

I marvel at the optimism of Arthur Johnston and his colleagues, who suppose that someone of my limited training and experience may be in a position to respond tellingly to two papers written by veteran scholars. Buttressed by such optimism, however, I shall plunge ahead; but I must first insist that my response offers the musings of an amateur rather than the trenchant critique of an expert.

The paper by Dr. Hiebert focuses attention on one particular problem, a question which belongs to the broader debate concerning contextualization, and seeks to define the problem by appealing to a mathematical analogy. The paper is a model of clarity and good sense. Its basic thesis—that problems between missionaries and nationals must be better understood, better analyzed as to the basic assumptions of missionaries and nationals, and better assessed in the light of Scripture, before genuine progress can be made—is surely one from which no thoughtful believer would demur. In the hope that I qualify as a thoughtful believer, I concur enthusiastically with this general conclusion. However, several minor criticisms of the paper come to mind, criticisms which in no way invalidate the general thrust nor dismiss the diversity of opinions regarding the boundaries of the church, but which might encourage still greater precision.

(1) In the closing paragraph, Hiebert points out that the participants in the debate would need to agree “whether the church in God’s view is a bounded body or whether it is a centered one.” Then he adds: “But this raises some deep theological questions that have, so far, remained unanswered.” In my view, that is not the real problem. To frame it that way makes it sound like a problem in the physical sciences where all the scientists concerned agree that the problem is as yet unanswered. In theological debates, including the debate about the boundary/center of the church, the problem is more subtle: either (a) the opposing sides reach different

(and perhaps even mutually exclusive) conclusions from the same theological evidence. It is not that there is no answer, but that there is no universally accepted answer, despite massive tomes by eminent men; for these men adopt opposing conclusions. Or else (b) the two sides adopt opposing positions because of tradition or because of copying from non-Christian models, without really considering the biblical evidence; or yet again, (c) there may be some theologizing on the nature of the church by one party or by both parties, but without adequate distancing of the theologian from his cultural heritage, thus rendering his conclusions premature and not legitimately normative. These three possibilities represent three quite distinct degrees of dealing with the concerns of contextualization, and with the concerns of theology proper. But to analyze them would require another paper.

(2) Hiebert’s mathematical model does not adequately account for the diversity of ecclesiastical structure in the West. The model of the church as a bounded set can best be applied to churches with fixed membership and congregational government; it applies only with considerable strain to certain Brethren assemblies, Presbyterian government, and large numbers of evangelical local churches with a national and hierarchical ecclesiastical structure (e.g., the Church of England). On the other side, even if being “in” in the Indian church really represents moving toward the center, and being “out” represents moving away from the center, a distinct differentiation between the “in” and the “out” has been achieved. In other words, the mathematical model notwithstanding, Hiebert at times seems to be differentiating between, not bounded *versus* centered sets, but between bounded sets with criteria ABC for the boundary *versus* bounded sets with criteria XYZ for the boundary.

(3) The biggest problem in Hiebert’s paper, in my judgment, is one which seems to appear with increasing frequency in the writings of certain Western missiologists. It is the caricaturizing of the Western model and the idealizing of the Third World model. I do not mean to suggest that Western believers have a corner on all truth. But accurate scholarship is not served by overcompensation which appears to suggest that Third World believers now enjoy that hold on the truth which Westerners confess to have abandoned. I have neither the time nor the space to catalogue this tilt in Hiebert’s paper; but I note, in passing, that the section on bounded sets contains references to “heretic games,” depicts mutually exclusive circles (e.g., there is emphasis on organization rather than

on interpersonal relationships), makes sweeping generalizations (e.g., because the sense of the presence of God at the center may be lost, the structure may become self-reliant and secular), and so forth. When Hiebert describes the centered set, by contrast, the entire presentation is enthusiastic and optimistic. The sole exception is a short cautionary paragraph about one possible evil. Such a presentation, I submit, will not encourage critical readers to think the study is dispassionate; and therefore the paper loses some of its value.

The paper by Dr. Archer raises so many issues that a brief response seems impudent. His paper is focused largely on the danger of syncretism that attends contextualization. The attempt to address such dangers from a biblical perspective must be roundly applauded. Readers of, *inter alia*, certain articles in *Gospel in Context* are painfully aware that some modern attempts at contextualization appeal to what is viewed as biblical precedent to justify practices which come into clashing dissonance with the Scriptures elsewhere. Archer seeks to avoid this by painting a large canvas in broad strokes, and his warnings are timely. The following observations are therefore not offered as demurrals, but as an attempt to sharpen the discussion.

(1) It is important to distinguish more adequately between a believer who maintains his faith while living in an alien culture, and a missionary who propagates his faith within an alien culture. Both must beware of the danger of syncretism, but the second has by far the more difficult task. Joseph and Daniel, taken as major paradigms in Archer's paper, belong to the former category: it is not obvious that they were missionaries. Principles that we learn from their heroic stance are important in their own right, but the challenges confronting the missionary demand sharper refinements.

By way of modern analogy, we may think of the Christian businessman who lives in certain moderate Islamic countries. He will no doubt be faced with important decisions as to how best to preserve the integrity of his faith. But the Christian who is committed to evangelizing the Muslim will confront a second vast range of questions, personal and even governmental. It is no answer to point out that every Christian must be a "missionary" in some sense, as a function of the genius of Christianity; for my point is that Old Testament saints like Joseph and Daniel are not "missionaries" in any case. Rather Joseph and Daniel are models of believers in every age who retain their personal piety and spiritual commitment despite temptations, inducements, and threats to compromise. Archer has

helped us see a common danger lurking behind both the missionary's program of contextualization and the separation of believers; but better marking of the distinctions between the two is bound to expose ambiguities in the task of contextualization. In the missionary's situation, one is forced to ask what aspects of religious behavior may be legitimately altered in order to facilitate the communication of the message. It is not obvious that Joseph and Daniel faced that sort of question.

This may be put another way. "Contextualization" in the modern debate concerns the communication and propagation of truth, with a view to conversion, in a cross-cultural setting. When Archer says, "It is perhaps questionable whether [Abraham's] resort to subterfuge in Egypt . . . really amounted to contextualization," I readily concur. But I do so, not only because Abraham's conduct was a "craven resort to expediency," but also because there is no evidence he was trying to win others to the true faith by this means. One still detects in this revised draft of Archer's paper something of the ambiguity surrounding the term *contextualization* found in an earlier draft, where he interpreted the entrance of the people of Israel into Canaan, and the command to blot out the inhabitants, as an example of "no contextualization at any level." Of course, in one sense, such an assessment is correct; but that historical event is not really an example of missionary work or of evangelizing on any level. One wonders if in the current debate the term *contextualization* is being pressed so far outside its normal usage as to promote conceptual confusion.

(2) Archer's final lines are of fundamental importance. The essential gospel must not be compromised, undermined, or prostituted in any way. But if I understand the nature of the current debate, I would say that much of it turns on just what the essential gospel truly is. "Never drink, smoke, swear, or chew/And never go out with girls that do," I was advised as a child; but the question returns, Do any of such elements constitute either *necessary* or *sufficient* criteria of true Christianity? How do we deal with the question of Sunday versus Friday observance in Muslim countries? Or with New Guinea tribesmen who celebrate the Lord's table with goat's milk and roots? Are we justified, because of the Muslim antipathy to baptism, in substituting a nonwater rite? If not, why not? Just what is the essential gospel? Archer's paper provides us with a general principle of real validity, but the worst problems are arising in connection with the interpretation of that principle.

I conclude with two personal reflections. *First*, missionary

training must include substantive courses in biblical theology; for, although the study of contextualization may help the missionary free himself from the cultural accretions of his own society, there is a growing danger that contextualization will be used as a new tool to pervert the gospel into something unrecognizable. Nothing will provide a better safeguard than the constant study of the Word of God. *Second*, when we appeal to the freedom of the apostle Paul in his evangelistic endeavors, we must not overlook his real continuity with salvation history, nor his special authority as one who wrote from a revelatory stance which we cannot share. But to explore such questions carefully would require two more papers.

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