

***Church and Mission: Reflections on
Contextualization and the Third
Horizon***

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A. INTRODUCTION

No work proposing to discuss some of the more disputed biblical themes relating to the church can afford to ignore the current ferment over the mission of the church. The field is vast and the disputed areas many; but this essay focuses on the interface between the new hermeneutic and contextualization. Before addressing such matters directly, however, it may be worth mentioning a couple of other matters that impinge deeply on the current discussion over mission, even if they cannot be probed here.

First, in the contemporary climate the notions of evangelism and mission are deeply offensive to some. Many Western theologians consider the idea of winning people to Christ a parochial vestige of past imperialism; and not a few 'third world' theologians agree. A recent volume by the Chaplain of the University of Kent,¹ for instance, argues against both exclusivism and inclusivism, and for the pluralism represented by Ernst Troeltsch, W. E. Hocking, Arnold

Toynbee, Paul Tillich and John Hick. Another recent volume records discussion on such points amongst participants from a broad theological spectrum.² There is little agreement; but what becomes readily apparent is that the most fundamental division of opinion has more to do with the authority status of revelation than with mission theory itself. Those who hold that God has revealed himself propositionally in the Scriptures, and definitively in the person and work of Jesus the Messiah, emphasize mission; those who argue that the religion of the Bible has no authority or revelatory status above the documents or traditions of other religions tend to de-emphasize mission. Of course, there are many mediating positions. It is common to stress the light given to all men (a variation on the argument of Acts 17) and affirm that Christianity preserves the highest revelation, not the only revelation. In itself, the argument is innocuous enough, and few thoughtful conservatives would wish to disagree with it;³ but it easily becomes the justification for the dubious theory of the anonymous Christian — and, *pace* Karl Rahner,⁴ it is hard to see how that theory can fail to vitiate at least the urgency of mission. Senior and Stuhlmueler have recently tried to ground Christian mission in the sense of mission exemplified in the early church;⁵ but despite the many useful insights in their work, their mediating position is rather more historical in its orientation than an attempt to determine what is in any sense normative for the church today. And much as conservatives may disagree with his conclusions, S. G. Wilson is nevertheless right in his analysis:

... we must face squarely the central, obstinate fact of [Paul's] christological exclusivism. If we leave this untouched then we shall, like Barth, remain essentially faithful to Paul. For many, however, his exclusivism has to be abandoned and his absolutism relativized. And Paul, of course, does not stand alone. The rest of the New Testament and most forms of Christianity since share essentially the same view . . . We are engaged, therefore, in no mean undertaking but can at least take comfort in the thought that we are dealing with *the* central issue. For if the challenge of other religions affected

only the peripheral parts of Christian tradition . . . the problem could readily be resolved at least for those who are already satisfied that they can be reinterpreted or jettisoned without loss. We are dealing, however, with the heart of Paul's gospel . . .⁶

It would take us beyond the scope of this paper to attempt to justify, exegetically and epistemologically, the view that biblical Christianity is a uniquely revealed and authoritative non-negotiable; but even these brief remarks may help us to see that behind the hermeneutical questions there sometimes lurk even more fundamental questions about the authority status of biblical Christianity.

Second, a large number of technical essays on the New Testament have reached conclusions that put a substantial distance between any commandment of Jesus and the actual cross-cultural evangelistic practices of the early church. For instance, both Best⁷ and Scobie⁸ argue that although Jesus allowed Gentiles some participation in the blessings he inaugurated and envisaged, he authorised no Gentile mission. The post-resurrection 'great commission' records cannot be treated as the commands of the *historical* Jesus (especially in Scobie's thought); and the actual impetus to evangelize Gentiles is thought to have originated with the Hellenists who scattered from Jerusalem after the martyrdom of Stephen. There can be no fundamental objection to the historical analysis of where such cross-cultural (or, better, cross-racial) evangelism was first practised; but slightly different application of critical thought might happily conclude that the ultimate impetus goes back to Jesus himself — and behind him to a host of Old Testament texts understood in the light of the person and work of Christ. The narrower focus of Best and Scobie and others tends to reduce the urgency of such evangelism by making it in its origins almost a sectarian enterprise.

Of course, it is true that there is no good evidence that the church as a whole, after the resurrection and ascension, promptly set out to obey the great commission.⁹ Much of their witness was the overflow of their life in the Spirit. But this fact cannot reasonably be used against the relative

importance of the great commission; for even after Pentecost the church had to go through repeated struggles in order to come to grips with such matters as the relationship between the Mosaic covenant and the new one promised by Jeremiah and inaugurated by their Lord before his death, or the precise force the law of Moses was to have in this new eschatological situation — even though such matters had been dealt with, sometimes directly and sometimes in symbol-laden language and acts, by the Master himself in the days of his flesh. Both Acts and the epistles testify to the fact that, guided by the Spirit, the early church grew in its understanding of its message and task. This means that we dare not seek to limit our grasp of that message or task by focusing too narrowly on some early period where the church's understanding was still immature.

Numerous other questions spring to mind, but they cannot be addressed here. I need only mention that there are many useful books that attempt to give a theology of mission, a biblical foundation for the enterprise;¹⁰ and in addition there are a few more recent works that deal sensitively and powerfully with the relationship between 'doing justice and preaching grace'.¹¹ One might also mention recent works analysing Paul's mission theology and practice,¹² a penetrating doctoral dissertation on Paul's self-understanding of his vocation,¹³ another that sheds considerable light on one of the reasons why Paul was able to operate effectively in so many cultures — namely his careful training of and partnership with local co-workers,¹⁴ an essay that explores the extent to which even Paul's theology finds its genesis in mission,¹⁵ and, conversely, another essay that calls contemporary theology back to its central missiological task.¹⁶ All of this is only to say that we are in a period of immense ferment over the subject of missions; and the complexity of the issues and the diversity of viewpoints loads even the narrow subject of communication to the third horizon with cumbersome and interrelated problems.

We may begin with some elementary observations on the new hermeneutic. Older hermeneutical models focused on the processes by which the interpreter, the 'subject', interpreted the text, the 'object'. The unwitting premise was very

often the historical positivism of von Ranke. The 'new hermeneutic' posits a 'hermeneutical circle' between the interpreter and the text. When the interpreter in attempting to understand the text asks questions of the text, the questions themselves emerge out of the limitations that characterize the interpreter; and therefore the responses that the interpreter hears the text giving are skewed to fit his own grid. Inevitably, however, those responses in turn shape the interpreter, and make him marginally different from what he was before he approached the text. Therefore the next time the interpreter asks questions of the text, the questions emerge from a slightly different matrix than did the first set of questions; and therefore the new responses will be skewed to a slightly different grid. Thus not only is the interpreter interpreting the text, but the text is 'interpreting' the interpreter. And this interchange can go on and on, setting up a 'hermeneutical circle'. In this model, understanding does not depend in any important way on a grasp of the referents of words, but emerges out of the heart of language itself. Mere words kill; advocates of the new hermeneutic speak of 'language poisoning'. Authentic understanding takes place when a text so 'interprets' the interpreter that a flash of insight occurs, a kind of revelatory experience, a 'language-event' (*Sprachereignis*).

There is much to be learned from the new hermeneutic. We human beings cannot escape either our sinfulness or our finiteness; and both are guaranteed to make the matrix out of which our questions emerge different from the matrix of every other human being. There is a 'horizon of understanding' unique to each individual. Pushed too far, of course, the new hermeneutic must result in the unqualified subjectivity of all knowledge — even that of the more radical skeptics who try to convince us by their writings that they are right. How then may two individuals communicate? How may an interpreter discover 'the meaning' of a text, without succumbing to a theory that postulates unqualified polyvalence of meaning — a different meaning for each interpreter, and indeed for the same interpreter at each new approach to the text? The solution seems to be along the following lines.

Each knower must begin with thoughtful ‘distanciation’, i.e. a careful distancing of himself and his own ‘horizon of understanding’ from that of the text or of the other person, in order to hear what the text or the other person is saying with as little interference as possible from the knower’s own mental baggage. By coming to understand the many *differences* between one’s horizon of understanding and the horizon of understanding of the text or of the other person, it becomes possible to make appropriate allowances. If the knower then tries to put himself or herself into the other’s place as it were (or, to use the modern jargon, if the knower attempts to fuse his horizon of understanding with that of the text), there is less danger of major semantic distortion. The hermeneutical circle becomes a hermeneutical spiral, enabling the interpreter, the knower, to approach the meaning of the text asymptotically.¹⁷

We have thus been introduced to two ‘horizons’ — the horizon of understanding of the knower or interpreter, and the horizon of understanding of the text. Contemporary discussion of mission, however, goes a step farther and deals with the ‘third horizon’ — viz, the horizon of understanding of the group or people being evangelized. The first horizon is that of the biblical documents or, as some would have it, of the first generation of Christian believers as that perspective is preserved in the New Testament. The second horizon is ours — i.e. that of established Christians who seek to understand the Scriptures. There are, of course, some major hurdles to cross if we are to understand the Scriptures aright — if we are going to fuse our own ‘horizon of understanding’ with that of the text so as to arrive at an accurate understanding of that text. Similar hurdles also present themselves when we try to cross from the second horizon to the third: in short, when we try to evangelize and teach the content of Scripture to another group or people. Indeed, the greater the cultural gap between the evangelizing church and the target people (or, otherwise put, between the second and the third horizon), the greater the potential for massive distortion of the message.

Two preliminary caveats should be entered at once. First, the terminology just introduced already masks a considerable

oversimplification. It is rare to find a Christian who has been converted simply by reading the New Testament. More commonly there has been at least one intermediary and perhaps there have been many — other Christians who have presented Christ to him and borne witness to the truth of biblical Christianity in their own lives. Therefore the person whom we now label as belonging to the second horizon at one time belonged to the third — or even the fourth, fifth, sixth or *n*th. And even if someone becomes a believer simply by reading the Bible, without any human intermediary, in one sense there were intermediaries involved in the Bible translation that made the Scriptures available to him in his own language. I shall return briefly to this question at the end of this paper; but for the moment it is enough to note the complexities while nevertheless using the simplified terminology. Second, although there are many important parallels between, on the one hand, the move from the first to the second horizon, and, on the other, the move from the second to the third horizon, so far as the difficulties in communication are concerned, there is nevertheless one important distinction. In the former, the onus is on what we might call the receptor — i.e. on the person belonging to the second horizon; for it is that person who is trying to understand the Scriptures. But in passing from the second horizon to the third, the onus is on what we might call the donor — i.e. on the person who is trying to communicate the message. That person is still at the level of the second horizon.

If there are ambiguities surrounding the ‘third horizon’ terminology, they are nothing compared with the range of meaning ascribed to ‘contextualization’. In this instance, however, definition stands at the very heart of the issue, since it is determined by the entire synthesis that is adopted. It seems wise therefore to approach ‘contextualization’ a little more inductively. I shall not attempt to sketch in what I understand by the term, and how it relates to the third horizon, until the closing pages of this paper. This much at least may be said: the term is very slippery. At one point it was indistinguishable from ‘experimental theology’;¹⁸ but it soon came to serve as the term that commonly supersedes

'indigenization'. The latter was frequently summarized under the 'three selfs': an indigenous church is self-supporting, self-governing and self-propagating. 'Contextualization' goes beyond this to include the notion that the church is doing its own theology in its own context. Broadly speaking there are two brands of contextualization. The first assigns control to the context; the operative term is praxis, which serves as a controlling grid to determine the meaning of Scripture. The second assigns the control to Scripture, but cherishes the 'contextualization' rubric because it reminds us the Bible must be thought about, translated into and preached in categories relevant to the particular cultural context.

The concerns of the new hermeneutic and of contextualization have thus begun to merge. Both are concerned with the difficulties inherent in passing content from one knower to another, or from a text to an interpreter. To put the matter another way, the theoretical and practical difficulties in moving from the first horizon to the second remain in place when moving from the second to the third. Indeed, as we have seen, a new difficulty is introduced. In the models we have used, when communication takes place from the first horizon to the second, the burden of responsibility rests with the second (i.e. the receptor); but when communication takes place from the second horizon to the third, the burden of responsibility *still* rests with the second — now the donor. That stands at the heart of missionary endeavour.

It is important to recognise how innovative these modern concerns for the third horizon really are. Fewer than twenty years ago, it was possible to publish a hefty volume on evangelism and mission and never mention the hermeneutical difficulties involved in communicating the gospel to the third horizon.¹⁹ But today a tremendous amount of energy in missiological circles is poured into problems connected with contextualization.

This phenomenon manifests itself in many ways. It is seen not only in endless journal articles, many of them more or less popular, that tell how some missionary or other overcame an unforeseen cultural or linguistic hurdle,²⁰ but in a long stream of major articles and books that tackle

the question head-on.²¹ Popular books relate how a proper understanding of a local culture make possible the effective communication of the gospel;²² and more serious studies grapple with the relationships between Christianity and culture.²³ Technical works on cultural anthropology and its relation to mission abound; and the work of Wycliffe Bible Translators and the United Bible Societies continues to pour out a stream of technical monographs and books, some of which have become standard texts for new generations of seminary students.²⁴ Various theological syntheses are being produced in the 'third world';²⁵ and experts are applying insights from contextualization theory to related questions such as TEE (theological education by extension) programmes.²⁶ None of this means there is widespread agreement. Far from it: there is massive theological and methodological disarray in the area. The sole point to be made at the moment is that the subject is everywhere being discussed.

In order to keep the subject narrowly focused, the rest of this paper proceeds in dialogue with the influential article of Daniel von Allmen on the birth of theology.²⁷ Some essays capture a mood or put into words what many others have been struggling to articulate. When such essays are published, they immediately gain assent and wide recognition — not necessarily because they are cogent or their arguments unassailable, but because they burst onto the theological scene just at the time when they seem to confirm the opinions of many readers. Apparently, something like that has happened to von Allmen's important essay; and so it provides a suitable backdrop to the following reflections on the third horizon.

In what follows I shall first of all summarize von Allmen's arguments, and then proceed to a discussion of exegetical and methodological problems associated with his work. Finally, I shall try to assess von Allmen's judgment of the kind of contextualization that ought to take place as one attempts to evangelize people of the third horizon, and conclude with some slightly broader formulations.²⁸

B. A SUMMARY OF VON ALLMEN'S ARTICLE

At the heart of von Allmen's thesis is his argument that the correct model of contextualization is already provided for us in the New Testament. It is this feature that makes his work so crucial. Von Allmen's essay was itself a response — indeed, a response to a response. The late Byang Kato had responded to the growing dangers he perceived in the work of such African theologians as Harry Sawyer and John Mbiti.²⁹ Emerging as the dominant evangelical voice in African theology before his untimely death,³⁰ Kato had detected in certain strands of African theology what he variously called 'Christo-paganism, syncretism or universalism' and in which he saw 'a real threat to the future evangelical church' of Africa.³¹ Against this protest, von Allmen suggests Kato is too tied to Western theology. Von Allmen sets out 'not only to reaffirm that an African theology is *necessary*, but also to show how it is *possible* on the basis of a true fidelity to the New Testament'.³² In other words, the force of von Allmen's criticism of Kato is that he is not biblical enough, and that Scripture itself authorises the kind of contextualization von Allmen advocates.

Von Allmen turns to the New Testament, and begins by assuming that the 'Judaic, that is Semitic, character of the Christian faith at its birth is beyond question'.³³ Within one generation, however, the church found its firmest footing on Hellenistic soil. Von Allmen therefore proposes to discover 'what were the forces behind this Hellenization of Christianity, and what sort of people were its first exponents'.³⁴

Von Allmen distinguishes three movements, almost stages based on three types of people. The *first* is the missionary movement. This explosion came about without the initiation by the Jerusalem 'pillars' (Gal. 2:9); indeed, the Aramaic-speaking apostles were caught unawares by these developments. What happened rather was that 'Philip and his Hellenist brothers saw in the persecution that was scattering them a divine call to preach the gospel outside the limits of Jerusalem'.³⁵ This was partly because they had the linguistic competence: they were at home in Greek and familiar with the LXX. Even at this stage, however, this Hellenistic

'missionary' movement was not a missionary movement in any modern sense. No one was being commissioned or sent. It was simply 'a work of evangelism undertaken under the pressure of external events (of persecution) that were understood to be providential'.³⁶ All of this suggests to von Allmen that in this 'first adaptation of Christianity to a new context', although there was a 'missionary thrust' it was not the thrust of people from one culture evangelizing the people of another, but the spread of Christian witness from Hellenistic Christians to Hellenists. In other words:

No true 'indigenization or contextualization' can take place because foreigners, the 'missionaries', suggest it; on the contrary, true indigenization takes place only because the 'indigenous' church has itself become truly missionary, with or without the blessing of the 'missionaries'.³⁷

The *second* movement is that of 'translators'. In one sense, as von Allmen rightly points out, no translation was needed. The 'missionaries' and those being evangelized shared Greek as a common language, and even a Greek Bible, the Septuagint. What concerns von Allmen here is something else: viz., 'the manner in which the Hellenists, who had received the Gospel from the lips of Aramaic Christians, translated it into Greek for the pagans. By Gospel I mean here, therefore, the living preaching'.³⁸ Von Allmen uses form critical theory and appeals to 1 Cor. 15:3–5, 11 to insist that the Hellenists were not free-lances: there were limits to how far they could digress from the tradition that had come to them. But a telling step came, he says, when the Hellenistic believers chose *kyrios* to render Hebrew *rabbi* and Aramaic *mari*. The result was a title for Jesus that served simultaneously as, among Jews, a Greek transcription of the divine Name, and, among others, as the word used to pay honour to the Emperor. This is the pre-Pauline history of the title. Von Allmen asks:

Was it a fatal slip? Criminal truckling to the Greeks and Romans? Paul does not look at it in that way, since he makes this very title of Lord the centre of his theology. In any case, there can be no talk of truckling when to confess 'Jesus is

Lord' exposed one to persecution for refusing Caesar the honour he claimed for himself.³⁹

What all this assumes, von Allmen argues, is that 'the "native" preachers were bold enough . . . to be themselves, while remaining faithful to the foundations of the faith they had received, to sift critically the received vocabulary in order to express themselves intelligently to their linguistic brothers'.⁴⁰

The *third* movement was the rise, not of theologians, but of poets — i.e. those whose work assisted the church in its indigenous worship. Von Allmen approves the thesis of Schlink, that 'the basic structure of God-talk is not the *doctrine* of God but the *worship* of God'.⁴¹ We may examine this movement, he says, by studying some of the hymns preserved in the Pauline epistles. Von Allmen selects as his test case Phil. 2:6–11. He prints it in poetic format, putting in parentheses the bits that many scholars hold to be Pauline redaction. Von Allmen's chief point with respect to this hymn, however, is that the parallelism between 'taking the position of a slave' and 'becoming like a man' (2:7) is not a Jewish or Jewish-Christian idea at all; for among them a man was not considered to be a slave. 'It is for the Greeks, particularly at this late date, that man is a slave, bound hand and foot in submission to all-powerful Destiny'.⁴² Moreover, von Allmen argues, 'it would be possible to find in the hymn a number of other expressions which find their closest equivalent in the Gnostic myths of the Original Man: the 'divine estate', the equal of God'.⁴³ But none of this is dangerous syncretism, von Allmen argues, for in this hymn the language used describes not 'a mythical Original Man losing his divine form and assuming a human appearance'; for only the vocabulary remains, and 'it is used to sing the praise of Jesus of Nazareth who entered history as a man of flesh and blood'.⁴⁴ 'We must see in this hymn an interesting, and indeed successful attempt to express the mystery of the condescension of Christ in the characteristically Greek vocabulary'.⁴⁵

From this, von Allmen draws a more general conclusion:

The theologian has no right to fear the spontaneous manner in which the Church sometimes expresses the faith. If the apostles had been timorous and shut the mouths of the poets through fear of heresy, the Church would never have found footing on Hellenistic soil. Thus the way things happen in the primitive church teaches us that in the Church the life and faith is [*sic*] the primary thing. Missionaries do not preach a theology but rather the Gospel (the good news). Nor is the response of faith yet theology, but rather worship or hymns proclaiming the mighty deeds of God in Jesus Christ.⁴⁶

It is only following these movements, von Allmen argues, that theologians are wanted, exemplified by Paul. But even here, he points out, Paul is not a systematician in any modern sense. The two functions of theology are the critical and the systematic; and Paul in his writings devotes himself primarily to the former. By this, von Allmen means that before adapting an already coined formula, Paul examines it 'critically'; and his criterion is 'the received faith'.

He does not demand that doctrine should be in literal agreement with the primitive Christian preaching. But whatever may be its formal expression, the doctrine must correspond to the inner thrust of the apostolic faith, and so eschatology is an essential element of Christian theology. Provided one reintroduces this moment of expectation, this eschatological tension, then why not use Greek terminology?⁴⁷

Along this line, von Allmen argues that the church began with the language of master/disciple, and adapted it to the Hellenistic mystery religions of the day to make Christianity over into 'the definitive and absolute mystery religion'.⁴⁸ The one limitation Paul imposed on this Greek influence was resurrection language. Christ may be like Osiris or Kore when Paul says 'You died with Christ', but Paul is independent of Greek thought when he says 'You have been raised with him' — especially so when he sets the ultimate raising as a hope for the future.

Along similar lines, Paul in Colossians (whether the epistle was composed by Paul or someone from the Paul school)

responds to the strange amalgam of Judaizing and syncretism by setting over against the worship of angels the supreme headship of Christ. Paul begins, von Allmen argues, with the central fact that Jesus is Lord — Jesus as crucified and risen. This central feature of Christianity enables Paul to rebut the Colossians. This is what von Allmen means by the ‘ordering function of theology’.

Even amidst the fiercest polemic, Paul remains firmly rooted in the basis of the Christian faith; Christ who died and was raised. It is only from this centre that one may dare to say anything at all; and all theological statements, whether polemical or constructive, must be set in relation to this centre.⁴⁹

Von Allmen then turns from the New Testament to the problem of how anyone, African or otherwise, must properly set about ‘doing theology’ in his or her own context. At this point he is building on his biblical analysis in order to address problems of contextualization. Before setting forth his own proposal, he briefly describes three *impasses* that must be overcome.

The first is *paternalism*. Paternalism expresses itself not only in the sense of superiority manifested by Western theologians, but also in the ‘colonized’ complex of Africans and other victims of colonization. In the first century, the power relationship between the cultures was if anything the reverse of the modern problem: the Jewish-Christians must have felt threatened by the all-pervasive Hellenistic culture, not the other way round. Von Allmen’s solution is that Africans become aware of the value of their own culture in its own right, so that they may ‘bring to birth an African theology that is more than a theology characterized by reaction’.⁵⁰ Moreover, just as the Hellenistic-Christian movement in the first century was the work of Hellenists themselves. In a spontaneous movement, so also must Africans do their own theology; and this means that Westerners cannot without paternalism even *encourage* Africans to get on with it. Rather: ‘Once and for all, then, there must be

trust’. And clearly this principle must be extended beyond Africa to all missions-receiving nations.

The second *impasse* is *heresy*. Von Allmen says that since ‘everyone is a heretic in somebody’s eyes’,⁵¹ we must tread very cautiously. His study of the New Testament leads him to conclude that at the first stage of indigenization, people are not too worried by dangers of heresy; and in any case, in Paul’s writings,

the heretics are not to be found among the Hellenistic progressives but rather among the Judaizing reactionaries who feel themselves obliged to denounce the foolhardiness or the rank infidelity of the ‘translation’ project upon which the Church has become engaged in Hellenistic territory. But, remarkably enough, this very conservatism goes hand in hand with a, perhaps unconscious, paternalism. The legalism of the Colossian heresy is accompanied by a disproportionate respect towards other powers than Jesus Christ.⁵²

The third *impasse* is an approach to contextualization that perceives it as an adaptation of an existing theology. The Hellenists, von Allmen argues, simply proceeded with evangelization; and the theology eventually emerged *from within* this Hellenistic world — but as a later step. Von Allmen’s conclusion is stunning:

It must be said with all possible firmness: there can be no question, in our days either, of an Africanization or a contextualization of an existing theology. Any authentic theology must start over anew from the focal point of the faith, which is the confession of the Lord Jesus Christ who died and was raised for us; and it must be built or re-built (whether in Africa or in Europe) in a way which is both faithful to the inner thrust of the Christian revelation and also in harmony with the mentality of the person who formulates it. There is no short cut to be found by simply adapting an existing theology to contemporary or local taste.⁵³

What this means is that so far as it is possible, African Christians, and indeed all Christians, must begin *tabula rasa*. Missionaries should provide working tools and building

materials to believers not yet able to train their own people, and then leave them to get on with the task.

Rather than teach a theology (even a theology that claims to be a 'New Testament theology') what we should try to do is point out what the forces were that governed the elaboration of a theology on the basis of the material furnished by the early church. This is the reason why, in my opinion, the study of the history of traditions in the early church is of capital importance in Africa even more than elsewhere.⁵⁴

In short, what von Allmen proposes is that no one has the right to tell or even encourage Africans to get on with the task, as that would smack of paternalism; and meanwhile no one has the right to provide them with any theology, as this would vitiate the principles of contextualization as he understands them. We must simply let the African church be African; and an African theology will ultimately result.

C. PROBLEMS IN VON ALLMEN'S BIBLICAL EXEGESIS

There are many points of detail in von Allmen's exegesis that could be usefully raised; but I shall restrict myself to four areas. Like him, I shall largely dispense with the clutter of detailed footnotes, and sketch in a response with fairly broad strokes.

1. Von Allmen's reconstruction of the earliest stage of witness is seriously deficient. As we have seen, he denies the influence of the Aramaic-speaking apostles, assigns all credit to the Hellenistic believers who interpreted the outbreak of persecution as a divine call to preach the gospel outside the limits of Jerusalem, and from this deduces that true contextualization takes place not because outsiders (the Aramaic-speaking Christians) suggest it, but because the indigenous church (the Hellenistic Christians) have themselves become truly missionary.

As I have already acknowledged, it is true, as Boer⁵⁵ pointed out some years ago, that the church in Acts is not presented as a community of believers with an immediate

and urgent sense of commitment to carry out, in an organised and methodical way, the great commission. Nevertheless, the arguments of both Boer and von Allmen could do with a little shading.

First, the church began from a tiny group. It did not begin as a multinational missions agency with boards and head offices and district conferences, plotting the systematic evangelization of the world. It began with a handful of people transformed by the Spirit of God and by the conviction that with the death and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah the promised eschatological age had begun. Immediately there was witness — not the strategic witness of careful planning but the spontaneous witness of irrepressible spiritual life, the most effective witness of all. In this atmosphere of early pulsating beginnings, it was inevitable that each group of early believers shared their faith primarily with those of its own language and culture. But at this very early stage, to draw lessons about the slowness of the Aramaic-speaking community to reach out to the Hellenistic world is no more realistic than to draw lessons about the slowness of the Hellenistic church to reach out to the Aramaic-speaking world. Luke's narrative simply does not address the kind of questions von Allmen seems to be posing.

Second, even at the earliest stages of Christianity, and within the Aramaic-speaking community, there was a consciousness that what was being experienced was the fulfilment of the Abrahamic covenant by which *all* peoples on earth would be blessed (Acts 3:25). And when the Aramaic-speaking church faced the first strong opposition, the believers prayed for holy boldness to speak the word courageously (Acts 4:24–30). It is very difficult to distinguish this from the attitude of the Hellenistic believers when they faced persecution. There is no evidence (*pace* von Allmen) that the latter alone saw in persecution a special divine call to preach the gospel outside the confines of Jerusalem. Rather, the believers scattered, the Aramaic-speaking ones to places congenial to them, and the Hellenistic believers to places congenial to them — *both* groups still boldly witnessing. Even then, the Hellenistic believers spoke, at first, primarily if not exclusively to Greek-speaking *Jews* (Acts

11:19–20) — a point von Allmen finds so difficult he has to say that Luke probably shaded the account here ‘to prevent the stealing of Paul’s thunder and keep for him the honour he thought his due’.⁵⁶ But a simpler explanation lies immediately to hand, provided we are not trying to squeeze the text into a preset mold. The Hellenistic believers were in the first instance themselves Jews; and so quite naturally they witnessed within their own Greek-speaking Jewish environment. In this sense there is no major cross-over of racial and cultural and linguistic barriers by *either* Aramaic-speaking or Greek-speaking Christians at this point. And when the Hellenistic believers do begin their witness before Gentiles in Antioch (Acts 11:20–21), the account is placed after the evangelisation of Samaria and of Cornelius, about which more in a moment.

Third, the reticence the Aramaic-speaking believers ultimately displayed was not over the *fact* of evangelism among Gentiles, but over *the conditions of entrance to the messianic community*.⁵⁷ Many streams of Judaism were aggressively proselytizing others in the first century; so it is not surprising, even from the perspective of their background, that early Jewish Christians, both Aramaic- and Greek-speaking, did the same. The debates behind Gal. 2 and Acts 15, therefore, do not stem from problems in mere indigeneity or contextualization, still less from carelessness about the great commission (or, in much modern discussion, its inauthenticity), but from a massive theological question: On what grounds may Gentiles be admitted to the messianic community? The answer had to do with the way in which the new covenant could be seen to be related to the old; and the synthesis forged by these debates in the early church was used by God to contribute to the writing of our New Testament documents.

To reduce such complex and frankly unique circumstances to the parameters of the modern debate over contextualization is to distort and trivialize (however unwittingly) the biblical evidence. It is historical nonsense to label the Hellenists ‘progressives’ and thereby tie them to modern liberal theology, while labelling the Aramaic-speaking Christians ‘reactionaries’ in order to bracket them with modern

evangelicals. Indeed, it is worth observing that according to Luke the first opposition that resulted in a martyr sprang from a ‘conservative’ *Hellenistic* synagogue (Acts 6:9)! This entire point is so important that I shall return to it from another perspective in the next division of this paper.

Fourth, within the synthesis I am suggesting, the large amount of space Luke devotes to the conversion of the Samaritans (Acts 8) and to that of Cornelius and his household (Acts 10–11) is eminently reasonable — the latter completely unmentioned by von Allmen, and the former barely so. The Cornelius episode is particularly instructive; for here, before there is any record of witness to non-proselyte Gentiles by Hellenistic Jewish believers, an Aramaic-speaking apostle is sent by the Lord to a Gentile who is not, technically, a proselyte. The point of the story, carefully repeated by Peter before a suspicious Jerusalem church, is that if God by pouring out his Spirit on the Gentiles, as on the Jews, has shown that *he* has accepted them, can Jewish believers do any less? This point does not concern the crossing of merely cultural, racial and linguistic barriers, as significant as such barriers are. The ‘them/us’ dichotomy stems from Israel’s self-consciousness as the people of God, and therefore from the clash between God’s antecedent revelation in what we today call the Old Testament, and God’s revelation in Christ Jesus and all that has come from it. The Jewish believers raise their questions not at the level of contextualization, *but at the level of theology* — indeed, at the level of *systematic* theology, for their question ultimately concerns the way in which the old and new covenants are to be related to each other. But none of this does von Allmen consider.

Fifth, part of von Allmen’s arguments about the reticence of Aramaic-speaking apostles stems from silence. The truth of the matter is that Luke does not purport to give us a comprehensive history of the early church, but a highly selective one. After Acts 8:1, we know nothing or next to nothing about the ministries of (say) Matthew or Thomas or Bartholomew or Andrew. Extra-canonical sources are not very reliable in this area; but some of the best of them tell us that Thomas, for instance, proclaimed the gospel as

far east as India, where he was reportedly martyred. Von Allmen's sweeping conclusions regarding the Aramaic-speaking apostles are therefore based not only on a rather selective and anachronistic approach to Acts, but even on the book's silences.

Sixth, the above arguments suggest that Luke is less interested in providing us with a merely sociological analysis of how various groups in the early church functioned, than with detailing how the resurrected Christ, by his Spirit, continued to take the initiative in building his church. There are indeed heroes and villains in Acts; but above all there is on display the missionary heart of God himself. Not only does the initiative belong to God in the Cornelius episode, but even in Acts 2 the gift of tongues enables Jews from every linguistic background to hear the wonderful works of God in their own language — not only the principal reversal of Babel but the demonstration of the principal removal, and not by Hellenistic or Aramaic-speaking Jewish Christians *but by God himself*, of the temporary barriers surrounding his old covenant people. The theme of prophecy and fulfillment in Acts is designed to display the inevitability of the dawning of the gospel age — precisely because it is God who planned it and is even now bringing it to pass by his Spirit. To force this magnificent panorama into lesser molds is to fail to understand it. We may learn some useful lessons about contextualization in the pages of the New Testament; but we must not force this book into our preconceived categories, nor compel it to provide detailed answers to questions it scarcely considers.

2. In almost every case, von Allmen's conclusions are not entailed by or even very clearly suggested by the exegetical evidence he presents. To take but one example: After discussing the role of the 'poets' in leading the church in worship, von Allmen, as we have seen, draws 'some more general conclusions. The Theologian has no right to fear the spontaneous manner in which the Church sometimes expresses the faith. If the apostles had been timorous and shut the mouths of the poets through fear of heresy, the Church would never have found footing in Hellenistic soil'.⁵⁸ Even if von Allmen's exegesis of Phil. 2:6–11 is basically correct,

there is no way to make it support so broad a conclusion. Von Allmen himself points to areas in which the earliest witnesses and apostles *refused* to follow Greek thought, which implies that the church was *not* willing to give the poets an entirely free hand. In any case, although it is true that a growing church, like the first century church, often produces its own hymnody, it is illegitimate to deduce from Paul's citation of one particular hymn that he had no right to check any hymnodic form of expression. Von Allmen's error in logic immediately becomes obvious when his argument is set out in syllogistic fashion:

1. Poets preceded theologians like Paul.
2. Paul approves a particular poem.
3. Therefore no theologian has the right to call in question the content of any hymn.

In reality, to provide a competent assessment of how far the apostles were willing to step in and question the theological formulation (including the poetry) of others, it would be necessary to examine all that the New Testament has to say about heresy — a point to which I shall briefly return.

Thus to argue that 'the way things happened in the primitive church teaches us that in the Church the life of faith is the primary thing'⁵⁹ is to obscure some important distinctions. In one sense, of course, this argument is valid: the early church was little interested in the niceties of theological argumentation for its own sake, but in life lived under the Lordship of Christ. But this life of faith did not perceive 'faith' to be exhaustively open-ended: it had an object, about which (or whom) certain things could be affirmed and other things denied. Indeed, I would argue that the church was interested in theological formulations, not for their intrinsic interest, but precisely *because* it rightly perceived that such formulations shaped and controlled much of the 'life of faith' believers were expected to lead. In any case, von Allmen's conclusions in this regard seem to depend rather more on an existentialist hermeneutic than on his own exegesis.⁶⁰

3. Von Allmen's presentation of the development of Chri-

stology⁶¹ is questionable at a number of points. I shall mention only three. First, the background on which he relies for his judgment reflects only one line of research, that of the history-of-religions school made popular in New Testament studies by such scholars as Reitzenstein and Bousset,⁶² and mediated to us by Rudolf Bultmann and others. Not only is this line of scholarship in less favour today than it once was, but also its many intrinsic weaknesses have been made clear by significant publications which a commitment to even-handedness might at least have mentioned. Brown, for example, has shown that the use of *mysterion* in the New Testament finds its closest antecedents not in Greek mystery religions but in a semitic milieu.⁶³ Again, it is not entirely clear that full-blown Gnosticism, as opposed to neoplatonic dualism, antedates the New Testament;⁶⁴ but even if it does, the differences between it and the New Testament presentation of Christ's death are profound. And to what extent may the 'in Christ' language reflect, not Greek mysticism, but *forensic identification* with Christ?⁶⁵

Related to this is a second criticism. To what extent do the demonstrable developments in the ascription of labels and titles to Jesus of Nazareth reflect innovation *removed from the historical actuality*, and to what extent do they merely reflect clarified and growing understanding of what was in fact *true* — an understanding mediated in part by the pressure of events, including opposition? This sort of question von Allmen does not raise; but it is essential that we consider it if we are to understand what he himself means by developments that remain 'faithful to the foundations of the faith'.⁶⁶

Consider, for instance, his treatment of *kyrios*. There is little doubt that Paul understands 'Jesus is Lord' to be a confession not only of Jesus' 'lordship', i.e. of his authority, but of his identification with Yahweh, rendered *kyrios* in the LXX. Was the apparent development from master-disciple relations ('my lord' meaning 'rabbi' or the like), to full ascription of deity to Jesus, in accord with or contrary to *what Jesus himself was and is*? If von Allmen would respond, 'Contrary to', then certain things inevitably follow: (1) The truth of Christological confessions does not matter, but only

the sincerity and naturalness to any culture of its own formulations. (2) Jesus himself should not be identified with Yahweh at any ontological or historical level, but only at the level of confessions which may or may not reflect reality. (3) 'Remaining faithful to the foundations of the faith' can in this case only refer to existential commitment to an empty *dass*, not to 'foundations of the faith' in any propositional or contentful or falsifiable sense. (4) How a culture responds to the gospel, i.e. with what degree of contextualization, is far more important than the content of the gospel proclaimed and believed. If on the other hand von Allmen would respond, 'In accord with', then again certain things inevitably follow: (1) He holds that Jesus really was and is 'Lord' as 'Yahweh is Lord', even though some time elapsed before the disciples fully grasped this. (2) More broadly, he has in this case committed himself to what is sometimes called the 'organic' view of the rise of Christology: i.e. that the full-blown doctrine grew out of the truth dimly perceived but truly *there* in the beginning of Jesus' ministry. The development is one of understanding and formulation regarding what was, not innovation and inventive explanation of what was not. (3) 'Remaining faithful to the foundations of the faith' therefore has objective criteria, rendering some formulations *unfaithful*. (4) The gospel itself includes true propositions and historical verities, and at all such points is non-negotiable, even if it clashes with some dearly held cultural prejudices.

Which answer, then, would von Allmen give? I am uncertain, for his essay does not make this clear. Perhaps it is a little troubling, however, to find him asking whether the adoption of *kyrios* was a 'fatal slip'. His answer is that it was not 'truckling' if it exposed believers to persecution. True enough; but was it a fatal slip?

I myself hold to the 'organic' view I outlined above; and elsewhere I have sketched in the kind of growth in understanding that was involved.⁶⁷ It is arguable, for instance, that even in the parables Jesus tells in the synoptic gospels, the figure who clearly represents Jesus (in those parables where he is represented at all) is frequently a figure who in the Old Testament metaphorically stands for Yahweh

(bridegroom, or farmer, for example — there are eight other examples).⁶⁸ Certainly, there is ample evidence that Jesus repeatedly applied to himself passages from the Old Testament that had reference to God. There even appears to be dominical sanction for using ‘Lord’ in reference to Jesus (Matt. 21:3), even though it is very doubtful that the disciples understood all of this at the time. The question arises therefore whether the shift to Greek *kyrios* was so very innovative after all, or largely the result of increased understanding of who Jesus truly was, in the light of his resurrection and ascension. And in any case, if the gospel was going to be preached in Greek at all, Greek terms had to be used. The crucial question, therefore, is whether the Greek terms used by Hellenistic believers were filled with pagan content, or with Christian content in harmony with the gospel truth transmitted. Von Allmen implicitly recognises this when he points out that the ‘man’ in Phil. 2:7 is not the ‘Original Man’ of Gnostic mythology, regardless of the term’s provenance. Context is more important as a determinant of meaning than is philological antecedent. Why cannot the same insight be deployed in other cases?

Similar things may be asked about von Allmen’s treatment of the slave-man parallel in Phil. 2:7. Apart from the fact that here as elsewhere in his essay von Allmen sweeps the Greeks together into one undifferentiated structure of thought,⁶⁹ the question is whether the hymn’s formulation says something untrue of Jesus. In fact, it does *not* put him in the condition of a slave ‘bound hand and foot in submission to all powerful Destiny’. Although some Greek thought conceived of man’s plight in such terms, the word for ‘slave’ has no necessary overtones of such thought; and *in this context*, the essence of Jesus’ ‘slavery’ is his voluntary refusal to exploit his equality with God⁷⁰ in order to become a man, not involuntary submission to inflexible and unavoidable Destiny. In what sense, therefore, has anything of substance in the gospel been changed by this Greek terminology?

Third, von Allmen’s use of vague language blurs important distinctions. Paul, von Allmen says, ‘does not demand that doctrine should be in literal agreement with the primi-

tive Christian preaching’.⁷¹ What does ‘literal’ mean in this sentence? It cannot mean ‘verbal’, since we have crossed from Aramaic to Greek. But what, then? Von Allmen simply says that ‘the doctrine must correspond to the inner thrust of the apostolic faith’.⁷² Not to the apostolic faith itself, we notice, but to its ‘inner thrust’. We may ask how this inner thrust is to be isolated, or, to put it in another way, who is to determine it. Calvin? Barth? Bultmann? Von Allmen? The only answer von Allmen gives here is that since ‘new hope is part of the inner thrust of the faith’, therefore ‘eschatology is an essential element of Christian theology’.⁷³ But ‘eschatology’ is a ‘slippery word’⁷⁴ in modern theology. In Bultmann’s thought, it has nothing to do with the return of Jesus at the end of the age, the present inaugurated kingdom then being finally consummated in a new heaven and new earth. Rather, it is reduced to the tension in the existential moment of decision. Does von Allmen follow Bultmann, then, when he rhetorically asks, ‘Provided one reintroduces this moment of expectation, this eschatological tension, then why not use Greek terminology?’⁷⁵ Why not, indeed — provided it is the same eschatological structure as that of the historic gospel. But if this ‘eschatological tension’ has been redefined as ‘this moment of expectation’ by appealing to Bultmannian categories, the ‘inner thrust of the apostolic faith’ appears to have come adrift. There is no longer any objective gospel at all; and appeals to an ‘inner thrust’ may simply hide infinite subjectivity. Once again, I am left uncertain where von Allmen stands in all this, or what he really thinks about Bultmann’s reinterpretation of Pauline eschatology, because his language is so vague; but I am persuaded his approach would do well to heed the wise assessment of Beker:

First Corinthians 15 provides us with an impressive example that the coherent center of the gospel is, for Paul, not simply an experimental reality of the heart or a Word beyond words that permits translation into a multitude of world views. Harry Emerson Fosdick’s dictum about the gospel as an ‘abiding experience amongst changing world views’, or Bultmann’s demythologizing program for the sake of the

kerygmatic address of the gospel, is in this manner not true to Paul's conception of the gospel. However applicable the gospel must be to a Gentile in his contingent situation, it does not tolerate a world view that cannot express those elements in the apocalyptic world view . . . that to Paul seem inherent in the truth of the gospel . . . And far from considering the apocalyptic world view a husk or discardable frame, Paul insists that it belongs to the inalienable coherent core of the gospel . . . It seems that Paul sacrifices dialogical contingency to dogmatic necessity by imposing a particular world view on Hellenistic believers. And if Paul imposes a dogmatic interpretative scheme on the 'core' of the gospel, he seems to require not only faith as *fiducia* but also faith as *assensus*.⁷⁶

4. Von Allmen's overarching reconstruction of the development of early Christianity depends on a reductionistic schema that runs more or less in a straight line from Judaism to Hellenism. More careful work has shown how misleading this schema is.⁷⁷ Judaism was already impregnated with Hellenistic concepts and vocabulary. Almost certainly the apostles themselves were bilingual or trilingual. At the same time, many New Testament documents (e.g. the Gospel of John) that had previously been classed as irremediably Hellenistic have been shown, since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, to have at least linguistic links with the most conservative strands of Judaism.

The same point can be made by again referring to two observations to which I have already alluded in this paper. First, there is no record of Hellenistic Jews being evangelized by Aramaic-speaking Jews. This is because *the church was bilingual from its inception*. It could scarcely be otherwise, considering that most if not all of the apostles came from Galilee. Even von Allmen's expression 'the Aramaic-speaking apostles' is misleading; for in all likelihood, both the Eleven and Paul were comfortable in both Aramaic and Greek. Of course, many Jews who became Christians during the first weeks and months after Pentecost were from the Diaspora; and presumably most of these would not be fluent in Aramaic, but would be more at home in the Hellenistic world than would those who had spent all their lives in

Palestine, even in Galilee; but it was never the case that a purely Aramaic-speaking church had to learn Greek in order to reach out to Greek-speaking Jews. For von Allmen therefore to distinguish the Hellenistic wing of the church from the Aramaic wing as if the former were the freshly evangelized and therefore the exclusively 'indigenous' church which alone could become 'truly missionary' is to propound disjunctions with no historical base and which offer no direct parallels to modern problems in contextualization, and few parallels to modern problems in crossing the bridge to the third horizon.

Second, we have seen that the really significant movement recorded in the New Testament documents is not from Judaism to Hellenism, linguistically and culturally considered, but from the old covenant to the new. This development had racial and cultural implications, of course, but primarily because the old covenant was enacted between God and one particular race. Profound theological questions therefore had to be faced, in light of the new revelation brought by Jesus and confirmed and clarified by the Holy Spirit in the early church. Modern problems of contextualization cannot in this regard be seen as parallel to the first expansion to Gentiles — unless new revelation is claimed as the basis on which the modern expansion into the new languages and cultures is taking place!

C. BROADER METHODOLOGICAL PROBLEMS IN VON ALLMEN'S ESSAY

There are two methodological problems in von Allmen's article that deserve separate consideration, one relatively minor and the other major.

1. The minor problem is found in the frequent disjunctions that force the unwary reader to 'either/or' reasoning when other options are not only available but arguably preferable. For instance, as we have seen, von Allmen approves the work of Schlink, who by concentrating on the *form* of 'God-talk' argues that 'the basic structure of God-talk is not the *doctrine* of God but the *worship* of God.'⁷⁸

Quite apart from the question as to the relation between form and content (a notoriously difficult subject), this conclusion is far too disjunctive: doctrine *or* worship. After all, even in worship the worshiper has *some* notion of the God he is worshipping; and therefore unless that notion is completely ineffable, he has some doctrine of God. Even the postulate 'God is utterly ineffable' is in fact a doctrinal statement. It is logically impossible to be involved in worshipping God or a god *without* a doctrine of God, even if that doctrine is not very systematic, mature, well-articulated or for that matter even true. Meanwhile von Allmen's approval of the Schlink disjunction has done its damage by giving the impression that so long as there is worship, doctrine really has no importance and can safely be relegated to a very late stage of development. The kernel of truth in his analysis is that it is possible to have doctrine without being involved in worship — a pathetic and tragic state indeed; but that does not mean the converse is possible, let alone ideal.

Or to take another example, von Allmen concludes: 'Even amidst the fiercest polemic, Paul remains firmly rooted in the basis of the Christian faith: Christ who died and was raised. It is only from this centre that one may dare to say anything at all . . .'.⁷⁹ Now the first of these two sentences is true, even if slightly reductionistic. Indeed, we must insist that Paul's understanding of Christ's resurrection will not compromise over such matters as a genuinely empty tomb and an objective resurrection body. It is certainly true that this is one of the cornerstones of the faith Paul preaches. But it is going too far to use this non-negotiable truth as the *sole* criterion by which all must be judged. True, no aspect of genuine Christianity can tamper with this central truth, or fly in its face; but it is not true that this is *the only non-negotiable* for Paul — as if, provided a person holds to this centre, all else is for the apostle negotiable. That is demonstrably *not* true. The eschatological error in Thessalonica, or the assorted moral errors in Corinth, are not resolved by simple reference to Christ's death and resurrection; yet Paul is adamant about the proper resolution of these matters as well. Indeed, as von Allmen has phrased things, someone might believe that Jesus died and rose from

the dead *exactly as Lazarus rose from the dead*, and still be holding to the 'centre'. But Paul would not agree; for Christ's death and resurrection is qualitatively different from all others. If so, we must say in what way it was different (e.g. his was the death of God's Son; it was an atoning death; his body after the resurrection was different from his body before death in ways that Lazarus' body was not; etc); and by saying in what way we are admitting other non-negotiables, other matters essential to Christian faith. The implicit disjunction *only* from this centre, from *nowhere* else suddenly begins to fray around the edges.

2. But there is a far more important methodological problem with von Allmen's work. At the beginning of his essay, he sets out to show that the creation of an African theology is both necessary and possible 'on the basis of a true fidelity to the New Testament'.⁸⁰ In a sense that I shall shortly elucidate, I entirely agree that an African theology is both necessary and possible. But von Allmen's way of establishing what is in 'true fidelity to the New Testament' is not the way most readers of the New Testament would judge such fidelity; and therefore it needs to be clearly understood.

Von Allmen does not attempt to justify his position on the basis of what the New Testament documents *say*, but on the basis of his reconstruction of *their development*. The authority lies not in the content of the Scriptures, but in von Allmen's understanding of the doctrinal changes those Scriptures reflect. This is manifest not only in the thrust of von Allmen's essay, but especially in its conclusion: 'Rather than teach a theology (even a theology that claims to be a "New Testament theology")', he writes, 'what we should try to do is point out what the forces were that governed the elaboration of a theology on the basis of the material furnished by the primitive church'.⁸¹ The 'material furnished by the primitive church' can only be a reference to the New Testament documents (and perhaps also to other early Christian literature — though for the earliest period we are pretty well shut up to the New Testament); so von Allmen is saying that we should not attempt to teach the content of these documents, but restrict ourselves only to deductions about the forces that generated the elaborations found in

these documents. And what is in conformity with von Allmen's understanding of these forces is precisely what he says is in 'fidelity to the New Testament'! In reality, of course, his theory is not in fidelity to the New Testament but to his deductions about the forces that shaped the New Testament; for as we have seen, these deductions frequently run counter to what the New Testament documents actually say.

More troubling yet is von Allmen's confidence regarding the objectivity and reliability of the scholarly reconstruction he sets forward as the core of the new curriculum. But I shall let that point pass for the moment to focus a little more clearly on the cardinal difference between Byang Kato and Daniel von Allmen. In brief, it is the source of authority in Christianity. Both profess allegiance to Jesus Christ as Lord. But *which* Jesus? The Jesus of the Jehovah's Witnesses? The Jesus of von Harnack? The Jesus of Islam? For Kato, it is the Jesus of the New Testament, because for him the New Testament documents are authoritative. Therefore every religious claim or precept must be tested against that standard. For von Allmen, it is not entirely clear how the confession 'Jesus is Lord' is filled with content; and although he appeals to the New Testament, in reality he is appealing to his reconstruction of the forces that shaped it. That reconstruction serves as the supreme paradigm for an endless succession of further reconstructions, and in that sense gains some authority. But the documents themselves, in their actual content, are stripped of authority. A person might therefore confess 'Jesus is Lord' but mean something very different from what Paul or Luke means. Does this not matter? Von Allmen seems to want to defend a core of gospel truth as one of the final criteria; but it is not clear how that core can avoid endless changes in content, making it no core at all but the proverbial peeled onion.

The same sort of problem appears in Kraft.⁸² Basing himself on von Allmen's article, Kraft assigns Luther's description of James as an 'epistle of straw' to Luther's 'unconscious ethnocentrism',⁸³ without struggling with Luther's later growth in understanding both of the gospel and of the nature of the canon.⁸⁴ The point, according to

Kraft, is that the Bible is a 'divine casebook' that embraces many different models of appropriate religion, each in its own way reflecting the non-negotiable core. Different cultures will feel most at home with this part or that part of the Bible, and prefer to overlook or ignore other parts. Luther found Paul congenial, and was uncomfortable with James. Well and good, Kraft argues: let each culture choose those parts that speak to it most clearly. This diversity produces many different theologies; and, writes Kraft:

We need to ask which of these varieties of theology branded 'heretical' were genuinely out of bounds (measured by scriptural standards), and which were valid contextualizations of scriptural truth within varieties of culture or subculture that the party in power refused to take seriously. *It is likely that most of the 'heresies' can validly be classed as cultural adaptations rather than as theological aberrations.* They, therefore, *show what ought to be done today* rather than what ought to be feared. The 'history of traditions' becomes intensely relevant when studied from this perspective.⁸⁵

Note, then, that the 'scriptural standards' to which Kraft refers are not what the Bible as a whole says, but an array of disparate theologies each based on separate parts of the Bible, an array that sets the limits and nature of diverse traditions and their development. In treating the Bible as a 'divine casebook' Kraft is very close to von Allmen in the way he conceives of biblical authority.

At the risk of oversimplification, I would argue that there are five problems in their conception. The *first* raises an historical question. By suggesting that 'most' of the historical heresies of the church ought to serve us today as models for what ought to be done in different cultures, has Kraft reflected deeply enough on the nature of heresy? Certainly ecclesiastical powers have sometimes persecuted groups that were more faithful to the Scriptures than the powers themselves; but that is not quite the spectre that Kraft is raising. He is arguing rather that ecclesiastical powers have persecuted groups with positions that more closely align to certain paradigms found in the Scriptures than do the pow-

ers — while the powers themselves retain a superior fidelity to Scripture with respect to *other* paradigms found in Scripture. But surely it is the very nature of heresy to grasp a piece of truth and inflate it out of all proportion. I do not know of a single heresy where that is not the case. But no such heresy could Kraft's approach ever detect, since the very essence of his programmatic call is to foster groups that adopt parts of Scripture congenial to them. How, for instance, would Kraft respond to the central Christology of Jehovah's Witnesses, or to any other Arian group? I am not asking how he would respond personally, as if his own Christology were suspect: that is simply not the point. How, rather, would he approach the question, methodologically speaking, of their acceptability within a broadly 'orthodox' framework?

The *second* question is theoretical: namely, is this the way that biblical authority is to be perceived, on the basis of its witness? I would answer with a firm negative. Of course there were cultural forces at work in the development of the biblical books. But the question is whether God so superintended those forces that the Bible's documents are to be read not only as historical documents that reflect the progress of revelation in redemptive history but also as a whole, not merely as case studies but as a divinely ordered progression that results in a unity of thought, a world in which there is prophecy and fulfilment, type and antitype, dark saying and clearer explication, diverse styles and genres and languages but a complementarity of thought — all resulting in the possibility of finding unambiguous *biblical* truth for many kinds of doctrinal, ethical and intellectual matters, not simply disparate and potentially mutually contradictory 'truths'.⁸⁶

The *third* problem concerns the extent to which these models depend on the paradigm shift theory of Kuhn and others.⁸⁷ Even if he was largely right regarding the substantial incommensurability of competing scientific paradigms, Kuhn never suggested that there is a *total* change in meaning when one moves from one paradigm to another. Some things hold under both Newtonian and Einsteinian physics. Indeed, one might argue that some elements (e.g. the law

of the excluded middle) are necessary constituents of every conceivable paradigm. More important, recent study has shown that Kuhn's work needs serious revision, and should not be depended on for too great a degree of support.⁸⁸

The *fourth* problem is practical. It is true, as Kraft says, that every culture finds certain parts of the Bible more congenial than others. On this basis Kraft seems to encourage each culture to operate with its own 'canon within the canon'. But this inevitably means that the final authority rests, not in the Bible, but in the culture. The canon comes to lose all canonical authority. If a society is polygamous, it may follow Abraham or David (Kraft's example); but then why not follow, in some other culture, Mosaic law regarding slaves, stoning, temple ritual and the bitter-water rite? How about wiping out entire peoples? A Hitler might find such accounts and commands very congenial. On the other hand, does any society find the Sermon on the Mount congenial? The problem is not only how the Old Testament passages to which I've just referred relate to later revelation (part of the *second* problem, above), but also how the Bible can ever have any prophetic bite at all. In my understanding of the canon, the preacher who is sensitive to the cultural sensibilities of his hearers will not only exploit their canonical preferences, and seek to relate the parts of the Bible into a self-consistent whole, he will also take extra pains to preach, teach and apply, within this canonical framework, those parts of Scripture his hearers find *least* palatable. This may not be his first step; but it is a necessary step, for otherwise no prophetic word will ever be heard, no correction of culture, no objective *canonical* balance. It appears, then, that advocates of a certain kind of contextualization are aware of the dangers of what might be called 'Scripture plus' (i.e. the distortion of Scripture's message by the dogmatic *addition* of cultural baggage), 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 uncongenial.

The *fifth* problem concerns the nature of von Allmen's appeal to a core gospel which he does not see as culturally negotiable, or, to use Kraft's expression, the 'supracultural

truth' of the core. But I shall return to this problem in the next section.

E. REFLECTIONS ON VON ALLMEN'S THREE *IMPASSES*

The first *impasse* to a truly African theology, in von Allmen's view, is *paternalism*. There is real insight here. We have all witnessed or heard about those horrible situations where a Western missionary squelches the honest probing of an African or other student who is questioning the missionary's interpretation of Scripture at some point. The put-down might be in terms like these: 'What right do you have to question this interpretation? This is the product of two thousand years of study and thought. Your business is to go and learn it!' May God forgive all teachers who employ such tactics, especially those who do so in the name of the authority of Scripture while unwittingly elevating tradition above Scripture. Moreover, von Allmen is wise to point out the inverted power structures when we compare the first century with the twentieth.

Nevertheless, von Allmen's solution — simply to let the Africans get on with it, offering neither criticism nor encouragement (because that too is a reflection of paternalism) but simply trust — is in my view not nearly radical enough. Unwittingly it falls into a new kind of paternalism. While theologians in the West are busily engaged in cut and thrust *among themselves* is it not a kind of inverted paternalism that declares a respectful 'hands off' policy to African theologians and biblical scholars? Surely it is far better to enter into debate with them. The real problem lies in heart attitude. The solution is the grace of God in the human life, grace that enables Africans and Westerners and others alike to learn from and criticise each other without scoring cheap shots or indulging in 'one-upmanship'.

The second *impasse* to a truly African theology, in von Allmen's view, is a *fear of heresy*. Certainly there is a great danger in this area, found not least in Western missionaries whose zeal is great but whose knowledge is slim. But von Allmen gravely underestimates the seriousness with which

heresy is taken in the New Testament, and overestimates the amount of diversity there.⁸⁹ At what point, for instance, can von Allmen sympathize and emphathize with the sentiments expressed in Matt. 7:21–23; John 3:36; Acts 4:12; Gal. 1:8, 9; 2 Tim. 2:17–29; Rev. 21:6–9? Even Paul's famous 'all things to all men' (1 Cor. 9) unambiguously presuppose limits beyond which he is not prepared to go.⁹⁰

Granted the truthfulness of Scripture and the rightness of the canonical approach I have briefly sketched in, Christians have not only the right but also the responsibility to learn from *and to correct* one another on the basis of this agreed standard. This must not be in any witch-hunting or judgmental spirit; but failure to discharge these responsibilities in a gracious and thoughtful way may not only reflect inverted paternalism but a singular indifference to the truth claims of 'the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints' (Jude 3).

The third *impasse* in the way of a truly African theology, according to von Allmen, is *the perception that contextualization must be merely the adaptation of an existing theology*. Again, there is considerable insight here. Will that theology be truly African which simply takes, say, Hodge's *Systematic Theology* and seeks to rewrite it for some African (or Burmese or Guatemalan or any other context)? Anyone who has thoughtfully worked cross-culturally for an extended period of time knows the answer to that question. There are far too many church clones, extending all the way to the style of buildings. David Adeney in conversation has drawn attention to a sign he saw in Shanghai before the revolution, announcing the presence of the 'Dutch Reformed Church of America in China'.

Nevertheless, von Allmen's solution, to foster a true *tabula rasa* and insist that a truly African theology can only flower when it emerges without reference to any existing theology, is impossible; and even if it were possible, unwise. It is impossible and unwise for four reasons:

(1) It is impossible because a *tabula rasa* is impossible. If the new hermeneutic has taught us anything, it is taught us that. Even if we were to follow von Allmen's suggestion and teach only tools and the history of traditions, we would

still be conveying *some* theological content. Teaching Greek invariably includes Greek sentences from the New Testament; and translating them entails *theological* decisions about the history and development of traditions as well as linguistic expertise. Moreover, one cannot talk about the history and development of traditions without talking about the traditions themselves. Even initial evangelization and church planting could not possibly have been accomplished by conveying no more than 'Christ died and rose again'. And in any case, even what one does *not* teach is teaching something. If a lecturer refuses to discuss, say, the interpretation of Romans or the language used of the atonement, he or she will invariably appear to be hiding something, thus conveying a distasteful impression — e.g. that such matters are religiously unimportant, or frightening, or too difficult.

(2) It is impossible because there is no core of gospel truth in the sense presupposed by von Allmen, no 'supracultural truth' in the sense demanded by Kraft.⁹¹ They both treat the Scriptures as having only casebook authority, examining it for every hint of cultural development, while nevertheless insisting that there is an undissolved core of indispensable gospel truth, a supracultural truth. In one way, this is far too radical; in another, it is not nearly radical enough. It is too radical, I have argued, because it reduces the locus of non-negotiable truth to one or two propositions such as 'Jesus is Lord' or 'Christ died and rose again', when in fact the corpus of non-negotiable truth embraces all of Scripture; that is the data base from which theological reflection must take its substance and controls. But now I wish to argue that in another way the position of these two scholars is not radical enough, in that it seems to think the core or supracultural confessions escape all restrictions of culture; and that is demonstrably untrue.

Consider, for example, the sentence 'Jesus is Lord'. We might all agree that no Christianity is possible where this three-word sentence is denied. But to a Hindu, the sentence might be happily accommodated within his syncretistic framework. In that context the confession is far from being a *sufficient* test of genuine Christianity. To a Buddhist, it would mean Jesus is inferior to Gautama the Buddha, for it

still *predicates* something of Jesus. To a Jehovah's Witness, there is no entailment regarding Jesus' deity. And to an existentialist, the same sentence is a mythological expression designed to call us to the decisions that characterise authentic existence.

My point is that from the perspective of human perception and formulation *there is no supracultural core*. However the heart of the gospel be conceived by human beings, it is conceived in a particular linguistic, cultural, philosophical and religious framework. Only God is supracultural. But this does not relativize the gospel. Far from it; it simply means that the supracultural personal God, in order to communicate with his finite and culture-bound sinful creatures, necessarily had to accommodate the form of his communication to their space-time limitations, their historical contingencies. From God's point of view, of course, truth may be supracultural; and for our part we may cheerfully insist that truth is supracultural in that it can be communicated to many different cultures. But it cannot be communicated to each culture in the same way; it cannot be communicated supraculturally. Thus it is difficult to see how we can determine what the supracultural core really is once we have abandoned the 'given' of Scripture. And even that 'given' comes to us in the garb of culture. None of this entails the relativizing of the truth; but it does mean that if any person is to understand the culturally conditioned Scriptures and apply them aright, he must, as part of the exercise, seek to shape his own horizon of understanding to that of the cultures and languages of Scripture, and then make the transfer of meaning back to his own environment.⁹² To put the matter another way, I must find out what 'Jesus is Lord' means in the Greek New Testament, how it functions, how it is coordinated with other truth, and then seek to confess the same truth in my own language and culture — even if it takes a paragraph instead of a three-word sentence, or a complete overturning of my conceptual framework (as, in this case, must happen to, say, the Buddhist). That it is always possible to convey *any* truth in another culture should be obvious to anyone with the most rudimentary knowledge of linguistics: if modern developments in that discipline have

taught us anything, it is that cross-cultural communication is possible, even if seldom straightforward.

Thus, although we may wish to speak of a 'core' of truths without believing in which one cannot be a Christian, even this core cannot be approached supraculturally. Someone might object that if everything is embedded in culture, then even the cross suffers the same fate. Does this not suggest, it might be asked, that the cross itself is optional? What would have happened if God had decided to send his Son to New York or Manila in 1985? Should we not try to discern God's purposes *behind* the cross, behind this particular cultural form? But the question itself betrays the problem: it presupposes that we have access to supracultural truth in some direct fashion. Even if we decided affirmatively — that is, that we *should* try to discuss the meaning of the cross apart from the cross itself — we would inevitably couch the principle we thus 'discovered' in some other cultural garb — ours! The truth of the matter is that all we have is the revelation God did in fact give; and it is cast in certain historical and cultural frameworks that cannot be disregarded, for we have no other access to God's truth.

It appears, then, that there is no intrinsic philosophical reason why the *entire* Bible cannot be seen (as it claims to be) as a definitive and true revelation, even if *all* of it is, in the sense just explained, culture-bound. And this suggests that the appeal of von Allmen, Kraft and others is epistemologically and hermeneutically naive.

(3) It is unwise because von Allmen, believing his proposed *tabula rasa* to be possible, and his particular reconstruction of gospel traditions neutral, is in fact promulgating his own brand of theology, while honestly but mistakenly thinking himself above the fray. No blindness is worse than that which thinks it sees (as John 9:39–41 points out). Is it not obvious that even as Western evangelical missionaries try to impose their theological frameworks on their converts, so Western missionaries of more 'liberal' persuasion try to impose their scepticism and relativism on theirs?⁹³ Far better is it to admit these tendencies, and become aware of the limitations these inevitabilities impose on the cross-cultural missionary.

(4) It is unwise because it fails to grapple with the third horizon. Modern debate over hermeneutics commonly speaks, as we have seen, of the *two* horizons; missiologists force us to think of the third. If the second horizon of understanding is that of the reader or interpreter of Scripture, that horizon of understanding will be at least roughly similar to that of the interpreter's colleague in his own culture; so that when the interpreter has fused his own horizon of understanding with the first (that of the text) so effectively as to have facilitated a true transfer of meaning, he becomes capable of learning to think through the meaning of the text in his own language and cultural framework; and then it is a relatively small step to communicate these findings to his colleague. Of course, the interpreter's own understanding may still need considerable correction, revision, deepening and so forth; but for the sake of simplifying the argument, let us suppose that he is substantially right in his understanding of the text, the 'fusion' operation having been responsibly carried out. If this interpreter now wishes to communicate the truth he has learned to a person of *another* culture, of course, he faces the third horizon, that of the 'target' person or group. To communicate accurately the substance of what he has learned, the interpreter, now a witness or preacher of sorts, must fuse the horizon of his own understanding with that of the hearer — for a start, he must learn a new culture. The truth he wishes to convey must then be passed on in the words and actions and parameters of that language and culture. That is one of the things that makes an effective missionary. In time, the new hearer, now a convert, learns to fuse the horizon of *his* understanding with that of the biblical text; and because he probably knows his own culture better than the missionary ever will, he has the potential, all things being equal, to become a far clearer and more effective witness and theologian in his own culture than the missionary does.

One problem, of course, is that the missionary may unwittingly incorporate a lot of his own cultural baggage into the gospel he is preaching. But that substantial truth *can* be conveyed across cultures is demonstrated by both von Allmen and Kraft themselves: they are read, and understood,

by Africans and Westerners alike. A second problem is that the new convert may have unwittingly picked up some of this unnecessary baggage from the missionary. But it is precisely in fostering the fusion of the convert's horizon of understanding with that of the biblical text, which both missionary and convert agree is the basis of authority for their shared faith, that there is a possibility of the convert's divesting himself of these unwise and sometimes unwitting accretions, a possibility of developing a genuinely contextualized theology.

In fact, as I suggested in the introduction, the model can become far more complex yet, because each generation of believers tries to grapple with the way the gospel given in the Bible has been understood in other ages, branches and cultures in the history of the church; and this involves still more fusing of horizons if true understanding is to be gained. That is what makes a competent historian.⁹⁴ Moreover, von Allmen frequently speaks of a genuine *African* theology over against *Western* theology, as if these two labels represent undifferentiated wholes; whereas in fact there are many different Western theologies (not to mention cultures and languages) and even more African theologies (and cultures and languages). Why should Byang Kato's theology be criticised as too subservient to Western thought because it is in line with one form of Western evangelicalism, whereas Mbiti⁹⁵ is praised for his genuine African insights even though he learned his eschatology in Europe? There is a double standard afoot here; and it has less to do with questions of contextualization than with animus against evangelicalism. It is very difficult to see how Mbiti is more 'African' than Kato, or vice-versa, in precisely the same way that it is difficult to see how Moltmann is more 'Western' than Carl F. H. Henry, or vice-versa.

In short, reflection on the third horizon, which relates to the missionary responsibility of the church, sheds light on the relation between the first two horizons, and renders invalid all theories that depend on the possibility that humans locked in space and time can formulate supracultural truth supraculturally. This means either that there can be no gospel at all (which of course von Allmen would not say),

or that the locus of revealed and propositional truth must include far more than the restricted core some are advancing.

F. CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

Where, then, does all this leave us? What is genuinely contextualized theology that is faithful to the gospel preserved and proclaimed in Scripture, and how do we foster it — assuming that we should?

I should first set out what I mean by contextualization. In the past, many missionaries of large spirit and vision spoke of the importance of the indigenization of the church. By this, as we have seen, they meant to sum up the 'three selfs': the church must become self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating. 'Contextualization' goes beyond this to include questions of biblical interpretation and theological expression: i.e. the Word of God needs to be 'contextualized' in each culture.⁹⁶

In many ways, this is surely right. Precisely *because* each culture approaches the Scriptures with its own set of prejudices and blinkers, it will be able to see, and (initially at any rate) be prevented from seeing, certain things that another culture might respond to (or fail to respond to) in quite a different way. For this reason, not only every culture, but ideally every generation in every culture (especially in those cultures that are undergoing rapid transition), must get involved in its own Bible study, and learn to express and apply biblical truth in its own context. In this light African theology, indeed, many African theologies, are both necessary and possible — as are, say, Portuguese and Taiwanese theologies.

But from the drift of the argument in this paper, I would delimit that contextualization of theology by five considerations:

First, the 'given' is Scripture. Of course, other things are not less important: prayer, humility, personal knowledge of the Saviour, enthusiastic submission to the Lord Jesus Christ, and more; but the 'given' data on which any truly Christian church must base its theology are the documents

of the Word of God. How this model of theology is related to the problem of the 'hermeneutical circle' has been worked out elsewhere.⁹⁷ But a truly contextualized theology is, in my view, one in which believers from a particular culture seek to formulate a comprehensive theology in the language and categories of their own culture, *but based on the whole Bible*. In doing so, they will want to be informed about many other attempts in other languages and cultures; and they will struggle with questions such as the relationships amongst the biblical covenants, the nature of prophecy and fulfilment, and much more. But the line of control is from the Scripture. In one sense, therefore, I agree with von Allmen that theology has not been properly contextualized if it simply tries to take over the effort of some other culture. However, this does not entail the abandonment of all contact with other theologies, which would be impossible anyway, but only that the line of direct control must be from Scripture.

The stumbling block that has tripped up von Allmen in his understanding of contextualization is his sub-biblical grasp of the Bible. For whenever there is an attempt to build a theology on an alleged supracultural core, or on an entirely non-propositional revelation (the Bible in this case being nothing more than a faulty witness to that revelation),⁹⁸ the inevitable result is that the *real* line of authority lies elsewhere: in the presupposed philosophy (articulated or otherwise), or in the standards and world-view of the culture, or in the preferences of the theologian. Western Christendom has generated its liberal Jesus, its Marxist Jesus, its Mormon Jesus, its unknown but existentialist Jesus, and so forth; but from the perspective of the Christian who believes that the Scriptures are authoritative, the core problem behind these reductionist and faddish theologies is their abandonment of the biblical data. Uncontrolled and speculative subjectivity is the inevitable result, even though each siren theology proclaims itself as the answer. Similarly, if we now cultivate various, say, African, Scottish, Indian and Burmese theologies, while abandoning the authority of Scripture, we have merely multiplied the subjectivity and speculation of the enterprise; and none of these efforts will prove very enduring, because at no level will they mesh with the central

heritage of biblical Christianity, however expressed in diverse cultures. But if by African, Scottish, Indian and Burmese theologies we are referring to attempts by nationals to work directly from Scripture in order to construct a biblically controlled theology each for its own language, culture and generation, the enterprise cannot be too highly lauded and encouraged; and the result in each case will mesh substantially with other efforts elsewhere, once their respective 'horizons of understanding' have been fused. And where there are disagreements that are not purely linguistic or cultural about what the Scriptures actually say, then at least in this case there is a common, recognised authority that renders further joint study and discussion possible and potentially profitable.⁹⁹

Second, the study of historical theology is a well-nigh indispensable element in the task. As I have already indicated, it strikes me as a kind of inverted paternalism to give Western students substantial doses of historical theology, including the study of theology in many languages and cultures not their own, and then advocate keeping such information from (say) African believers, unless, presumably, Africans are the ones teaching the subject. Yet historical theology should not be taught as if it were normative, but should be constantly assessed both culturally and against the norm of Scripture. In other words, while von Allmen wants to assess streams of *inner* canonical tradition, as he reconstructs them, against the minimalistic, supracultural gospel he judges to be normative, I want to assess *post*-canonical streams of tradition against the 'given' of the canon itself. Such study invariably widens the options, generates care in biblical interpretation, exposes the thoughtful student to his or her own blind spots, and enables the thoughtful person to detect patterns of genuine continuity, frequent doctrinal and ethical sources of contention or objects of disbelief, and so forth.

Third, it follows therefore that a Christian in, say, Lagos, Nigeria and another in Oslo, Norway do not have to pass each other as ships in the night. They will of course construct their theologies along quite different lines, using different languages, metaphors, genres, and so forth. But once the

linguistic and cultural barriers between them have been substantially overcome (as is the case when one of the two learns the language and culture of the other), enabling them to communicate fairly freely, there is no intrinsic reason why these two Christians should not sit down and, with patient probing, not only learn from each other but be corrected by each other — precisely because each of them has learned to fuse his own horizon of understanding with that of the Scriptures both hold to be normative. The African, for instance, might expose the unbiblical individualism of his European counterpart, and show how much of the biblical language of the church is ‘family’ language — points on which the European may have been insensitive. On the other hand, the European may challenge the African to ask if his understanding of family solidarity may not have been carried too far — perhaps by introducing elements of ancestor worship into his theology, even though such worship has no sanction in Scripture.¹⁰⁰ It thus becomes important for *every* cultural group to ‘do theology’ not only for its own sake but also because each will contribute something valuable to the worldwide understanding of biblical truth. But the exchanges must ultimately be reciprocal; and it must be recognised that the authority that corrects every culture is the Word of God.

Fourth, although the subject cannot be explored here, there are two important theological truths that should be borne in mind in this debate. The first is that the Bible’s teaching on the depravity of fallen human nature, a depravity extending even to the natural mind that *cannot* understand the things of God (1 Cor. 2:14), in one sense makes the communication process, the transfer of meaning from the second horizon to the third, far harder than those who focus only on the new hermeneutic can imagine. But conversely, the Bible’s own solution to this dilemma — the enabling work of the Spirit of God, is not afraid to bring God into the picture; and is therefore a highly creative and powerful ‘solution’. This is most emphatically *not* a surreptitious appeal to mystical and ill-defined knowledge, but an acknowledgement that the Spirit’s convicting, transforming, regenerating work changes attitudes and motives and values that

had once erected immense epistemological barriers. Failure to wrestle with these two points has led to some serious misjudgments even by those who take a high view of Scripture.¹⁰¹

Fifth, *pace* von Allmen, there is no reason why Westerners should not encourage Africans to develop their own theology — just as there is no reason why Africans should not encourage us to do a far better job of developing our own.

The aim must always be to develop indigenous, contextualized Christianity that is in hearty submission to Scripture, growing in its understanding of and obedience to God’s Word. If this means, in the West, that we must re-think our tendencies toward, say, scepticism, individualism, an arrogant sense of racial superiority, and materialism, is Byang Kato so wrong when he warns believers in his own context of their dangers of falling into syncretism, universalism and Christo-paganism? Why should it be thought that the Bible can be wielded as a prophetic sword over Western culture and not over African culture?¹⁰²

The struggle between the views of Kato and von Allmen does not ultimately turn only on the way contextualization should proceed, but even more on the authority of Scripture; and as such, the debate is a reflection of a similar struggle throughout Christendom — one which, ironically, is fuelled even more by the West’s rationalism than it is by post-colonial nationalism.

NOTES (pages 213-257)

1. Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism; Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions* (London 1983).
2. Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky CSP, *Christ's Lordship and Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll London 1983).
3. Few conservatives, for instance, would disagree with more than the odd detail of the book by M. Warren, *I Believe in the Great Commission* (Grand Rapids 1976).
4. The point recurs in Rahner's writings; but cf. *Theological Investigations XIV* (London 1976) 180-294.
5. Donald Senior and Carroll Stuhlmueller, *The Biblical Foundations for Mission* (London 1983). Cf. also Donald Senior, 'The Struggle to be Universal: Mission as Vantage Point for New Testament Investigation', *CBQ* 46 (1984) 63-81.
6. S. G. Wilson, 'Paul and Religion', in *Paul and Paulinism: Essays in Honour of C. K. Barrett* (ed. M. D. Hooker and S. G. Wilson; London 1982) 339-354, esp. p.349. See further the helpful articles by Dewi Arwel Hughes, 'Christianity and other religions: a review of some recent discussion'. *Themelios* 9/2 (1984) 15-21; and Christopher J. H. Wright, 'The Christian and other religions: the biblical evidence', *Themelios* 9/2 (1984) 4-15.
7. E. Best, 'The Revelation to Evangelise the Gentiles'. *JTS* 35 (1984) 1-30.
8. Charles H. H. Scobie, 'Jesus or Paul? The Origin of the Universal Mission of the Christian Church', in *From Jesus to Paul: Studies in Honour of Francis Wright Beare* (ed. Peter Richardson and John C. Hurd; Waterloo 1984), 47-60.
9. Harry R. Boer, *Pentecost and Mission* (London 1961).
10. E.g. Johannes Blauw, *The Missionary Nature of the Church: A Survey of the Biblical Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids 1962); J. H. Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions* (Philadelphia 1960); J. Herbert Kane, *Christian Missions in Biblical Perspective* (Grand Rapids 1976); Ian Hutchinson, 'What is Mission?' in *Faith active in Love* (ed. John Diesendorf; Sydney 1981) 159-172; Peter Cotterell, *The Eleventh Commandment* (Leicester 1981).
11. Harvie M. Conn, *Evangelism: Doing Justice and Preaching Grace* (Grand Rapids 1982). Many other works that treat a similar theme are of much more mixed worth: e.g. the *Theological Fraternity Bulletin* and the book edited by Tom Sine, *The Church in Response to Human Need* (Monrovia, CA 1983).
12. Dean S. Gilliland, *Pauline Theology and Mission Practice* (Grand Rapids 1983).
13. William Paul Bowers, 'Studies in Paul's Understanding of His Mission' (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Cambridge University, 1976).
14. Wolf-Henning Ollrog, *Paulus und seine Mitarbeiter: Untersuchungen zu Theorie und Praxis der paulinischen Mission* (WMANT 50; Neukirchen-Vluyn 1979).
15. John B. Polhill, 'Paul: Theology Born of Mission', *RevExp* 78 (1981) 233-247.
16. Harvie M. Conn, 'The Missionary Task of Theology: A Love/Hate Relationship?' *WTJ* 45 (1983) 1-21.
17. The most important work on this complex subject is that of Anthony C. Thiselton. *The Two Horizons*; but cf. also Hendrik Krabbendam, 'The New Hermeneutic', *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible* (ed. Earl D. Radmacher and Robert D. Preus; Grand Rapids 1984) 533-558, and the equally important 'Responses' by J. I. Packer and Royce Gruenler (pp. 559-589); J. I. Packer, 'Infallible Scripture and the Role of Hermeneutics', *Scripture and Truth* (ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge; Grand Rapids 1983) 321-356. Broader treatments that shed considerable light on the topic include Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics* (Evanston 1969), and Roy J. Howard, *Three Faces of Hermeneutics: An Introduction to Current Theories of Understanding* (Berkeley 1982).
18. Cf. the excellent article by David J. Hesselgrave, 'Contextualization of Theology', in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (ed. Walter A. Elwell, ed.; Grand Rapids 1984) 271-272.
19. To give but one example, cf. Carl F. H. Henry and W. Stanley Mooneyham, ed., *One Race, One Gospel, One Task*, vol. 2 (Minneapolis 1967).
20. E.g. most recently N. E. Allison, 'Make sure you're getting through', *EMQ* 20 (1984) 165-170.
21. E.g. Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture; A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Maryknoll 1980); David J. Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally; An Introduction to Missionary Communication* (Grand Rapids 1978); idem, *Planting Churches Cross-Culturally: A Guide for Home and*

- Foreign Missions* (Grand Rapids 1980); and the short-lived but influential journal, *Gospel in Context*.
22. E.g. Don Richardson, *Peace Child* (Glendale 1976); idem, *Lords of the Earth* (Glendale 1977).
 23. E.g. J. R. W. Stott and Robert Coote, ed., *Down to Earth: Studies in Christianity and Culture* (London 1981).
 24. E.g. Eugene A. Nida and Charles R. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (Leiden 1974).
 25. To name but three of the better known ones: Kosuke Koyama, *Waterbuffalo Theology* (Maryknoll 1974); Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation* (tr. and ed. by Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson; Maryknoll 1973); John S. Mbiti, *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background: A Study of the Encounter between New Testament Theology and African Traditional Concepts* (Oxford 1971).
 26. E.g. see the unpublished paper of Lois McKinney, 'Contextualizing Instruction: Contributions to Missiology from the Field of Education', delivered at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School on March 19, 1982.
 27. Daniel von Allmen, 'The Birth of Theology: Contextualization as the dynamic element in the formation of New Testament theology', *IRM* 64 (1975) 37-52. This work has been frequently mentioned or discussed by missiologists, and has appeared as well in important reprints: e.g. see Charles H. Kraft and Tom N. Wisbey, ed., *Readings in Dynamic Indigeneity* (South Pasadena, CA 1979).
 28. The bulk of the rest of this essay was first published in *East Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 3 (1984) 16-59, and is here reprinted with permission. A few significant changes have been made.
 29. Byang Kato, *Theological Trends in Africa Today* (WEF Theological News, Monograph 6; April, 1973).
 30. Others such as Drs. Adeyemo, Tiéno and Paluku doubtless exert similar influence; but Kato stood out as primarily a specialist in biblical studies.
 31. *Ibid.* 1.
 32. Von Allmen, 'Birth', 37 (emphasis his).
 33. *Ibid.* 38.
 34. *Ibid.*
 35. *Ibid.*
 36. *Ibid.* 39.
 37. *Ibid.*
 38. *Ibid.* 40
 39. *Ibid.* 41
 40. *Ibid.*
 41. Edmund Schlink, 'Die Methode des dogmatischen ökumenischen Dialogs', *KD* 12 (1966) 209.
 42. von Allmen, 'Birth', basing himself on P. Wendland, *Die hellenistisch-römische Kultur* (Tübingen 1912) 104-106.

43. *Ibid.*, referring to J. Gnilka, *Der Philipperbrief* (Freiburg 1966) 131-147.
44. *Ibid.*
45. *Ibid.*
46. *Ibid.* 44.
47. *Ibid.* 46.
48. *Ibid.* 45.
49. *Ibid.* 47.
50. *Ibid.* 48.
51. *Ibid.* 49.
52. *Ibid.*
53. *Ibid.* 50.
54. *Ibid.* 51.
55. Boer, *Pentecost and Missions*, *op. cit.*
56. Von Allmen, 'Birth', 39.
57. For general discussions on Jewish proselytizing in this period, see B. J. Bamberger, *Proselytism in the Talmudic Period* (Cincinnati 1939); W. G. Braude, *Jewish Proselytizing in the First Five Centuries of the Common Era* (Providence, RI 1940); F. M. Derwacter, *Preparing the Way for Paul: The Proselyte Movement in Later Judaism* (New York 1930); D. Georgi, *Die Gegner des Paulus im 2. Korintherbrief* (Neukirchen-Vluyn 1964); and on this particular point, see especially the doctoral dissertation by W. Paul Bowers, 'Studies'.
58. Von Allmen, 'Birth', 44.
59. *Ibid.*
60. See the assessment of von Allmen by Bruce J. Nicholls, *Contextualization: A Theology of Gospel and Culture* (Outreach and Identity: Evangelical Theological Monographs No. 3; WEF Theological Commission; Exeter 1979). Rather telling is the typology of Bong Rin Ro, 'Contextualization: Asian Theology'. *What Asian Christians Are Thinking: A Theological Source Book* (ed. Douglas J. Edwood; Quezon City 1976) 47-58, who categorizes modern attempts at contextualized Asian theology under four approaches; (1) syncretistic theology; (2) accommodational theology; (3) situational theology; and (4) biblically oriented theology relevant to Asian needs.
61. Von Allmen, 'Birth', esp. 40-46.
62. Esp. R. Reitzenstein, *Der hellenistischen Mysterien-religionen nach ihren Grundgedanken und Wirkungen* (2nd ed'n; Leipzig 1920); Wilhelm Bousset, *Kyrios Christos: Geschichte des Christusglaubens von den Anfängen des Christentums bis Irenaeus* (2nd edn; Göttingen 1921).
63. R. E. Brown, *The Semitic Background of the Term 'Mystery' in the New Testament* (Philadelphia 1968).
64. Cf. Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism; A Survey of the Proposed Evidences* (London 1973); idem, 'Some Alleged Evidences for Pre-Christian Gnosticism', in *New Directions in New Testament Study* (ed. Richard N. Longenecker and Merrill C. Tenney; Grand

- Rapids 1974) 46–70; idem. ‘Pre-Christian Gnosticism in the Nag Hammadi Texts?’ *CH* 48 (1979) 129–141.
65. See the discussion by Peter Stuhlmacher, *Gerechtigkeit Gottes bei Paulus* (2nd ed’n; Gottingen 1966).
 66. Von Allmen’s expression, ‘Birth’. 41.
 67. Cf. D. A. Carson, ‘Understanding Misunderstandings in the Fourth Gospel’, *TynBull* 33 (1982) 59–91; idem, ‘Christological Ambiguities in the Gospel of Matthew’, in *Christ the Lord (Festschrift Donald Guthrie)*, ed. Harold Rowdon; Leicester 1982) 97–114.
 68. Cf. Philip Barton Payne, ‘Jesus’ Implicit Claim to Deity in His Parables’, *TrinJ* 2 (1981) 3–23.
 69. There were, of course, many quite different positions or schools of thought in the Graeco-Roman world. Lucretius, for instance, was a thoroughgoing materialist, and was in turn heavily dependent on Epicurus.
 70. See especially the frequently overlooked article by Roy W. Hoover, ‘The Harpagmos Enigma: A Philological Solution’ *HTR* 64 (1971) 95–119.
 71. ‘Birth’, 46.
 72. *Ibid.*
 73. *Ibid.*
 74. The expression is that of I. Howard Marshall, ‘Slippery Words: I. Eschatology’, *ExpT* 89 (1977–78) 264–269.
 75. Von Allmen, ‘Birth’, 46.
 76. J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia 1980) 170.
 77. Cf. *inter alia* I. Howard Marshall, ‘Palestinian and Hellenistic Christianity: Some Critical Comments’, *NTS* 19 (1972–73) 271–287; and esp. Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in Their Encounter in Palestine during the Early Hellenistic Period* (London 1974).
 78. Von Allmen, ‘Birth’, 41.
 79. *Ibid.* 47.
 80. *Ibid.* 37.
 81. *Ibid.* 51.
 82. Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture*, *op. cit.*, esp. pp. 232–233, 286–287, 295–297.
 83. *Ibid.* 32.
 84. On recent treatemnts of Luther’s attitude to the Scriptures, cf. esp. Eugene F. Klug, ‘Word and Scripture in Luther Studies since World War II’, *TrinJ* 5 (1984) 3–46.
 85. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture* 296 (emphasis his).
 86. Charles H. Kraft, ‘Cultural Anthropology: Its Meaning for Christian Theology’, *Theology Today* 41 (1985) 393 draws attention to Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago 1970) and to Ian G. Barbour, *Myths, Models and Paradigms* (New York 1974).
 87. Cf. especially Frederick Suppe, ed., *The Structure of Scientific Theories* (2nd ed’n; Urbana 1977); Gary Gutting, ed., *Paradigms and*

- Revolutions; Applications and Appraisals of Thomas Kuhn’s Philosophy of Silence* (Notre Dame 1980).
88. Cf. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, ed., *Scripture and Truth* (Grand Rapids 1983), esp. the essay ‘Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: The Possibility of Systematic Theology’.
 89. *Ibid.*; and cf. I. Howard Marshall, ‘Orthodoxy and Heresy in earlier Christianity’, *Themelios* 2/1 (1976) 5–14.
 90. Cf. D. A. Carson, ‘Pauline Inconsistency: Reflections on I Corinthians 9.19–23 and Galatians 2.11–14’, *Churchman*, 100 (1986) 6–45.
 91. *Christianity in Culture* 296–197.
 92. For the best discussion, cf. Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons* (Exeter 1979).
 93. Many examples could be cited. For instance, one major brand of liberation theology has strong roots in Marxism — originally a European philosophy.
 94. There is of course a small but vocal minority of historians and philosophers of history who appeal to the new hermeneutic in defence of the ‘new history’ — which not only insists, rightly, that no history is ever written absolutely ‘*wie es eigentlich gewesen war*’ (to use von Ranke’s celebrated expression), but that all history-writing is so subjective that even to speak of accuracy is inappropriate. ‘Truth’ in history-writing has nothing to do with correspondence. The debate is extremely important, but cannot be entered into here.
 95. I am thinking in particular of John S. Mbiti’s thoughtful work, *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background: A Study of the Encounter between New Testament Theology and African Traditional Concepts* (Oxford 1971).
 96. I here follow one common use of ‘contextualization’, recently and ably discussed by Martin Goldsmith, ‘Contextualization of theology’, *Themelios* 9/1 (1983) 18–23.
 97. Cf. Carson, ‘Unity and Diversity’, *art. cit.*.
 98. E.g. V. E. Devadutt, ‘What is an Indigenous Theology?’ in *Readings in Dynamic Indigeneity* (ed. Charles H. Kraft and Tom N. Wisbey; South Pasadena, CA 1979) 313–324.
 99. For further reflections on the connections between a high view of Scripture and problems of contextualization, cf. David J. Hesselgrave, ‘Contextualization and Revelational Epistemology’, in *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible* (ed. Earl D. Radmacher and Robert D. Preus; Grand Rapids 1984) 691–738.
 100. See the important discussion by Tite Tiénou, ‘The Church in African Theology: Description and Hermeneutical Analysis’, in *Biblical Interpretation and the Church: Text and Context* (ed. D. A. Carson; Exeter 1984).
 101. E.g. Don Richardson, *Eternity in Their Hearts* (Ventura, CA 1981).
 102. See especially Andrew F. Walls, ‘The Gospel as the Prisoner and Liberator of Culture’, *Faith and Thought* 108 (1981) 39–52.