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## **A MODEL FOR CONTEXTUALIZING THEOLOGY FOR MELANESIA**

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There is widespread agreement among missiologists that theology needs to be contextualized; there is little agreement, however, about how the contextualizing should be done. There is agreement that the Christian faith must be relevant and meaningful to the people in the local churches, but are we to put the focus on the gospel message or on the cultural context?

Bevans outlines five main models of contextualization in his book, *Models of Contextual Theology*. He defines contextual theologizing as “a way of doing theology in which one takes into account: the spirit and the message of the gospel; the tradition of the Christian people; the culture in which one is theologizing; and social change in that culture.”<sup>1</sup> These four elements—gospel, tradition, culture and social change—are all essential elements in developing a contextualized theology, and various people have placed their emphasis on different points. The following diagram (Figure 1) helps show the various models in relation to each other.

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<sup>1</sup>Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1992), 1.

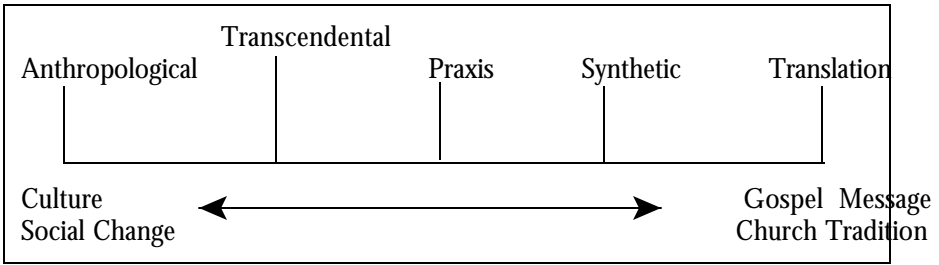


Figure 1. *Bevans' Models of Contextualized Theology*<sup>2</sup>

The *translation model* is concerned with transferring the gospel message as understood by the missionary and the sending church, into the language and thought forms of the people so that it makes sense to the hearers. It is concerned with effective communication and seeks to preserve the content of the gospel and the church tradition. Bruce Nicholls defines it as, “the translation of the unchanging content of the gospel of the Kingdom into verbal forms meaningful to the peoples in their separate cultures and with their particular existential situations.”<sup>3</sup>

Generally evangelicals have taken the translation model approach. Culture is seen as very important, but the focus is on communicating the gospel as quickly and as effectively as possible to people within that culture. One of the key presuppositions of this model is that there is a central gospel core that is supra-cultural. There is no real agreement, however, as to what that core may be.

Papua New Guineans have responded quickly and openly to Christianity, and often missions were overwhelmed with the response. The initial emphasis was on translating Scripture, but that is a major long-term process, so generally they relied on a few Old Testament stories and some details on the life of Christ. Then the “Statement of

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 27.

<sup>3</sup>Bruce Nicholls, “Theological Education and Evangelization,” in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, ed. J. D. Douglas (Minneapolis: World Wide Press, 1975), 647.

Faith” or a basic catechism of that particular denomination was translated into the local language, and taught to the new converts. Most missions have continued in the same direction, usually by either translating or simplifying Western books or notes for use in Bible schools and colleges. I agree that one has to start somewhere in the early stages of evangelism and the simpler the better, and there is no doubt that God has used this approach, but is this the only approach to use? If this is the only approach that is used, then what do we do about the cultural questions that are not addressed by the imported theology or the “Statement of Faith?” Dyrness says that it is his “conviction that only Scripture, not some particular interpretive schema, is trans-cultural.”<sup>4</sup>

The *anthropological model* starts at the opposite end of the spectrum with the culture and works back to the gospel. Proponents of this model are concerned with retaining as much of the traditional customs and culture and still being Christian. They are asking such questions as, “How can we Christianize such important cultural concepts as ancestor veneration?” They are concerned about retaining cultural identity and cultural values. People who use this model generally work from a theological background that is creation centered rather than redemption centered. As Bevans explains, a redemption centered theology is “characterized by the conviction that culture and human experience are either in need of a radical transformation or in need of total replacement.” On the other hand a creation centered approach to theology works on the assumption that “culture and human experience are generally good.” In this approach, “human experience, current events, and culture would be areas of God’s activity and therefore sources of theology.”<sup>5</sup>

Ennio Mantovani has taken this approach which he calls *Celebrations of Cosmic Renewal*. He says, “Melanesian religions in general could be

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<sup>4</sup>William A. Dyrness, *Learning About Theology from the Third World* (Grand Rapids: Academic Books, 1990), 31.

<sup>5</sup>Bevans, 16-17.

defined as ‘An ultimate concern with *life*.’<sup>6</sup> He draws largely upon the “*dema* myth” which concerns “a being (human or animal) is killed violently and buried (or eaten). Out of his/her/its grave comes the item of culture which stands for life.”<sup>5</sup>

The strength of this approach is that it has a very positive view of culture and starts where people are with their real problems and questions. On the other hand, if people are not careful, they can have an overly romantic view of culture and not look closely enough at the evil in culture that must be addressed and dealt with.

A third approach is the *praxis model*, which focuses on the cultural changes going on within society. Its focus is not on knowledge about faith, but rather on commitment to positive action to bring about change in society. People who use this model emphasize the concepts of liberation and transformation. They seek to bring about change in society that is based upon action with reflection. Sin is seen as a social problem that is closely related to social structures, rather than the concept of sin as personal evil.

The *transcendental model* places emphasis upon individual human experience. God reveals himself “within human experience, as a human person is open to the words of Scripture as read or proclaimed, open to events in daily life, and open to events embodied in a cultural tradition.”<sup>6</sup> Theology takes place as a person wrestles with his or her faith and then shares that faith with others within the same cultural context.

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<sup>6</sup>Ennio Mantovani, “What is Religion?” in *An Introduction to Melanesian Religions*, ed. Ennio Mantovani, Point Series No. 6 (Goroka, PNG: The Melanesian Institute, 1984), 29.

<sup>5</sup>Ennio Mantovani, “Comparative Analysis of Cultures and Religion,” in *An Introduction to Melanesian Religions*, ed. Ennio Mantovani, Point Series No. 6 (Goroka, PNG: The Melanesian Institute, 1984), 74.

<sup>6</sup>Bevans, 99.

Midway between the two approaches of translational and anthropological models is the approach which Bevans calls the *synthetic model* (Figure 2). In this model the four elements of gospel, culture, tradition and cultural change are held in creative tension as culture and the gospel are balanced against each other, and church tradition is balanced against the concerns of the local situation.

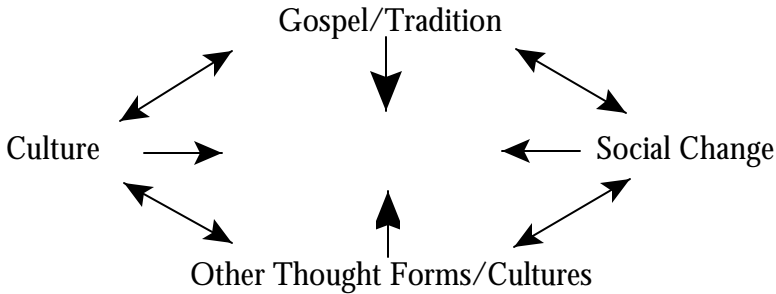


Figure 2. The Synthetic Model<sup>7</sup>

Bevans describes the synthetic model as a “middle-of-the-road model”:

It takes pains to keep the integrity of the traditional message, while acknowledging the importance of taking culture and social change seriously. . . . It tries to preserve the importance of the gospel message and the heritage of the traditional doctrinal formulations, while at the same time acknowledging the vital role that culture has played and can play in theology even to the setting of the theological agenda.<sup>8</sup>

The synthetic view sees culture as being a mixture of good and evil. Some of the culture is good and must be retained; some is evil and must be replaced; and much is neutral and must be preserved and enriched.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 86.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 81-82.

The synthetic model looks at the social situation and the social change going on and realizes the church must respond to social issues. It also looks to other cultures and other theological expressions to see what contributions they can make to the church. This means that there is an ongoing dialogue taking place among all these different factors.

Dialogue is an essential feature of the synthetic model. This dialogue takes place between the lay people who bring the questions, concerns, and fears of the local situation, and pastors, teachers, and theologians who can bring biblical knowledge and knowledge of the teachings and traditions of the church. In the Melanesian context, this means that issues such as ancestors and the spirits of the dead must be addressed along with the whole spirit world. Another cultural question is the issue of spiritual power and the manifestation of spiritual power in revival.

The biblical scholar is important as he or she encourages the people and explains the Word of God. Often they can also bring forth ideas from church history, creeds, liturgies, and theologies written in other times and places. As all of these insights react together, a true synthesis takes place.

### **Developing a Visual Model**

Much of what is written about contextualization is written in theological journals and textbooks in rather technical language. Taber says that much theology is doubly alien: "alien because it is Western in mode and form, and it is alien because it is highly technical and complex."<sup>9</sup> Theology is to serve the people of God and help them come to a greater understanding of God's goodness, love, and salvation, but technical language and abstract thought forms actually prevent theology from doing what it is called to do. Therefore, in dealing with the issue of contextualization, I have sought to develop a visual model that is easily comprehensible to lay people as well as trained pastors.

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<sup>9</sup>Charles Taber, "The Limits of Indigenization in Theology," *Missiology* 6/1 (January 1978): 65.

## The Wesleyan Quadrilateral

What are the essential features that must be in place for effective contextualization to take place? How can their relationship with each other be visualized? These were questions that were in my mind and led me to think about a simple model that has become known as “the Wesleyan quadrilateral.”<sup>10</sup> “Contextual theology” was not a term that was in use in Wesley’s day, but Wesley was very concerned with practical Christianity. Donald Thorsen writes, “Wesley’s genius lay partly in his conviction that we should continually seek to make our beliefs more comprehensible and compelling to the world.”<sup>11</sup> He did not write a systematic theology as such, but he wrote a lot of theology in his sermons and in letters to various people. As Thorsen says, he focused “on issues having a more immediate and holistic impact on the life of faith in his day.”<sup>12</sup> It is obvious from this that the real life situation of the people was extremely important to Wesley, and so it is quite appropriate to speak of Wesley as doing contextualized theology.

Albert Outler has studied the works of John Wesley and noticed how Wesley, in addition to the Anglican triad of Scripture, tradition and reason, had added a fourth factor, experience, in formulating his theology. Outler coined the phrase “The Wesleyan Quadrilateral” to describe this distinctive innovation. He says, “We can see in Wesley a distinctive theological method, with Scripture as its pre-eminent norm but interfaced with tradition, reason, and Christian experience as dynamic and interactive aids in the interpretation of the Word of God in Scripture.” Outler also said, “It was Wesley’s special genius that he conceived of adding ‘experience’ to the traditional Anglican triad, and thereby adding vitality without altering the substance.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Albert Outler, “The Wesleyan Quadrilateral—in John Wesley,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 20 (Spring 1985): 9.

<sup>11</sup>Donald A. D. Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), x.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 63.

<sup>13</sup>Outler, 9-10.

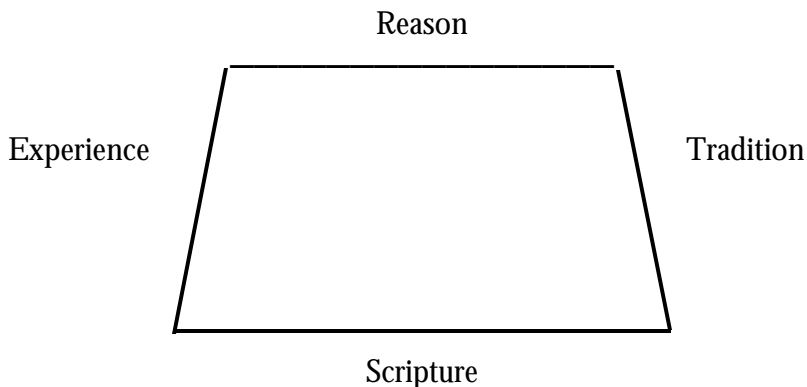


Figure 3. The Wesleyan Quadrilateral

This method has been studied by Thorsen who describes it as being like a baseball diamond. Home plate is Scripture. First base is tradition. Second base is reason and third base is experience. Thorsen writes that “presumably one must begin theological reflection with home plate—Scripture. But to ‘score a run’ one must cross the bases of tradition, reason, and experience before completing the return to Scripture—the start and finish of theological reflection.”<sup>14</sup>

What does Wesley mean by Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience and how do they relate to developing a theology?

### **Scripture**

Wesley saw Scripture as the basis and foundation of all true Christian belief. He said, “I lay this down as an undoubted truth: The more the doctrine of any Church agrees with the Scripture, the more readily it ought to be received. And, on the other hand, the more the doctrine of any Church differs from Scripture, the greater cause we have to doubt it.”<sup>15</sup>

### **Tradition**

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<sup>14</sup>Thorsen, 72.

<sup>15</sup>John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., vol. 10, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 33.



Wesley placed great emphasis on “the early ecumenical creeds and the patristic writings of the Western and Eastern churches . . . . He believed that classical orthodoxy was the second most important source of Christian truth.”<sup>16</sup> He also drew from other sources besides the early church fathers. Wesley published a Christian library for the use of his pastors, as well as writers from Christian antiquity; they included extracts from Puritans, Baptists, Quakers, and Roman Catholics.<sup>17</sup>

### **Reason**

Wesley said, “It is a fundamental principle with us that to renounce reason is to renounce religion, that religion and reason go hand in hand, and that all irrational religion is false religion.”<sup>18</sup> He saw reason as a gift from God that we are to use for God’s glory. He did not see faith as opposed to reason, but sought to lead people to a reasonable faith.

### **Experience**

Wesley’s greatest contribution was including personal experience as a valid way of knowing God and an important aspect of our theologizing. Thorsen says that Wesley was “the first to incorporate *explicitly* into his theological worldview the experiential dimension of the Christian faith along with the conceptual.”<sup>19</sup>

This is no doubt due in part to his own spiritual pilgrimage including the event at Aldersgate Street when, as he describes it in his journal, “I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation: and an assurance was given me, that he had taken away my sins, even mine and saved me from the law of sin and

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<sup>16</sup>Thorsen, 239.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 159.

<sup>18</sup>John Wesley, *The Letters of Rev. John Wesley*, ed. John Telford, vol. 5 (London: Epworth, 1931), 364.

<sup>19</sup>Thorsen, 201, emphasis added.

death.”<sup>20</sup> Since this was so significant in Wesley’s life, he made it a habit of interviewing people and learning about their personal Christian experience. He said that “Christians cannot be satisfied with anything less than a direct testimony from His [God’s] Spirit, that He is merciful to their unrighteousness, and remembers their sins and iniquities no more.”<sup>21</sup>

Thorsen says, “One may consider Wesley the consummate theological synthesizer of the eighteenth century.”<sup>22</sup> Wesley was without doubt a theological innovator, and if Wesley were here today, he certainly would be very concerned in developing a contextualized theology. Let us take a look at Bevans’ synthetic model for contextualized theology and Wesley’s synthetic model and see if it is possible to combine them.

### **Synthesis of Bevans’ and Wesley’s Models**

There are a number of similarities between the two models especially in relation to gospel and tradition in Bevans’ model, and Scripture and tradition in Wesley’s model.

<b>Bevans</b>	<b>Wesley</b>
Gospel	Scripture
Tradition	Tradition
Culture	Reason
Social Change	Experience

Figure 4. Bevans’ and Wesley’s Models Compared

The biggest difference is that Wesley does not have a category for culture. Culture is a term that was not in common usage in Wesley’s

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<sup>20</sup>Nehemiah Curnock, ed., *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley*, vol. 1 (London: Epworth, 1938), 475.

<sup>21</sup>Wesley quoted by Thorsen, 219.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 164.

day, and also because Wesley was working in what was largely a monocultural situation. There was, however, quite a difference between the educated elite, which was Wesley's background, and the largely uneducated working class that made up a large proportion of Wesley's congregation. Wesley was very aware of the needs of the common people, and so developed a holistic and contextualized ministry. Although a very well educated person, he stated that his intent was to speak "plain truth for plain people."<sup>23</sup> He contextualized his evangelistic methods with such unorthodox practices as outdoor preaching, singing hymns to popular tunes, and appointing lay preachers including some women.

He was also very aware of the social problems of his time and developed methods of dealing with them. He provided basic medical care and wrote a simple medical manual to help those who could not afford professional care. He provided social services for widows and orphans. He started schools and produced all sorts of books to meet the needs of his constituents. He was aware of the economical problems and set up a loan fund for people with immediate financial needs. This religious and economic radicalism of Wesley laid the groundwork for later political involvement for Methodists, and he was a strong supporter of the abolition of slavery.<sup>24</sup> Because of this practical involvement of Wesley in the social problems of his day, I do not feel that we are doing any injustice to expand Wesley's quadrilateral to include a fifth aspect of culture and social change. By combining Bevans' model and the Wesleyan quadrilateral, we end up with a fifth component of culture which turns the quadrilateral into a five sided figure.

It could be argued that culture could be seen as communal experience and so is included already in the Wesleyan quadrilateral. There is an advantage in separating it out as a distinctive category, for each culture has questions that are unique and which must be addressed. In

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<sup>23</sup>John Wesley, "Preface to Sermons on Several Occasions," in *The Works of John Wesley*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 2.

<sup>24</sup>Thorsen, 94-95.

this diagram all sides are not equal. Scripture is the solid base on which all else stands, for it is our primary source of religious authority.

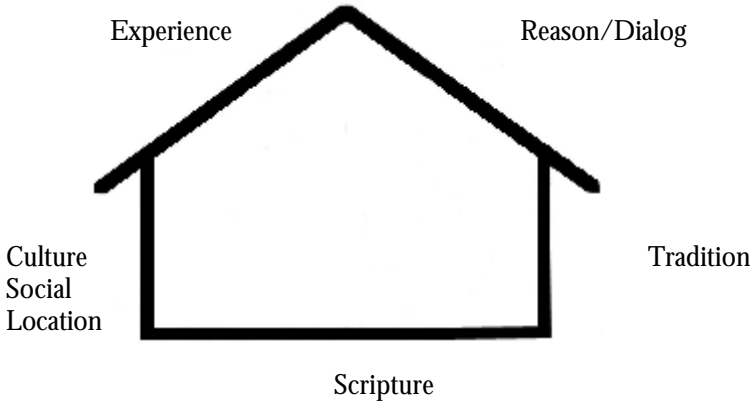


Figure 5. House Model for Contextualizing Theology

### **The House Model**

If the diagram (Figure 5) happens to suggest the shape of a house, it is not by accident. The image of a house conveys the idea of a theology that is constructed by the people, essential for life, and providing stability, protection, and security.

#### **1. Scripture**

Scripture becomes the foundation and the base on which everything stands. Jesus likened the person who listened to His words and who obeyed them as being like a person who built his house on a solid foundation (Matt 7:24-27). Paul likewise emphasized the importance of Scripture, for it is “God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Tim 3:16). Numerous modern writers have emphasized the importance of Scripture as the

basis of a contextual theology.<sup>25</sup> It is important for Christians to be familiar with the Scriptures and taught how to understand the Scriptures, for there have been some “disastrous misunderstandings on the basis of insufficient and poorly selected biblical foundations.”<sup>26</sup> Too often a denominational theology has been imported intact by Western missionaries. Contextual theology calls Bible colleges and seminaries to give students the necessary hermeneutical skills and let them bring their own agendas to the Scriptures for theological reflection. Primary importance is placed upon the Word of God rather than a system of theology.

All Christians should be able to “process, reflect upon, and organize biblical truth so that the Book and the truth become their own.”<sup>27</sup>

## 2. Cultural Context

In developing our theology, we start with the culture of the people and the questions, struggles, and insights they bring to the process. Christianity is a life to be lived rather than a creed to be affirmed. Therefore, theology must deal with what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ in a particular time and place. It must deal with local fears, hopes, and questions that arise within the local situation. Missionaries must also recognize that the Spirit of God has been working in the culture long before the missionary arrived. Therefore, the missionary must look at the rituals, ceremonies, and myths of the people to search out those places where God has been at work preparing the people for the good news of Jesus Christ. Schreiter says, “A local theology begins

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<sup>25</sup>Taber, 69-70; Dean S. Gilliland, “Contextual Thinking as Incarnational Mission,” in *The Word Among Us—Contextualizing Theology for Mission Today*, ed. Dean S. Gilliland (Dallas: Word, 1989), 11-12; Paul G. Hiebert, “Critical Contextualization,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 11/3 (July 1987): 110; John Hitchens, “Culture and The Bible: The Question of Contextualization,” *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 8/2 (October 1992): 41.

<sup>26</sup>Taber, 57.

<sup>27</sup>Gilliland, 11.

with the needs of the people in a concrete place, and from there moves to the traditions of faith.”<sup>28</sup>

### 3. Church Tradition

The cultural beliefs and values of the people will influence their theology. It is helpful if they are aware of the wisdom and insights of theologies, biblical studies, creeds, and systems of belief from two thousand years of church experience as well as from many countries and cultures. This means that theology is not done in isolation but in interaction with Christian believers in other times and places. If we neglect this “rich inheritance of Christian theology, liturgy and devotion,” we will suffer from spiritual impoverishment. But on the other hand, this Christian tradition must not be “imposed on any church, but . . . made available to those who can use it as valuable resource material.”<sup>29</sup>

### 4. Experience

The fourth component of our model is Christian experience, for it is very important that people’s theology be tied in with their own experience. By this we mean that Christianity is a life to be lived and knowledge is basically experiential rather than theoretical. Theology must be practical; it must give people a realistic view of the world in which they live and of the intervention of God in their lives today. Theology must be relevant. Charles Kraft says, “Theology that is perceived as irrelevant, is in fact irrelevant.”<sup>30</sup> Bevans speaks about the role of experience in theology when he describes, what he calls “the transcendental model.” He says, “The only place God can reveal Godself truly and effectively is within human experience. . . . Theology

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<sup>28</sup>Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1985), 13.

<sup>29</sup>Lausanne Committee for World Evangelism, “The Willowbank Report: Report of a Consultation on Gospel and Culture” (Wheaton: Lausanne Occasional Papers, 1978), 11.

<sup>30</sup>Charles Kraft, *Christianity in Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1979), 296.

is only possible for the converted subject, only for the person who in full openness has allowed God to touch and transform his or her life.” Bevans also says, “The development of a truly contextual theology takes place as a person wrestles with his or her own faith and shares that faith with others with the same cultural parameters.”<sup>31</sup> The Scriptures are records of people’s experiences as they responded to God and God interacted with them. People’s individual stories became intertwined with the bigger cosmic story of God at work in the world. Individual and collective human experience is therefore a very valuable resource as we work to develop a theology that is truly contextualized and meaningful.

## 5. Reason/Dialogue

It is important that we combine dialogue and reason together. Reason by itself could give the impression that developing a contextualized theology was the responsibility of a professional theologian. But contextualization involves dialogue as people reason together. Schreiter says,

In cultures where ideas emerge and decisions are made on a communal basis, one now sees theology developing in that same way. While the professionally trained theologian continues to have a role in relating the experience of other Christian communities to the experience of the local group, the community itself takes much more responsibility in shaping theological response.<sup>32</sup>

People come to the Scriptures with questions arising out of their cultural background. The result is not merely answers, but more questions, for Scripture has a way of cross-examining us. “We find our culturally conditioned presuppositions are being challenged and our questions corrected . . . We are compelled to reformulate our previous

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<sup>31</sup>Bevans, 99-100.

<sup>32</sup>Schreiter, 4.

questions and to ask fresh ones.”<sup>33</sup> And so an ongoing dialogue between culture, Scripture, and Christian tradition develops and continues.

Reason and logic have been important factors in shaping Western theology for they are a strong force in Western culture, but formal analytical theology is not part of the Melanesian tradition. Religion is an experience which one “feels” rather than thinks or reasons. One “feels into one’s cosmos and its inhabitants through an organic process.”<sup>34</sup> Melanesian theology will be rich in symbol, allegory, and analogy. Dialogue is therefore an essential part of the theologizing process. Charles Taber says,

It should be produced in dialogue: dialogue within the community of believers. . . . Dialogue with the world in which it is being evolved— the culture, the religion, the politics, the economics, the social system . . . and dialogue with the church in the broadest sense. . . . It is important to maintain in a proper balance both the autonomy of the indigenous theologians . . . and the interdependence of all parties of the body for the enrichment of all.<sup>35</sup>

## 6. **Christ Centered**

The diagram that we have is not totally adequate. The heart of Christianity is not primarily a code of ethics, or a philosophy, but God’s actions revealed in the life and death of Jesus Christ. Christianity without Christ is not Christianity. The essential heart of Christianity is that God has revealed Himself to humankind through the person of Jesus Christ. Taber insists that one of the requisites for Christian theology is that it be Christological. He quotes Koyama, who says, “The historical context is ruled by God. To it the Son came (incarnation,

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<sup>33</sup>Lausanne, 11.

<sup>34</sup>G. W. Trompf, ed., *The Gospel Is Not Western* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1987), 14.

<sup>35</sup>Taber, 75.



crucifixion, resurrection) to challenge it profoundly. Contextualization is, then, an outcome of reflection on the career of Jesus Christ.<sup>36</sup>

The Melanesian Pidgin Bible translates “Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone” to read: Jesus Christ is the “number one post of the house” (Ephesians 2:20). This refers to the Melanesian style of building a house with posts from the jungle. The center post is usually a specially selected hard wood post that will out last all the other materials of the house, for it is the center post that supports the roof and all the structure of the house. In the same way Jesus Christ becomes the center and focus of our theology (Figure 6). E. Stanley Jones says, “The more I know of Jesus, the more I know of God.”<sup>37</sup>

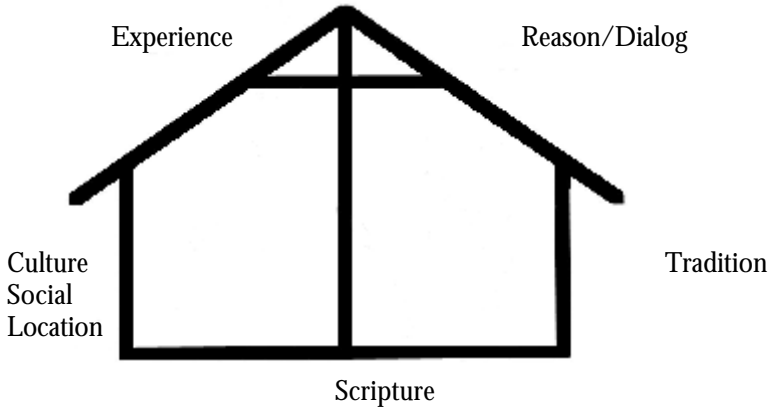


Figure 6. House Model with Cross in the Center

It is significant that the center post is the cross, for the uniqueness of Jesus Christ is not primarily in his teaching, but especially in his death, resurrection, and ascension. Paul said, “but we preach Christ crucified:

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 73.

<sup>37</sup>E. Stanley Jones, *A Song of Ascents* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968), 386.

a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor 1:24). We will readjust our model by inserting a cross in the center of the structure (Figure 6).

There is an offence in the cross that contextualization must not do away with. We are to offend “only for the right reasons, not the wrong ones.”<sup>38</sup> In many countries a foreign imported gospel is not good news, for the foreignness offends and turns people away from experiencing the good news of God’s salvation.

### **7. Guided by the Holy Spirit**

Taber in his excellent article mentions another very important element in doing theology. He says, “The dynamic guide who leads the church into all truth is the Holy Spirit. . . . It is only as the same Spirit, who inspired the Scriptures, directs the community of the believers in its understanding, in its application, and in their obedience to it, that doctrine will be able to play its full role as that teaching enables the church to be the church.”<sup>39</sup> Such an important area of life needs to be saturated with prayer. Missionaries and church leaders need to trust the Holy Spirit to guide and direct the church in its theological reflection. As the Holy Spirit guides people into the truth of the scripture and applies those truths to cultural issues, the resulting theology will give the people a newer, fresher, and greater understanding of God’s power and the fullness of God’s salvation. God will be relevant and will not be a stranger, and people will respond with an outpouring of richer praise and worship.

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<sup>38</sup>Darrell Whiteman, “Contextualization: The Theory, the Gap, the Challenge,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 21/1 (January 1997): 3.

<sup>39</sup>Taber, 76.

## The Inadequacy of an Imported Theology

This model is very helpful in showing how inadequate an imported non-contextualized theology is. This can be seen in the following diagram (Figure 7).

The theology that is imported is biblical, orthodox, and Christocentric, but it only partially relates to the questions, struggles, and values of the culture. Because it does not adequately relate to their culture, it does not relate fully to them experientially. It is imported intact from another culture, and so the local believers are not involved in dialogue, reasoning, and wrestling with the issues. Christ is there and they have had experience with Him, but He is seen basically as a distant Christ who is a bit of a foreigner and not totally involved in their world with their fears and struggles. Christ may have been presented as the Savior from sin, but is He also the mighty conqueror who has defeated the powers of evil? Is Jesus seen as the friend of the poor and the downtrodden, or is He seen as the friend and ally of the Westerners with their comfortable life styles?

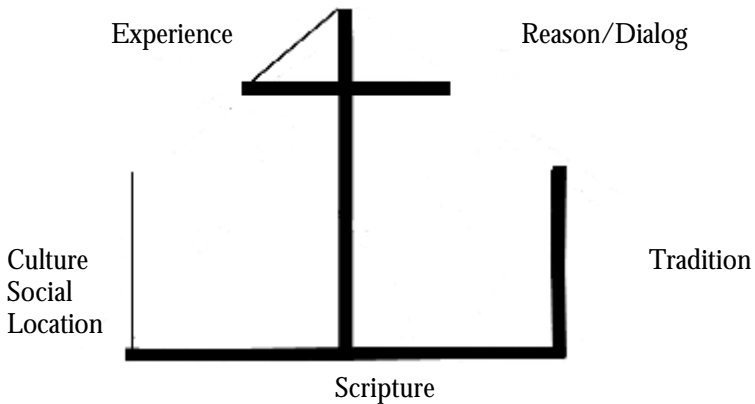


Figure 7. House Model Showing Inadequacy of Imported Theology

The model of theology as being like a house is helpful in that it carries the connotation that theology must be livable. It must speak to the needs of day to day living. When problems and crises of life come, then our theology, i.e., our understanding of God, must be such that it is perfectly adequate to withstand the storms of life. Obviously this house offers little protection when the storms come. It is biblical, orthodox, and Christ-centered, but it is inadequate. The missionary finds his pre-packaged, imported theology to be inadequate to the questions he faces as a missionary.<sup>40</sup> The national Christian also finds it inadequate, and concludes that God is not all powerful, neither is He all knowing. God is seen as inadequate for meeting the needs and problems of human life.

Indigenous theology must address itself to issues that are real to the people for whom it is done. It should resolutely ignore questions that do not emerge in the context, so as *to avoid irrelevance*. This may mean both that indigenous theology will say not a word about matters that in the history of the Western churches have caused endless controversy . . . and that questions will be raised as burning issues requiring immediate solution that never occurred at all to theologians in the Western world.<sup>41</sup>

Many well-meaning missionaries and mission organizations have insisted on indoctrinating their converts in their own particular brand of theology because they want a strong church. They fear syncretism or heresy, and so they want the people to be grounded in a solid theology. Unfortunately, they do not realize that one of the greatest causes of syncretism is the teaching of a foreign theology that does not meet some of the people's needs and does not relate to their worldview. People who have inadequate housing are not happy, and will either try to patch up the house or go and live elsewhere. When theology is imported and does not meet people's needs, they patch it up with bits and pieces from

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<sup>40</sup>Schreiter, 3.

<sup>41</sup>Taber, 67, emphasis added.

their traditional beliefs and practices. Rather than contextualization leading to syncretism, contextualization done on a solid base of Scripture will actually prevent syncretism. Missionaries must be involved in working closely with the national church and actually *doing theology* with them, not merely teaching an imported theology to them.

### **Ongoing Theology**

Obviously no model can do complete justice to a topic so complex as contextualizing theology, and this model does have one major problem. The concept of a house gives one the impression that the final product is the most important. From the Western viewpoint we see a house as something that is built by an expert and is expected to last for as long as possible with a minimum of attention. Perhaps we need to think of this house as a traditional Melanesian house which is built by the people of the community. They work together, using local materials along with some imported items such as axe, hammer, saw and nails. Everyone knows that in five years time they will need to build another house. I am not saying that we need a new theology every five years, but it brings us to the point that is raised by a number of authors that theologizing must be open ended and on going.

The Wesleyan quadrilateral represents a model or approach to reflecting on and formulating theology rather than a completed system of theology . . . Doing theology is an ongoing process. Theological conclusions should be developed, but held tentatively. They must be left open to the leading of the Holy Spirit, to reformulation in the light of new insights or experiences and to reevaluation in the face of ever new and complex questions asked by a progressively secular society.<sup>42</sup>

As society and culture evolve, issues change their complexion; some disappear, new ones emerge, and the total configuration, at least in its details, is perpetually in the process of transformation . . . A second reason for open-endedness is the necessity for

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<sup>42</sup>Thorsen, 236.

modesty about our grasp of biblical truth at any stage of our pilgrimage. We confuse the closing of the canon and the closing of our theologizing and end up with theological idols.<sup>43</sup>

What becomes clear as the context is taken seriously in theology is that theology can never be understood as a finished product produced by experts, which is merely delivered to a Christian community for its consumption.<sup>44</sup>

All theologizing is culture-bound interpretation and communication of God's revelation. Good theologizing is Spirit-led, even though culture-bound. In spite of the impression often given that theology is an absolute, one-for-all kind of thing, theologizing is a dynamic continuous process.<sup>45</sup>

Theologizing is an ongoing dialogical process carried on in the church community that must be based on the Bible, focused on the cross, culturally relevant, and related to the real life experience of the people in their social context.

Figure 8 is an expanded view of our model that sums up the major factors which I feel are essential in developing a contextualized theology. I have included some stick figure people in the model to remind us that even such simple illustrations as stick figure pictures can be very helpful in communicating abstract ideas. I found in teaching this model that it was best to follow the outline used in this chapter, and develop the model section by section, just as if one were constructing a house. If one presents only the final house model it can appear to be too complex, but when presented one component at a time, people more readily understand the process and essential elements for constructing a contextual theology.

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<sup>43</sup>Taber, 76.

<sup>44</sup>Bevans, 13.

<sup>45</sup>Kraft, 291.

**HOLY SPIRIT**

He “will teach you all things” and “guide you into all truth” (John 14:26; 16:13). “No one know the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God” (1 Cor 2:11).

**JESUS CHRIST** the “number one” post of the house” (Melanesian translation)

**4. EXPERIENCE:**

“That which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim . . .” (1 John 1:1).

**5. REASON-DIALOGUE:**

Connects Scripture, tradition, culture and experience with the Cross of Christ. “They examined the Scriptures to see if what Paul said was true” (Acts 17:11).

**2. CULTURE**

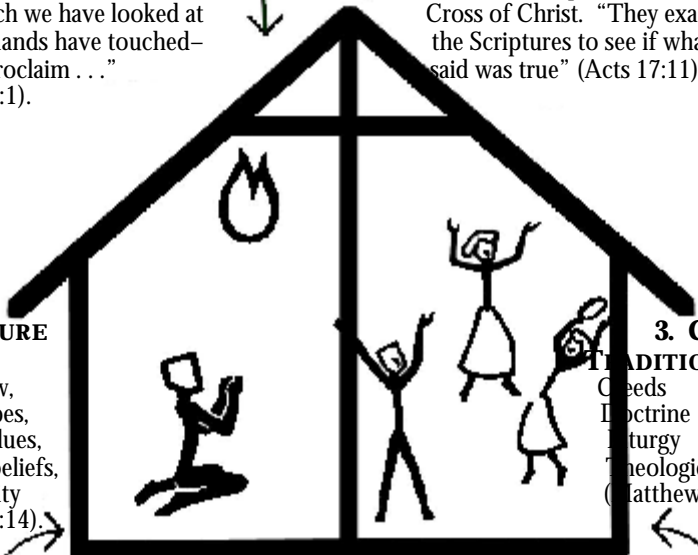
Identity, worldview, fears, hopes, needs, values, dreams, beliefs, community (1 John 1:14).

**3. CHURCH**

**TRADITION**  
Creeds  
Doctrine  
Liturgy  
Theologies  
(Matthew 5:17)

**1. WORD OF GOD – SCRIPTURE**

“All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Tim 3:16).



Theologizing must begin and continue with prayer. “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God” (James 1:5).

Theologizing should lead to greater worship. “I will praise your name forever and ever. . . I will meditate on your wonderful works” (Psalms 145:1, 5).

Figure 8. House Model for Contextualizing Theology for Melanesia

## Summary

The essential elements that must be in place for true theologizing to take place are as follows:

1. *Theology must have Scripture as its foundation.* People must be encouraged to bring their question, needs, fears and hopes to the scriptures themselves.
2. *Theology must be Christ centered.* It must have a clear focus on the incarnation, the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ.
3. *Theology must be culturally relevant.* The questions that we seek to answer are the questions that come out of the cultural/social location. The resulting theology must be expressed in culturally relevant forms.
4. *Theology must draw on the rich resources of church tradition, doctrines, and creeds.* The church is not only local, but global and has a long history.
5. *Theology must relate directly to people's experience.* People cannot truly comprehend the significance of Christ's death and resurrection, or of the power of the Holy Spirit if they have not first experienced the reality in their own lives.
6. *Theology grows out of dialogue as people reason together.* Theology is not something that is constructed in an office by experts and then mass produced in order to be distributed, but it is done in the community with theologians, biblical scholars, church leaders, village pastors, and lay people in dialogue together.
7. *Theological reflection must be guided by the Holy Spirit.* Jesus said the "Holy Spirit will guide you into the full truth" (John 16:13 CEV). Theologizing requires a spirit of prayer, and a total dependence on the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit. In debating cultural issues, the church in each culture needs to be able to say as the Apostles did, "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us. . ." (Acts 15:28).