

Exploring Biblical Theology as a Contextualization Method in Countries with a Semi-Established National Church

by Jason Morris

Introduction and Thesis

The Protestant Church of Vietnam, just over 100 years old (Austin, Grey, and Lewis 2019, 153) exists primarily as the product of God's Spirit working through various dedicated missionaries from North America, Europe, and Asia. Unfortunately, the nascent missiology of these missionaries failed to consider the issue of contextualization. They believed that all the local community needed to establish and grow the church was a translation of the gospel message and some basic creedal works in Vietnamese. The theology of the works proved sound, but the philosophical construct and hermeneutical methodology did not fit the Vietnamese thought process. The Confucian-influenced educational mindset of Vietnam, which strongly discourages questioning teachers, buttressed the transfer of western theological ideas and approaches. Consequently, Vietnamese theologians have developed little credible theological work from their own cultural perspective and understanding of Scripture. In addition, the dominance of this western theological perspective has crippled the church in its mandate to relate the gospel to its culture in an organic way. This has impeded discipleship, as believers struggle to understand scriptural concepts taught through a western framework.

It seems that in order for the Vietnamese Church to more effectively evangelize and disciple, it needs a contextualized theology that addresses the real-life dimensions of the Vietnamese culture and Church. If the Vietnamese Church embraced a robust biblical theology, it could see more clearly, through its own worldview, how and what God has revealed about himself in Scripture (Mead 2007, 242). Once the Vietnamese Christian community understands biblical themes through its worldview, believers can develop a subset of systematics that will move them closer to a contextualized theology.

Sadly, much of the literature that addresses developing a contextual theology fails to adequately address the theological needs of Vietnam for

two reasons. First, while excellent material exists describing the need for contextualization, locating a tenable method for developing a context-sensitive theology has proven difficult. Second, the material that does provide some methodological insight focuses on helping people groups receiving the gospel for the first time. Vietnam, in contrast, has a 100-year-old Christian community, with denominational Bible schools and pastors, but no clearly defined contextualized theology. The literature remains silent regarding retro-correcting this overly Westernized theology.

I propose that to develop a contextual theology faithful to the global and historic Christian community, and at the same time understandable and applicable to the Vietnamese mindset and context, the Christian Church and Vietnamese theological educators must first look to biblical theology. In this paper, I will (1) make a case for the need for a contextual theology, (2) examine the nature and function of biblical theology and systematic theology and offer some preliminary reflections on their usefulness in cross-cultural contexts, (3) look at an example of contextualized biblical theology from Scripture, and (4) explore some practical implications of using biblical theology as a contextualization method and what that could mean for the local church.

Theology, Contextualization and The Bible

To capture the scope and importance of the topic addressed in this article, clarifying first what is meant by “theology” and “contextualization” as well as why one must do theology in context remains crucial. At the beginning of this process must be a clear understanding of what the Bible is and why its truths must be contextualized. Oftentimes a church’s theology from a particular era becomes “enshrined” as sacred and authoritative—on par even with the Scriptures themselves. Intercultural missions means a plurality of ethnicities sharing the Christian faith. Consequently, it stands to reason that a multiplicity of theological expressions must exist. As David J. Bosch points out,

a plurality of cultures presupposes a plurality of theologies and therefore, for Third-World churches, a farewell to a Eurocentric approach (cf Fries 1986:760; Waldenfels 1987:227f). The Christian faith must be rethought, reformulated and lived anew in each human culture (Memorandum 1982:465), and this must be done in a vital way, in depth and right to the cultures’ roots (EN 20). (Bosch 2011, 445)

Lest unaware missiological practitioners be guilty of committing theological imperialism, there must be attention given to the development of a contextually nuanced theology in every place where the Holy Spirit is redeeming the lost. This can only happen when one understands that the Bible is the authoritative revelation of God that must be understood and applied to the lives of local people, that makes sense through their worldview lens and communicated in a way that is consistent with their own philosophical framework.

The Bible

In the quest for developing a contextualized theology, the nature and authority of Scripture must remain in high view. “If there is one defining characteristic of evangelical models [of contextualization], it is the normative nature of the Bible (Lausanne 1978) in the contextualization process—the “unchanging word in the changing world” (Espiritu 2001, 280)” (Moreau 2012, 59). This high view of Scripture remains central to the contextualization process, as it provides an authoritative guide for everything done within that process. “God’s word in the form of the Bible in an inspired record of events and truths of divine self-discloser. . . . [it] Speaks with God’s authority directly to the individual” (Horton 2015, 81-82). As the self-revelation of God, Christian leaders remain tasked to understand, contextualize, and communicate the Bible in located theological terms. “Evangelicals see the Bible—rooted in God’s own normative nature (Howell 2001, 31)—as central in all of our theological task” (Moreau 2012, 57). The authoritative message of the Bible is the content that must be understood by the local people and thus necessitates a contextual rendering. Scripture, as God’s Word, becomes the guide, authority and objective for developing a contextual theology (Hesselgrave 1995, 139). The Bible as God’s authoritative self-revelation is intended by God to be the vehicle through which humanity understands God and thus it must be contextualized, not just translated, for that to happen.

Theology

In contrast to God’s self-revelation, the Bible as authoritative and forever settled in the heavens, “theology itself is a human activity and discipline, and thus it is subject to and reflects the characteristics of those who do theology” (Ott and Netland 2006, Kindle: Loc. 179). The Church often accepts and exports the theological reflections of theologians from a past era and particular theological camp as though those reflections remain divinely inspired and forever settled in the heavens, such as

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Scripture itself. Missiologists must realize that “All theology is contextual theology, from the creeds of the early church to the modern ‘Four Spiritual Laws’” (Flemming 2005, Kindle: Loc. 3813). Therefore, theology is seen as necessary, but not static, thus requiring ongoing theologizing. Theology functions as the product of reflection upon what God has revealed about himself through Scripture, how he has acted and continues to act in the world today as seen and understood through the cultural and worldview of the theologizer in a particular era. Developing a local theology, one must simultaneously take into consideration the history of the World Christian movement. “One of the fundamental tasks of the subject of intercultural theology/mission studies is to take into account the broad scope of world Christianity” (Wrogemann 2016, 20). If one does not consider the broad scope of world Christianity in the development of a context-sensitive theology, that individual would run the risk of developing a theology neither truly biblical nor orthodox.

Faithful theology should communicate the constant message of Scripture in alternative forms as seen from the perspective of the theologizer (Kraft 2005, 291). This does not mean that the gospel has no central message or objective meaning. As Allan Anderson (2004, 103) quotes from Lesslie Newbigin, “the gospel is not an empty form into which anyone is free to pour his or her own content.” Benno van den Toren (in Cook 2010, 93) affirms that the need to develop local theologies does not mean no “supra cultural core” exists within the Scriptures. Central to this supra cultural message of God’s self-revealed testimony stands the call to allow Jesus to remain the Lord of one’s life and to experience the liberating freedom that comes through placing one’s belief in the one living and true God. While the culture in which the gospel is contextualized colors much of what Christians teach and how they understand following Jesus, the culture cannot define the central claims of the gospel. While culture and worldview impact every expression of the gospel, including the original writing of Scripture, it is not culture that determines the central core of God’s self-revelation. In addition to scriptural and cultural exegesis, developing theology and seeking to remain true to the central message of Scripture requires dependence upon the guidance of the Holy Spirit. “Theologizing must be led by the Holy Spirit, who instructs us in the truth. We need also to recognize that the same Holy Spirit at work in us is also at work in the lives of believers in other contexts” (Engen 2016, 75). Theologians and Christian leaders must develop this central core of God’s self-revelation, the message of Scripture, into theological statements that humans can quantify and that provide clarity, guidance, and understanding for the Christian community.

Contextualization

In order to develop this type of locally nuanced theology, faithful to the revealed Word of God and in step with what the historic global Church has understood about God, a process—contextualization—must take place.

Contextualization has to do with how the gospel revealed in Scripture authentically comes to life in each new cultural, social, religious and historical setting. . . . it refers to the dynamic and comprehensive process by which the gospel is incarnated within a concrete historical or cultural situation (Flemming 2005, Kindle: Loc. 49, 114).

Although there are not various truths nor a different revelation of God for each ethnic group, humanity is so enmeshed in their context and bent by their surroundings that “faithful theology must be profoundly situated” (Cook 2010, Kindle: Loc. 250). Contextualization of the gospel and theological concepts, then, not only exists as a good idea, but remains essential to understand, accept, and live out the message in a manner pleasing to God. “The Christian message [and theology] must be proclaimed in the framework of the worldview of the particular people to whom it is addressed, it must emphasize the parts of the message that answer their particular questions and needs, and it must be expressed through the medium of their own cultural gifts” (Anderson 2004, 104). Though opting to use the term “translation” in lieu of “contextualization,” Lamin Sanneh (1989, 36) says:

Translation [contextualization] involves a degree of cultural decentralization—or, at least cultural retrenchment, on the part of the translator [theologizer] . . . translation [contextualization] commits to the bold, radical step that the receiving culture is the decisive destination of God’s salvific promise, and as such has an honored place under “the kindness of God.”

Van den Toren (in Cook 2010, Kindle: Loc. 262) argues that “although the supra-cultural core of the gospel surely exists, one can never explain that core without using the categories and language of a specific culture,” and this is what is meant by “contextualizing” theology:

It is the task of theology, then, to discover what God has said in and through Scripture and to clothe that in a conceptuality

which is native to our own age. Scripture, as its terminus a quo, needs to be de-contextualized in order to grasp its transcultural content, and needs to be re-contextualized in order that its content may be meshed up with the cognitive assumptions and social patterns of our own time. (Cook 2010, Kindle: Loc. 3203)

This understanding of contextualization is vital as it provides an understanding of the responsibility that cross-cultural worker have in doing contextualization. This view of contextualization does not compromise or bring a low view to the authority of God's revealed word, but rather, sees the Word in such a high view that it justly demands a contextual rendering of its theological truths.

A Biblical Basis for Contextualization

One can make a biblical basis for contextualization from many different angles. When looking closely, one can easily see that each of the four Gospels stand as contextualized documents for a specific audience. Furthermore, each of the Apostle Paul's letters serve as stellar examples of his ability to do theology in context. Maybe, however, the most profound and convincing example and validation for the need for contextualization exists not in the writing of the Scriptures, but in the "Word" made flesh, in the Incarnation of Jesus, as well as the manner in which he taught. "The incarnation of Jesus makes contextualization not just a possibility but an obligation. It establishes a paradigm for mediating God's redeeming presence in the world today. The Incarnation of Jesus serves as a key paradigm for a contextualized theology" (Flemming 2005, Kindle: Loc. 126. 146). Through his Incarnation, Jesus took on a robe of humanity, becoming fully man while still being fully God, in a divinely devised plan to contextualize the eternal plan of salvation in a manner that could be understood by humanity. Andrew Walls, using the word *translation* rather than *contextualization* says, "Christ for Christians, . . . is the word translated. Incarnation is translation [contextualization]. When God in Christ became man, Divinity was translated [contextualized] into humanity, as though humanity were the receptor language" (Walls 1996, 27). The Incarnation of Jesus Christ set forth not only a biblical precedent for contextualization, but also a biblical example of how to do it. Jesus lived humbly in a specific place, with real people, became a part of human culture, and divinity embedded in a local human context. "Paul describes Jesus's radical identification with humanity as a 'self-emptying,' a 'self-humbling' and a 'self-enslavement' on behalf of those he came to serve" (Phil 2:6-8). In C. Rene Padilla's words (in Fleming 2005, Kindle:

Loc., 133), "It may be said that God has contextualized himself in Jesus Christ."

From this position as the incarnate contextualized God-man, Jesus profoundly expounded the principles of the kingdom of God, theologizing, using human terms and examples from the place where he lived and taught. Dean Flemming states it well:

. . . When Jesus did theology, he consistently used local resources. Jesus' preaching of the kingdom of God, his teaching on the law and righteousness, and his use of life-specific parables drew upon language, thought categories and rhetorical traditions from the Jewish culture of his clay. He communicated to people not in theological abstractions but through familiar, concrete forms—miracles, illustrations from common life, proverbs and stories, master-disciple dialogue and the example of his life among them. Although he offered a radically new teaching he did not coin a new language to express it. Instead, he used the earthy images of everyday rural life. Fishing and farming, weeds and wineskins, soil and salt became the "stuff" of his theological activity. From the beginning the gospel was voiced in local, culturally conditioned forms. What is more, Jesus' message and method of doing theology were context-specific. He mediated the good news in ways that were appropriate to particular people and occasions. (Flemming 2005, Kindle: Loc. 140)

This example of contextualization is more than merely a captivating stroke of divine genius, but rather a compelling call and a biblical pattern for cross-cultural workers to be guided by in their quest for developing contextual theology.

Summary and Clarification

From understanding theology as a contextually sensitive articulation of God's authoritative self-revelation, to a particular people in a particular place and time in history, this paper moves forward in seeking a viable methodology, as laid out above, for accomplishing this task in a semi-established church context such as Vietnam. Achieving this end, a contextually sensitive local theology for in particular people, for a nation with a semi-established church, requires a different approach than developing such theology for a people group just receiving the gospel for the first time.

As mentioned above, in order to develop a context-sensitive theology in keeping with the understanding of contextualization and theology outlined above, a systemic shift in the approach to teaching theology in countries like Vietnam must take place. This approach must respectfully correct previously-understood, overly-westernized doctrinal creeds and theological tenets, while at the same time introducing a method of theologizing that provides latitude for developing and maintaining a contextually-appropriate theology that addresses the needs of the people and remains faithful to Scripture (Cook 2010, Kindle: Loc. 104). Again, I propose that foundational to this conversation remains the implementation of teaching biblical theology first in Bible schools and seminaries throughout Vietnam and then from that, developing systematics specific to the Vietnamese context.

Understanding Biblical Theology

Unlike systematic theology, which often reflects the dogma of a particular theological persuasion, biblical theology exists as more of a methodological process for discovering the theology of the text and how it fits into the whole of Scripture. To be sure, within the world of biblical theology, there are various methodologies, each prioritizing a unique scope and focus, however fundamentally biblical theology considers the broad narrative with Scripture, and takes its primary information from scripture.¹ Graeme Goldsworthy (n.d., 1; cf. Vos 2014, 13) states that “Biblical theology is not so much about identifying fixed theological truths, as it is about a process by which theological truth is revealed. At its simplest, it is theology as the Bible reveals it.” While it may be impossible for the theologizer to remain completely objective during the process of developing theology, as Goldsworthy points out above, the theological discipline of biblical theology provides a theological methodology that allows one to discover theological truths as recorded in Scripture. “In effect, Biblical theology suggests that there is a basic hermeneutical principle implicit in the biblical text and priority is given to that embedded hermeneutic” (Hesselgrave 1995, 27). Biblical theology engages the biblical texts while giving careful consideration to the historical setting in which it originated, seeking to “locate and relate the contributions of the biblical documents along the lines of the continuum of God’s salvation-historical program centered in the coming and salvific work of Christ” (Bock and Köstenberger 2012, 19). To

¹This paper primarily focuses on “Biblical theology as history of redemption,” as seen in Klink & Lockett’s work on “Understanding Biblical theology.” For a further understanding of various lenses through which to do Biblical theology, see Klink & Lockett, “Understanding Biblical Theology.”

further understand the focus of this, G. K. Beales' (2011, 9) working definition of biblical theology provides clarity:

Biblical theology, rightly defined, is nothing else than the exhibition of the organic process of supernatural revelation in its historic continuity and multiformity. In this light, a biblical theological approach to a particular text seeks to give its interpretation first with regard to its own literary context and primarily in relation to its own redemptive-historical epoch.

Biblical theology intentionally allows humanity to see the historical progression of God's revelation, the centrality of God's redemptive plan, and other major foci of Scripture come to light. As such, the divine emphasis that God has placed on certain issues throughout his interaction with humanity takes precedent in the theologizing (Vos 2014, 17).

The practice of doing biblical theology as an official academic theological discipline can seem fairly uncommon and maybe even new to the modern theological field, at least in post-Reformation and Enlightenment era theology done from the West. One of the leading biblical theologians of the modern era, Darrell Bock (Bock and Köstenberger 2012, 19), even states, "Biblical Theology is a relatively new academic discipline. . . . [yet, this field of theology is] one of the most promising avenues of biblical and theological research today." From the earliest church history, however, key leaders have viewed biblical theology, though maybe not officially dubbed as such, as a necessary component for understanding the big picture and unity of the Bible. As John Easter (2019, PPT 1-Biblical Theo) highlights, the Early Church fathers employed the interpretation methods used in biblical theology in countering what they viewed as false teaching. Irenaeus, for example ("a disciple of Polycarp, who was a disciple of John the disciple of Jesus"), devoted considerable energy to developing a biblical theology that demonstrated the unity of the whole of Scripture (Wingren 2004, 34). Additionally, Irenaeus

formed the "rule of faith" (what we call the "analogy of faith"—"Scripture interprets Scripture") principle that was thereafter readily employed and developed by the Church . . . He also Defended the fourfold gospel as inspired by the Holy Spirit, and wrote extensively towards a biblical theology that demonstrated the unity of the whole of Scripture as he integrated the Christian understanding of the OT with a consistent interpretation of the Gospels and epistles. (Easter 2019, PPT 1-Biblical Theo)

Much later, in the 1780s, J. P. Gabler (in Klink and Lockett 2012, 14) began disusing the need to differentiate between biblical theology and dogmatic (systematic) theology, on the basis that biblical theology allows the theologizer to understand and see the meaning of Scripture, without imposing the biases of a particular church tradition. In the late 1890s Geerhardus Vos (2014, 16-17), of Princeton Theological Seminary, drew great attention to the purpose and value of doing biblical theology, explaining it as a way of understanding both how God has spoken—and what he has said to humanity throughout the course of history—as he addressed humanity’s spiritual needs.

In seeking to understand how the discipline of biblical theology can serve as a systemic contextualization methodology for semi-developed national churches with an “overly westernized theology,” one must understand how biblical theology works, as well as see its practical uses in the life of the church. Biblical theology as practical and prescriptive, suits the “action motif” of God and the mission of God well. Vos (2014, 17-28) highlights six practical uses of biblical theology that are germane to this discussion:

1. Biblical theology exhibits the organic growth of the truths of special revelation.
2. Biblical theology supplies us with a useful antidote against the teachings of rationalistic criticism.
3. Biblical theology imparts new life and freshness to the truth by showing it to us in its original historic setting.
4. Biblical theology can counteract the anti-doctrinal tendency of the present time . . . by bearing witness to the indispensability of the doctrinal groundwork of our religious fabric.
5. Biblical theology relieves to some extent the unfortunate situation that even the fundamental doctrines of the faith should seem to depend mainly on the testimony of isolated proof-texts.
6. Biblical theology’s highest practical usefulness is that it finds its supreme end in the glory of God.

These six practical uses of biblical theology remain important to understand, as they highlight the usefulness of this theological discipline in developing a theology for the local context that addresses real-life issues of the people. Overly rationalistic theology or, worse still, mere theological theory formulated by academic theologians, remains of little to no use in showing how the God of the Bible has spoken and interacts with the needs and concerns of humanity.

When thinking about developing a contextualized theology, one must make room for the local theologizer to discover for himself or herself what God has said and how he has said it. Biblical theology attempts to provide that space:

Rather than allowing traditional church teaching to control the formulation of Biblical theology, Gaber argued that biblical theology should be a historical concept—that is, that it should proceed from historical argument. This biblical theology could and should be pursued quite independently from the church’s dogmatic biases (Klink and Lockett 2012, 15).

Biblical theology thus provides a foundational approach to understanding Scripture that allows for authentic theological reflection from the worldview of the theologizer while at the same time prioritizing the divinely ordained themes found in the authoritative self-revelation that God has given to humanity, the Bible.

Understanding Systematic Theology

Systematic theology, on the other hand, refers to a set of theological presuppositions or doctrinal statements. Systematics exists fundamentally as a theological position determined by synthesizing a collection of verses throughout the Bible on a particular topic (Lawrence 2010, 89). As Easter (2019, n/a) clarifies, “Systematic theology uses a proof-text method, and seeks to classify in logical order the cardinal doctrines of the Church.” Typically, systematic theology organizes these theological nuggets in a logical manner clearly defined for a particular part of the world and that suits the thinking of a particular theological camp. As such, “systematics is dogmatic in that it is the orderly arrangement of the teachings of a particular view of Christianity. Dogmatics involves the crystallization of teachings as the end of the process of revelation and as ‘what is to be believed now’” (Goldsworthy n.d., 26). Geerhardus Vos states, “In biblical theology the principle is one of [following] the historical [development of biblical themes as revealed in Scripture]; in systematic theology it is one of logical construction. Biblical theology draws a line of development. Systematic theology draws a circle” (Vos 2014, 16). As Darian R. Lockett (2012, 9) further explains, “Biblical and systematic theology equally construct their individual projects by extracting data from the biblical text. . . . systematic theology relies heavily on logic or philosophy as an abstracting aid, while biblical theology relies heavily on history as an equally abstracting agent.”

Systematic theology further seeks to formulate its theological findings into precise and accurate summaries that articulate doctrine and define the boundaries between truth and error, and between orthodoxy and heresy. “It seeks to make “normative” statements. . . . Systematic theology goes beyond general summaries to precise and detailed doctrinal formulations” (Lawrence 2010, 90). Part and parcel to systematic theology’s emphasis on precise doctrinal statements involves the fact that Biblical scholars generally formulate those statements as relevant to a particular culture during a particular era in history. D. A. Carson (in Alexander et al. 2000, 101) states, “systematic theology that is worthy of the name . . . seeks to articulate what the Bible says in a way that is culturally telling and culturally prophetic.” Michael Lawrence (2010, 91) further emphasizes these time- and culture-bound characteristics of systematic theology: “Systematic theology has a strong concern for contemporary relevance. Its goal is to teach us not just timeless truth, but what it means to believe and obey that timeless truth today.” This applicable dynamic of systematic theology proves highly valuable, pragmatic, and even necessary. At the same time, however, it makes its adaptability to a different era and context, difficult and often artificial.

Although, as mentioned above, systematic theology can prove helpful in organizing biblical truths in an understandable way, it can also inhibit the local theologizer’s process of seeing the naked truth of Scripture. As Walter Kaiser (1978, 11) states, “Systematic theology as well as some other methods of theology, in a sense, select certain theological data that suits our fancy or meets a current need.” It can have further undesirable effects when cross-cultural practitioners translate systematic theological works and introduce them to a developing church in the form of fixed theological tenets. This process fails to account for the worldview or philosophical framework of the host culture and assumes that the ones who developed the original set of systematic statements covered everything and did so in a manner understandable to everyone. This methodology not only allows little room for the local theologizer to reflect on biblical truths, but it can also miss entire themes of Scripture irrelevant to the western theologizer yet integral to the host culture and its spiritual development. Systematic theology, when misapplied or simply translated from one language into another, can thus serve as a “theological straight jacket” for the local church. When this happens, it hinders the church from developing a context-sensitive theology that actually reflects their own understanding of Scripture and that addresses their daily needs.

The Relationship between Biblical and Systematic Theology

Seeking to explore biblical theology as a methodology for developing context-sensitive theology requires one to understand the nature of both biblical theology and systematic theology. Both methodologies remain necessary, but in our estimation of what is required in order to develop a context-sensitive theology, one needs to understand not only how each discipline works, but also the sequence in which one develops and implements each theological methodology or discipline. As Klink and Lockett (2012, 16) note, “the two disciplines are siblings both participating in the abstraction in order to reach an understanding. . . . Both kinds of abstraction are necessary for a theological understanding of scripture.” As Vos (2014, 15) says, both biblical theology and systematic theology take the truth deposited in the Bible and seek to apply it to the spiritual needs of humanity. In this sense they are alike and have the singular purpose of helping humanity understand the Word of God so that it can be appropriately applied.

Biblical theology tends to be more foundational, while systematic theology deals with the fruit of biblical theology and is determined by the parameters or horizons that biblical theology establishes. As Carson (in Lawrence, 2010, 91) states, “systematic theology is not so much a mediating discipline as it is a culminating discipline.” Biblical theology then, when understood from this perspective, serves as a hermeneutical guide to help the local theologizer extract the naked truth of Scripture. One can then formulate those truths into contextually sensitive statements that apply the truth of God’s Word in a manner that makes sense to the local people. Those truths would then be the beginning of their systematic/dogmatic theology. Lawrence explains the relationship this way:

. . . here is the proper work of systematic theology. Undergirded and surrounded by biblical theology throughout, systematic theology applies the truth of God’s word to the specific contemporary situation . . . without Biblical theology one might be tempted to merely give rules and moral guidelines . . . without systematic theology one might be only able to tell a story that the audience is unable to relate to their problem. (Lawrence 2010, 97)

This clarification of the relationship between biblical and systematic theology further moves one toward understanding how biblical theology can be used and is needed in developing contextual theology.

Summary

One should not view biblical theology and systematic theology, then, as mutual enemies, but related, more like a tree and its fruit. Biblical theology provides a minimally-enculturated approach to understanding Scripture so one may apply it and live it out in context in a manner faithful to the historic Christian faith (Goldsworthy, n.d., 29). Biblical theology allows the local theologizer to discover the “supra-cultural core” (Cook 2010, 156) of the gospel, from his or her own worldview and philosophical framework, and then articulate it in a manner that local people can understand. “Biblical theology as a discipline, not only provides the basis for understanding how the text in one part of scripture relate to other text, but it also serves as the basis in underpinning for all theologizing” (Lawrence 2010, 89). Biblical theology thus empowers the interpreter to view Scripture in a context-sensitive way that can lead to the development of contextually-appropriate dogmatics.

A Biblical Example of Biblical Theology

One of the distinguishing elements of biblical theology is that it allows the metanarrative or big story of Scripture to reveal the central theological themes of the Bible as the biblical authors present them in the unfolding revelation of God (Goldsworthy, n.d., 26). Creation, the fall of humanity, and God’s redemptive plan provide three of these major theological themes that surface repeatedly within Scripture. This section briefly highlights how the Apostle John, in John 1:1-18, uses these “images and categories that are anchored in Judaism but that also speak to an audience with a broader cultural and religious background . . . [to recontextualize] the story of Jesus for a new audience and a new generation” (Flemming 2005, Kindle: Loc. 3275). Clearly, both from the text as well as from historical data, Gnostic teaching deeply impacted the Jewish audience to whom John was writing. As Sanneh notes, “. . . the Gospel of John was the most ambitious attempt in Scripture to assimilate the Gnostic system. . . . The inclusion in the Christian canon of the Johannine corpus, so different in tone and temper from the Synoptics, shows the lengths to which the community of believers went in its practice of translatability [contextualization]” (Sanneh 1989, 21-22). The Apostle John’s writings, and specifically John 1:1-18, remains thus, in effect, a biblical example of contextualized biblical theology.

First, John states at the end of his Gospel his purpose for writing—so that his audience “may know and believe that Jesus is the Christ the son of God and that through believing they might have life in his name”

(20:31).² John brilliantly accomplishes his stated objective of showing this part (who Jesus is) within the whole (the metanarrative of Scripture) by employing a biblical-theological approach in context. Within the first twenty-four words of John 1, he ties his story of Jesus and Jesus's divine identity to the historical creation narrative: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning." Words such as "in the beginning" (1:1-2), "the Word," "light," "darkness," "made," and "the world" evocatively echo the genesis of the metanarrative of Scripture. By introducing the creation narrative at the very beginning of his Gospel, he can tether his story and explanation of Jesus's identity to this familiar and foundational text. John bridges his statements to the past to help his Jewish audience understand this *Logos* as the eternal creator, God, and their long-awaited Messiah.

John contextualizes his claims about Jesus by employing the term *Logos* to identify Jesus. *Logos* had rich religious and philosophical meaning for both the Jewish and Greek audiences to which he was writing (Flemming 2005, Kindle: Loc. 3288). John, as a biblical theologian, seeks to tie his propositions to the big narrative of Scripture in a context-sensitive manner; his interpretation proves thus both faithful and creative. It expounds on and adds new dimension to previous understanding. As mentioned above, biblical theology not only identifies the major themes of Scripture, but it also allows the divinely-embedded and progressively increasing dimensions of God's revelation on that topic to be emphasized as it is naturally emphasized in Scripture.

In addition, John brings to the surface another major biblical-theological theme in the opening section of his Gospel by highlighting the fallenness of humanity and its relational separation from God. In verses 12 and 13, John makes an indirect statement to the Jewish community that appears as an intentional contextualization move: he states that those "who believe" will receive the "right" to be called the children of God. This statement underscores to the Jewish community the pervasiveness of humanity's fallenness. John indirectly asserts that simply existing as a descendant of Abraham did not give them the "right" to be called a child of God, as they had assumed. Taking the biblical-theological theme of the Fall of humanity from the Genesis story, and showing that it applies to not only "everyone else" but also to the Jews, again ties the big picture of humanity's condition to the audience itself.

What John takes away with his left hand, he offers anew with his right as he focuses on God's redemptive plan. John begins to introduce the idea of being spiritually born into the family of God through God's

²All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the New International Version.

divine initiative and belief in the Messiah. Craig Keener (2014, 234) notes the familiarity both Jews and Gentiles would have had with this birth terminology, as: “Jewish teachers spoke of converts to Judaism as starting life anew like ‘newborn children,’ just as adopted sons under Roman law relinquished all legal status in their former family when they became part of a new one.” The Jewish community to which John writes would also have had awareness of the “child of God” terminology from the Old Testament, which points again to John’s intentional contextualization of a biblical-theological theme. John here allows his contextually-informed writing to intentionally grate against the commonly-held position of his Jewish audience. He boldly asserts that membership in God’s family requires not human bloodlines, as the Jewish community commonly believed, but belief in Jesus as the Messiah.

John 1 provides an example of how biblical theology ties a specific text to the major themes and overall narrative of Scripture, and how he contextualized Old Testament truths for his contemporary audience. Furthermore John 1:19-34, with John the Baptist’s preaching and the ensuing response of the people, provides an example of how the truths of biblical theology pulled from the grand narrative of Scripture come to bear on the daily lives of the people who believe it. While this might not qualify as a “fully developed” systematic theology, it serves as a movement toward an applicable dogmatic that flows out of biblical theology.

Implications and Application

Having reviewed the aims and methods of biblical and systematic theology and provided a biblical example, this section now extends the implications of these efforts to the context of the Vietnamese Protestant Church. I aim, as previously stated, to propose that teaching theology from a biblical-theological approach first remains a valid, if not necessary, foundational component to the development of a contextual theology within a semi-established national church. While biblical theology has made a decisive comeback over the past few decades in the theological academy, missionaries and other cross-cultural practitioners seem slow in seeing biblical theology as a fundamental component in developing contextual theology. This is the case in Vietnam, where missionaries involved in theological training work with a generation of Vietnamese church leaders who received a subset of either non-contextualized or minimally contextualized systematics developed through a western philosophical and theological framework:

The Church [in Vietnam] has shown little evidence of having a specific Vietnamese contextual theology. In other words, the Church has not “nurtured” or “expressed” itself theologically in the cultural context in which it has existed. Its architecture, liturgy, music, homiletical style and organizational structure have all reflected the foreign culture of the missionary, thus being completely discontinuous from Vietnamese cultural patterns. The Church remains to this day, for the most part, a western church, . . . in Vietnam, rather than a contextualized and culturally appropriate [church]. (Nguyen 2019, Kindle: Loc. 222)

Across the board in the major evangelical denominations in Vietnam, Bible schools and seminaries struggle with this reality as they seek to raise up new ministers and church leaders who are faithful to Scripture and authentically Vietnamese.

Early Catholic Jesuit missionaries who came to Vietnam in the seventeenth century, such as Alexander de Rhodes, gave remarkable attention to the need for contextualization and enculturation, but Protestants seem to not have done well in this area. De Rhodes was particularly careful about not wanting to establish Christianity as a culturally separate group within Vietnam. (Phan 2006, 81). He had a deep conviction that the Vietnamese people should understand the Bible and apply its theological truths. The Jesuits’ efforts at contextualization in the seventeenth century, which included learning the local language and culture, provided a significant foundational component for the Catholic Church’s survival in Vietnam (Nguyen 2019, Kindle: Loc. 240).

Conversely, Protestants have seemed much more comfortable with translating theological materials than with developing culturally sensitive materials for the Vietnamese mind and way of life. While theological training has served as the significant part of the Vietnamese Protestant history in Vietnam since its beginning in 1911 (Thai Phuoc Truong 2019, 32), to date no credible contextual theology has been developed for the Vietnamese people. “French and American Protestant missionaries in early twentieth-century Vietnam seemed to be intent on making the native Vietnamese a more western Christian, overlooking perhaps, that in the process, they were also making [them] less Vietnamese” (Nguyen 2019, Kindle, Loc. 240). Perhaps out of zeal to do as much as possible as quickly as possible, or more probably out of ignorance regarding the necessity, both Protestant missionaries working in Vietnam as well as Protestant believers in Vietnam, have seemingly failed to develop a true context sensitive theology. “Protestant

missionaries have struggled to communicate the gospel in a way that is relevant and indigenous to the Vietnamese people . . . essentially the [Protestant] church is but another American denomination, [with a branch in Vietnam]” (Nguyen 2019, Kindle: Loc. 260). At least one contributing factor to this tragic reality, is that the majority of the missionaries have promoted their denominational dogmatics/systematic theology, giving little attention to the theological and philosophical framework through which they were developed. A commitment to biblical theology as a preliminary way to teach and understand Scripture could provide a counter measure to begin addressing this issue.

Although making this shift in Vietnam, where the church has existed for a little over 100 years, may not prove easy or a “fix all” for its theological problems, doing so warrants serious consideration in the spirit of helping the church mature and move forward in a manner that facilitates faithful living out of the call of God on the life of the Vietnamese Church. As Vince Le (2019, 73) suggests, to have a genuine “Vietnamization of faith” in Vietnam will require development of a contextual theology for Vietnam that takes into account the actual needs of the people who live in the Vietnamese context.

Christian education in Vietnam must be concerned with what is happening to the people who actually live there and deal with their needs, including poverty, fear, hopelessness, loneliness, disease, and discrimination. The gospel of salvation must prove that its power can liberate them from such situations (Dung Le 1994, 134-36)

Doing biblical theology as a preliminary step for developing a contextualized theology should provide the Vietnamese Church with some interpretive latitude that systematic and dogmatic theology does not. If the church embraces biblical theology as the primary theological method for introducing theology to Bible school students and church leaders, it should nurture context-sensitive theological reflection. This will, in turn, produce a contextually-nuanced theology that speaks to specific issues within the culture from a worldview that makes sense to the local Vietnamese Christian community. As Craig Ott (2006, Kindle: Loc. 181) states, “Theology is rooted in God’s authoritative revelation . . . however, [developing] theology is a human activity and discipline, and thus it is subject to and reflects the characteristics of those who do theology.” Contextualized theology must indeed take seriously the revealed Word of God, the Bible; but in order to develop theological statements and systematics, theologizers must understand the Bible

through the cultural lens and worldview of local people (Cook 2010, 157).

While practitioners should not abandon western Enlightenment-era systematic theology, there does need to be discernment in evaluating its strengths and weaknesses (Douglas Hayward, n.d., 39). Western theologians have long inferred that once a set of systematics are developed, using good historical-grammatical exegesis, they may simply translate the resulting theological nuggets and subsequent creeds into various languages without further contextualization. While historical-grammatical exegesis is foundational to both Biblical and Systematic theology, it does not negate the necessity of contextualization.

When contextualization is ignored, multiple undesirable effects occur. First, the philosophical and theological framework through which the truths were developed do not mesh well with the local worldview. In addition, the foreigner's theological grid does not allow for him or her to see certain biblical truths and realities that need addressing within the theology of the local people. As Cook (2010, 157) discerns, theology will always reflect the worldview and cultural surroundings in which it was birthed. Although cross-cultural theological teachers often have the best of intentions, they inevitably inject more of their home culture into the theology than they realize. This causes an unnecessary hindrance to the gospel (Anderson 2004, 110). Further efforts to equip local theologians with an approach to Scripture that provides sufficient latitude for them to develop a context-sensitive theology remain imperative.

The implications and fruit of a contextual theology faithful to the historic Christian faith are far-reaching and essential to the maturation of the church in a local area. In an article entitled "The Missionary Role in Developing Indigenous [Contextual] Theology," Lois Fuller (n.d., 406-407) identifies four central reasons why a contextualized theology remains necessary. The following sections utilize these four general categories, with some modification, to highlight the implications of a contextual theology.

Personal Spiritual Growth

First, contextual theology proves necessary for personal spiritual growth. If the version of theology that missionaries hand a local people does not address local spiritual and everyday life issues, it will stunt spiritual maturity and possibly lead to their abandoning the Christian faith altogether. In some case it has been noted that when there isn't a contextual theology that addresses the real life needs of the people, there is a tendency to bifurcate one's life into spiritual and natural, thus leaving the impression that the Bible doesn't speak to the whole of life. As

Flemming (2005, Kindle: Loc. 112) notes, contextualization enables “the people of God to live out the gospel in obedience to Christ within their own cultures and circumstances.” A contextualized theology allows the people to understand what God has said about himself in his word and thus provides them with the biblical information necessary to grow into mature disciples. Paul Hiebert (1985, 196) suggests that if cross cultural workers do not allow the developing church to engage in theological reflection, they will be guilty of stunting the spiritual growth of the people. Contextualized theology allows the gospel to become real to the people we serve (Ott and Netland 2006, 245). People knowing Christ and growing in their faith stands as the first and foremost reason for finding a contextualization methodology that allows for genuine indigenous theological reflection.

Self-Propagation

Second, the Church as a whole cannot operate in a truly indigenous and self-propagating manner without a contextualized theology. Indigenous church principle missiology has long held that the local church must be self-propagating. Melvin Hodges (2009, 49) says, “A church that does not propagate itself will die. New Testament churches were self-propagating churches.” If no one allows or teaches the church to do theological reflection on its own, it will not develop into a truly self-propagating or self-missionizing entity. A contextualized theology allows locals to understand and embrace God’s redeeming grace (Flemming 2005, Kindle: Loc. 142). This idea of the local church taking responsibility for the mission of God and seeking to advance the kingdom of God through the winning of the lost, requires the church to know who they are and how the Bible speaks to their culture. When the local church has a contextualized theology that allows them to see God’s invitation and command to take the gospel to the lost, that self-propagating activity can then begin to flow from a position of obedience to God rather than obedience to the missionary.

Systemic Cultural Peculiarities

Third, in order to address deep systemic issues (e.g., issues with power, leadership, gender equality, evil spirits, honor-shame, and human rights), the local church must reflect on Scripture in context and let Scripture speak to these issues from their located perspective. “Every church in every particular place and time must learn to do theology in a way that makes sense to its audience while challenging it at the deepest level” (Flemming 2005, Kindle: Loc. 42). When theology is imported

and not organic, it does not address many deep systemic cultural issues. As Jayson Georges (2016, 73) points out, when local people do not understand from their own perspective the fullness of what the Bible says about particular issues, “the veracity and integrity of the Bible is threatened.” Although all of humanity is created in the image of God, worldview, religion, geography and many other factors create unique circumstances and strongholds that God wants to redeem and bring freedom to. In order, however, to faithfully address these issues about life and spirituality particular to a local area, a context-sensitive theology remains non-negotiable. It is through that type of theological reflection that what God has already said and provided for to address those deep level context particular issues and sins will be discovered. Biblical theology provides the latitude needed for those involved in local theologizing to discover what God has already said about the issues that exist in a given culture.

Contribution to the Global Christian Community’s Understanding of God

Finally, when a local body of believers develops a contextual theology, it makes an invaluable contribution to the global Christian community that helps everyone understand God and his Word in a more complete way. Contextualized theology not only helps address issues, but also reveals dimensions of God’s unsearchable reality that people simply cannot capture through one cultural lens. Speaking about the desire of God from Revelation 5:9-10, Ott (2006, 309) states, “If theology is understood as a part of worship, then our theology should no less reflect the manifold richness of human diversity and expression present in the heavenly vision.” Local theology in any context helps the global Christian community by contributing to the ever-worthy pursuit by God’s followers of faithfully understanding what he means by what he has revealed about himself in his Word (Cook 2010, Kindle: Loc. 452).

Summary

When the church truly operates in an indigenous manner and has the tools it needs to engage in contextual theological reflection, beginning with biblical theology, these priceless outcomes are within reach. In contexts like Vietnam, where remarkable loyalty to the Christian workers who brought and taught the Bible in the beginning remains, missionaries and church leaders must proactively and patiently offer the church the tools and latitude that will stimulate local theological

reflection. These necessary tools must come from those the church trusts and respects—both local and foreign persons in positions of leadership and theological education—in order for the church to recognize its potential for growth. In this way, adopting biblical theology as an initial theological approach to understanding God’s Word could indeed provide the foundational contextualization methodology for faithful and contextual theological reflection.

Conclusion

In the quest to see a robust indigenous Vietnamese national church that is self-propagating and self-missionizing, leaders must begin to help the church become self-theologizing. In light of the cultural and educational realities that exist within the Vietnamese culture and the national church, this intentional fundamental shift in the church’s teaching of theology and hermeneutics remains imperative. Adopting a biblical-theological approach in Bible schools and ministerial training programs across the nation will create philosophical space and a basic framework for contextualized theological reflection. While adopting this approach to teaching theology may not address the issues embodied in the older generation, hopefully the up and coming generation of Vietnamese Church leaders will embrace and expand this dynamic. A truly contextualized Vietnamese theology faithful to the revealed Word of God will affirm its authoritative role in the life of the believer and remain consistent with the historic global Christian community, yet address the real-life needs of the Vietnamese people from a philosophical perspective that makes sense to them. This remains a task worth pursuing.

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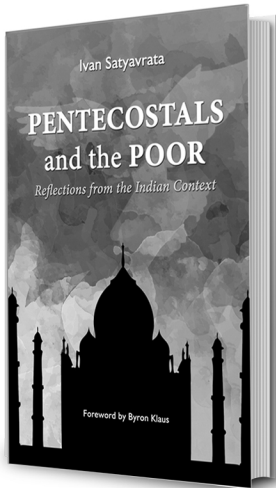
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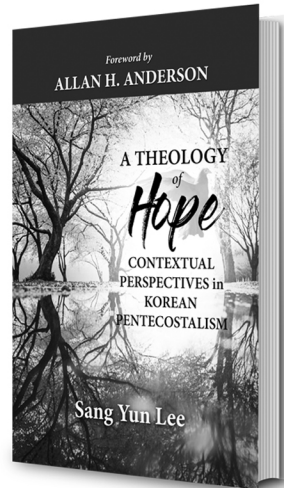
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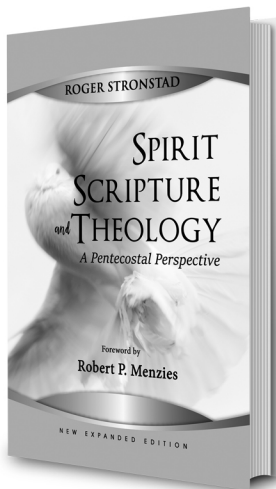
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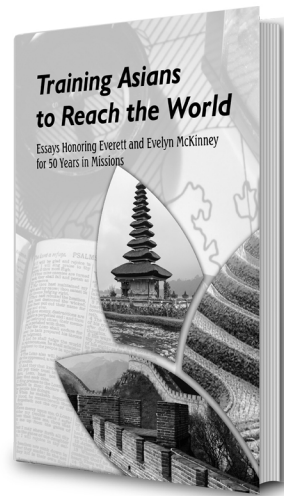
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