

REDEEMER

R E P O R T

SUMMER 2006

CONTEXTUALIZATION VS. THE ORDINARY MEANS OF GRACE

BY: KATHY KELLER

Many of you reading this article may be unaware of the issues surrounding the subjects mentioned in the title. Never mind, it affects you anyway, so read on!

As the staff member at Redeemer charged with overseeing our public communication so that it is clear, understandable, and free of the pious-babble phrases that afflict much Christian-speak, I have followed with increasing bemusement (and sometimes ire) the hot and heavy debates over contextualization. For those in need of a definition, let me give you two: contextualization is either a) communicating the gospel in a

manner able to be understood by the culture to which you are speaking; or b) selling out Christian truth by accommodating the prevailing culture in ways which compromise the message.

In actuality, it can be either. I am probably not the only person who remembers the painful attempts of churches in the sixties and seventies to be “relevant,” the addition of bongo drums, Hawaiian shirts, and extra hair playing a large part. Contextualization is not the same as relevance, but it can partake of the same silliness—pasting on the outward trappings of a particular culture,

especially as regards music, dress, language and so on.

Or, contextualization can be a thoughtful attempt to analyze the inevitable cultural accretions that accompany any communication, and to use the ones which best communicate the truth of the Gospel without distortion or violation. The purpose of this is to gain acceptance and thereby a hearing for the Gospel message, a worthy goal.

The debate surrounding contextualization, which is particularly hot when church planting or church renewal is under discussion, centers on whether it is ever possible to choose new ways of commu-

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WORLD VISION AIDS EXPERIENCE

BY: MICHEAL O'NEILL

I had never had an HIV test before, but I found myself sitting in the waiting room of a small, sparsely furnished clinic waiting for my results. There was only one other person in the waiting room. She had just received the results of her HIV test. Although it was an intensely personal thing, I couldn't help looking at her hands . . . and I saw her results. She was HIV positive. I struggled with the guilt of violating her privacy and wanting to say something, anything, comforting. For once,

words completely escaped me. I couldn't manage a word, because I sat on my bench terrified I might also be HIV positive.

Before I knew it, I was directed to a window in the corner of the waiting room. I reached out for my results, and the young man quietly stamped the back of my hand with a large red stamp. My stamp was “negative.” I was HIV negative. Actually, I wasn't negative, “Beatrice” was.

I first met “Beatrice” at an exhibit called *The AIDS*

Experience. Designed and created by World Vision, one of HFNY's affiliates, the exhibit was a powerful presentation of the impact of HIV and AIDS in Sub Saharan Africa. It was also a window into the life of a young 9 year-old girl named “Beatrice.” The exhibit allowed a visitor to assume the identity of one of four children and, while wearing an MP3 player, walk through the life of one of them. I became Beatrice and walked through her life and a replica of an African vil-

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lage in the middle of Grand Central Terminal.

Beatrice was orphaned by AIDS at the age of seven when AIDS claimed her mother's life. Her aunt had just died after giving birth to a beautiful little girl named Miriam. When no one offered to care for the newborn, Beatrice became both caregiver and provider to baby Miriam. I struggled to comprehend how such a young child could possibly feed and care for a newborn.

Miraculously, both Beatrice and Miriam survived for two years. Suffering from malnutrition and disease, Beatrice and Miriam were approached by a World Vision staff member who offered food, clothing, medical care and compassion, love and a hug.

Tears continually flowed as I made my way through the exhibit, and looked into the eyes of Beatrice and Miriam. I have two girls. They are three and two years-of-age. I couldn't begin to imagine them forced to

survive without my wife or me. I couldn't imagine them so malnourished and in desperate need of medical care. And I couldn't help but face the reality that Beatrice represented millions of children suffering in Sub-Saharan Africa and throughout the world.

My family sponsors a little girl through World Vision, and ironically, her name is Beatrice. Each month we make a donation that helps provide Beatrice with food, clothing, education and an opportunity to learn more about Jesus. We are thousands of miles – and a world apart – from one another, but we, as a family, have the ability to make a difference.

The world has now been living with HIV and AIDS for 25 years. The devastation of the AIDS pandemic has killed and orphaned millions of men, women and children. Hope for New York has, since its inception 14 years ago, been connecting volunteers to serve those living with HIV and

AIDS. HFNY volunteers prepare, serve and share dinner at a local AIDS hospice three times a month. Recently, many of Redeemer's children and youth volunteered to assemble approximately 2,000 bracelets that were distributed to those who walked through *The AIDS Experience* in Grand Central.

As I saw the HIV negative stamp on the back of my hand, I couldn't help but realize that Beatrice was negative despite overwhelming odds. Yet she still faced extreme poverty – a poverty that claims the life of a child every three seconds . . . I walked out of the clinic and cried. I still cry when I think of Beatrice. But I am grateful she and Miriam are receiving care from one of the many projects sponsored by World Vision.

If you would like to learn more about volunteering locally for World Vision, the hospice to which I refer, or at any of HFNY's 35+ affiliates, contact volunteer@hfny.org

INTERARTS FELLOWSHIP

Artists...save the date! On Friday, September 15, Tim Keller will be the featured speaker for the monthly InterArts Fellowship. The Lamb's Ballroom, 130 W 44th St., 7:00 p.m.

Watch the Arts Ministries webpage (www.faithandwork.org/arts), Arts e-Newsletter (sign up on the webpage), and Redeemer Bulletin Board for more information on this event, and others including:

- The "In Dialogue" series of play readings and discussions
- Events hosted by the new Dancers' Vocational Group
- The fall art exhibition and more!

SUMMER PREACHING

As most of you know, Tim Keller has been preaching through the Gospel of Mark this past year. For those who enjoy the 'previews of coming attractions' at the movies we thought you would like to know the plans for preaching this summer. Tim typically takes several weeks of study leave to prepare for the fall prior to a few weeks of vacation. This summer while Tim is away John Lin and David Bisgrove will continue preaching through Mark's Gospel. The Fellowship Group material will continue to be made available throughout the summer. If you haven't heard John or David, you are in for a surprise and a treat.

REDEEMER REPORT

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nication that do not somehow compromise the revealed truth of the Bible, which we all agree is inviolate. Those who object to contextualization in any form claim that the methods and message of many of today's churches have been compromised in attempting to address contemporary sensibilities. Instead of finding new methods or expressions to communicate the gospel to new times and settings, we should simply preach the Word of God, administer the sacraments, and pray faithfully. That's it. Use the "ordinary means of grace" and nothing else. Efforts to make new cultural connections can only result in compromising the truth.

Since there definitely are churches (and entire denominations) that are clearly compromising the gospel by over-adapting to the cultural context, this is a matter of legitimate concern. But if we are going to oppose this drift intelligently, we must be aware of the fact that it is just as possible to compromise the truth of the gospel by failing to think through the cultural issues as it is to make them the center of attention.

Think with me for a moment. Every expression of Christianity is to a degree culturally contextualized. There is no such thing as a universal, non-cultural expression of Christianity. Jesus didn't come to earth as a "general being." To be actually human he had to be a particular human—in his case, he was incarnated (that is, took flesh) as a Jewish, working-class male, born in a certain time, speaking Aramaic

and Hebrew, etc. Following his resurrection, when he gave his disciples the Great Commission, charging them to go into all the world and preach the gospel, the early church wrestled with how much Jewish culture and practice had to accompany the message. The answer was, not much. The Hebrew Scriptures were still the Word of God, but Jewish culture was not central to the Gospel message, so missionaries to the Gentiles and barbarians were not required to circumcise the new converts, nor to teach them Hebrew or how to make a good gefilt fish.

But that presents us with a problem. The minute we begin to practice or preach our faith, we must become "incarnate" in a particular culture. When we choose which language to conduct our worship services in (and whether the vocabulary we use will be simple or educated), what time and place to hold them, whether to sit or stand or do some of both, we enter a culture. When we choose our worship music, we enter a culture. When we make any choice at all, we are contextualizing—either consciously or unconsciously.

And that brings us to a tremendous irony. Those who speak against contextualization most vigorously are often, very often, those who are so deeply entrenched in a particular culture that they are completely unaware of it. They have taken on the particulars of their culture so long ago and so thoroughly that it feels natural, just the way things ought to be, rather than a series of accommodations to a specific culture.

The "ordinary means of grace" in these churches are colored by music that speaks to a certain type of person, liturgy ditto. The language used in preaching and prayer all have cultural cues attached to them. Not to think about and consider those choices doesn't mean that they haven't been made, just that you are so inside those choices that you don't realize anyone else could find them opaque, impenetrable, confusing, and, ultimately, a barrier to hearing the gospel.

This is not relativism! Just because every specific articulation of a truth is incarnated in a particular culture, that doesn't mean that the truth itself doesn't transcend culture! It is important to keep the balance of the statement. If you forget the first half you'll think there is only one true way to sing, preach, or live the gospel. If you forge the second half you'll lose your grip on the fact that nonetheless there is only one true gospel. Every attempt to adapt the gospel to culture, beginning with the translation of the original Greek and Hebrew into a common language, runs the risk of possible distortion. But to refuse to adapt the gospel to culture can lead to just as great a distortion, for then we are absolutizing our favorite cultural trappings without recognizing what we're doing.

Proper contextualization, then, is not "giving people what they want," but rather it is giving God's answers (which they may not want!) to questions they are asking and in forms that they can comprehend. Incarnation, in fact.

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REMEMBERING NEW ORLEANS

BY MINDI COOKE

Almost one year ago, Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans harder than any other hurricane has ever hit a city in United States. The aftermath continues to bring new challenges to the people of New Orleans. In an effort to help in the restoration of this city, a team of 18 students and leaders from Redeemer's youth ministry are going to New Orleans August 12th-19th. The purpose of their trip is to help one of Redeemer's affiliate churches in the Uptown/University district with the clean up and restoration of their congregants' homes

and neighborhood.

To raise money for the trip, approximately 20 leaders and students walked 10 miles in Central Park the last weekend in June and collected over \$4,000 from their sponsors' donations. Although the age limit for students to go on the missions trip did not include students from the Jr. High, the junior highers nevertheless wanted to help by participating in the walk-a-thon fundraiser. The students' desire was to help the church with a donation in addition to the physical help being given by

the team through assisting them financially in their rebuilding process.

The youth ministry's team is thrilled to take this gift on behalf of Redeemer to the congregation in New Orleans. Most of these donations came from people who attend Redeemer, and the entire youth ministry thanks all those who were so generous in helping this church get back on its feet. Please pray for the safety and efforts of this team as they go to serve in this city which continues to need so much help.

HOPE FOR NEW YORK CHARITY BIKE RIDE

HFNY is sponsoring the 2006 Annual Charity Bike Ride this fall to raise funds to support work with the poor and marginalized in New York City. On September 16th, cyclists will participate in a one-day ride in New York for HFNY.

Please visit the following site for more info:
<http://sports.groups.yahoo.com/group/RedeemerCycling/>
or subscribe to automatically receive updates in your inbox by sending an email to: -
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