

Contextualization and Women in the Church

By Doug Matacio

At their 2003 Spring Meeting Seventh-day Adventist General Conference leaders voted a document that emphasizes the need to contextualize the age-old gospel to “position the church for the future.” The document recognizes that the Church “is far behind in developing, producing, and teaching the use of contextualized material,” and challenges the world divisions and Religious Study Centers to act.¹

The time has come for clear thinking and resolute action. Darrell L. Whiteman, editor for many years of *Missiology*, offers a valuable insight into the task at hand:

Contextualization attempts to communicate the gospel in word and deed and to establish the church in ways that make sense to people within their local cultural [and geographical/historical] context, presenting Christianity in such a way that it meets people’s deepest needs and penetrates their worldview, thus allowing them to follow Christ and remain within their own culture.²

When the message is contextualized people understand it in their own language. If other cultural systems, such as leadership style, decision making, and gender relations, do not have hearers’ own vocabulary and rules of “grammar” as well, hearers may remain clueless.

Contextualization follows the example of God, Jesus, and Paul, who all contextualized, and offers an essential tool for the Holy Spirit to help the Church accomplish its mission. It is a need within the Church’s leadership as well as its message.

God’s Everlasting Covenant

The source of the Church’s mission is the everlasting covenant between God and his people, which is a primary biblical example of contextualization as the means of mission. The covenant has this importance because in all its contextualized forms, or “renewals,” it was the means by which God himself chose to accomplish his mission. He entered our context by becoming one of us, and by doing so saved us.

“I will be your God; and because of my plan of salvation, you shall be my people forever if you will trust me,” runs God’s eternal covenant. Without it, there would be no good news of salvation to proclaim. God first presented it to Adam and Eve. Then in Bible times he renewed it in five distinctive historical contexts, which we call the Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Davidic covenants, as well as the new covenant ratified by Christ’s blood.

In each instance, the same message was repeated, but it was contextualized to fit differing historical circumstances. Each time there was (1) a recitation of God’s mighty acts, (2) a word from God concern-

ing relationship commands, (3) promises, then (4) a response from God's people through worship and sacrifices, and (5) a physical sign or symbol of the covenant.³ Each sign fit the local historical context but continues today. As a result, the contextualized manifestations of God's eternal covenant displayed profound continuity of essential content amid changes due to historical and cultural contextual factors.

A study of the Greek word for "new" as in "new covenant" sheds further light on God's contextualization. *Neos* refers to the kind of radical discontinuity we associate with the English concept of "new"; there is a complete break with the past. *Kainos*, on the other hand, refers to "continuity in the midst of change."

In John 13:34, Jesus issued a "new" (*kainos*) commandment to love one another. But what was "new" about it? Wasn't it a repetition of the Old Testament command to love one's neighbor? Jesus spoke of the new dimension to loving demonstrated by his own example. The New Testament, in every case except one, refers to the new covenant as a *kainos* covenant: the same everlasting covenant ratified by the blood of Christ.⁴

God's ongoing program of contextualization is the work of the Holy Spirit. Those who live "in accordance with the Spirit" (Rom. 8:5) will gain insight into God's truth for a particular context today. "The Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things, and will remind you of everything I have said to you" (John 14:26).

Notice three points in this process of contextualization: (1) new things will be taught to us that Jesus did not mention while on earth, things that would come up in later contexts; (2) these new things will result from remembering what Jesus had said and applying it to the new contexts; and (3) the Holy Spirit will superintend the process.

John 16:12-13 repeats the same concept: "I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth." Charles Van Engen has summarized this point well, "Again [in fresh contexts] there is clarity of the truth; it is the truth of Jesus Christ, and it will not be a *neos* truth. It will be a *kainos* truth, which is both continuous with previous revelation and discontinuous in its radical contextualization."⁵

Jesus and the Sermon on the Mount

Matthew 5:17-48 shows us how Jesus contextualized. The first-century context was not the same as that of Moses' law giving. By then, Jesus existed on earth in the flesh, and the people of God were deeply rooted

Jews rather than wandering Israelites. So Jesus contextualized: "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'Do not murder,' and whoever murders will be answerable in the judgment. But I say to you that anyone who is angry at his brother will be answerable in the judgment" (Matt. 5:21-22).

The Sermon on the Mount shows that Jesus expected Christians to keep the whole law. But the way he expected them to do so was different from those of traditionalists (Matt. 5:17-21). Jesus' contextualization actually made the law more rigorous than before. Jesus internalized the law, focusing on inner motives. "By changing the focus of the law, he transformed it. In the language of verse 17, he 'fulfilled' the law."⁶

Jesus showed that even the ceremonial laws had meaning many centuries after they were first given, but he referred to only a few. He left it up to individual Christians and communities in their historical and cultural contexts to work out applications under the contextualizing guidance of the Holy Spirit (the John 16:12-13 principle again).

Sometimes Jesus performed a radical contextualization, as in the following example, which concerned gender relations: "It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must [simply] give her a certificate of divorce. But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to commit adultery, and anyone who marries a woman so divorced commits adultery'" (Matt. 5:31-32).

Still there was continuity amid change.

Contextualization by the Apostle Paul

For the Apostle Paul, contextualization was a toolbox that enabled him in the power of the Spirit to accomplish his mission. We must assume that 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 was a public announcement that he never went anywhere or did any evangelizing without those tools.

Changing metaphors, Paul was a slave to the contextualization process, making sure that wherever he went and whatever he did in the name of Christ he made himself "a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible" (1 Cor. 9:19). When working with Jews, he followed their customs to prevent creation of needless barriers to acceptance of the gospel, which itself was a formidable barrier that struck at the heart of their worldview. Paul's approach didn't



always work (see Acts 21:20-36), but he consistently applied the principle.

Paul also contextualized when ministering among Gentiles. Insisting that they did not need to become Jews first in order to be saved, he went so far as to reject the Old Testament rite of circumcision as a sign of God's covenant with his people. But he transformed it (like Jesus with the Mosaic law in the Sermon on the

bands without losing their reputations. But in classical Greek and Hellenistic culture only the *hetairai*, intelligent, upper-class prostitutes similar to modern-day geisha girls, could approach, converse with, and otherwise consort with men at social gatherings. Wives, for the most part, stayed home. Even at home dinner parties, they stayed out of sight.⁷

These differences must be kept in mind when

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Mount) in the context of the New Covenant: Circumcision became not just a cutting of male fore-skins; it represented the removal of both male and female hearts, thus bringing an end to lives of sin and preparing believers for new lives in Christ.

For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have this fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority. In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of your sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ. In baptism you were buried with him and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. (Col. 2:9-12)

Women in the Context of the Early Church

Because Paul contextualized to further his mission, contextualization becomes an important factor for understanding his counsel on women's involvement in the church, as given in passages like 1 Corinthians 14:33-35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-15.

It is useful to understand the context of Paul's practical advice in terms of the macrocontext and the microcontext. By macrocontext, I mean the historical and sociocultural backgrounds of the three major world influences in New Testament times: Jewish, Hellenistic Greek, and Roman. Microcontext refers to the unique local factors like heresy, legalistic false teachers, and disorderly worship.

Looking at the macrocontext of Paul's counsels on women in ministry, one should understand that the expected behavior of women was different in Greek and Roman societies. In Rome, women freely participated in public social events, conversing with men not their hus-

bands without losing their reputations. But in classical Greek and Hellenistic culture only the *hetairai*, intelligent, upper-class prostitutes similar to modern-day geisha girls, could approach, converse with, and otherwise consort with men at social gatherings. Wives, for the most part, stayed home. Even at home dinner parties, they stayed out of sight.⁷

reading Paul's letters to Greek Hellenistic churches in Corinth (1 Cor. 14:34-35) and Ephesus (1 Tim. 2:11-15), in which he advised women to remain silent in church. Paul's advice was a matter of crucial importance. For the sake of the church's mission, he could not allow inquirers to get any ideas that Christian women of Corinth and Ephesus might be *hetairai*.

A closer look at the passage in 1 Corinthians gives the macrocontextual reason for Paul's counsel. After instructing women to be silent in the churches, "as in all the congregations of the saints" (which I interpret as Hellenistic churches), he told them to ask their own husband at home if they wanted to inquire about something. Then Paul gives his macrocontextual reason: "For it is disgraceful (NIV) (shameful, NRSV) for a woman to speak in the church. The Greek word used here is *aischron*, which could refer to physical ugliness, but "was most commonly used in a moral sense . . . for something considered shameful or base."⁸ Cognate words are *aischrosemnia*, "obscenity"; *aischrotes*, "filthy conduct," specifically, fellatio in Aristophanes; and *aischroourgeo*, "to act unseemly" with a connotation of masturbation.⁹

New Testament scholar Terence Paige in a groundbreaking article has recently concluded that the "shameful speech" in 1 Corinthians 14 "was not sacral speech at all; it was ordinary conversation with men who were not relatives." The Greek word *aischron* helps us to understand the macrocontextual reason that Paul told the women in Corinth not to speak in church: Paige concludes, "Women's leadership was not at issue; rather, it was modesty and honorable behavior."¹⁰

A microcontextual reason for the ban on women speaking is seen in the context of 1 Corinthians 14:33-35, where the topic is order in public services. After a long discussion on the dangers of disorderly speaking in tongues, Paul states, "For God is not a God of disorder but of peace." Note that mission outreach is

the reason for allowing prophesying but disallowing speaking in tongues without a translator.

Paul says that if everyone speaks in tongues an “unbeliever” might say “you are out of your mind” (1 Cor. 14:23). But an unbeliever at a service that includes prophesying might well be converted (1 Cor 14:24–25). Then he urges women to remain silent. In the local context, women had evidently been interrupting the worship service. Paul was pleading for orderly reverence instead of disorderly bedlam.

In contrast, in letters to the church in Philippi, a Roman colony (Acts 16:12), and to the church in Rome itself Paul said nothing about women not speaking in church. With our knowledge of Roman culture it is not surprising that Paul’s first encounter in Philippi was in fact with a group of women by the river. They interacted openly with him and his companions (v. 13).

Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth, spoke up and said, “If you consider me a believer in the Lord, come and stay at my house” (v. 15). We see an openness in Roman culture that would not have been likely even in Hellenistic society, which was somewhat more liberal than that of ancient Athens.

The letter to the Romans provides additional evidence to support the thesis that Paul was fully aware of the differences between Greek and Roman culture. In the epistle to the Romans, Paul praises the gifted, hard-working ministry of Phoebe (16:1), Prisca (16:3), Mary (16:6), and Junia (16:7). Paul seemed to go out of his way to encourage women who were active in Christian ministry.

In Philippians 4:2–3, Paul speaks of two women, Euodia and Syntyche, who had “co-operated vigorously at his side in the cause of the gospel.” These women, perhaps among those he had first met “down by the river,” had worked with him openly, and his concern was that they not be lost to gospel ministry due to a personality conflict.

In contrast, Paul mentions women mainly in the context of simple greetings in his letters to the Hellenistic churches. Those named are Priscilla, along with her husband (1 Cor 19:19; 2 Tim. 4:19); and Nympha, the host of a house church, who was the recipient of Paul’s greetings (Col. 4:15). The contrast is clear. The Roman letters commended women for working in ministry; the Hellenistic letters only convey greetings to or from women.

In 1 Timothy, Paul addresses a local situation in Ephesus, where a grave danger existed of women leading men into false doctrine, just as Eve had led Adam into sin. Paul has this microcontextual factor in mind as well as the macrocontextual factor that prompted his

command to the women in Corinth: Women were not to speak to or with men in public in Hellenistic churches because non-Christians in attendance might think they were sexually available. Therefore, the Ephesians were not to conduct their worship services in a way that brought public reproach to the church and its mission—and, by extension, its head, Jesus Christ.

A Call for Action

God’s covenant relation with his people, Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, and Paul’s practice of being all things to all people are models for us to contextualize our message and patterns of leadership. Contextualization aligns itself with the traditional Adventist concept of “present truth” quite well. Toward that goal, the Church needs to train leaders to be flexible and to lead in many cultural and strategic contexts. Eschewing ethnocentrism, we will not force others to use our tools, but will applaud one another as we develop tools appropriate to the cultural environment in which we work. We might also recognize that the concept of women as elders and pastors is an acceptable form of contextualized theology and mission practice.

Notes and References

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2. “Contextualization: The Theory, the Gap, the Challenge,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 21:1 (Jan. 1997): 2.
3. I am indebted to Charles Van Engen, my former professor of theology of mission, Fuller School of World Mission, for many of the insights on covenant, mission, and contextualization. Please see his chapter, “The New Covenant: Knowing God in Context,” in *The Word Among Us: Contextualizing Theology for Mission Today*, edited by Dean S. Gilliland (Dallas: Word, 1989), 74–100.
4. *Ibid.*, 86–87.
5. *Ibid.*, 91.
6. Robert K. McIver, *The Four Faces of Jesus* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press, 2000), 20.
7. See Sue Blundell, *Women in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 139.
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