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Two Approaches to Contextualization

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Unreached People Group (UPG) has become an enigmatic term in missions today. On the one hand, some of the ambiguity relates to how it is a rallying cry and inspiration to get the task of reaching the world completed. On the other hand, it raises the idea of a church that has been neglectful and ignorant of the status of the world in terms of the Gospel. The mystery of this term is how it fits into sound theology for God has been neither neglectful nor ignorant, and indeed for him there are no difficulties in reaching any person or group anywhere in the world. So, the issue seems to be for the church, and therefore this term is for the church's benefit and conviction. Ralph Winter explains how at a Lausanne Strategy Working Group in Chicago in 1982, they came to a definition of an Unreached People Group as follows: "a people group within which there is no indigenous community of believing Christians able to evangelize this people group."¹ The result for both mission agencies and individual missionaries has been an explosion in strategy, funding, sending, discovering and accessing the UPGs of the world. At the heart of the issue is a question such as this: "If these people groups are unreached, then what have we either done incorrectly or left out and therefore need to change or discover as something new?" It may seem as if the answers are pragmatic and methodological in nature, and while this is certainly part of the challenge, nevertheless there is an important theological component.

Reaching the lost belongs to God. It is his idea, and he has the strategy all planned out. Incredibly he invites Christians to be a very important part of the strategy, but always as servants to the Lord of the harvest. It means that his methods have never been incorrect or incomplete, and so the answer for a missionary or agency is to reach a UPG by aligning human insights and innovations with God's methods. The word *community* in the definition of a UPG brings in the ecclesiological component and raises the question of what God's plan for church should look like. *Indigenous* proposes the penetration of the Gospel within the people group in such a way that they stay true to its meaning but express it as their own.

There are important decisions to make based on assumptions regarding how God has revealed his strategy. These assumptions are based on the answers to the question of whether in the Bible we have a comprehensive

¹Ralph Winter, and Steven Hawthorne, *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1999), 514.

plan for reaching a UPG or whether there are only broad principles. In summary, there are two sets of assumptions that will determine the approach to reaching a UPG:

The first assumption is that God has given a broad outline in the Bible on how to reach the lost, and by the Holy Spirit he will inspire missionaries to fill in the details in each new context. The idea is that throughout history there has been change and diversity in the make-up and context of various people groups, and the Bible cannot possibly speak to each one in detail. What the Bible can do is give broad principles which are then worked out in each context. An example of support for this assumption would be that Jesus summed up everything into “Love God and love your neighbor,”² and so whatever we do that fits in with this is acceptable strategy. This appears to be Paul’s approach where he says, “I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some.”³ Specific instructions to churches in the New Testament are informative but not necessarily normative or universally instructional. There is significant latitude for creatively figuring out how to do church where Jesus says, “For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst.”⁴ When Paul instructs Timothy not to appoint someone who is a new believer into a leadership position within the church,⁵ then this addresses an issue in that context, but does not prevent the head of a household from a UPG who is saved today from being the leader of his house church next week or next month. All the new leader needs to know is what to do next, and this can be taught in a short space of time so that eventually experience will be gained. Additionally, the Holy Spirit is involved, and he is able to help fill in the details through new and special insights. In short, with the Bible in hand as a general guide and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, this approach does whatever it takes to reach a UPG.

The second assumption is that in the Bible God has given a detailed blueprint on how to reach the lost, and while useful methodological insights and the details of a context can be used throughout the process, this must never be done in a way that supplants or compromises the blueprint. Pratt, Sills, and Walters summarize this approach as follows, “Scripture rules, shapes, directs, and judges all of our mission theory and practice.”⁶ This approach is not based on the assumption that God has given exact instructions in Scripture on how to reach each UPG, implying that no consideration should be given to that UPG’s context. To use an obvious example, this would be like saying that the Bible makes no reference to the Internet and so neither should those involved in doing missions. Or, it would be like saying that the biblical pattern for sending out missionaries seems to be directly by God and/or

²Matthew 22:36-40 paraphrased.

³1 Corinthians 9:22. All direct quotations are from the NASB.

⁴Matthew 18:20.

⁵1 Timothy 3:6.

⁶Zane Pratt, M. David Sills, and Jeff Walters, *Introduction to Global Missions* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2014), 76.

the church, with no evidence of any sort of sending agency. Consequently a sending agency like the International Mission Board would fall outside of God's plan and would be an unbiblical human invention. What Pratt, Sills, and Walters do propose is a high view of Scripture that says, "The way to know the nature of the task God has given his people, the means he has prescribed, and the parameters he has set, is through Scripture,"⁷ and "What the Bible says, God says, and what God says goes."⁸ Opening the door for insights from anthropology and other means, they also propose, "Under the judgment of Scripture, we can make use of knowledge from secular sources."⁹ Jerry Rankin puts it this way: "Obedience to the Lordship of Jesus Christ and to the Bible as our sole authority of faith and practice are the foundational principles for our mission task as well as our Baptist beliefs."¹⁰ He goes on to explain how we are to "conform our methodology to biblical models and teaching."¹¹ Under this approach then we can build on the biblical blueprint in such a way that the Gospel is presented in the best way possible to the members of a UPG, and the resulting churches match the biblical blueprint while at the same time looking and feeling as if they belong in the local context. The Bible is the Sword of the Spirit, and so the Holy Spirit is intimately involved through the teachings of the Bible as well as in measuring other insights against the Bible.

Clearly there are nuances and variations between these two approaches, but for the purposes of this article only these are delineated. Missionaries and agencies either intentionally or not will choose to favor one of these approaches. With so many of the unreached parts of the world going through conflict and tragedy, there is a sense of desperation and urgency that can sway a move from one approach to the other. Other motivations in choosing one approach above another can include an eschatological view that says if we can just do what it takes to reach the UPGs, then Jesus will return.

One of the exciting trends sparked by the UPG focus is a renewed passion to reach Muslims with the Gospel. A number of mission agencies have this as their main focus and are continually recruiting personnel and resources for this task. Accompanying this are various levels of trepidation when from a human point of view there appear to be significant obstacles to a Muslim coming to faith in Jesus Christ. Keith Swartley in *Encountering the World of Islam* allocates three major sections to describe these obstacles: cultural barriers, theological issues, and past approaches (methodological).¹² It seems that missionaries in their zeal to reach Muslims have not taken the time or effort to understand Muslims adequately in their particular cultural

⁷Ibid., 74.

⁸Ibid., 75.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Jerry Rankin, *To the Ends of the Earth* (Richmond: International Mission Board, 2005), 38.

¹¹Ibid., 39.

¹²Keith Swartley, *Encountering the World of Islam* (Atlanta: Authentic Media, 2005).

settings, have not considered their theological point of view, and consequently have not developed the most effective ways to share the Gospel with them.

Building on what was stated before, it is understood that from God's point of view there is no difficulty at all in reaching Muslims with the Gospel. He knows them intimately and has the perfect way to reach them. His way is made clear in Matthew 28:19-20 where he commands his disciples to go and make disciples of all nations. Sitting back and watching then is not an option; his followers have to go and make disciples of the Muslim nations. If this is God's plan, then it is the best plan, and so missionaries are left with trying to figure out the details. It is at this point that the effort to reach Muslims with the Gospel diverges into the two approaches. The proponents of each approach certainly appear truly to want to reach Muslims with the good news of the Gospel. If, however, the second approach is adopted (that there is a detailed biblical blueprint), then what is to be done when methodology raises serious concerns when measured up against biblical truth?

The idea of text versus context is an oversimplification of a vast area of discussion and debate in missions known as *contextualization*. Numerous books have been and continue to be written on this subject, and the purpose of this article is not to try to summarize what has already been said. Indeed, the fall 2012 edition of this journal has much to say about contextualizing the Gospel. For a comprehensive discussion, Moreau's *Contextualization in World Missions* is an excellent resource that gets into the various aspects and positions on contextualization.¹³ Doug Coleman's *A Theological Analysis of the Insider Movement Paradigm from Four Perspectives: Theology of Religions, Revelation, Soteriology, and Ecclesiology* is an excellent study of the insider movement approach to contextualization, and in particular he spends time in specific Old and New Testament passages, looking at how they are used to support various approaches.¹⁴

For those who hold to the blueprint approach, a text over context position, there is a very important issue to be settled, and that is how do we approach the biblical text? It is one thing to say that text is over context, but all too often missionaries are guilty of proof texting so that methods appear to be biblical. For example, in a passage mentioned before, is the Bible speaking about a church in the verse "where two or three are gathered I am there?" It sounds nice and simple and certainly helps start a church in a small period of time. But is the Bible offering a definition of church in this verse? Does "becoming all things to all men" mean that missionaries and/or their disciples are able to take on a Muslim identity to reach Muslims? In Philipians 1:18 are missionaries given permission to use any, even devious, means to proclaim the Gospel? The answer to these types of interpretations will

¹³Scott Moreau, *Contextualization in World Missions* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2012). See review on page 137 in this journal.

¹⁴Doug Coleman, *A Theological Analysis of the Insider Movement Paradigm from Four Perspectives: Theology of Religions, Revelation, Soteriology, and Ecclesiology* (Pasadena: WCIU Press, 2011).

greatly affect how the Gospel is shared and churches are started.

Within this framework, the purpose of this article is to examine three specific aspects in contextualizing the Gospel to Muslims taking the approach that the correct understanding of the biblical text has authority over any approach used in any particular Muslim context, and that indeed there is a detailed blueprint in the Bible for how to share the Gospel and start churches within a UPG. This position falls in line with certain evangelical presuppositions described by Moreau, namely that “the God who created human beings chose to reveal himself to them with a message that transcends human culture,” and “any expression of the Christian faith must be congruent with biblical teachings. We consistently judge contextualization efforts that we perceive to be flawed in this regard as inadequate or inappropriate.”¹⁵

The three aspects in contextualizing the Gospel to Muslims that are the subject of this article can best be introduced by means of a personal anecdote. While living in a Muslim context I was approached by a believer who was a former *mullah* (leader at the mosque). He explained that God had called him to reach his own people and he needed my help. I listened for some time as he explained how he had been saved and disciplined in a Russian Baptist context and had then tried to use this *Russian* way of doing things to reach his own people. He had become discouraged with the opposition and lack of response and broke away from the Russian methodology. He met some American missionaries who introduced him to the idea of working from within Islam, especially as he was a mullah and so would have both insight and credibility within the Islamic community. He began to experiment with this and felt as if a light had gone on as to how to reach his people. He even positioned himself as something of an itinerant mullah who was available for the various ceremonies needed in life events such as births, weddings, and funerals. He now approached me to help him secure a building which could be used as a *messianic* mosque, where he would be the mullah. I probed him with my concerns, beginning with his return to an identity as a mullah. I asked him if he had performed any funerals in this capacity, and he said he had. In his context Muslim funerals are an elaborate event with many details culminating in a special prayer in Arabic by the mullah. This prayer has three basic parts: praise to Allah, blessings on Muhammad, and a request for the departed soul to enter paradise. I asked him how as a believer he could pray such a prayer. He replied that he substituted it with his own Arabic prayer, and because it was in Arabic, which hardly anyone in this culture understood, no one was the wiser.

I then probed regarding the idea of a messianic mosque.¹⁶ I explained that as I understood it there were two ways to do this. First, it could be a highly contextualized church that would carry the title of a mosque but in essence function as a church. Second, it could have both the name and func-

¹⁵Ibid., 50.

¹⁶This term is not new to this context and its meaning and description usually depend on how it is applied in each context.

tion of a mosque, but an emphasis would be placed on Jesus as Messiah. My friend explained that for him to have credibility as a mullah he needed to pursue the latter and that in times of small group study he would find ways to introduce the Bible and teachings by and about Jesus. Once someone believed in Jesus that person would stay in the mosque as his faith community and continue to practice the Muslim way of doing things, but now he would help to influence others towards Jesus.

After further discussion I told him that he needed to find someone, preferably more than one person, who was a strong believer and would hold him accountable in his walk and ministry. I explained that I could not be one of those persons as I had some serious concerns that would cause conflict between us. Three key terms describe the areas of concern that I had.

Identity, Deception, and Community

Identity

David Garrison makes some interesting observations regarding identity in *A Wind in the House of Islam*.¹⁷ He explains four interpretive frameworks to bear in mind when listening to the salvation stories of Muslim-background believers.¹⁸ One of these frameworks is to distinguish between a Christian religious identity and an identity that is characterized by a personal, saving relationship with Jesus Christ. This is useful as the Gospel is not some general idea of changing religions. Rather, to use Garrison's explanation, "So true conversion results in a life transformation that occurs through the power of God when one turns from Islam or any other life orientation toward Christ."¹⁹ Salvation then involves being *converted, transformed, turning from*. In other words the person has a completely new identity that is clearly and intimately connected with Christ. Garrison goes on to explain how baptism is a visible expression of this that within Islam separates "Jesus fans" from "Jesus followers." One of Garrison's presuppositions throughout the book is to let the Muslim-background believers tell their own stories without a Western ethnocentric bias. This can result in *insiders* having identities that "are indistinguishable to most outsiders from the Muslims around them."²⁰ The real issue is not so much how outsiders see it, but how distinguishable are they to the *insiders*? Should a new, converted, transformed identity in Christ not be distinguishable from anything else within the culture?

This was a major issue with my friend who wanted to start a messianic mosque. His insider approach would require a secret identity as a follower of Christ covered with the veneer of an Islamic identity. I explained that this for me was departing from the biblical blueprint regarding a believer's identity. Most missionaries will acknowledge that their roles are more like catalyts

¹⁷David Garrison, *A Wind in the House of Islam* (Monument: Wigtake Resources, 2014).

¹⁸Ibid., 34.

¹⁹Ibid., 38.

²⁰Ibid., 111.

in reaching a UPG with the Gospel and that Christ uses the local believers themselves to establish the church and build its future. What a Christian identity looks like to an outsider then is not all that significant when compared to those within the culture, so the question is whether those within the culture recognize a believer who clearly follows Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. A teaching from Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:14-17 points out that as followers of Jesus we are the light of the world that should not be hidden but should shine in the darkness. There must be an element in which all Christians from within their own cultures should stand out as lights in the darkness. Certainly this will have its own expression in each culture, but there cannot be a blending and blurring without giving rise to major problems.

Another way to refer to a blending of belief is by using the term *common ground*. Its definition is usually determined by who is using it and the particular context, but for the purposes of this discussion it refers to an approach that says that in Islam and Christianity there are beliefs and practices that can be agreed on as being the same or similar enough that they are held in common by both religions. Examples would be one creator God, heaven, hell, sin, judgment, prophets, prayer, worship, and fasting. To know if these beliefs and practices are truly held in common requires a detailed study of each within the two religions. A good example is a brief examination of the idea of *sin*. Both religions would argue that sin separates man from God and results in judgment. Commonality seems to disappear however when looking at the details. A Christian position that holds to the authority of the Bible would see sin as a direct offense towards God that results in the punishment of death and eternal separation from him. The payment for sin is death, and no good work can make up for any sin. Central to Christianity then is not man's goodness, but dealing with his sin.

In Islam the emphasis is good works and the belief that sin can be made up for by doing good. There is an unforgivable sin, and that is to reject the Islamic faith, and depending on the school of theology there are a few sins, such as adultery, that carry harsh punishment. Most sins, though, can be outweighed by good deeds so that entry into heaven will require only a brief time of testing over the fires of hell. In fact, good deeds have a multiplying effect whereas sin only carries its face value as seen in the *Hadith* saying:

Allah has written down (that is, revealed to us what are) the good deeds and the bad deeds. Then he explains them. He who intended to do a good deed and did not do it, Allah would record it down for him as a good deed (that is, he receives one reward/ credit for not doing it). If he intended to do a good deed and actually did it, he would receive from ten to seven hundred rewards/ credits for it or more. But if he has intended to do a bad deed and has not done it, Allah would compensate him with one reward/ credit. If he has intended to do a bad deed and did it,

Allah would record it for him as one bad deed.”²¹

In Christianity, all of man’s goodness cannot make up for one sin, whereas in Islam one good deed can make up for many sins.²² So while there is the idea of sin in both religions, there seems to be very little common ground as to the meaning and consequences. Stepping outside of Islam, the same can be said about resurrection in Christianity and reincarnation in Hinduism and Buddhism. Both concepts carry the idea of life after death, but they have no common ground as to their significance and implications.

Eugene Nida speaks of a *point of contact* between religions, so rather than holding to common ground in belief and practice, common terms are used as a way to make a connection.²³ Regarding the issue of sin, the idea would be to ask a Muslim, “What does your faith teach about sin?” and “May I tell you what my faith teaches about sin?” There must be a commitment to engage fully, understand, and respect the Islamic view and so earn the credibility to share fully the Christian view. Those who work as outsiders among Muslims understand that this requires a genuine relationship with a Muslim that can take time before points of contact can be discussed. This approach appears equally beneficial to insiders who seek to be faithful to a biblical blueprint. They can hold to a Christian identity (free of American/Western/Korean or any other bias) while engaging in discussions about belief and practice.

The seemingly less significant role of the outsider does raise an important issue regarding *self-theologizing*. This term has risen to prominence with the growing number of Muslim background believers and churches. In summary it is the desire for insiders to apply biblical teaching to their people group context and thereby speak to the challenges faced in starting churches in that context. The task of missionaries is to work hard to raise up insider theologians who can step into this role and take over from the missionary. Stephen Bevans offers an interesting perspective in his description of the Synthetic Model of contextual theology.²⁴ This model calls for the Gospel in one context to reach out to that in another context in such a way that they learn from each other and help to point out problems that exist in each culture’s blind spot. The problem with this approach is that it elevates culture above Scripture; but is there validity to the assertion that outsiders can and should have an ongoing role to play as the Gospel develops within a culture? Robert Schreiter speaks of a *new catholicity* described by its three aspects of wholeness, fullness, and exchange and communication.²⁵ By wholeness he refers to the idea that all cultures have a proportionate basis for the acceptance

²¹Yushau Sodiq, *40 Hadith: An Explanation* (Houston: J.S. Printing, 2011), 262.

²²This *hadith* is used to show how loving God is in Islam.

²³Eugene Nida, *Message and Mission: The Communication of the Christian Faith* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1990), 15.

²⁴Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2009).

²⁵Robert Schreiter, *The New Catholicity* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997), 128.

and communication of the Gospel which by implication means that they share something in common despite other differences. Fullness refers to the accepted theory, doctrines and practices, or orthodoxy, of the Christian faith and how the Gospel is communicated so that an orthodox Christian identity can be established. By exchange and communication is meant that “there is a need for intense dialogue and exchange to ensure the transmittal of meaning in intercultural communication.”²⁶ In a day where there are many avenues to connect and communicate, there is a need to discuss and define what an ongoing insider/outsider relationship looks like for a UPG.

Deception

Continuing the discussion with my friend, I told him that I was very concerned for his safety and the reputation of the Gospel as he conducted funerals and other events. If he was supposed to pray for the departed soul to enter heaven but only pretended to do so, what would happen when it was discovered that he was not really a mullah in the way that was expected? Would the family and community hold him responsible for the destiny of the departed soul? Would the funeral be seen as invalid? I explained that the people would feel deceived and that there was no biblical support for deceiving others. The issue did come up that there were missionaries who held to other identities as a cover for their real identity. I explained that I did not agree with this either and that we should never have to hide that we are followers of Christ, but that we all carried other identities in terms of our daily work. Before entering a new context a person must determine his identity, and this should be clear and true in the sense that he does what he says. If I say I am an English teacher, then I must fulfill this role in a way that all who know me would commend me for the way I do my job. So, in his case, if he positioned himself as a mullah who follows Jesus as Lord and Savior, then he needed to be clear about this so that the community would understand the implications of him performing a ceremony.

For those who support the insider movement approach, the issue of deception is very real and must be dealt with. There is currently a case in process in a large and significant Muslim country where the authorities are considering legislature outlawing any approach that uses insider methodology.²⁷ The accusations are based on the authorities uncovering hidden identities in the mosque where people were pretending to be Muslims in the commonly understood meaning of the term, but they were really something else. *Commonly understood meaning* here is important. According to a dictionary type definition, a Muslim is one who submits to God, and therefore Christians can use this term to refer to themselves. Almost without exception, though, the term Muslim is commonly understood to mean a person who has embraced the religion of Islam, which is not what Christians would

²⁶Ibid., 132.

²⁷In order not to cause hardship to those in the middle of this situation, the country will go unnamed.

say of themselves. Despite concerns such as these, proponents of the insider movement do appeal to Scripture. For an explanation of specific passages in Scripture which are used to support an insider approach, Coleman's study again is recommended.

Community

The third major area of concern that I discussed with my friend had to do with community versus place of outreach. I told him that I was much more comfortable with his approach if he saw the mosque as a place of outreach. This seemed compatible with the approaches of both Jesus and Paul in Scripture where they went to the spiritual places of the people they were reaching in order to share the Gospel. Distinct from the outreach at the mosque would be the regular coming together of believers as they live together in community, what is commonly called *church*. If the Bible supports the idea that believers come together and form a community/church centered on Christ, then it becomes difficult for believers to say that their community is the Islamic one based at the mosque. *Centered on Christ* means that it is all about him. When believers come together, Christ is openly proclaimed and worshiped; his words (the Bible) are studied and obeyed; testimony is given as to his working in believers' lives; he is appealed to for help in all situations; and his salvation remembered in worship, testimony and the sharing of the Lord's Supper. He is understood to be the cornerstone of the church so that without him there is no church. All of this could not happen at the mosque. The Bible is full of teachings that explain how believers need each other and are called to live out their faith together so that no one believer is gifted enough to survive in isolation. How this works out in high persecution environments is a great challenge; but if it is part of the blueprint, then it must be worked out.

Conclusion

The spiritual need of the peoples of the world is overwhelming, and as followers of Christ we want to do whatever we can as soon as we can to reach them with the Gospel. Knowing Jesus is amazing, and he brings peace, hope, joy, and perspective to life. If only the unreached of the world could know Jesus, and sooner rather than later, they would receive what Jesus gives freely. This is a healthy burden and passion that needs to be shared by far more people in the church; but for those who have it, it is in trying to do something about it that we can forget that God is infinitely more passionate about the unreached than we are. He has a plan to reach them, and there are either some general principles in Scripture about this plan, or there is a detailed blueprint to follow. It is this choice that will determine the approach taken by missionaries and their sending agencies. In particular, it will determine whether the journey will be taken down the path of approaches such as insider movements and common ground.