

Foreword

Indigenous mission in a digital age

A quarter of a century ago, specialists in theology and mission endlessly talked and wrote about contextualization. A century before that the buzzword was ‘indigenity’: the aim of mission, we were told, was to plant churches that were ‘indigenous’, that is self-governing, self-financing and self-propagating. What ‘contextualization’ added to this mix was (to coin a word) self-theologizing. In other words, Christians needed to think through the Bible for themselves, within their own language and culture, within their own contexts.

Inevitably, the call for contextualization resulted in both good things and bad things. Where the local context becomes the final control, historical rootedness – and even the Bible itself – may become domesticated. In the name of Christianity, some forms of contextualized theology became mere excuses for an array of current social agendas with only marginal connection to the gospel of Jesus Christ. On the other hand, to have Rwandans and Singaporeans and Japanese and Bolivians thinking through the Bible for themselves, learning from the history of the church, while

nevertheless learning to be faithful and learning to read the Bible in their *own* contexts, was surely a good thing.

The work of contextualization must go on, of course; the need is perennial. Yet there is a sense in which the word itself sounds vaguely old-fashioned today. A lot of observers and theorists now speak of the *globalizing* of mission and of the *globalizing* of theology. In this world of rapid travel and digital communication, ideas, eye-witness accounts, stories, pictures and other bits of data travel faster than ever before. So as soon as it becomes digitally connected, no community is any longer an isolated community in which everything must be *contextualized*. For it has become part of the global community: here we learn from each other, we influence one another. Contextualization cannot be ignored, but it now lives in tension with globalization.

There are both advantages and dangers to these developments. Those who always conceive of the glass as half empty see only the dangers; those who prefer to think of the glass as half full trumpet the opportunities.¹

Those of us who love to remember that around the throne of God on the last day will be men and women from every language and tribe and people and nation cannot help but rejoice that world mission is less and less about westerners going elsewhere to serve Christ, but about believers from everywhere going everywhere. Even in the realm of theology, while we must never, not even for a second, side-step the unique role of Scripture as the ‘norming norm’ for Christians, we are learning from one another, and teaching one another.

The book you hold in your hand does not address these topics in a theoretical way. It does something more foundational: it introduces you to the stories of Christians in one remarkably worldwide movement. The International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (IFES), made up of many national bodies, works in one of the most strategic populations in the world. University and college students become not only the next generation of leaders in most countries of the world, but the next generation of Christian

leaders. In these accounts, Lindsay Brown opens our eyes to what is going on in the world: he helps us become 'global Christians'.

Read these chapters, and you will wonder, you will reflect, you will laugh, you will weep. Above all, you will be reminded that the Lord Christ has not yet finished calling people to himself; that we Christians have brothers and sisters in many, many places, all of them with their own stories; that faithfulness to the gospel and to the Lord, issuing in perseverance, courage and sometimes martyrdom, is still a distinguishing mark of blood-bought human beings; that all of us, not least those of us in the West, have many lessons to learn from the global church. This book is not written to address all the theological and strategic questions that might be raised, but it introduces us to real brothers and sisters in Christ, and that is important, for neither Christian truth nor Christian love can long survive if we forget there are people out there. Please, read it, and pass it on.

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