

# MISSION AND CONTEXTUALIZATION

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## **1. Introduction: Some Preliminary Thoughts**

All mission theology is contextual theology because it involves the communication of gospel truth by someone with a particular context to someone else in a different context (Bevans, 1994:10):

"Contextualisation is not something on the fringes of the theological enterprise. It is at the very center of what it means to do theology in today's world. Contextualisation, in other words, is a theological imperative"

Every context provides a lens through which we view reality and truth, and it thereby influences the way we understand the gospel as well as the way in which we express our faith. This was as true for the writers of Scripture themselves as it is for us today. Every theology in history has been rooted in a particular context and has reflected the concerns of that context. That doesn't necessarily make it any less an expression of truth, but it does challenge us to accept that there is no privileged interpretation of the gospel which is the exclusive possession of any one culture or christian tradition. Hopefully our understanding of the truth will be stretched and enriched as we listen to other contexts (Whiteman, 1997:4):

"Contextualisation forces us to have a wider loyalty that corresponds to an enlarged and more adequate view of God as the God of all persons, male and female, and as a God who especially hears the cry of the poor. God can no longer simply be the God of myself, my family, my community, my nation; such a god is ultimately an idol or false god, one made according to my narrow and limited image and perspective"

This paper explores the challenge of taking the truth of the gospel and the reality of the context equally seriously. It involves issues of hermeneutics (how we interpret truth), epistemology (how we know what is true) and authority (what criteria we adopt), and so encompasses the whole theological enterprise!

## **2. The Meaning of Contextualisation**

It is important first of all to define what is meant by 'contextualisation' and how it is different from 'indigenization'. Nicholls traces the development of contextualisation from an emphasis on the clothing of the gospel in traditional cultural elements which facilitates its communication in a relevant way (indigenization), to an attempt to allow the whole context, including the social and political dimensions of a culture, to influence the way in which the gospel is expressed (Nicholls, 1979:20ff). Contextualisation therefore is a more radical form of indigenization. Furthermore indigenization in its traditional form did not necessarily raise the theological stakes, since it was assumed that the gospel was the unchanging truth revealed in scripture which only had to be appropriately 'translated' into cultural forms which meant something to its hearers. Some think of contextualisation in this way (see below). But more radical approaches to contextualisation have theological implications which go beyond issues of culture.

## Theological Issues

For this reason Nicholls distinguishes cultural and theological contextualisation. It seems to me that cultural contextualisation is really indigenization by another name, and concerns the communication of the gospel to the traditional institutions of the culture such as the family, law, education etc. Theological contextualisation deals with the context as a whole, with its wider issues, the world-view, the values and the socio-political structures.

Then within a theological understanding Nicholls distinguishes two further ways of doing contextualisation, namely existentially or dogmatically. The existentialists relativise the context and the text according to the perspective of the observer. Because text and context are both culturally conditioned and our understanding is always to some extent subjective, it is said that we cannot be dogmatic about what the gospel will mean in a certain context. We all see things through different sets of lenses provided by the context, and we will see the gospel differently depending upon which lenses we wear. Dogmatic contextualisation, however, presupposes a given revelation which transcends culture and is objective and authoritative in its own right. The context may determine what we choose to say or not to say from out of this body of truth, but at the end of the day this propositional revelation must be allowed to judge any and every context.

Bosch makes a similar analysis of the different types of contextualisation (Bosch, 1991:421). He sees indigenization as either translation (primarily to do with language) or as inculturation (primarily to do with culture). He further subdivides the socio-economic model of contextualisation into evolutionary (development) or revolutionary (liberation theology).

Some traditional evangelical approaches to contextualisation have assumed the universal objective truth of the gospel as a 'given', something which only needs to be accurately translated into another language in order to be effective. This could be called the '*translation*' model of contextualisation and it works primarily at the level of *language*. It is assumed that the gospel speaks primarily to individuals: it is people who need the gospel, not cultures or contexts. Culture and context are secondary, and may even be considered irrelevant to evangelism. They need not affect the receptor's understanding of the universal truth of the love of God, so long as words are found which provide sufficient equivalence with the original concepts of the faith as given in the scriptures. This is a linear approach to the way in which the gospel comes to people, because it does not invite or expect any comeback or interaction with the culture and context. It is represented as follows:

### TRANSLATION

**GOSPEL**

**INDIVIDUAL**

A more refined way of thinking about this process is to take the receptor culture into consideration and look for the ways in which the gospel is relevant to the concerns of that culture. This kind of contextualisation recognises that people have a culture and context which has made them who they are and which matters to them. We cannot speak to them as individuals in isolation from their context. This approach may be described as *transculturation*, or *adaptation*. It recognises that the needs of the context are important and the gospel must speak to those needs in a relevant way. If the first model operates at the level of *language*, this model operates at the level of *relevance*. It therefore invites some reciprocal interaction with the context, but only in order to listen and understand the concerns which it raises, so that decisions can be made about which aspects of the gospel need to be

appropriately emphasised. However, it still assumes that the gospel is supracultural. It can be represented thus:

## TRANSCULTURATION

GOSPEL

CULTURE

A third and more radical approach is to recognise that those who listen to our preaching in the receptor culture will filter all that they hear through the spectacles of their cultural context in such a way that they understand the gospel differently for their own perspective. In this model the biblical text is drawn into a dialogue with the context. This acts both to transform the context and the text, revealing new dimensions of significance in the text which had not been evident in other contexts. The gospel goes through a process of *transformation*, not necessarily in a way which becomes unfaithful to its original context or importance, but which nevertheless allows people to see levels of meaning relevant to their own perspective. This kind of contextualisation operates therefore at the level of *meaning*, and it sets up an on-going process of reflection and action which continues to refine our understanding of what the gospel will mean for that particular context. Some advocates of this process allow the context to be the hermeneutical key - that is the context itself gives us the categories in which the gospel is to be understood. Others acknowledge the need for the two-way process of interpretation, but want to maintain the authority of the gospel to speak to the context in a prophetic way. This approach is represented as follows:

## TRANSFORMATION

GOSPEL

CONTEXT

Now you see why it is important to define what we mean when we use the word 'contextualisation'! It is a word so often banded around without these qualifications, and if we are not careful we can be talking about quite different processes using the same word!

### 3. The Meaning of the Gospel

What we have said so far leads us to consider the extent to which the context itself might influence what we say about the gospel, and some will claim that the 'meaning' of the gospel will change according to the context in which we want it to be 'relevant'.

This process is explored by Bevans and Schroeder (2004), who argue that it is possible to hold together the universality and particularity of the gospel, by maintaining our hold on the *constants* of the faith while at the same time recognising that those constants will take on a different 'shape' depending on the *context*:

“The church’s mission has been lived out in the concrete circumstances of particular contexts but also in fidelity to the constants of the gospel and the church’s rich and diverse traditions of theology, liturgical practice and Christian life” (Bevans and Schroeder, 2004: 397)

This means that the church’s mission has to be *dialogical*, since it has to engage the context in a conversation about how it understands the gospel. The gospel will sound different in different contexts, which will bring to light different dimensions of its meaning. The gospel will speak

differently to each context as the context views it through the lenses of its own concerns. The church must therefore listen to those concerns and understand how the context is viewing the gospel before it makes any proclamation. Church and context are therefore in dialogue about what the gospel means to that context. The church also has to be in dialogue with God Himself who is at work in the context by his Spirit in new and surprising ways, which makes it difficult sometimes for the church to keep up with what He is doing. But the church's mission has also to be *prophetic* since there are ways in which the gospel challenges the context from outside of it, and brings a transforming power to bear upon it out of the constants of the universal love and truth of God, the absoluteness and uniqueness of Christ, and the witness of the Spirit, all of which characterise his Trinitarian mission in every age.

Context therefore becomes critical in the interpretation of the message of the gospel itself. The gospel is rooted in the biblical text which itself has a context which bears upon its interpretation. But that fact need not empty it of its intrinsic authority or of its ability to speak authoritatively. What is more, considering the relevance of the text to a particular context may not empty it of its ability to speak into other contexts or to transcend contexts. A text may have a number of layers of meaning which can apply in different contexts, so that the issue of interpretation then becomes a matter of discerning which aspects of the text can have significance for a particular context without the context necessarily becoming the *controlling* factor in the interpretation. Texts can also function as 'principles', giving us frameworks for truth without spelling out how that truth must be applied in each and every context.

#### **4. The Gospel as Liberation**

Liberation Theology began by asking about the meaning of the gospel in a context of poverty and injustice. If the gospel does not speak to that context, we might say it means nothing – at least to them! Actually when we take the context seriously and listen to its concerns we find that it brings to light dimensions of the gospel which have hitherto remained hidden. We find fresh meanings emerging, not imposed upon the gospel, since they have always been there, but arising from out of its very roots in God's historical and incarnational engagement with the world. We find ourselves going back to the traditional texts and reading them in a new way. We find a liberating gospel which sets people free from every dimension of their oppression, a gospel that is not a 'spiritual' gospel, or one that is only relevant for insiders, or simply handed down from on high by the church, but one whose inner meaning is revealed by the context itself.

Gutierrez recognises how a commitment to liberative change raises questions of interpretation and meaning:

“If we look more deeply into the question of the value of salvation which emerges from our understanding of history - that is, a liberating praxis - we see that at issue is a question concerning the very meaning of christianity. To be a christian is to accept and to live - in solidarity, in faith, hope, and charity - the meaning that the Word of the Lord and our encounter with that Word give to the historical becoming of humankind on the way toward total communion. To regard the unique and absolute relationship with God as the horizon of every human action is to place oneself, from the outset, in a wider and more profound context. It is likewise more demanding. We are faced in our day with the bare, central theologico-pastoral question: What does it mean to be a christian? What does it mean to be Church in the unknown circumstances of the future? (Theology of Liberation, New Edition, P.32)

Liberation Theology locates the meaning of the gospel in the history of God's engagement with the world. What it means comes out of that history and rooted in history. The gospel is not a supracultural, unchanging truth which has simply to be proclaimed. It is rather a dynamic, critical, historical and human truth, revealed in fresh ways within each fresh context through the dialogue

between text and context, and experienced as good news for that context.

## 5. Dynamic Equivalence

How do we know that the truth we are embracing in our own context is consonant with the revealed truth to which the Bible bears witness? We have said that epistemology is crucial to this debate. Is it possible to affirm knowledge of a truth that is culturally independent? Is there any such thing as 'objective knowledge' which is totally value free and transcends all contexts? Newbigin says not, implying that there are no self-evident truths, and therefore "the originally given revelation has to be continually reappropriated and reinterpreted in the light of new situations" (Newbigin, 1989:63)

Charles Kraft proposed that contextualisation be done by 'dynamic equivalence', reproducing in another context the equivalent effect of the words in their original context. He saw the process of theology itself as a dynamic process of discovery in which insights from different cultures need to be set alongside each other to discover transculturally valid expressions of revealed truth. Theology is about translation, but also about reinterpretation (Kraft, 1990:297):

"Theological truth must be re-created like a dynamic-equivalence translation or transculturation within the language and conceptual framework of the hearers if its true relevance is to be properly perceived by them"

More conservative commentators have seen this as a shift away from propositional revelation (God revealing his will in the form of statements which are always and everywhere true) by its suggestion that meaning and inspiration is not in the words themselves but in their intended effect on the hearers. So, for example, Hesselgrave and Rommen have been critical of Kraft, because they want to maintain the givenness of the biblical revelation with its supracultural relevance to any context. They want to avoid syncretism at all costs, otherwise if context is allowed to play too much of a role, it might determine the meaning of the gospel. They suggested that in the process of interpretation bias from our own cultural assumptions can be overcome and the message 'decontextualised' so that we can remain faithful to the revelation as originally given (Hesselgrave and Rommen, 1989:201):

"The adequacy of an attempted contextualisation must be measured by the degree to which it faithfully reflects the meaning of the biblical text"

The conservative scholarship of Don Carson would agree with this approach (Carson, 1996), insisting that God's objective truth must be able to stand over against culture.

## 6. Contextualisation in History

So conservatives have traditionally been suspicious of contextualisation, claiming that it easily leads to syncretism and compromise with the pure, supracultural truth of the gospel. There is not much written on contextualisation by evangelicals! But this poor reputation is hardly justified when we look at the importance of contextualisation historically. In fact throughout history, it has been the ability of the Christian faith to contextualise itself which has secured its survival! Andrew Walls shows this in his important book, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* (1996)

Walls describes six phases of cultural transition through which the gospel went. In each of these phases, the gospel took on certain features which could only have come from that context, but which then were carried on into future generations.

Christianity started off with a Jewish identity, as we know from the gospels. But it was the ability of

the faith to find a home in the Hellenistic world which saved it after AD70 and the fall of Jerusalem and that translation into Greek culture ensured its universalisation. Later the gospel went north and took root in the barbaric tribal peoples of northern Europe, as well as going east into the Byzantine Empire where its Hellenistic form survived for several centuries. So when the Roman Empire collapsed Christianity did not go down with it. Through the Middle Ages and into the Reformation Christianity established itself in Western Europe, and then when Europe began to expand from the 16C and 17C onwards the great missionary movement took the gospel elsewhere, so that now that the faith has all but collapsed in Western Europe, it is in the Third World countries where it flourishes and the Church grows. It is fascinating to trace through history how the gospel has moved from culture to culture, and its ability to do that has always preserved it for the future. It is a process of what Walls calls the 'infinite translatability of the gospel' (Walls, 1996:23):

"This principle (of translatability) brings Christ to the heart of each culture where he finds acceptance; to the burning questions within that culture, to the points of reference within it by which people know themselves"

But if Jesus transcends every culture and every context there must be something supra-cultural about the gospel. The claim of scripture is surely that there is something about God revealed in Jesus Christ to which every person and culture is obliged to submit their lives. Jesus does more than just answer the questions of a particular culture: there are questions which *He* wants to ask *of them!* The gospel comes with a demand for repentance and submission to the Kingdom of God. In fact if that is not true, we are into a sea of relativism, and Jesus Christ cannot be allowed to challenge each and every culture after all with a truth which ultimately judges them.

And yet, as Walls shows, while Christianity was able to express itself in the terms of the worldviews of these different cultures, it was also able to transform them. In this way the process of contextualisation became a process of transformation of cultures, re-orientating them back to God. Such has been the historical power of the gospel. True contextualisation will do more than touch individuals with the gospel - it will reach into the heart of the culture and transform the social and political context.

But we need to accept that while we indeed have a gospel to proclaim, we do not have a monopoly on its interpretation, even if historically many western theologians have thought that we do. This is how Lesslie Newbigin puts it (Newbigin, 1989:144):

"We must start with the basic fact that there is no such thing as a pure gospel, if by that is meant something which is not embodied in a culture. The simplest verbal statement of the gospel, "Jesus is Lord" depends for its meaning on the content which that culture gives to the word "Lord". What kind of thing is "lordship" in the culture in question? The gospel always comes as the testimony of a community which if it is faithful, is trying to live out the meaning of the gospel in a certain style of life, certain ways of holding property, of maintaining law and order, of carrying on production and consumption, and so on. Every interpretation of the gospel is embodied in some cultural form. The missionary does not come with the pure gospel and then adapt it to the culture where she serves: she comes with a gospel which is already embodied in the culture"

So what we need is what I would like to call *Appropriate Contextualisation*. As always, we need to avoid two extremes: having a gospel totally irrelevant to the context, and on the other hand ending up with a gospel which only gives comfort to the context and does not challenge it. Somewhere in the middle there should be a way of being faithful both the text and to the context.

It is to some extent a truism to say that all theology is contextual. However, this is reinforced if we think, with Kwame Bediako in *Theology and Identity*, that theology is essentially an attempt at Christian self-definition. It is about expressing how we see ourselves in relation to God on the one hand and our own context on the other. Our context is vital to our own Christian identity and will to some extent shape the way we see ourselves and the way we do our theology. So Bediako's claim is that "theology is called to deal always with culturally-rooted questions" (Bediako, 1992:xv). The identity of the Early Church was forged in the context of the religious pluralisms of the first and second centuries. He wants to ask fresh questions about this tradition from his own perspective (Bediako, 1992:xii):

"It is possible to ask fresh questions of the Christian tradition of the past, questions which can in turn illuminate the task of constructing local theologies and the doing of theology in our religiously pluralistic modern world"

This dynamic dialogue with the past will then lead us into a fuller understanding of Christian self-understanding as a whole, because essentially the two contexts belong to one and the same story of God's dealings with humanity.

But we still have the problem of meaning, when something 'means' something different to people in different contexts. Is it ever possible to know the absolute meaning behind these differences? And in any case what is the meaning of 'meaning'?

## 7. The Meaning of 'Meaning'

In today's postmodern context we come up with a particular set of problems relating to meaning and truth and how truth is perceived. The relativism, pluralism and subjectivism of today's thinking challenges our convictions about the absolute truth of scriptural revelation, and we are challenged with questions such as: "how can you be so arrogant as to say that you know that you are right? No-one can know anything for certain, there is no such thing as objective truth, it all depends on your own perspective?" Are we going to carry on doggedly affirming 'true truth', as Schaeffer put it, or is there a way of thinking about truth which will resonate more with postmodern thinking without compromising its cutting edge? Some commentators such as Walter Brueggemann think that there is. But postmodernism certainly challenges us to think about what we mean by 'meaning'.

You will be considered naive today if you think that you can discover the intended meaning of any text. What, if anything, is the meaning of 'meaning'?? Any text has an author and a reader, and these are the three main elements of anything that is written. The question is, which of these three is the primary focus for determining the meaning of what is written? More recently the focus has shifted away from the intentions of the author to the response of the reader and the interests and presuppositions she brings to her reading of the text.

The difficulties of an objective interpretation are obvious. We have to accept that we do indeed bring our own background and theological traditions with us into our attempts at interpretation. We need that tradition to help us, of course - interpretation has to be done within some cultural and theological framework. But what can happen is that we come to control the process of discovering the meaning of the text by our own perspectives. We read back into the text our own concerns, which makes an objective approach impossible. Whether this *has* to be the case is open to question. Some *want* it to be so, deliberately denying the value of objectivity, and even seeing it as dangerous and oppressive. For them it is much better to say that in the act of reading something from my own perspective, the text can come alive *for me* in a dynamic way and I find myself in an open-ended process of discovery in

which, through bringing my own preunderstanding to the text, I am finding new meaning and new possibilities.

The question for contextualisation is this: do we just have local meanings and no more? Or is there meaning which transcends the context, which can be universally recognised as true? And if that is the case, does that universality provide a benchmark against which contextual theologies may be 'judged'. Surely not everything said in the name of contextual theology can be allowed to have validity, so we then have to decide what our criteria will be for deciding what is and what is not 'acceptable' contextual theology. Who decides?

## 8. Critical Realism and Critical Contextualisation

The contemporary developments in exploring the 'meaning of meaning' challenge our views about objectivity. At their extreme the postmodernists say that there is no objective truth; the only 'truth' we can have is our own. A conservative response to them has been made by Don Carson. Many, however, are not satisfied with a simple reaffirmation of the traditional evangelical approach, since it implies a naive objectivism. Maybe it is impossible to be totally objective; but many do not want to slip into total subjectivity either, by saying with the postmodernists that we only have our own perspective, and therefore there is no access to ultimate meaning. They have therefore adopted a so-called 'critical realist' approach, which recognises that there is a measure of subjectivity and perspectivalism in everything we say and therefore a certain provisionality in our truth claims; but this does not rule out the possibility of speaking truthfully. ie that what we say can have reference to objective reality. It enables us to hold on to the normativeness and authority of scripture, while at the same time setting us free to explore its potential to fire our imagination and create new meaning through our personal interaction with the text. Meaning is thrown open to new possibilities, but not every interpretation of the text will be legitimate since the text has got to be allowed to give us the criteria for its own interpretation. It does still speak to us from beyond ourselves with a truth that confronts us. We are not merely the creators of our own truth.

Hiebert invites us to engage in what he calls 'critical contextualisation'. This takes us beyond the 'translation model' and obliges us to be self-critical as well as engaging critically with the context. It is based on the critical-realist approach and envisages the development of what he calls 'metatheology', which aims to be supracultural, but which is forged out of contextual engagement, with the aim of producing a set of procedures to construct and test local theologies (see Hiebert, 1994:88ff). Hiebert suggests further that it is the insiders of a culture who ought to be engaging in this process of theological engagement, not the outsiders who only perpetuate their theological imperialism, wittingly or unwittingly.

Hiebert suggests therefore that we need to build on our systematic theology and our biblical theology with what he calls 'missiological theology' (Taylor, 2000:167). These theologies will be complementary. Missiological theology will recognise the contextuality of truth and engage with the questions and issues in each context. The question remains however about who does this theology – and indeed who does the systematic and biblical theology! And who is going to ask the critical questions? Ideally we should be self-critical in our theologising, constantly testing our perspective in relation to the way others see it. Also, ideally, the church universal should be the place in which our critical contextualisation is tested and refined. But how will this all work in practice?

With 'critical realism' and 'critical contextualisation' at least we can avoid the profoundly pessimistic conclusions of the postmodern project of deconstruction, and yet we concede that we need a critical dimension in all truth claims, and the willingness to submit them to the searchlight of other perspectives. So it is a '*critical* realism' about what it is possible to know and say. This has the ring of

honesty and certainly more humility than the strident dogmatism of fundamentalism, and is much more likely to find sympathy with postmodern ears without at the same time selling out to relativism. For further reading on this, look at Brueggemann, "Biblical Theology Appropriately Postmodern", Wright, The New Testament and the People of God, Middleton and Walsh, Truth is stranger than it used to be, and Hiebert, Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues and Grenz and Franke, Beyond Foundationalism

## 9. Contextualization and the nature of God

What we say about contextualisation has direct relation to our doctrine of God. The dynamic relation between text and context mirrors the relationship between propositional and historical revelation. In turn these dimensions are related to God's nature as both transcendent and immanent. God reveals himself both in the universal truth of his universal sovereignty and in the contextual truth of his particular historicity. The creative tension between these two polarities must be maintained. A focus on eternal truths to the detriment of context leaves us with a deist view of a God uninvolved with the world. A focus on contextual truth to the detriment of its universality leaves us with a human God whose meaning is governed by the context:

“an overemphasis on transcendence can lead to a theology that is irrelevant to the cultural context in which it seeks to speak, whereas an overemphasis on immanence can produce a theology held captive to a specific culture” (Grenz and Olson, 1992:12)

Contextualisation is most meaningful in relation to the Incarnation, which gives us a model for how God's truth is contextualised in the world.

“The Incarnation unmistakably demonstrates God's intention to make himself known from within the human situation. Because of the very nature of the gospel, we know it only as a message contextualized in culture” (Padilla, 1985: 83)

In the Word becoming flesh, he does not cease to be the eternal Son of God, the eternal Word; but because that Word is made known in a specific human and cultural form new dimensions of God's truth are revealed which were previously unknown. Jesus, as a real human being, engages with real human beings in the concrete realities of their lives. But first he spends 30 years living amongst them, listening to them, dialoguing with them and understanding their context. Then he speaks of God in terms they understand, using cultural referents that were familiar and could relate to but giving them new meaning. His words come to them as good news to their poverty, and offer them 'life in all its fullness', healing and deliverance from all forms of their oppression, new hope and new possibilities. At the same time his words challenge them to repent and submit their lives to the Kingdom of God, speaking words of judgment to those who dominated their cultural horizons, and offering a radical, upside-down way of living in the world. His gospel was no endorsement of their culture and context, but that's where it began.

Christology in fact becomes highly relevant to contextualisation, since those who want to make the context determinative for the meaning of what Christ said have a 'Christology from below', that is they begin with the human Jesus and focus on his life and words. They bring their own human context to his context, to see how he can inspire and encourage them. Those who have a 'Christology from above' tend to view His words in terms of absolutes which need no interpretation and are relevant to every context. The Incarnation broke through any division between the eternal and the human. It does not destroy the difference between them, but it does allow us to hold the two together. Similarly text and context need to be held together to be faithful to God's revelation in Christ. To relativise the text is to lose its transcendent dimension. To absolutise the text is to make it irrelevant.

Just as Christ was, Christians are ‘in the world, but not of the world’ and therefore are a ‘pilgrim people’ whose identity arises out of, and sets its sight upon, transcendent realities.

“Not only does God in Christ take people as they are: He takes them in order to transform them into what He wants them to be. Along with the indigenizing principle which makes his faith a place to feel at home, the Christian inherits the pilgrim principle, which whispers to him that he has no abiding city and warns him that to be faithful to Christ will put him out of step with his society; for that society never existed, in East or West, ancient time or modern, which could absorb the word of Christ painlessly into its system” (Walls 1996:8).

Our contextualization must follow Christ as an ‘incarnation’ both of the gospel and of our own selves. As we do that we will find both being transformed and at the same time the context itself renewed in line with God’s truth.

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