Christianity and Cultures

Westminster Presbyterian, February 2025

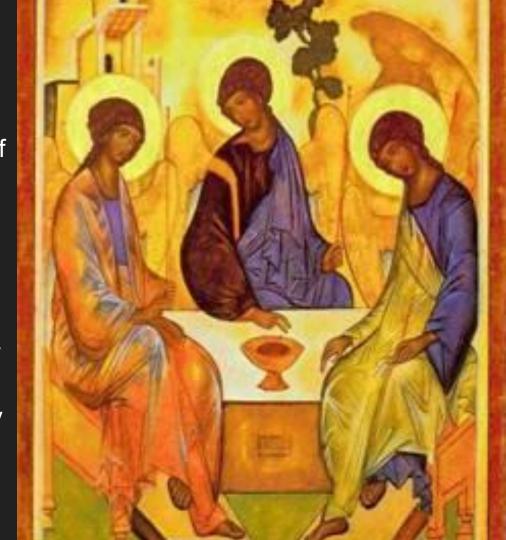A Problem of Adaptation

Adaptive vs. Technical
Change/Challenges

"With the emergence of whiteness, identity was calibrated through possession of, not possession by, specific land … racial agency and especially whiteness rendered unintelligible and unpersuasive any narratives of the collective self that bound identity to geography, to earth, to water, trees, and animals. People would henceforth (and forever) carry their identities on their bodies, without remainder" (Jennings, *Christian Imagination,* 59).

"To enter a new land was to enter a newness that required careful listening to the rhythms of creation played by the indigenous peoples so that the sounds of Christian witness might be joined in harmony (with its proper dissonances) with those rhythms. Moreover, to enter a new land was to touch the skin of a people, joining skin to skin, with the inevitability of being changed, of being transformed, not simply by the people but by creation itself" (Jennings, *Christian Imagination,* 114).

Luke-Acts Story

"Is it possible to be faithful to the God of Israel in a new way? … This is a risky time, second only to Good Friday and Holy Saturday, in which God risks with Peter and Peter risks with God. Will Peter hear this *new word* from God, and will Peter believe that this is a new word *from God*? This is the condition of risk in which Christianity comes to exist and without which authentic Christianity does not exist" (W. Jennings, *Acts,* 108).
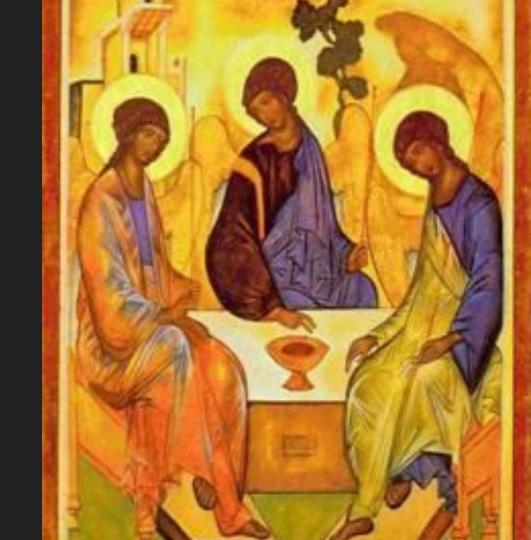
Christian Pluralism

Rule rather than *exception:*

"World Christianity … must be interpreted by a plurality of models of inculturation in line with the variety of local idioms and practices. The mental habits of Christendom predispose us to look for an essence of the faith, with a corresponding global political structure as safeguard, whereas world Christianity challenges us to pay attention to the dynamic power of the gospel and to the open-ended character of communities of faith" (L. Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity,* 35).
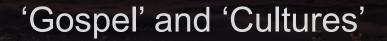
‘God is love’ (1 Jn. 4:8)

'Gospel' and 'Cultures'

Translation thesis: "…mission as translation makes the bold, fundamental assertion that the recipient culture is the authentic destination of God's salvific promise and, as a consequence, has an honored place under 'the kindness of God.' (Sanneh, *Translating the Message,* 31)

'Gospel' and 'Cultures'

"...one only learns to have faith by living in the full this-worldliness of life" (Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 542).

Contextualization as Faithful Christian Practice

Pilgrim Principle: Christianity is universal and therefore poses a challenge to any culture or community

> "the Christian inherits the pilgrim principle, which whispers to [her] that [she] has no abiding city and warns [her] that to be faithful to Christ will put [her] out of step with [her] 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, *Missionary Movement in Christian History,* 8).

Contextualization as Faithful Christian Practice

Pilgrim Principle: Christianity is universal and therefore poses a challenge to any culture or community

Indigenizing Principle: Christian diversity is the rule rather than the exception

> "In Christ God accepts us together with our group relations; with that cultural conditioning that makes us feel at home in one part of human society and less at home in another…He does not wait to tidy up our ideas any more than He waits to tidy up our behavior before He accepts us sinners into his family." (Walls, *Missionary Movement in Christian History,* 7)

Contextualization as Faithful Christian Practice

Pilgrim Principle: Christianity is universal and therefore poses a challenge to any culture or community

Indigenizing Principle: Christian diversity is the rule rather than the exception

Conversion and Culture: Christian conversion is worldly, in that it occurs within one's cultural and linguistic context.

> "Conversion to Christ does not isolate the convert from his or her community; it begins the conversion of the community. Conversion to Christ does not produce a bland universal citizenship; it produces distinctive discipleships, as diverse and variegated as human life itself. Christ in redeeming humanity brings, by the process of discipleship, all the richness of humanity's infinitude of cultures and subcultures into the variegated splendor of the Full Grown Humanity to which the apostolic literature points" (Walls, *Missionary Movement in Christian History,* 51).

Contextualization as Faithful Christian Practice

Pilgrim Principle: Christianity is universal and therefore poses a challenge to any culture or community

Indigenizing Principle: Christian diversity is the rule rather than the exception

Conversion and Culture: Christian conversion is worldly, in that it occurs within one's cultural and linguistic context.

Listening, Discernment, and Discovery: Faithful Christian practice is a kind of 'continuous conversion' (D. Guder) discerned and discovered, attentive to surprise and able to improvise *plausible* and *coherent* connections to the story of God and God's people

A Map of the Models of Contextual Theology

(Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology, 32*)

Transcendental Model
- Gospel is within you
- Revelation as universal subjective experience

Synthetic model
- Gospel witness through dialogue
- Revelation as God's work in the world, personal presence, and particular content

Countercultural Model
- Gospel story offers a lens to interpret the world and human experience
- Revelation is narrative/story and history (the 'fact' of Jesus Christ)

Praxis Model
- Gospel discovered through practice/reflection/ practice
- Revelation as God's liberating work in the world

Anthropological Model
- 'Pull gospel out of culture'
- Revelation as personal presence

Translation Model
- Plant seeds of gospel in culture
- Revelation as content …

Experience of the Present
(context)

Experience of the Past

Human Experience (Personal, Communal)
Culture (secular, religious)
Social Location
Social Change

Scripture
Tradition

Adaptation, Contextualization, and Discernment