

THE CHALLENGE OF CONTEXTUALISATION, PRESENCE AND PROCLAMATION IN SHORT-TERM
CROSS-CULTURAL MISSION - PETER FRANCIS

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Introduction

The relative silence of my office and my concentrated work was suddenly broken around a year and a half ago as one of my students burst into my office with sheer delight radiating from his piecing blue eyes. Here he was, a mature aged student, now in his seventies but with all of the energy and enthusiasm of a thirty-year-old who was ready to take on the world! Malcom¹ had some months earlier been a student in my class on Christian Ministry in the Islamic Context.

Shortly after completing this unit of study Malcom had travelled to Slavikstan² where he had been involved with the ministry of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (IFES). This was not his first visit to Slavikstan. A few years earlier Malcom had been instrumental in establishing a mission organisation which had as its focus a commitment to work beside Christian university groups in a number of former Soviet dominated countries. The aim of his mission organisation has been to assist these groups in the training and encouragement of young Christians and the broadening of their vision for outreach. With this in view Malcom had now visited with this group in Slavikstan on two previous occasions, during which time he had established a number of meaningful and enduring relationships.

On his most recent trip to Slavikstan he had been given the opportunity of addressing a conference of International students on the subject of “The Comparisons between the Bible and Quran.” Malcom was thrilled that he was able to take so much of what he had recently learned about this subject and share it with a diverse group of international university students, many of whom were practicing Muslims. Indeed, some of those in attendance had served as Imams in their countries of birth. Following on from his presentation he had been inundated by requests for further conversation and deeper inquiry about the distinctives of the Christian gospel and faith.

¹ Pseudonym is used throughout to conceal the identity of the student.

² Pseudonym is used throughout to conceal the identity of the country

In consequence to the effectiveness of this particular presentation, Malcom was asked by the Slavikstanian members of the IFES to make enquiry about the possibility of his lecturer joining him on a return visit the following year. It was in response to this invitation that my wife and I agreed to travel to Slavikstan in the early part of 2016 to share in two weeks of conference with the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students.

The Challenge of Understanding the Context

The at times heady (Azumah 2009) debate surrounding the concept of contextualisation in mission has been occupying the minds and attention of missiologists for at least the last forty years. As Engle³ reminds us, the etymology of the more contemporary use of this term in respect to missions, goes back to the theological debates generated by the 1971 World Council of Churches' "Consultation on dogmatic or contextual theology" in Bossey, Switzerland. While this debate was centred upon an existential use of the word contextualization, giving preference to a more "contextual or experiential" theology over against the more traditional systematic theologies of the past, the result was that the term "contextualization" quickly made its way into the publication *Ministry in Context: The Third Mandate Programme of the Theological Education Fund*.⁴ The new location of the term went directly to the heart of one's mission praxis. How then, in Nicholls'⁵ terms do we translate "the unchanging content of the Gospel of the kingdom into verbal form meaningful to the people in the separate cultures and within their particular existential situation?"

For the past forty years the debates over appropriate forms of contextualisation, which do not give way to syncretism, have persisted. However, Song reminds us that all faithful contextualisation begins by "understanding the context of the particular people"⁶, by appreciating their culture and history as well as the issues impacting their lives. But such a process surely takes considerable time. This becomes one of the great challenges when engaging in short-term mission. Yet, as Paredes asserts, "if contextualization is one of the

³ Richard W Engle, "Contextualization in Missions: A Biblical and Theological Appraisal," *Grace Theological Journal* 4, no. 1 (1983).

⁴ Theological Education Fund, "Ministry in context: the third mandate programme of the Theological Education Fund (1970-77)," (Bromley, Kent: Theological Education Fund, 1972).

⁵ Bruce J. Nicholls, "Theological Education and Evangelization," in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, ed. J. D. Nicholls (Minneapolis: World Wide, 1975).

⁶ Minho Song, "Contextualization and Discipleship: Closing the Gap between Theory and Practice," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 30, no. 3 (2006).

parameters of a mission that is effective and faithful to the gospel, then STM [short-term mission] must consider it in its approach, preparation, objectives and goals.”⁷

Being cognisant of this I endeavoured to learn as much as I could about the context before leaving for this short-term ministry in Slavikstan. The official website of the Republic of Slavikstan provided a range of information about this country which was until 1990 a part of the former Soviet Union. Now an independent state, it is a country of approximately nine and a half million people which is controlled by a communist government, and maintains its traditionally strong ties to Russia. Culturally, the country has been influenced to some degree by Western values, but continues to exercise very tight border controls. While the government policy is one of religious freedom, the principle religion of the country is Orthodox, and the “government has imposed some restrictions on freedom of speech and religion.” The International Fellowship of Evangelical Students further notes that, “[a]ll religious activities at educational institutions are considered to be illegal, but Protestant Christians are experiencing the most pressure from the government. It is illegal in Slavikstan to read the Bible in student dormitories, although you are allowed to do so in church buildings.”

More specifically, the context into which we were entering was with a diverse group of university students, many of whom were international students who had come to study at one of ten major universities to be found in two major cities. To facilitate a greater understanding of this specific context I engaged in a number of Skype conversations with members of the IFES team, where I learned that a significant percentage of their international student cohort were Muslims who came from such diverse countries as Turkmenistan and Nigeria. In addition to this I was also able to meet personally with one of the IFES team members who was briefly visiting Australia. These conversations provided extremely helpful insight into both the wider context of the country and the more specific context in which we would be engaged.

However, a brief encounter in a taxi whilst in Jordan just two weeks before entering Slavikstan, reminded me that even our best efforts to understand the missional context in preparation for short-term mission is always limited at best. Travelling from the airport in Amman to our hotel, our driver asked where we were going after our time in Jordan. When I explained that we were headed for Slavikstan he asked, with a sense of amazement, “And you

⁷ Tito Paredes, "Short-term Missions: What Can Be Rescued, What Can Be Criticized, and the Challenge of Contextualization," *Journal of Latin American Theology* 2, no. 2 (2007).

are taking your wife?” His sense of incredulity peaked my interest. But, before I could frame a response he went on to inform me that, “the women in Slavikstan are very beautiful.” He then suggested that “taking your wife to Slavikstan was like taking your own sandwich to a fancy restaurant!” Further research before entering the country revealed that human trafficking and the sex trade were major problems within this country.⁸ This information would later prove to be extremely useful as my wife engaged with a variety of young women who felt that in their culture their primary worth was only to be found in their outward appearance.

This experience reminded me of the importance of continually keeping our ears and our eyes open when moving into a new short-term missional context, so that, like the Apostle Paul in Acts 17, we might be able to accurately observe and discern the cultural norms and drivers which shape the culture into which we are moving. Yet, like the Apostle Paul, we also were challenged about how, in a relatively short space of time we might through both presence and proclamation, share the life-transforming message of Jesus.

The Challenge of Presence

Kimberley Samuel develops a strong case for the connection between presence and proclamation as the church prays and becomes an integral part of the answer to that prayer that Jesus taught his disciples to pray, “Thy kingdom come.” She posits that, “the phrase ‘Thy kingdom come’ is not just the words of a prayer; it is a reality we live while we pray toward that end.”⁹ Indeed, I would contend that it is no coincidence that long before Jesus gave his disciples what we refer to as the Great Commission¹⁰, he taught his disciples to pray what we might call the Great Petition, “Thy kingdom come.”¹¹ Without prayer, our attempts to see the advancement of the kingdom of God are powerless. As we survey the Acts of the Apostles we might note that before just about every major advancement of the gospel there was a concerted focus on prayer.¹² Yet, prayer that has truly tapped into the missional heart of God, inevitably compels us to not only seek to understand the disparate contexts of

⁸ “The Psychology of Conversion,” in *Handbook of Religious Conversion*, ed. H Newton Malony and Samuel Southard (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1992).

⁹ Kimberly Samuel, “The Community of Mission: The Church,” in *Theology and Practice of Mission: God, The Church and the Nations*, ed. Bruce Riley Ashford (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2011).

¹⁰ Matthew 28:18-20

¹¹ Matthew 6:10

¹² Before the outpouring of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost, the disciples “all joined constantly together in prayer” (Acts 1:14). Before Peter was lead to take the message of the gospel to the Roman centurion, Cornelius, he was found up on a roof in Joppa praying (Acts 10:9ff). Before the church in Antioch sent out Saul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey, we read that the leaders of the church leaders were “worshipping the Lord and fasting” (Acts 13:2) and by clear implication were praying.

people's lives but to meaningfully engage with them in the existential realities of life, so that we may in turn meaningfully share the good news of the gospel with them. Stott and Wright remind us that,

proclamation of the gospel cannot be seen as an activity in isolation. Something precedes it and something follows it. What precedes it may justly be called "presence" and what follows it "persuasion."¹³

While on the one hand the concept of "presence" may be taken to refer to the concept of proximity, that is the sharing of location and circumstances of the lives of those we are seeking to minister to, true "presence" demands so much more. It demands a willingness, as far as possible and as far as is permissible, for us to enter into the lives of those with whom we are seeking to share the good news.

During our two weeks in Slavikstan we shared in two consecutive residential conferences which were held in a retreat centre. The retreat centre, which we understood was designed to house fifty-five guests, was packed each week with roughly equal numbers of men and women. The sleeping arrangements, by Western standards, were fairly rudimentary with many of the attendees sleeping on fold-away beds. Given the heavy snow and the daytime temperatures of minus 18 degrees, few ventured outside during the whole time, while the narrow stair cases and relatively small communal areas were filled with a constant press of humanity. The sharing of meals was also a cosy affair with a relatively spartan diet. One upside of this, according to my wife, was that we both lost about 6 kilograms each during our stay. But, added to these challenges was the somewhat less than reliable internal heating and hot water supply. Of particular challenge to my wife was the one shower and toilet combination which was to service the needs of around 26 women.

In establishing our "presence" amongst these cohorts of University students it was imperative for us to not only share in their immediate circumstances, but to do so with a grace which would adorn the gospel of grace which we had come to share.¹⁴ The demonstration of this grace was sorely tested when a number of the students would regularly stay up until around 3 am listening to music and playing pool in the small communal area right outside of the tiny room in which we attempted to sleep.

However, a genuine desire to enter into the lives of the students amongst whom we had the privilege of ministry also demanded that we engage in open and honest conversation with

¹³ John Stott and Christopher J.H. Wright, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 2015).

¹⁴ Titus 2:10b.

them. Most of the students were keen to talk with us for a variety of reasons, not the least of which was their desire to hear and learn more of the English language. Thus, many hours were spent in small group conversations, usually with one or two more linguistically proficient students volunteering to act as interpreters. But, these conversations proved to be essential in both building relationships and learning about and understanding the reality of the world they inhabited. Whilst a multitude of questions were fielded about our personal lives and relationship, we were also keen to demonstrate a genuine interest in their lives and the worldviews which informed their values and choices in life. Kraft¹⁵ reminds us that effective communication is a two-way street, with those that we seek to communicate with being active participants, who ultimately will process our message in accordance with their needs, interests and values.

One of the significant challenges in any short term mission is the giving of oneself, our time and energy, even in the face of personal weariness, to enter into those deeper conversations which develop relational bridges and provide greater insight and understanding of the needs, interests and values of those amongst whom we minister. It is at this point that we can at least begin to enter into the cultural context of those we seek to serve. However, Rodewald insists that, “when we serve in another cultural context without understanding those to whom we witness, we run a high risk of causing unintended consequences.”¹⁶ For example at one point I was seeking to illustrate the concept of repentance by suggesting that it was like driving down the road, only to discover that you were going the wrong way. I described in animated detail the common process of drawing over to the curb, turning on the indicators and then doing a U-turn. That all seemed fine to me, until I discovered that most of the students cannot afford to drive and that my reference to driving could have been easily construed as indicating that becoming a Christian was a means to affluence! Even given our intentional commitment to a deeper sense of “presence” we found that, given the brevity of time with each of the two cohorts who attended the week-long conferences, we were regularly reminded of our short-comings in truly understanding and appreciating the cultural differences, many of which were exacerbated by the broad and culturally diverse backgrounds that were represented within this international student body. So how might I effectively share the message of the gospel in a way which might be both culturally sensitive and clearly understood?

¹⁵ Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross Cultural Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005).

¹⁶ Mike Rodewald, “Short-term Mission: A Reflection,” *Missio apostolica* 18, no. 1 (2010).

The Challenge of Proclamation

Paragraph 4 of the Lausanne Covenant, entitled “The Nature of Evangelism” states that,

To evangelize is to spread the good news that Jesus Christ died for our sins and was raised from the dead according to the Scriptures, and that as the reigning Lord he now offers the forgiveness of sins and the liberating gift of the Spirit to all who repent and believe. Our Christian *presence* in the world is indispensable to evangelism, and so is that kind of dialogue whose purpose is to listen sensitively in order to understand. But evangelism itself is the *proclamation* of the historical, biblical Christ as Savior and Lord, with a view to persuading people to come to him personally and so be reconciled to God.¹⁷ (emphasis added)

Before leaving for Slavikstan I had spent considerable time in prayer and preparation regarding the way in which I might seek to share or proclaim the message of the gospel. Having been informed that there would be a sizable proportion of Muslims amongst the delegates to these conferences, I decided that I would work from the story of Abraham, the man of faith, who first responded to God’s call and promise and went out from Ur of the Chaldeans to the land that God would later show him.¹⁸ The reason for this choice is that this story is celebrated by Christians, Jews and Muslims alike. In one sense I was attempting, like Paul in his gospeling of the members of the Areopagus in Acts 17, to find a point of common agreement from which to present the message of the gospel. Here Paul seized upon their reverence of the “unknown god” and used this as a platform for presenting the truth about “the God who made the world and everything in it.”¹⁹ Then, having described him as the one who gives to all people life and breath and everything else, the great apostle goes on to take their very own texts, excerpts from two of their pagan poets who have written about the god Zeus, and shows how these assertions about Zeus, are actually statements which perfectly define the nature of God and our intended relationship with him.

At the start of the first session I opened my English copy of the Quran and proceeded to explain that the patriarch Abraham or Ibrahim is mentioned a total of 98 times throughout the Quran. Reading first from Surah 2:124-260 I sought to establish the commonality of our respect for this great man of faith. However, as we continued to trace the story of his faith and the challenges that came to that faith, we finally came to the story of Abraham’s ultimate challenge of faith, when God commanded him to offer up his son as a sacrifice. From Surah 37:99-113 we were able to trace the story which is celebrated by Muslims each year in the three-day feast of Kurban Bayram. We noted that while the Quran does not mention the

¹⁷ John Stott, "LOP 3 - The Lausanne Covenant: An Exposition and Commentary," <https://www.lausanne.org/content/lop/lop-3#4>.

¹⁸ Genesis 12:1-7

¹⁹ Acts 17:24

child's name in respect to this incident, Muslim tradition holds that it was Ishmael that was offered, as opposed to Isaac as indicated in Genesis 22. Notwithstanding, we were able to press ahead with the fundamentals of the story demonstrating that just as Abraham had offered that prophetic word, "God himself will provide the lamb,"²⁰ which in the grace of God was able to become his son's substitute offering, so too, God has provided yet another substitute lamb for each one of us. This lamb is none other than the one that John the Baptist described as "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."²¹

At the end of each session, the students were invited to direct their comments and questions which were for the main part written in Russian and then translated into English for me to reflect upon. Each night I found myself being pressed to wait upon the Spirit of God for wisdom and direction in responding to the plethora of questions which arose. As Sunquist rightly observes, when addressing the place of the Holy Spirit in Mission, "our doctrine of the Holy Spirit requires that we wait, listen, and respond to the Spirit's prompting."²² The fact that I was conversant with not only the biblical text but also the Quran seemed to have established considerable credibility to my presentation of the message. Indeed, a number of students were keen to look at the English translation of the Quran, with one Muslim student requesting the opportunity of keeping it overnight, so she could study it more closely.

As I drew in on the message of the substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus towards the end of the week, I was delighted to find that seven of the students had decided to commit their lives in faith to Jesus Christ. Others also indicated their desire to continue investigating this message.

So what does the *proclamation* of the historical, biblical Christ as Saviour and Lord look like? Even as we read through the book of Acts we find that there were numerous ways in which the message was crafted to speak effectively into the context of the hearers. But in essence there appears to be at least four key elements which define the apostle's gospel. Whilst the order of these elements in their presentation is not always the same, the essential core of each element is nearly always present. The first regular feature of their gospel proclamation or presentation goes to our need to be made right with God. This key element can be observed whether we are considering Peter's Pentecost Day sermon in Acts 2, or his gospelling of the household of Cornelius in Acts 10, or even Paul's message to the Greek philosophers at the Areopagus in Acts 17.²³ Second to this is the true identity of Jesus, the

²⁰ Genesis 22:8

²¹ John 1:29

²² Scott W. Sunquist, *Understanding Christian Mission: Participation in Suffering and Glory* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013).

²³ Acts 2:23,38; 10:34,35; 17:23,30,31.

Christ. Time and again we see the apostles labouring the fact that Jesus is not only the Lord of all, but the Christ, the Holy One of God who was sent to save. The third key element of their presentations was centred on the reality of Jesus' death, burial and resurrection.²⁴ Indeed, in the Apostle Paul's summation of the gospel in Acts 15:3-4, he clearly identifies these facts as being at the essential heart of the gospel. In Paul's mind, the rejection of any one of these facts destroys the very foundation of the gospel. But, in each gospel presentation we also observe a fourth element which is a deliberate call for an appropriate response of repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.²⁵ Interestingly, there are also occasions when the apostles are careful to introduce yet another important element to their message, and that is the certainty of coming judgement. This might be particularly noted in Peter's address to the household of Cornelius in Acts 10:42 and Paul's message to the Athenians in Acts 17:31. In presenting the gospel message to these International students, many of whom were Muslims, it proved to be important to lock into the concept of the certainty of coming judgement, as this is a concept which is deeply embedded in the Muslim conscience.²⁶ Many of the Muslim students were surprised to hear that the Christian gospel contains such a concept while also offering hope and certainty in the face of such a prospect.

Conclusion

In reflecting on this recent short-term ministry exercise, I was alerted to a number of critical challenges which centred around our understanding and approach to contextualisation, presence and proclamation when engaging in short-term ministry. While many who are preparing for longer term cross-cultural mission are regularly encouraged to work carefully through these issues before embarking on their mission enterprise, the same challenges must be acknowledged and addressed by those committing to short-term mission. Indeed, the potential for inflicting more harm than good on the cause of the gospel is great if these issues are not carefully and prayerfully processed. Thus, it is my conclusion that those seeking to engage in such ministry need to approach the task with great diligence, being careful to learn as much as they can about the contexts into which they are planning to minister. Yet, beyond such diligence in preparation, there is also a great need for the short-term missionary to recognise the importance of ongoing observation and learning even as they press into the

²⁴ Acts 2:23,24; 10:39,40; 17:31.

²⁵ Acts 2:38; 10:48; 17:30.

²⁶ Some fairly lengthy accounts on the future resurrection and judgment can be found in Surahs 81:1-19; 82:4-21; 84:1-25.

context. A humble and flexible spirit will enable them to be alert to misconceptions which they may have developed before entering into the context. Such a spirit will also ensure their willingness to alter and recalibrate their approach given their growing knowledge and awareness of the needs, interests and values of those amongst whom they are ministering. Yet, while flexibility and humility are essential in responding to one's growing understanding of the missional context, the short-term missionaries must equally maintain their clarity about the fundamentals of the gospel message which ultimately they are seeking to proclaim.