

CHAPTER 2

BIBLICAL BASES FOR UNDERSTANDING SYNCRETISM AND CONTEXTUALIZATION: TWO DYNAMICS IN THE HEALTH OF THE CHURCH

The Sirens of Syncretism: A Deviant Lure to the Guatemalan Evangelical Church?

The most critical issue facing the Guatemalan Evangelical Church is that of syncretism with Catholicism, Mayanism, and the world in general. Though he does not use the word "syncretism," SEPAL researcher Ross Rhodes puts it in similar terms.

The evangelical church of Guatemala has learned to believe that the answer to their problems is to do more evangelism and church planting. They are so painfully lacking in Bible knowledge and doctrine that they don't even know what they are missing. Consequently, they have become masters at church planting, but babes in keeping a church together and healthy.¹

Rhodes lauds the church planting and missions efforts of the evangelical Church in Guatemala. Because missions and church planting were intensive in Guatemala, these have become part of the psyche and soul of the Church as it has matured and become indigenous. No casual observer from the outside could ever question the Guatemalan evangelical's zeal for evangelism and missions. This same report mentioned the compromise of pastors with ignorance and sinful ways of the culture. Rhodes raised deep concerns about the direction of the Guatemalan evangelical Church in 1991. These concerns still exist in the year 2002 and they are tied to the primary issue of lurking syncretism and secondarily to contextualization.

¹Ross Rhodes, researcher of SEPAL, interoffice communication to Larry Keyes, Guatemala, Guatemala, 19 May 1992.

The Context of Contextualization

The Gospel must be assimilated into each culture and context without compromising the heart of the message, or by diluting the authority of Scripture and the core truths of Christianity. The term "contextualization" was introduced in 1972 as the Theological Education Fund attempted to formally implement aspects of cultural identity, social change, and popular religion into missions.² The Fund proposed how to communicate their Gospel in a more effective format so that converts in the target culture would own and propagate the Gospel. They armed themselves with Roland Allan's proposals for indigenization and the powerful tools of the social sciences to incorporate the Gospel message into the fabric of other cultures. Contextualization is differentiated from syncretism in that it bridges between the core Gospel message and the target culture. It never contradicts Scriptures and remains faithful to the spirit and context of the Message. When Scripture is neither taught, nor integrated, or Scripture is altered for the sake of gaining wider acceptance in a comfortable, viable religion, it results in compromise of basic Christian tenets and syncretism.

Underlying Causes of Syncretism

The Christian messenger must walk a thin line to assure proper contextualization of the Gospel message. One side of the line ends in rejection of the Gospel message and the other ends in the pollutant of syncretism. Though spoken in a different context, this razor line of contextualization is analogous to Jesus' description of the narrow road to Heaven through the narrow gate. "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate

² Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theory* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1992), 21.

and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it" (Matthew 7:13-14). The highway of destruction has signposts of pleasure, self-determination, perversion, religion, and syncretism. People compromising Christianity with other religions tend to be very religious, but are tares in the Church. Jesus' parable of the tares in Matthew 13:24 speaks of the weeds that were sown over the good seed. The tares were sown by the enemy and in this sense, the Christian worker always encounters tares. But may God help us not to do the work inadvertently of the enemy by sowing seeds of syncretism. Instead, we need to sow the seeds of the pure and understandable Gospel through balanced contextualization!

A person's theology determines both contextualization and syncretism of the Gospel. Biblical and Christ centered theology views man and his cultures as fallen and only through Christ can they be redeemed. Degrees of perceiving man's depravity and the fallenness of his culture correspond to the degree of engagement a Christian has with his culture. When the Christian messenger maintains a clear separation between sinful cultures and the Holy message, he tends to present a "pure" Christianity, but experiences a limited acceptance of Christianity. Christianity cannot find significant commonalities in the culture due to its "other worldliness." When the Christian messenger's perspective recognizes that "he is not of the world but in the world", he rejects sinful cultural elements and makes bridges between the good qualities of man, his culture, and the Gospel. The Gospel then finds a home in culture and enjoys wider acceptance. The spectrum of application in this genre flesh out different forms of contextualizing the Gospel without compromising the core tenets of Christianity.

A theology that assumes the innate goodness of man and his culture modifies the message of the Gospel in order to make the message more familiar or palatable. This leads to wide acceptance and syncretism.³ Thus, Christianity appears to have negotiable core beliefs that change according to culture. For example, Ricardo Soto states that according to the Mayan beliefs, God made everything and every person for a different function. "The Mayan has his function: if the Creator had wanted to, he could have made only black men, Chinese or Mayans, Incas, Jews . . . but he didn't. . . . The same explanation can be used of why there are so many religions. . . For them there are Catholics, evangelicals, Mormons, Muslims. . . ; everything is like that."⁴ Religions without absolutes easily absorb the useful parts of Christianity and produce an apparent Christian religion. In the Fall of 2001, the Pope published a "highly controversial" document on curbing syncretism. "All religions are not equal," the Congregation insists, "Catholics must be committed to the necessity of conversion to Jesus Christ." The document, "*Dominus Iesus*" was sharply criticized "by mission scholars who have labored long to find a way of presenting Christ in terms that Hindus and Buddhists can understand."⁵ The ultimate disagreement between the Catholic missiologists and the Pope is the authority of Scripture versus the ascendancy of culture. Similarly, a low view of the supernatural and the authority of Scripture invariably leads to prioritizing culture over Truth and syncretism.

³ H. Richard Nieburh in *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1951), observes relationships of a person's basic understanding of Christ to contemporary culture. These presuppositions directly affect a person's lifestyle. One of these relationships is similar to the conditions that can lead to syncretism. He states on page 83, ". . . they understand Christ through culture, selecting from his teachings and action as well as from the Christian doctrine about him such points as seem to agree with what is best in civilization. So they harmonize Christ with culture. . . ." Syncretism is a total harmony and blending or blanding of the Gospel.

⁴ Ricardo Soto, *Aproximación a la Cosmovisión Maya* (Guatemala: Landivar University, 1995), 50.

⁵ Kenneth L. Woodward, "The Changing Face of the Church," *Newsweek* 137 (16 March 2001), 46.

Pragmatic theology, where success is judged by numbers of converts, characterizes many American evangelicals. This produces a short-sighted urgency to make converts at any cost. Such a simplification leads to acceptance of the Gospel by large numbers of converts with overall weak Christian beliefs. Unless the resulting new Christian has a strong inner drive of the Holy Spirit to grow in the Word of God, his mentor will be a shallow Christian who brought him to Christ. This is one reason why in Guatemala only 25% to 42% of Guatemalan evangelicals are actually Christian.⁶

Methodology Can Lead to Syncretism: Types in the Bible

The Bible is replete with examples of actions that led to syncretism or wayward contextualization. A few representative cases will be examined. Aside from theological issues which purposely guide methods and actions, there are also independent actions that lead to syncretism. These actions can have more to do with poor methodology than theology.

Inadequately Teaching the Truth of God Leads to Syncretism

The Example of Israel at the Time of Hosea: My People Consult their Wooden Idols

There is a fine balance between knowledge, relationship, and God's grace. In very simple terms, Paul posed the question in Romans 10, that if people have not heard the Gospel then how can they be saved? Salvation in Christ is intimately tied to the Christian messenger and message. If the message is skewed, unclear, or not scriptural, then the resultant faith left behind might not take root in the Truth of the word but is corrupted and syncretized with the world.

⁶Details of this research are given in Chapter 6 of this paper.

In the Old Testament, the writers condemned false prophets who led people astray. In the case of God's judgment against Israel through the prophet Hosea, God judged the nation for "Ephraim's harlotry" (Hosea 6:10). Although literal sexual immorality along with other sins were denigrated by the prophet, these were merely external signs of what happened internally because of a prostituted heart. "My people consult their wooden idols, and their diviners wand informs them; for a spirit of harlotry has led them astray . . . they offer sacrifices on the tops of mountains and burn incense on the hills . . ." (Hosea 4:11, 13). "Ephraim mixes himself with the nations; Ephraim has become a cake not turned . . . so Ephraim has become like a silly dove without sense" (Hosea 7:8,11). This compromise refers to the gullibility of Israel, with reference to their political ties to Assyria versus Egypt. Their gullibility was not only political, but their compromise and spiritual prostitution removed God's hand of protection, common sense, morality, and order from the nation. Douglas Stuart wrote,

[The priest's] uncritical support of the upper classes and indulgence in syncretism and materialism earned them (and probably the cult prophets) wealth and prestige, though compromising the true faith . . . Abundance produces an accrued wealth, which in turn results in false security and the temptation to abandon God for some competing divinity. The resulting religion is degenerate.⁷

Scripture shouts out the most obvious cause for the spiritual harlotry or syncretism in Israel during the time of Hosea, "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge because you have rejected knowledge, I also will reject you from being my priest" (Hosea 4:6). Because of the compromise and laxness of the priests or spiritual leaders, this

⁷Douglas Stewart, *Word Biblical Commentary: Hosea-Jonah* (Waco, Texas: Word, 1987), 79.

condition was multiplied to the people of the land. "Lack of knowledge" of the Lord refers to a relationship with God as well as understanding God's covenant with the people of Israel. In this case, clear teaching of God's Word was not convenient to the leaders as it would first judge them. Honeycutt stated, "One wonders whether or not alienation is ever so deliberate as this implies. Men reject knowledge of God not only as the result of deliberate, premeditated actions, but through quieter but equally dangerous means as well."⁸ For whatever the reason, laziness or sin on the leader's part, no teaching and no knowledge of the Lord created the vacuum where people prostituted themselves with local religions and imagined divinities.

An Early Latin American Paradigm

As the Spanish Crown and the Catholic Church "Christianized" the New World, much of their zeal was overshadowed by their lack of preparation and lack of solid teaching. Eugenio Mauer wrote of the problems of syncretism in the early Catholic Church in Central America. He stated that the problem in the 1600s was exacerbated by the lack of preparation by the early Catholic missionaries. "This is substantiated not only by the testimonies but can be verified by reading some of the sermons from that time."⁹ He maintained that shallow foundations were laid in the Americas because the priests could not teach what they did not know.

⁸Roy Honeycutt, *The Broadman Bible Commentary: Hosea-Malachi* (Nashville: Broadman, 1972), 23.

⁹Eugenio Mauer, *The Indian Face of God in Latin America* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1996), 53.

Victoria Bricker demonstrated the incipient nature of syncretism as most Indian groups in Latin America had a propensity to return to their familiar native roots and ways of thinking. She cited a famous study by the Catholic Priest, Father Diego de Landa, who in 1562 investigated relapses into idolatry among the Maya.

Landa was concerned about the syncretism of the Christian Crucifixion with the aboriginal heart sacrifice. . . . Syncretism had a different meaning for the Maya. They could only understand the new religion in terms of familiar concepts. The Crucifixion was similar in form to the heart sacrifice, so the Maya vested it with the same meaning. The syncretism was a necessary step in making Christianity intelligible to them. Thus what was "incipient nativism" to Landa was meaningful acculturation to the Indians.¹⁰

Unless a person's worldview and lifestyle become truly Christian, a reversion to the old ways slowly takes place.

A Modern Example in Missions

Many Catholic missionaries still fall into the same trap of over-contextualizing and exaggerated bridge-building as they meld Christianity with paganism. Woodward reported,

The identification with Christianity and Indian traditions often goes beyond externals. At the Jeevan Dhara Ashran in the Hindu holy city of Rishikesh, Vandana Mataji, a Catholic nun, sings bhajans (devotional songs) in praise of Jesus and of Krishna four times a day, eats strictly vegetarian and meditates in silence with retreatants. "Christians do not have a monopoly on Christ, Vandana Mataji teaches. "Nor is their knowledge of him exhaustive of his full reality."¹¹

¹⁰ Victoria Bricker, *The Indian Christ, The Indian King: The Historical Substrate of Maya Myth and Ritual* (Austin, Texas: University of Austin Press, 1981), 179.

¹¹ Woodward, 48.

Poor Contextualization and Political Manipulation

The Example of Jeroboam

If the Gospel is not contextualized, it will remain at best, an external tradition. Schreiter stated that one of the classic mistakes of early missionaries is that they exported Christendom, as opposed to Christianity, to dissimilar cultures. Christendom is the entire European Christian system, including forms of government, along with the history of European Christianity. When a religion is taught in lieu of simple biblical Christianity, the resulting religious culture clashes with the indigenous culture. Assimilation becomes difficult, at best.¹² Lack of assimilation assures adaptation of an external form that commonly leaves out the heart of Christianity.

After the split into the Northern and Southern kingdom, Jeroboam made deliberate decisions to manipulate religion in order to consolidate his new kingdom. I Kings 12:27ff state that the king was afraid that his subjects would revert to Rehoboam, king of Judah, because Judah had the monopoly of sacrifice and worship centered in Jerusalem. "So the king consulted, and made two golden calves, and he said to them, 'It is too much of you to go up to Jerusalem; behold your gods, O Israel, that brought you up from the land of Egypt. . . .' And he set one in Bethel, and the other he put in Dan." Commentators are mixed as to the origin or purpose of using calves. "It may be that the calf is a form of Caananite fertility religion . . .," stated Kaiser.¹³ Regardless of the exact parallel of the calves, the results were hideous. Allan wrote that the "revelry" (*sahaq*) the Israelites made at the celebration in the presence of the calves means a "drunken, immoral orgy with sexual play."¹⁴ He asserted that this was a reversion to the Egyptian gods

¹² Schreiter, 108.

¹³ Walter J. Kaiser, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Kings* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 478.

¹⁴ Clifton Allen, *The Broadman Bible Commentary: Kings* (Nashville: Broadman, 1969), 434.

crossed with the Canaanite worship of animals. Devries stated that the confusion of the Canaanite cult religion led to a confusion between Yahweh and Baal. This type of religious symbol and worship was all around Israel and the people of Israel knew that. "Officially or unofficially, baalism was in the land; it was destined in the days of Ahab to gain mastery. The golden calf could have done nothing but to confuse and mislead."¹⁵

Jeroboam's motivations were political as he sought to consolidate and protect his power through religion. He was not just concerned with keeping the people of the North from migrating to the South, but he sought to give them a more comfortable religion. He did not understand the word "contextualization," but he understood the concept. He saw how the people struggled for centuries between Canaanite paganism and the more demanding, moral, monotheistic worship of Yahweh. He knew that pagan hearts desired images to worship in a lax, less demanding religion. He chose the popular way of gaining more converts and allegiance as he gave the people a politically contextualized religion that ended in a theologically syncretized religion. This achieved his purposes. The immediate result was separation of ideology between the north and south. But the cost was syncretism, moral degeneracy, and the ultimate collapse of a kingdom several generations later.

Unregenerated Leaders Typically Produce Religious Syncretism

The Example of Simon Magus

Syncretism is characterized as taking on the external trappings and forms of religion, but never understanding the heart of God. Though religious form flourishes, there is a disconnect between lifestyle, relationships to one another and to God. Personal accountability to a Holy God is weak to non-existent.

¹⁵ Simon Devries, *Word Biblical Commentary* (Waco, Texas: Word, 1985), 162.

The book of Acts records the story of an individual who did not internalize the Gospel but sought to use religion for his own end. Just as he used religion as a tool to make a living, he wanted to do the same with the Gospel. Acts 8: 9-13 records that Simon Magus was a sorcerer. Upon hearing the preaching, he believed, and after he was baptized, he continued with Philip. When he saw signs and miracles, he was amazed. To the absolute disdain of Philip, Simon offered money to have the same powers as Philip. Peter's reaction was immediate and fuming as he replied, "Your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money!" (Acts 8:20). This hideous act of buying God's power or abusing religious grace through bribes is known as "simony" today. Most commentators state that when confronted with Philip's harsh response and consequences, that Simon's repentance may not have been genuine. Barrett affirmed this as he noted a slight change in the verb construction associated with "repent." "On the whole, Simon does appear to be penitent, though possibly motivated by a desire to escape the consequences of his sin rather than to amend his life."¹⁶ Early Christian writers asserted that Simon did not truly repent as he became the originator of the Gnostic heresy. Smith wrote, "Some scholars, basing their conclusions upon the writings of Justin Martyr, Ireaneas, Hippolytus, and Epiphanius, believe that Simon was the first Gnostic heretic."¹⁷ Gnosticism is the apogee of syncretism. When Christianity is reduced to controlling divine powers, repentance is irrelevant and no internalization of the Gospel can occur. Syncretized Christianity becomes a form to control God and others.

¹⁶ Barrett, 418.

¹⁷ Smith, 378.

Coercion and Manipulative Fear Produce External, Shallow Christians with a Twisted Understanding of God

Maurer stated that in the Colonial Period the content of the Church's preaching contributed to syncretism. Preaching was based wholly upon fear of judgment and Hell. Converts to Catholicism entered the Church due to the unhealthy fear of God and fear of the Crown. They had a basic knowledge and twisted fear of the Lord producing a life based on appeasing an angry God. The theme of grace and forgiveness was absent from preaching during the first two hundred years of Colonialism.¹⁸ This fear of God is not the same kind of fear of God that Proverbs refers to. True fear of God is the beginning of wisdom. When a person enters into the kingdom via manipulative fear such as, fear of God, fear of an enemy, or fear of the Church, he can never experience a growing, healthy relationship with God. He will have only a sense of utility, or at best, a sense that God is the panacea for fear in life. Simon Magus is one example of this kind of "convert."

Syncretism Commonly Occurs with Cyclical Thinkers

The Meaning and Significance of Cyclical Thinkers

Chronological time is something that Westerners assume is absolute and intuitive to all cultures. Events and processes are referenced to chronological time. The Creation was in the beginning. God chose a certain people who existed at a certain period of time. "I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." God's continued revelation to man was marked by specific events in time that serve as markers and teachers. Israel's deliverance from slavery in Egypt by God's intervention is celebrated yearly by the Jews as they remember what God did in times past. Certainly, the apex of God reaching into time was the miracle of the incarnation, the crucifixion, and the resurrection. The New Testament

¹⁸Maurer, 49.

attests to these events as irrevocable facts that occurred at a specific time and place in history. Time in the Western and Christian mindset is a fabric of reality that orders sequential events and facts of the past, and these shape world view. Time and history are intertwined. History serves to substantiate the Truths of the Facts in the Bible.

Sequential history and the resultant Facts mean little to a person in a primitive culture who looks at Time in cycles. Cyclical thinking erases absolutes and creates patterns, commonalities, and relative comparisons. There is no Absolute Truth for cyclical thinkers as they naturally assimilate contradictory systems.¹⁹ This was the case for the Israelites in the Old Testament as they consistently were contaminated by the scourge of Baalism. It was seated in a fertility religion based upon cycles of the moon and seasons. Treating historical events as equivalent to the cyclical thinker sets up fertile ground for syncretism. Bricker wrote,

Because history repeats itself, all ethnic conflicts can be reduced to a common structure which serves as an epistemological paradigm for understanding new ethnic conflicts when they arise. It constitutes the Maya's theory of knowledge, their metahistorical model for interpreting recurrent events. . . . The same guide also serves for future action; therefore, epistemology cannot be distinguished from ethics. Prophecy mediates between the past and the future, between myth and history, and between ethics and epistemology. . . . It is a dynamic theory of history that is constantly at work making events conform to an ethical paradigm.²⁰

The Heresy at Colosse

The Colossian converts came from this same mindset and were tied to the cycles of life associated with the fertility religions. As gentile converts entered into the Christian faith, they brought these teachings and world view with them. Paul addressed

¹⁹ Bricker, 181 and Hesselgrave, 325-38.

²⁰ Bricker, 181.

this in Colossians 2:13. "Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and worship of angels disqualify you for the prize. Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions."

There is question whether the Colossian heresy (syncretism) had its roots in Judaism or paganism. Clinton Arnold powerfully demonstrated that the Colossian heresy indeed was based in "folk religion roots [that] provided a belief structure that some of them considered compatible with Christianity."²¹ Martin stated that the Colossians had a wrong motive in their worship as they recognized the "elements of the universe, the astral powers which direct the course of stars and regulate the calendar. And so they must be placated. . . It is bad religion leading to man's bondage to 'fate' that Paul attacks."²²

The Heresy in Mayan Culture

The Bible asserts absolutes: holiness/sin, justification/condemnation, right/wrong, "you are for me or against me", the Supremacy of Christ/the subjugation of all powers. Syncretism continuously has been a problem with the Indians in Latin America since the beginning of the Conquest because the old mindset and world view were not challenged by Catholic Christianity. In the case of Mayan culture, the recipients of Catholic Christianity continued to think in parallel terms and did not make an absolute crossover

²¹ Clinton E. Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism, The Interface between Christianity and Folk Belief in Colossae* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 246.

²² Ralph P. Martin, *The New Century Bible Commentary: Philipians and Colossians* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1973), 90.

from the old to the new. Relativistic thought and parallelism were part of the thought process which further impeded the absolute acceptance of the Gospel.

The early Mayans did not integrate the Gospel during the Colonial period partly because of conflicting world views and an inability to think in absolutes. Maurer wrote of the early Colonial period, "We have . . . a situation which, for the Indians of the colonies, the teaching of the evangelists are true for the world of the evangelists; and those of the pre-Hispanic religion are true for the Indian." Relativistic, cyclic thought allows outside systems to enter and to be assimilated. He quoted Bishop Francisco Nuñez de Vega as he wrote in the late 1600s,

In the blindness of these poor deceived little lambs from Christ's fold. . . whom [Christ] by his just and inscrutable judgments has permitted to return voluntarily to his [Satan's] power and in whom, among the great selection of the truths of the faith, tares have been sown . . . [tares] of the false errors from their primitive Gentilism, impeding the fruit of the abundant harvest which has been cultivated by the servant of the Lord by incessantly preaching his divine word for almost 200 years since they received the light of the Gospel. . .

However, the roots of their old Nagualism is kept in the hearts of those miserable Indians . . . their simple ears are infected with the contagious pestilence of its diabolic superstition.²³

In short, for 200 years the Indians did not internalize and live the Gospel of the Catholic Church because of competing religious practices. This is still the case today and is now a problem in the evangelical Church.

²³ Maurer, 51 quoting (Pastoral IX, no. 13) Caietano Zenobi, *Constitutiones diacesnas del Obispado de Chiapas* (Roma: 1702).

The Bible Responds to Syncretism and Contextualization

Response to Idolatry in the Old Testament

In the early Old Testament, syncretism or "idolatry" within Israel was dealt with mercilessly. After the great sin of the golden calf in the wilderness, Moses commanded that those loyal to the Lord kill the disloyal in the camp. Nearly 3,000 people were killed in one day (Ex 33:28). Levitical law prescribed death by stoning if an Israelite turned to the Canaanite god Molech or to a medium (Lev 20:1-6). During the time of Moses, Israel was taught about God as they saw his redemptive acts, and they also were warned about the consequences of turning from God to idolatry (Deuteronomy 4-6). Harsh treatment of turning from God was the norm during the formative years of Israel. As Canaan was conquered, Israel was commanded to eliminate natives (pagans) from the land.

After Joshua's era and the Conquest, Israel quickly forgot most of her lessons of faithfulness to the one true God. "They followed and worshipped various gods of the peoples around them" (Judges 2:10). From the time of the Judges until the kings, Israel fell into periods of "idolatry" or syncretism as they borrowed religious practices from their neighbors. Most Judges were warriors, but few were teachers. A new type of Judge arrived with the great prophet, Samuel. Samuel's work contrasted with past judges as his work was pedagogical. Samuel's most drastic action was when he removed the kingship from Saul for disobeying the teachings of God by consulting with a medium, which was punishable by death (I Samuel 15). From this point in the Old Testament, syncretism or idolatry was normally addressed by the prophets, and ultimately was addressed through Divine intervention. Samaria was destroyed by God through the Assyrians for their idolatry. "All this took place because the Israelites had sinned against

the Lord their God, who had brought them up out of Egypt from under the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt. They worshipped other gods and followed the practices of the nations the Lord had driven out before them, as well as the practices that the kings of Israel had introduced" (II Kings 17:7-8). There was no question in Judah's mind why the national disaster had fallen upon their Northern neighbors. The prophets understood that if Judah remained unfaithful, they would suffer a similar punishment. King Jehoshaphat prevented divine judgment as he sent out his officials to teach in the towns of his kingdom. "They taught throughout Judah taking with them the Book of the Law of the Lord; they went around to all the towns of Judah and taught the people" (II Chronicles 17:9). The results were that God blessed the country, but for only a generation. Shortly after the intensive teaching efforts, Judah lapsed into laziness and ignorance. The religious form of Yahweh worship continued, but there was no heart to it. Generations passed and the Book of the Law, which had been taught throughout the land, was rediscovered by the priests. It was read to Josiah, who upon hearing the rediscovered message, "tore his robes" when he realized they had "forsaken God and burned incense to other gods" (II Kings 22:17). The king responded by having the Law read to the leaders of Israel and then took action to remove idol worship from the land (II Kings 23:1-25). During the time of the kings, pagans in Israel were rarely killed. The few exceptions were directed against the pagan priests, not so much the common people. Idolatry was successfully fought by teaching the Law, remembering God's Covenant, and taking action against the sources (priests and worship centers) of idolatry. The prophets were always in front of the reforms as they preached, denounced sin, and taught God's ways. National religious reforms were always facilitated by prophets and a godly king.

Responses to Syncretism and Contextualization in the New Testament

Good Methods of Contextualization: The Example of Paul's Mars Hill Speech

The manner in which Paul dealt with the Athenians on Mars Hill is one of the finest examples of good methodology to contextualize the Gospel. T. C. Smith indicated that many commentators look to Paul's mission as a complete failure based upon his "philosophical preaching."²⁴ More contemporary commentators, such as Hans Conzelman, interpreted the Mars Hill preaching as successful. "The speech intends not to simply provide an example of typical Christian missionary preaching, but to show how that unique individual named Paul fared in this incomparable encounter with representatives of Greek civilization . . . the conclusion of the scene is not meant to portray any failure on Paul's part, but rather a failure on the part of the Greeks."²⁵ Conzelman also pointed out that this is the only portion of a true cross-cultural sermon that we have preserved in scripture. The structure of the speech indicates that Paul understood the contemporary pagan philosophy. Paul consistently took his audience into account as he preached, explained, and taught the Gospel. Smith asserted that even the first few chapters of Romans follow closely to Hellenistic Judaism thought patterns as Paul communicated with common terms and style.²⁶

The Mars Hill speech is a contrast to Paul's early preaching to Jews in the synagogues. With Jews, he dealt with a common world view in foundational areas as an understanding of scripture, Mosaic Law, and God's character. The Athenian audience at

²⁴ T. C. Smith, *The Broadman Bible Commentary: Acts I-Corinthians* (Nashville: Broadman, 1970), 104.

²⁵ Hans Conzelman, *Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 147.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

Mars Hill did not contain Jews or reflect Jewish presuppositions of monotheism and morality connected with God. Paul stood on totally new territory. He first observed and tried to comprehend the context, "I observe you are very religious. . ." (Acts 17:22). Next, he attempted to find common ground through compliments, ". . . you are very religious in all aspects." Then he started with Athenian theology, though patently pagan, as he built a bridge of commonality by talking about the "Unknown God" (verse 23). He based his arguments upon the well-known Greek Stoic philosophers, Epimedes and Aratus, instead of scripture. He argued that since the Stoics themselves admit dependence upon the True God, why should they then relate to idols? After establishing a worldview bridge through logic and argumentation, Paul began to cross into new territory for the Greeks. Using Scripture, his argument concluded with God's forbearance to man's sin and the resurrection of the dead and, "a Man whom he has appointed" to judge the dead. This was too much for most of the Athenians and many in the audience ridiculed Paul. Others wanted to know more.

Paul contextualized not only the message of the Gospel but also the presentation of the Gospel. He used the tools of the Greeks: argumentation and logic. The results were minimal as far as numbers and as far as we know, no church was planted in Athens.²⁷ Paul delimited his preaching and was not driven by "success" but by preaching "foolishness" of the cross. Success must not be measured by numbers but rather by the depth of converts. There was little fruit in Athens, but it was profound. Recent commentators, such as C. K. Barrett, pointed out that Dionysius the Areopagite was the first bishop of the church of Athens.²⁸

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles: Volume 2* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark Ltd., 1994), 87.

The Jerusalem Council: Contextualization or A Gateway for Syncretism?

The earliest encounter with syncretism is recorded in the dilemma of Acts 15. The expanding Christian movement had to define criteria for becoming a Christian. Until that time, most Christians were Jewish converts who looked to Jesus as fulfillment of the Law and the Messiah. Jewish Christians had come from a religious culture that was concerned with heritage, tradition, and religious forms. The new Jewish Christians wanted to import similar criteria into Christianity as they insisted that certain religious forms and rituals had to be met before becoming a Christian. "Unless you are circumcised, according to custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved" (Acts 15:1). This brought to a head several issues for the early Christians: who can be saved? and how is a person saved? Peter demonstrated to the Jewish Christians that, indeed, God chose to save the gentiles, as evidenced by the Roman Cornelius' dramatic experience. "God purified their hearts by faith" (v. 9b) and the gentiles are saved the same way the Jews are: "We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are" (v. 11). James resolved the issue once and for all as he affirmed this experience as valid (v. 13) and then referred to Scriptures to further validate this "new" concept (vv.15-17). The Council concluded by writing an official decree stating the conditions for a person to become a Christian. This statement served to normalize Christianity and set up delimitations concerning what was acceptable.

Depending on the perspective, the Jerusalem statement "must make concessions to the prejudices of Jews and Jewish Christians"²⁹ or it left room for compromise and future religious syncretism through certain Jewish rituals. The Jews insisted on some external norms within Christianity as they wanted to assure that the pagan and immoral gentiles realized that conversion meant faith, grace, and a resultant changed ethic. For this reason they added to belief and grace the outward forms of "abstaining from food sacrifices offered to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality." This compromise still showed a hint of Judaism in the council's statement. Smith wrote that James maintained that Jewish scruples must be respected.³⁰ The subsequent statement was read to all Gentile Christians.

Because of past background and worldview, the early Jewish Christians did not easily throw off all of their Judaism. The natural desire to mix the Jewish law to God's grace was a major problem in the Galatian Church. At the council of Jerusalem, Luke does not record whether or not Paul participated. Polhill observed that "Paul stated that 'nothing' was added to his message (Gal. 2:6). This does not necessarily conflict with the existence of the decrees. The conference did approve Paul's basic message of a law-free gospel for the gentiles. . . . Paul did not accept the decrees as 'law'; he did embrace their spirit."³¹ In Galatians, Paul gives a glimpse of a result of the compromise from Jerusalem. He said that Peter was in the wrong for his hypocrisy for imposing one set of standards on the Jews and then another for the gentiles (Galatians 2:11-13). Longenecker

²⁹ T. C. Smith, 92.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ John B. Polhill, *The New American Commentary: Acts Volume 26* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1988), 335.

recognized that the Jerusalem council "was a matter of practical concern and they tried to take measures to keep Gentile Christians from needlessly offending the Jewish sensibilities . . . the Judaizers who invaded the churches of Galatia, however, turned this practical concern into a theological issue. . ." ³² Paul in front of all opposed Peter and showed that salvation for all comes the same way: through grace (Galatians 2:14ff). Paul did not back down to compromise salvation by grace and opposed other conciliatory teachings at the great risk of being ostracized by the Christian leadership. In the letter to the Galatians, he directed his arguments to the Jewish Christians as he used well-known Jewish stories and imagery. His methodology built bridges between the well-known Jewish stories and the truths of Christianity. He dealt with syncretism by attacking it directly and then teaching in-depth the supremacy of Christ and the reasons for the faith.

Confronting Syncretism at Colosse

Paul used a subtle attack against the syncretism of the Colossians. Rather than making a frontal assault on the celebrations and special knowledge of angels in Colossians 1, he first established the primacy of Christ in verses 13-15. The cornerstone of his argument is the "rule of Christ" and his office as Lord over the powers of evil. "Paul is directing attention to such memorable experiences of the Colossian's life as baptism, (vv. 1, 12), new life in a spiritual awakening from death (v. 13), forgiveness and a new standing before God (v. 14) because Christ overcame all their enemies and accusers (v. 15)." ³³ Paul continued by showing the deficiency of the virtues of the false teachers as

³² Richard Longenecker, *Word Biblical Commentary: Volume 41, Galatians* (Dallas: Word Books, 1990), 74.

³³ *Ibid.*, 80.

he juxtaposed them with Christian attitudes and virtues. The very things that seem to make a person spiritual lead him astray and disqualify him. He showed in verse 23 that supposed spiritual knowledge makes a person proud and immoral. In verse 20, Paul stated that kind of religion is of the world and Christians who have died with Christ have died to the things of the world. The passive verb *dogmatizesthai*, "let oneself be dictated to," shows the Colossian's inadequate view of Christ and makes them subject to other forces. He argues that because of the supremacy of Christ, Christian ethics, desires and actions should not be like the world's. Similarly, Paul argues in I Timothy 1:3 that "false doctrines, myths and endless genealogies . . . promote controversies rather than God's work -- which is by faith. The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith." In both cases, Paul's argument is not directly against the false teaching, but against the resultant attitude that comes from believing and promoting these teachings. There is an indissoluble link between belief in the Supreme Christ and ethics.

A Summary of Biblical Lessons over Contextualization and Syncretism

Theology

Conservative views on the authority of Scripture shape a leader's thoughts as to the relevance and use of scripture. If scripture is a devotional book then subsequent generations look for a subjective, convenient experience with God as they live in peace and decline with sinful culture. If scripture is authoritative, then scripture produces norms for living and judges man and his culture. A fear of God and understanding His holiness shape disciples and future disciples.

Presenting the Gospel to the Lost

A number of fundamental conclusions can be drawn from the previous discussions of syncretism from historical and biblical perspectives. Listed below are fundamentals that can be useful guides to aid a cross-cultural missionary to present effectively the Gospel to the lost.

- ◆ There is a fine line between contextualization and creating conditions that provoke syncretism. In order for the Gospel message to be understood culturally, the Gospel must be contextualized. Bridges and commonalties must be established as Paul modeled on Mars Hill. The lack of an effective Gospel contextualization creates an unintelligible message that gains few converts. An over-contextualized gospel eliminates the tenets of Christianity but gains many "converts".
- ◆ When contextualizing the Gospel, the basic tenets of Christianity should never be compromised. Paul underscored the following essentials in his teachings against syncretism: the Supremacy of Christ, salvation by grace through faith, the oneness of God, and the one way to Him. He also demonstrated that the source for Christian doctrine in the Bible.
- ◆ The Christian messenger must understand the reasons for syncretism and try to address these underlying reasons. A lack of understanding of these reasons prohibits prescriptive Biblical teachings to address the plague of syncretism.
- ◆ The best prevention against syncretism is to carefully and effectively teach the Bible.

- ♦ The Christian messenger must be regenerated. The message is more than the written Word, it also encompasses the lived Word.
- ♦ The Christian messenger should never coerce converts, or produce converts from fear. The shallow results of this type of conversion are catalogued in the Bible and in mission history.

Dealing with Syncretism in the Church

The Old Testament practice of killing heretical leaders is inappropriate today, but emphasizes the seriousness of syncretism within the people of God. God's grace is necessary to change the twisted heart from desiring earthly passions, shallowness, mental laziness, and detours. God's Word is necessary to guide the transformed heart and mind into God's truth and along His paths. When addressing syncretism, the Christian's tool is the Bible, and the method is teaching. The following list summarizes methods for combating syncretism within the church. These are drawn from the review of the discussion of contextualization and syncretism:

- ♦ Use familiar forms of communication and story examples from the Bible.
- ♦ Teach, explain and apply the Supremacy of Christ.
- ♦ Teach, explain and apply salvation by grace through faith.
- ♦ Teach, explain and apply that there is one God and only one way to Him.
- ♦ Contrast the ways of Christ and the lifestyle of adherents of syncretism.