

Local Ownership of the Theological Task

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Theologians and missiologists have rightly highlighted the importance of theological contextualization throughout the Majority World.¹ Contextualization is the comprehensive endeavor to express and embody the truth of Scripture in ways that make sense in a given context, such that people may perceive Christianity for what it truly is—both contextually relevant and prophetically challenging.

Theological contextualization refers to the “expressing” component of that endeavor. In fact, all expressions of theology are contextual. Dean Gilliland explains, “Theology clarifies what the Christian message is, in a

¹ For example, see Wilbert R. Shenk, “Theology and the Missionary Task,” *Missiology* 1.3 (1973): 295–310; “The Seoul Declaration: Toward an Evangelical Theology for the Third World,” *IBMR* 7.2 (1983): 64–65; Harvie M. Conn, *Eternal Word and Changing Worlds: Theology, Anthropology, and Mission in Trialogue* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 211–338; David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1989); William A. Dyrness, *Learning about Theology from the Third World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 29–34; Dean E. Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2005), 296–322; David K. Clark, *To Know and Love God: Method for Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2010), 113–22; See also the essays in the following edited volumes: Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland, eds., *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006); Jeffrey P. Greenman and Gene L. Green, eds., *Global Theology in Evangelical Perspective: Exploring the Contextual Nature of Theology and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012).

continuing effort to understand the faith and to demonstrate obedience to Jesus Christ in all dimensions of life. . . . This is to say, for the purpose of missions, that there must be a maximizing of the meaning of Christian truth for the particular situation in which and for which the theology is being developed.”² In other words, theological contextualization is important because it brings the Word of God to bear on contextual issues and thus helps Christians navigate treacherous currents of their cultural contexts.

Moreover, local churches and their members should ultimately become the agents of such contextualization. According to missiologist Brian A. DeVries, “Evidence of the new church’s spiritual maturity includes the practice of self-theologizing, the confessing and teaching of biblical truth (Word) by indigenous people within the local church (receiver) in the language and worldview of the local context (receiving culture).”³ He refers to this stage of maturity as “ecclesial contextualization,” in which “the agents who engage in contextualization are indigenous Christians from the local culture, ideally guided by the spiritual leaders of the local church.”⁴ In other words, the maturation of local churches includes the local believing community assuming responsibility for contextualizing its theology.

Mission practitioners can play a vital role in facilitating such local theological agency. While some Majority World churches have, over time, become agents of their own theological convictions, many others have relied on borrowed theology from churches outside of their context. In South Asia, mission practitioners have addressed this deficit in local theologizing by equipping leaders of emerging churches to develop their own doctrinal

² Dean S. Gilliland, “Contextual Theology as Incarnational Mission,” in *The Word Among Us: Contextualizing Theology for Mission Today*, ed. Dean S. Gilliland (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1989), 12.

³ Brian A. DeVries, “The Contexts of Contextualization: Different Methods for Different Ministry Situations,” *EMQ* 55.4 (2019): 12.

⁴ DeVries, “Contexts of Contextualization,” 12.

statements through a process called *Confessing the Faith*.⁵ This approach might serve as a helpful model for other practitioners laboring in the fields of theological education and pastoral development. By embracing the *Confessing the Faith* model or one similar to it, missionaries can help cultivate theological ownership among emerging churches and set them on a path of long-term theological health.

Biblical Warrant for Local Theologizing

A foundational warrant for local theologizing rests in the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. Hank Voss defines the doctrine as “the believer’s sharing in the Son’s royal priesthood through faith and baptism resulting in participation in the *missio Dei* and spiritual sacrifices of Worship, Work, and Witness.”⁶ A foundational component of most Protestant ecclesiologies, this doctrine finds its most common support in 1 Pet 2:4–9, in which Peter declares, “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (v. 9). This doctrine also holds deep roots in other parts of the biblical narrative, including the call of Israel to be a kingdom of priests (Exod 19:6), Isaiah’s portrayal of the royal-priestly Servant and his seed (Isa 40–66), the apostolic interpretation of Melchizedekian priesthood in Psalm 110 (e.g., Heb), Matthew’s narrative portrayal of Jesus as the royal priest-king, and John’s picture of an eschatological kingdom of priests (Rev 1:6; 5:10).⁷

⁵ N. Shank and K. Shank, “Confessing the Faith within Church Planting Movements: A Guide for Training Church Planting Networks Toward Contextual Theology,” <https://www.imb.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/57-Seconds-S1E14-Confessing-the-Faith.pdf>, 2011.

⁶ Hank Voss, *The Priesthood of All Believers and the Missio Dei: A Canonical, Catholic, and Contextual Perspective* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2016), 6. See also: Uche Anizor and Hank Voss, *Representing Christ: A Vision for the Priesthood of All Believers* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016).

⁷ For an excellent biblical theology of the priesthood of all believers, see Voss, *Priesthood of All Believers*, 25–99.

In the Old Testament (OT), priests served as mediators between God and the people, a role that included the task of instruction in God's Law. Voss explains, "[O]ne of the priests' original responsibilities was to serve as oracular spokespersons. They were to inquire of the Lord, and to speak his Word to the people."⁸ The prophet Malachi rebuked Israelite priests in his day for failing in this task (Mal 2:1-9). They had not upheld the standard that God established with Levi: "For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the Lord of Hosts" (Mal 2:7). Pointing to this verse, Voss asserts, "The importance of the priests' responsibility to know the Word of God so as to be ready to teach remained throughout Israel's history."⁹

The events of the New Testament (NT) radically broadened this priesthood. The tearing of the temple veil at Jesus' crucifixion (Matt 27:51) and the subsequent descending of the Holy Spirit through tongues of fire (Acts 2:1-13) symbolize the new reality that all followers of Christ now share the same priestly access to God that OT priests had maintained. Moreover, this access carries with it the priestly responsibility for all believers to serve as heralds of the faith. No longer does the responsibility to declare and teach rest solely upon a select caste of clergy; it rests on all those who name and follow Jesus as Lord and Savior.

This broadening of the priesthood to include all believers carries significant implications for theologizing. It signifies that disciples of Christ are agents of theology—priests with access to Truth and an ability to discern and teach that Truth. For example, the Apostle Paul praised the Roman church because its members were "full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to *instruct* one another" (Rom 15:14, emphasis added). Read in light of Malachi's rebuke of Israelite priests, this passage indicates that these Roman Christians were faithfully upholding the theological standard to which those

⁸ Voss, *Priesthood of All Believers*, 226.

⁹ Voss, *Priesthood of All Believers*, 227.

priests had failed to adhere. The recipients of Malachi's warning had dishonored God's name (Mal 2:2), corrupted the covenant (Mal 2:8), and failed to guard or instruct the people in theological knowledge (Mal 2:7–8). These Roman believers, however, were carrying out their priestly duty to embody sound theology and instruct one another in it.

In other words, the call to priesthood is a call to local theologizing. Paul encouraged the Colossian church, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, *teaching* and *admonishing* one another in all wisdom" (Col 3:16, emphasis added). The local believers addressed here were not merely passive recipients of theological understanding, handed down by ordained officials. Rather, they themselves—sharing in Jesus' royal priesthood—were to serve as agents of theology, instructing others from biblical convictions cultivated by the Word of God within them. Karl Barth thus rightly declared, "In the Church there are really no non-theologians."¹⁰

Stuart Murray, a mission practitioner and scholar on Anabaptism, therefore refers to the "priesthood of all believers" also as the "theologian-hood" of all believers.¹¹ He contends, "'Trickle-down' theology, disseminated by academic theologians via graduates from theological institutions to passive congregations, must be replaced by theological reflection on the frontiers of mission and partnerships between those who know what questions matter and those who can offer biblical, historical, and theological resources."¹² Such local theological reflection, however, has not been a common emphasis in the work of Western missionaries and mission agencies over the past few centuries, particularly during the Modern Missions Movement.

¹⁰ Karl Barth, *God in Action: Theological Addresses*, trans. E. G. Homrighausen and Karl J. Ernst (New York: Round Table Press, 1936), 57.

¹¹ Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World*, 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018), 220.

¹² Murray, *Post-Christendom*, 220.

Historical Deficit in Local Theologizing

Missions history reveals a quite different precedent, one at odds with the priesthood of all believers. A deficit in local theologizing was becoming apparent as far back as the turn of the twentieth century. For example, a report from the World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh in 1910 detailed a lack of local theological reflection across the Majority World.¹³ It noted that in every mission field there existed a danger both to the missionaries and the local believing communities. In reference to missionaries, it declared, “The danger is that the teacher may seek at each stage to introduce from without, in an external and mechanical way, systems of truth, knowledge, and practice, which are the results of western experience, but do not vitally appeal to the mind or even to the Christian consciousness of the local Church.”¹⁴

This precedent of foreign theological imposition rendered local believers and churches as passive recipients who looked to Western churches, denominations, and agencies for their theological convictions. The Edinburgh report explained,

[W]estern teachers appear to them to be the official custodians of a religion in which truth has already been fully gathered and systematized in theological forms, so that theology itself, instead of wearing its true aspect of a search for the many-sided truth which is vital to spiritual life, appears rather as a hortus siccus

¹³ David Esterline, “From Western Church to World Christianity: Developments in Theological Education in the Ecumenical Movement,” in *Handbook of Theological Education in World Christianity: Theological Perspectives—Regional Survey—Ecumenical Trends*, ed. Dietrich Werner et al. (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2010), 13–14, points this out in his historical survey of ecumenical theological education.

¹⁴ *The Church in the Mission Field: Report of Commission II* (Edinburgh: Oliphant, Anderson and Ferrier, 1910), 189–90.

which has exhausted, and contains, in improved and final form, all that is to be found in the Bible.¹⁵

The danger for local believing communities within this precedent is to either acquiesce to foreign theological teachers and adopt their theological systems and textbooks wholesale or reject foreign teaching altogether.¹⁶ Missions history both before and after Edinburgh 1910 indicates that many churches succumbed to the former danger.¹⁷

In fact, reports from around the world, which constituents issued to the those leading the Edinburgh 1910 conference, indicated a pervasive lack of local theologizing. In their own, subsequent report, conference leaders noted, “In another part of our enquiry we have put the question whether there are any indications of original and formative native thought in theology, and the replies are, with noticeable unanimity, in the negative.”¹⁸ Others around that time, like Charles Cuthbert Hall, Roland Allen, and Arthur Judson Brown, also highlighted and critiqued this precedent.¹⁹ Later in the twentieth century, evangelicals within the Lausanne Movement expressed similar sentiments. Lausanne’s Willowbank Report recognized that Western missionaries had often indoctrinated Majority World Christians “in western ways of thought and procedure. These westernized local leaders have then

¹⁵ *Church in the Mission Field*, 190. *Hortus siccus* refers to a systematized collection of dried plants.

¹⁶ *Church in the Mission Field*, 190–91.

¹⁷ For an overview and case studies of this precedent, and for a survey of Majority World reflections on Western theological imposition, see C. S. Barefoot, “Hermeneutical Community: Recasting the Outsider’s Role in Local Theological Development” (PhD Diss., Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2023), 20–173.

¹⁸ *Church in the Mission Field*, 190.

¹⁹ Charles Cuthbert Hall, *The Universal Elements of the Christian Religion: An Attempt to Interpret Contemporary Religious Conditions* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1905), 42–52; Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul’s or Ours* (London: Robert Scott, 1912), 187–99; Roland Allen, *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church: And the Causes which Hinder It* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 43–59; Arthur J. Brown, *Rising Churches in Non-Christian Lands* (New York: Missionary Education Movement of the United States and Canada, 1915), 188–90.

preserved a very western-looking church, and the foreign orientation has persisted, only lightly cloaked by the appearance of indigeneity.”²⁰

This precedent left many churches throughout the Majority World without biblical answers to the cultural challenges they faced, thus rendering them susceptible to syncretism. René Padilla perceptively explains,

Those who object to the contextualization of the Gospel out of fear of syncretism must take into account that precisely when there is no conscious reflection as to the form that obedience to the lordship of Jesus Christ must take in a given situation, quite easily conduct is determined by the culture instead of being controlled by the Gospel. . . . [S]yncretism will enter through the back door and product [sic] a “culture Christianity” that simply assimilates the values of the surrounding culture.²¹

In other words, when the theology governing a church does not provide appropriate guidance to local Christians seeking to navigate challenging cultural contexts, those Christians will often turn to other, non-Christian sources for direction. The Edinburgh report thus rightly declares, “[S]urely the production of such [local theological] thought should be one of the principal aims of any really living system of theological teaching.”²²

²⁰ Lausanne Theology and Education Group, “The Willowbank Report,” in *Down to Earth: Studies in Christianity and Culture*, ed. Robert T. Coote and John R. W. Stott (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 329.

²¹ C. René Padilla, “The Contextualization of the Gospel,” in *Readings in Dynamic Indigeneity*, ed. Charles H. Kraft and Tom N. Wisley (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1979), 299.

²² *Church in the Mission Field*, 190. The reports adds, “We advocate no new Gospel, and our chief concern is with the permanent and fundamental elements of theology. These are neither oriental nor occidental, but in order to build up the Church on these lasting foundations Christian theology must be written afresh for every fresh race to whom it comes, so that it may justify itself to all as the abiding wisdom that cometh from above, ever quick and powerful, and not misrepresented as if it were no more than a precipitation from the antiquated text-books of the West” (p. 191).

Contemporary Model for Local Theologizing

One way for mission practitioners to begin facilitating such local theologizing—and thereby strengthen local churches against false teaching from within and cultural challenges from without—is to lead local believers through a creative process of engaging the biblical text with the needs of their context in mind. N. Shank and K. Shank, missionary church planters in South Asia, developed such a process for emerging church leaders. Their method, called “Confessing the Faith within Church Planting Movements: A Guide for Training Church Planting Networks Toward Contextual Theology” (henceforth *Confessing the Faith*),²³ serves as an innovative way forward in local theological development.²⁴

Confessing the Faith is a one- to two-year process by which local church leaders develop, in community with one another, indigenous theological statements on core doctrines (e.g., soteriology, ecclesiology) and important cultural issues (e.g., ancestor veneration, church-state relations). For Shank and Shank, this process builds on prior biblical, hermeneutical, and homiletical training. It is important that participating church leaders begin *Confessing the Faith* with a strong understanding of the biblical meta-narrative in tow and an ability to interpret Scripture and teach others from it.²⁵

This process involves a series of monthly multi-day gatherings, in which emerging church leaders pursue biblical answers to questions related to classic doctrines of the faith.²⁶ Each gathering focuses on one doctrine. The practitioner leading the *Confessing the Faith* process does so with four objectives in view:

²³ Shank and Shank, “Confessing the Faith.”

²⁴ One finds a forerunner to Shank’s model in John Gration, “Willowbank to Zaire: The Doing of Theology,” *Missiology* 12.3 (1984): 297–309. Gration’s model is less developed, but shares similarities to Shank’s later approach.

²⁵ Shank and Shank, “Confessing the Faith,” 1.

²⁶ These gatherings range from two to four days in length, depending on the particular doctrine in focus, and can also occur on alternating months.

- 1) A systematic survey of the Bible's teaching on the doctrine.
- 2) The creation and/or introduction of frequently asked questions within the cultural context of church planting leaders.
- 3) Progress toward consensus answers to these questions as a group.
- 4) The creation of a "statement of faith" related to the doctrine among the participants.²⁷

The goal for the missionary practitioner here is to cultivate local ownership of the theological task among local churches and pastors.

Confessing the Faith begins with the practitioner soliciting questions regarding the doctrine in focus for that meeting. According to Shank and Shank, this step

involves the creation of questions relevant to the local cultural setting and additional challenges of false teaching or misunderstanding within the church planting network. Typically questions suggested by the participants will range from very broad (among newer leaders) to more specific (among leaders with longer ministry experience).²⁸

The practitioner leads participants to prioritize the questions and then writes their most important questions at the top of a sheet of chart paper.

Step two of the process requires participants to spend several hours reading deeply through passages of Scripture that bear upon the doctrine in focus. The practitioner provides participants with a list of passages to peruse but encourages them to study other passages with which they are

²⁷ Shank and Shank, "Confessing the Faith," 2.

²⁸ Shank and Shank, "Confessing the Faith," 2.

familiar that might also inform a right understanding of that doctrine. The purpose of this step is to “listen as the Bible speaks on the chosen topic.”²⁹

Steps three and four involve group discussion and the pursuit of answers both to the general question *What does the Bible say about this doctrinal topic?* and to the prioritized questions from step one. In step three, the practitioner arranges participants into small groups, in which they begin to discuss possible answers from Scripture. This step can last several hours. Participants use the chart paper to write provisional answers drawn from various biblical passages. Then in step four, the practitioner facilitates discussion among the larger group concerning possible answers to the above questions. At this stage, participants offer up for consideration and discussion the provisional answers they developed in small groups. The practitioner here acts as a facilitator with the goal of encouraging deliberation among the group and “where possible lead them toward consensus.”³⁰

Finally, in step five, the practitioner allots time for the group to jointly write a statement of faith concerning the doctrine in focus. “Using the questions and answers created in steps 1–4 (recorded on the chart papers) the participants should be encouraged to write as comprehensive a statement as possible. The statement will be written in paragraph form with the verses listed at the bottom of the provided chart paper.”³¹ Ideally, this statement of faith would not only highlight major components of the biblical doctrine, but also respond to contextual challenges facing the churches. For example, among South Asian participants, a statement of faith on soteriology might highlight not only justification by faith, but also the nature of biblical salvation in contradistinction to the notion of reincarnation—a common religious tenet in South Asia.

²⁹ Shank and Shank, “Confessing the Faith,” 2.

³⁰ Shank and Shank, “Confessing the Faith,” 9.

³¹ Shank and Shank, “Confessing the Faith,” 3.

As participants grow in their understanding of this theological process over the series of gatherings, they assume increasing responsibility for facilitating the steps involved. That is, the missionary begins to entrust the process to local church leaders, who then guide their fellow participants through the steps of biblical study and confessional theological development. This entrustment helps mitigate foreign dependency and promote sound local theologizing in its stead.

In doing so, the process of *Confessing the Faith* seeks to buttress local churches against cultural challenges from without and potential false teaching from within. Participants walk away from this process with local confessions of theology—written in their own words and language—that can guide their churches and ministries as they face such challenges. Shank and Shank add, “We consider the ability to refute those teaching false doctrine to be the role of local emerging leaders (Titus 1:9). Our goal is for this workshop to provide an intentional response in such cases and perhaps create a tool across multiple churches for the fellowship of sound doctrine.”³²

Conclusion

This approach does not entail a local break from the wider Church or historic theological orthodoxy, but rather a deep, direct engagement with the text of Scripture by local believers with the aim of theological ownership. In the process, the missionary outsider serves as a facilitator and—when necessary—a voice for orthodoxy as participants discern biblical truth in hermeneutical community.³³ Further, even if the process yields conclusions similar to

³² Shank and Shank, “Confessing the Faith,” 10.

³³ Fleming, *Contextualization in the New Testament*, 318, contends, “[B]iblically informed contextualization calls for *communal* hermeneutics and theologizing. . . . Today doing theology and interpreting the Word of God within a particular context is not something reserved solely for academic ‘experts’ or for church officials. It is the responsibility of the whole people of God. It is done best when a faithful community of cultural insiders can dialogue and wrestle with how the gospel intersects their world. At the same time, those with theological and biblical training, such as pastors, theological educators or

theologies of the West, it remains a valuable endeavor because—borrowing Gilliland’s words—it allows local believers to “be able to process, reflect upon, and organize biblical truth so that the Book and the truth *become their own*.”³⁴

Confessing the Faith thus provides an opportunity for local Christians to take ownership of the theological task, rather than outsource their convictions to Western theological voices. Local churches that live off borrowed theological convictions compromise their ability to stand firm in the face of cultural pressures. Paul Hiebert explains, “[S]olid theological foundations are needed to keep a church true to Christian faith in the long run.”³⁵ Yet the building of such foundations must entail local agency. As Hiebert notes, “To grow, spiritually young churches must search the Scripture themselves, and if—for fear that they will leave the truth—we do not allow them to do so, we condemn them to spiritual infancy and early death.”³⁶ By adopting an approach like *Confessing the Faith*, mission practitioners can instead encourage the maturation and long-term health of emerging local churches—an end to which missionaries must continually strive (Eph 4:11–16; Col 1:28–29).

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missionaries, can play a key role in guiding and providing critical input to the process,” emphasis original.

³⁴ Gilliland, “Contextual Theology as Incarnational Mission,” 15, emphasis original.

³⁵ Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), 204.

³⁶ Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights*, 208.

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