Contextualization for Social Change

David D. Reedy

Omega Graduate School

10/17/2024

Professor

Dr. David Ward

1. Select One (1) Core Essential Element from the Syllabus Outline:

a. Create a 350-word original discussion paper (with cited sources) during the week

of the residency. Be prepared to discuss and engage with other students during

the live sessions. Post this document in DIAL.

b. Professor will check for quality of content and word-count requirements. Grade

assigned will be Credit or No Credit (CR/NC).

God’s people are called in Matthew 28 to the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to all the world. At the heart of this commandment and authorization is communication. For two thousand years, Christians have communicated the Gospel in a multitude of languages and cultures seeking to faithfully communicate the truths revealed by God in His holy Word in terms that can be understood by the receivers. “Contextualization adapts a transformational message to a cultural context so that its message can be understood and received by a social group in order to change the world through spiritual and positive social change.” (Brucker, et al., p.20) While I would argue this definition is too focused on the concerns of this world and also applies to the communication of the Gospel through which the Holy Spirit creates saving faith that forgives sin, the heart of the definition is about communication that is faithful to Christian revelation and allows for the power of the Gospel to transform lives.

Sometimes the world pushes back when Christians communicate the Gospel. There is a tension between faithfulness to God’s revelation and being “…meaningful to respondents in their respective cultural and existential contexts.” (Brucker et al., p. 21) As a pastor, proclaiming the truth of God into specific and unique human lives is a constant aspect of ministry. People have their own strongly held beliefs, often influenced by and reflective of wider cultural values. The reality of this fallen world is that many cultural values do not reflect the glory of God nor our creation in His image, but rather reflect the fallen nature of humanity into sin. There is often pressure put on the pastor, and any Christian seeking to communicate the Gospel, to compromise on issues for pragmatic reasons. Jobs, relationships, friendship can all be tangled up in the pressure to compromise, for at the heart of communication is relationship. Bruker warns about the danger of such compromise which can be a conscious decision or a subconscious erosion of belief and practice. He warns that the temptation is there to not just proclaim in an understandable way, but to blend in elements of the dominant culture that causes “Christianity to lose it distinctiveness.” (p. 23)

Where this can become most challenging is in the middle areas between black and white. Scripture has many clear teachings regarding many aspects speaking to how human beings should live their lives and live their lives together. But sometimes, Scripture is silent, or at least not clear. There are a good many issues that can arise which may be problematic and need addressing to which Scripture does not directly speak. In the Lutheran tradition we call these adiaphora or matters where practice is neither forbidden nor commanded. That is not to say they may not have an ethical component nor may not be related to some foundational Christian value. It merely recognizes that in some things, the decisions are left up to us. It is here Christian engagement must be more diligent and reflective than on matters that are commanded and forbidden. The latter are in some way easier, as they are made clearer for us. But in matters that arise which are not directly addressed in Scripture, diligence is required. I have often taught the following: where God has commanded: faithfulness; where God has not commanded: freedom with responsibility. The Lutheran approach in the Formula of Concord (a confessional document) recognizes a certain degree of freedom within the church to create worship practices that are not commanded if they are not forbidden and create good order that supports the proclamation of the Gospel. (McCain, p. 671) Extending the logic, one can recognize that questions of human practice arise outside of the worship setting, and the same principle applied above continues to be valuable. In particular the following is useful. “…all frivolity and offense should be avoided in this matter. Special care should be taken to exercise patience toward the weak in faith.” (p. 671) Not all who Christians seek to communicate to are of the faith, but the point is taken that as we engage social issues, we must be mindful and diligent to take into account how Christianity itself is being described, if we are being responsible to the overall mission of the Gospel, and if we are engaging in a way that is productive for God’s desires for human life and society. For instance, my main research focus in this class will be the church’s approach to transgender issues. At this writing, I am only starting to formulate some ideas, which I will not introduce here beyond saying that this is a delicate issue that not only relates to God’s design for human life, but also is deeply personal to a good many Christians who either experience this themselves or have friends and family members who so identify. This is a delicate issue, a sensitive issue, one that must be approached with diligence to remain faithful to God’s truth while also being faithful to God’s call to love.

WORKS CITED

Bruckner, L., Ward, D., & Reichard, J. (2015). *PHI 923 Contextualization for social change supplemental study guide*. Retrieved October 15, 2024, from <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1HQq_7_ckigs1UGm_fB0BzrCuZd9FGiTe/view?usp=sharing&usp=embed_facebook>

McCain, P. (Ed.). (2005). The formula of concord epitome. In *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions* (2nd ed.). Concordia Publishing House.