberate gospel contextualisation have gone largely undetected. These need to be understood, critically evaluated and appropriated.

³⁹ As in his 2012 book, “Every good endeavour: Connecting your work to God’s plan for the world.” (Dutton Publishers).

⁴⁰ He has written two important works on mercy and justice: “Ministries of Mercy: the call of the Jericho Road” P&R, 1997 and “Generous Justice: How God’s Grace makes us Just,” Dutton, 2010.

APPENDIX A: TIM KELLER QUESTIONNAIRE

Dear Friends

Warm greetings from East London! I trust that this mail finds you and your family well and that you are enjoying a season of fruitful gospel ministry.

Please can you help me? I am doing some studies on Tim Keller (pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church, Manhattan); specifically on his theology and practice of gospel contextualisation and its relevance for ministry in our country. You would help me greatly by answering the attached questionnaire. Please note that your views or comments will not be quoted or published.....or held against you in any way!

With much gratitude in Christ

John Koning

Grace Bible Church, East London

(Please email your responses to me as soon as is convenient.)

1. Have you read any publications, blogs or listened to sermons and seminars by Tim Keller?

Yes	No
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Please list what you have read or heard:

2. How would you rate Keller's theological faithfulness and practical usefulness? (1= not helpful or faithful at all, 5 = spot on)

1	2	3	4	5
---	---	---	---	---

3. Do you have any significant reservations or problems with Keller's theology or practice? Please specify.
4. Have you made adjustments to your ministry as a result of what you have learned from him? Please specify.
5. On a scale of 1 to 5 (1 being unimportant, 5 being vital), how important is contextualisation in your ministry right now?

1	2	3	4	5
---	---	---	---	---

6. How do you understand 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 and apply it in your ministry?
7. Have you conducted neighbourhood research in your city/suburb/town? What form did it take?
8. Do you have any significant concerns or reservations about the concept or practice of gospel contextualisation? Please discuss below.
9. Has Keller challenged you in this regard in any way? Please discuss below.
10. During the time you have ministered with your current church, have you been involved in planting another church?
11. Are you currently busy with/ planning a church plant?

APPENDIX B: CONTEXTUALISATION QUESTIONNAIRE

Dear Friends

I am doing some studies via NWU on contextualisation and faithful Gospel ministry. I would very much value your input. Please take just a few minutes to complete this questionnaire and return it to me. This is not an abstract, theoretical exercise. The purpose of this exercise is to serve the Church in the great task of Gospel ministry. Your names will not be used and what you say will be used sensitively. (eg "one pastor indicated that.....")

Together for the cause of Christ

John Koning 0742524650

ENDORSEMENT from Prof P.J. (Flip) Buys: Associate Director, World Reformed Fellowship

As study leader I want to stress the importance of this study for all reformed type churches. On the one hand there is a danger of pastors who are corrupting the core of the gospel in their efforts to be winsome and see numerical growth at all costs. On the other hand there is a danger that pastors who are very serious and labour hard to be faithful to the gospel but have lost touch with their audience and communicate as someone scratching where people are not itching.

Your participation in this questionnaire will assist John as researcher to eventually present research results that might help pastors and churches to be more faithful as well as effective in proclaiming the gospel to the desperate spiritual needs of all South Africans.

QUESTIONNAIRE

1. What do you understand by the term "contextualisation?" How would you define this term?
2. On a scale of 1 to 10, how much importance do you place on being faithful to the Word of God in your ministry? (1 being of minimal importance, 10 being of supreme importance.)

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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3. On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate your flexibility in bringing the Gospel to people where they are at?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----

4. How would you describe your attitude towards contextualisation?

Opposed	Critical	Suspicious	Careful	Deliberate	Enthusiastic
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5. Would you say that you deliberately give attention to the situation of your listeners in preparing and preaching the Bible?

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often	Mostly	Always
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6. What are the prevailing worldviews/thinking patterns of the people in your city, town, suburb, area of ministry? You may tick more than one. If other, please indicate.

Christian	Nominal Christian	Postmodern	Atheistic/ agnostic humanist	Animist	Pantheist	Post- everything
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7. How many unbelievers (as opposed to believers who have transferred from other churches) have come to faith and joined your church in the past five years?

8. Have you seen signs of real spiritual growth among members of your church? Briefly describe and motivate.

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