

Contextual Theology: Newbigin's Contribution Amid the Changing Landscape

Michael W. Goheen

The Changing Landscape

There has been an important shift within the missiological tradition with respect to theology in the last few decades. It is important for the whole North American church to attend to this shift if it wants to be relevant and faithful in its theology. While the nature of theology remains the same—reflection on Scripture's teaching in varying contexts—there is a new emphasis on the particular context that shapes the theological reflection. This can be attributed to many factors, but perhaps two stand out. First, the growth of the Third World church has spawned theological reflection that is very different from what we have become accustomed to in the West. Second, the move toward postmodernity in Western culture has enabled us to see how captive we have been to many assumptions that have shaped our culture for centuries. Specifically our captivity to the objectivism of modernity in the sciences has become apparent, and this includes the discipline of theology. This shift has made us aware that *all* theology is contextual theology.

The need for a contextual theology is not simply a non-Western challenge. The dramatic changes in our own culture have revealed the continuing need for fresh theological reflection. There is a growing urgency for a reforming theology that remains faithful to Scripture and to the theological tradition of the church, yet addresses the issues and needs of the present day. There is a growing literature within missiology on this subject (Schreiter 1985; Dyrness 1990; Bevans 2003). While there is much within this literature that needs to be criticized, there is also much insight that can enable us to see our way forward.

This brief paper is made up two sections. The first is historical: It sketches an historical narrative of the changing landscape that is shared by many missiologists today, which informs and spurs the new emphasis on context in theological reflection. The second part is more systematic: Using Lesslie Newbigin's model of contextual theology, I will offer a framework for the struggle toward continuing reformation in theological studies. Newbigin's model attempts to take hold of the insights yet avoid the dangers of this new emphasis on context within theology.

Contextual Expression of the Gospel Within Scripture

The gospel is about historical events, specifically what God has accomplished in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Already within the New Testament itself many images are used to explicate the meaning of these events and so the articulation of the gospel has from the beginning taken shape in the social, lingual, and cultural context of those who received it. The initial incarnation of the gospel by the church was in the Jewish milieu shaped by Hebrew categories and social institutions. Yet the young Jewish church found itself in the midst of the Roman empire. Its missionary expansion required that the gospel be translated into the Hellenistic context. Already in the canon of the New Testament this process of translation had begun to take place. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke the central category that Jesus employs in the announcement of the gospel is the kingdom of God. It is not surprising that Jesus takes hold of this image; it had become dominant in the Jewish culture in which Jesus carried out his ministry. While the prophets had used a plethora of images to announce the end-time salvation that would be ushered in by the Messiah, the image of the reign of God had become increasingly popular over the inter-testamental period. By the time Jesus opens his ministry it is the central image that fuelled Jewish eschatological expectation.

When one reads John, however, the Jewish image of kingdom virtually drops out of sight. Instead, all kinds of concepts that were quite common in classical philosophy and had made their way into popular classical culture—light/darkness, life/death, heaven/earth, body/soul—become categories of choice for the expression of the gospel. On the surface the translation appears to be so starkly different that some New Testament scholars such as Rudolf Bultmann have argued that the gospel was syncretistically accommodated to Hellenistic thought. According to these scholars, the gospel in the synoptics is defined by Jewish categories and looks forward horizontally in time to the renewal of creation in the kingdom of God. However, the gospel in John and Paul, they say, is defined by Greek categories and looks upward vertically in space to the salvation of individuals in heaven. More careful study shows this view to be mistaken. We do not have two contradictory expressions of the gospel but a faithful translation or contextualized expression of the gospel. John and Paul employ classical categories to express the gospel in a relevant way; yet they reshape those categories to remain faithful to the gospel. Here are two different expressions, both relevant to different cultures, yet both faithful to God's revelation in Jesus Christ as revealed in Scripture (Ladd 1968).

From Plural Cultural Forms To Standardized Theology

This New Testament paradigm of translation and multiple 'contextual theologies' continued during

the New Testament period as the church spread to differing cultural contexts: Jewish, Greek, barbarian, Thracian, Egyptian and Roman. In the post-apostolic period the same pattern is evident as the gospel was incarnated in many different cultural settings—Syriac, Greek, Roman, Coptic, Armenian, Ethiopian, and Maronite. The norm was a plurality of cultural expressions of the gospel.

This all began to change in the fourth century. There were at least two reasons for this. First, the conversion of Constantine ultimately led to the establishment of the church as the official religion of the empire. With the close connection of the church with the Roman empire, the gospel was associated with *one* culture, which was considered to be the *dominant* and *superior* culture. This would remain the case for over a thousand years, first the Roman empire, then European Christendom. Second, as the gospel was contextualized in the empire, the Greek spirit proved, at times, to be too strong for the church. Greek notions of truth as timeless, supracultural ideas reshaped the gospel in its mould. The aim of theological expression was to capture this single, suprahistorical and unchanging truth in its theoretical articulations. As a result of this development, the plurality of expression found in the early church was eclipsed. The theological articulation of the gospel was standardized, or at least that was the goal.

The rise of Islam in the 7th century contributed to this situation as it hemmed in Europe to the south and east. This isolated the gospel on the European peninsula from the other cultures of the world. Issues of contextual theology simply were not part of the Christian experience for many centuries as the gospel found a monocultural home. This is not to denigrate the theological development that took place during these centuries; such a position would be foolish. Neither is it to say that the theology of this period is not contextual. The theology continued to be shaped by its context and uncovered much Biblical truth. However, it remained within one cultural context. And neither is it to say that there was one theological tradition. Rather the goal remained *one* faithful theological expression of the gospel.

Missions Contact with Non-Western Cultures

The age of discovery in the 15th and 16th centuries opened new opportunities for Roman Catholic missions to have contact with various cultures. A number of factors confronted missions with the problem of gospel and cultures: the initial communication of the gospel in terms that were understandable to the people yet faithful to the Bible; the translation of the Scriptures into the native tongues of the people; the ongoing question of treatment of the indigenous cultures in their social, cultural, moral, and religious practices; and the need to find forms of worship, churchmanship, and theology that were suited to the new setting. Jesuit experiments in contextual theology were quashed by the pope in the 17th century when, in face of the continuing Protestant threat, he attempted to safeguard

Catholic unity by imposing a rigid theological uniformity.

Protestant missions faced the same issues in the 19th century. This coincided with fresh initiatives of exploration and colonization that encompassed vast areas of the earth. With missions following in the steps of the colonizer, there was a new encounter with the cultures of the world. Unfortunately, the inextricable connection between Western culture and the gospel was not immediately broken. Colonialism seemed to demonstrate the superiority of European culture; the theological equivalent was the superiority of European theology. Further, the scientific rationalism that now encompassed European society after the Enlightenment, fostered the illusion that truth is ahistorical and uncontaminated by the taint of human culture. For missions this meant that western theology stands above history and culture. Western theology was considered to be supracultural and universally valid. The mission of the church was to export these normative theological expressions of the gospel to the rest of the world. The late Harvie Conn, long-time professor missions at Westminster Theological Seminary writes: ‘Our creedal formulations structured to respond to the 16th century cultural setting and its problems, lose their historical character as contextual confessions of faith and become cultural universals, having comprehensive validity in all times and settings. . . . The Reformation is completed and we in the West wait for the churches of the 3rd World to accept as their statements of faith those shaped by a Western church three centuries ago in a *corpus Christianum*. . . . We have diminished their historical, cultural character. The creed as a missionary document framed in the uniqueness of an historical moment has too often been remythologized by white paternalism into a universal essence for all times’ (1980:17).

Meanwhile the work of missions was one of the factors God used to produce a rapidly growing and maturing church in the non-Western world. The dramatic growth of the Third World church at the end of the 20th century introduced a new dynamic into theology. On the one hand, the Asian, African, and Latin American church have become dissatisfied with traditional approaches to theology that do not fit their own cultural patterns or thought forms. Nor do European theologies meet the differing questions and needs of those churches. On the other hand, the growing contextualized theologies of the Third World churches often demonstrate a faithfulness to Scripture and new insights into the Biblical story that challenge the self-sufficiency and universal validity of western theology.

Contextual Theology Today

The following commitments characterize many missiologists today with respect to theology. First, contextual theology is constitutive of the gospel. There is no such thing as a culturally disinfected theology; the gospel will always be expressed in some cultural context. This is not something to be

regretted but is given in the very incarnational nature of the gospel. Different from Islam wherein God's revelation is vouchsafed to humanity in untranslatable Arabic propositions, the gospel is about God's acts in history and is thus inherently translatable to varying cultural contexts. The former Muslim turned Christian scholar Lamin Sanneh notes that the early church 'in straddling the Jewish-Gentile worlds, was born in a cross-cultural milieu with translation as its birthmark' (Sanneh 1989). Far from threatening the universal validity of the gospel and Biblical revelation, a contextualized 'theology' is already present in the pages of the New Testament, as the gospel moves from its Hebrew home to the Greek setting. Faithfulness to the Christian message requires recognizing the incarnational dynamic of the gospel. The need for contextual theology is not simply an outside pressure of changing cultures but is also the result of the very incarnational nature of the gospel.

Second, there can be varying cultural expressions of the gospel that are faithful to the gospel. Since the gospel is not first a changeless idea that stands above history but the announcement of universally valid events that have significance for all of history, this can be expressed with various mutually enriching and correcting images. There is not a universal theology or embodiment that stands in judgement of various contextual theologies. Scripture alone is the arbiter; all theologies must constantly be reforming. This, of course, does not mean that all theologies are equally valid. While all contextual theologies must seek to express the truth of Scripture within their settings, with their categories, and in response to their needs and issues, some will be more faithful than others.

Third, contextualizing theology is an ongoing process. Since culture is constantly changing, and since the gospel must be translated faithfully into every idiom, if the church is to live out of the gospel, the process of contextualization will never be a *fait accompli* but a continuous challenge intrinsic to the church's theological calling. Changing cultural situations will raise new questions and issues that need to be addressed by Scriptural revelation.

Fourth, contextualizing theology is a process that takes place in every cultural setting. Contextual theology is as much an issue for the Western church as it is for the younger churches of the Third World.

If this is true, there is continuing need today to express the teaching of Scripture in a theological expression that addresses the current needs and issues of the beginning of the 21st century. We are in the midst of a momentous shift in culture with new questions, concerns, and sensitivities. This kind of change calls for fresh theological expression.

There are at least three dangers that accompany this new emphasis on the contextual pole of theology. First, emphasis on context can undermine the divine authority and universal validity of Scripture. In fact, many contextual models argue that the starting point for theology is the context. Scripture then is simply

moulded to fit the needs of the context. Second, emphasis on the present need for relevance can lead to a minimizing of the history of the church and theological insights and gains from the past. Some models simply want to place Scripture in dialogue with the present culture; historical theology, creeds, and confessions play no major role in their understanding of contextual theology. Third, the spectre of relativism continues to present itself. If there is no universal theology that can judge all the various contextual theologies, the very practical problem emerges as to how one can judge one theology to be closer to Scripture than another. The solution of some contextual models is simply to reject any criterion for faithful theology.

The next step is to ask how one can engage in theological reflection that takes the cultural context seriously, that recognizes the need for continuing fresh expressions of the gospel, that is relevant because it addresses the issues of the present, and yet does not fall into relativism, does not lose the primacy or final authority of Scripture, nor undermine the historical development of theology. The next section suggests a way forward treating especially Lesslie Newbigin's understanding of contextual theology.

Lesslie Newbigin's Contribution

Hendrikus Berkhof, the great Dutch theologian, comments that theology is 'meant to equip the saints for service.' The problem is that theology often seems to many to be dry and irrelevant. Perhaps part of the reason is, as Berkhof puts it, 'classic dogmatics gave profound answers to questions that no one asks anymore.' In his introduction to his own restatement of the Christian faith he says: 'What God has given us [in Scripture] is inexhaustible, but we are only little people, still on the way toward fully understanding everything, while the gospel needs restating in ever new situations. There are bound to be many theological articulations of the faith, all of them pointing to the same thing and by their multiplicity relativizing and complementing each other' (1979: xii).

In the first section on this topic of theology in context we noticed that the importance of context is increasingly recognized in the theological enterprise. We also noted three dangers to this trend: the final authority of Scripture can be eclipsed; the history and tradition of the church can be ignored; and the spectre of relativism arises when the formative power of context is recognized. Can a way be found to affirm the importance of context without falling prey to these attendant dangers? I believe the insights of Lesslie Newbigin (1909-1998) can provide us with some direction. In this article I sketch his understanding of contextual theology. Lesslie Newbigin served as a missionary for forty years in India and is widely regarded as one of the leading missionary theologians in the twentieth century. I unfold his

position in four statements paying special attention to the third section.

The Bible is the starting point and final authority for all contextual theologies.

For Newbigin there are at least four tributaries that flow into the stream of theology: Scripture, the tradition of the church especially found in creeds and confessions, current issues and needs of the church in a particular culture, and the theological work of churches from other cultures. Each of these will be examined. Yet these are not ‘equal partners’; priority must be given to Scripture since it is God’s revelation.

Scripture must be given primacy in relation to present context. One of the problems today in contextual theology is that many models prioritize context over the Scriptures. Surprisingly this is the case in most of the models surveyed by Stephen Bevans in *Models of Contextual Theology*. In contrast to this Newbigin says: ‘ . . . authentic Christian thought and action begin not by attending to the aspirations of the people, not by answering the questions they are asking in their terms, not by offering solutions to the problems as the world sees them. It must begin and continue by attending to what God has done in the story of Israel and supremely in the story of Jesus Christ. It must continue by indwelling that story so that it is our story, the way we understand the real story. And then, and this is the vital point, to attend with open hearts and minds to the real needs of people . . . ’ (1989:151). In this statement, the importance of both the primacy of Scripture and the context (real needs of people) are recognized. Nevertheless Scripture is acknowledged as the final authority: ‘True Christian theology is a ‘form of rational discourse . . . which accepts the primacy of the Biblical story . . . ’ (ibid)

Moreover Scripture must also judge the history of the church. The Scripture is not simply a record of the earliest chapters of church history but the rule in faith and life for the church at all times. While the Bible does not provide a prescribed pattern to be mindlessly imitated—after all it too is given in a cultural setting—its authority is final. Newbigin speaks of two fatal identifications that can eclipse the power of the gospel. The first fatal identification is between the gospel and ecclesiastical traditions that bear the gospel: ‘Traditions which are good in themselves are evil when they are put into the place which belongs to the Gospel itself’ (1948b:53). The second fatal identification is between the gospel and theology: ‘The danger inherent in all the (necessary) work of theological statement is that it may go beyond the task of protecting the gospel and become a series of additions to the gospel’ (1948:16).

Finally dialogue between churches in various cultural settings is for the purpose of understanding the message of Scripture. Our cultural blindnesses are corrected and our limited insights supplemented by those who read the Scripture with new eyes.

It is essential, therefore, to truly understand the nature of Biblical authority. It is no accident that in the last decades of Newbigin's life, when he was struggling with a missionary encounter with Western culture, he spent much time on defining Biblical authority. I cannot possibly begin even to summarize his views in this short space. However, I note one essential point important for our subject.

For Newbigin, the difference between the rationalistic humanism of the classical period and the Biblical story is the location of reliable truth. In the Bible, truth is located in a story of God's deeds in history centred in Jesus Christ while classical thought locates reliable truth in timeless ideas that can be accessed by human reason (1995b:3). If this is true, the truth of the gospel can be expressed in mutually enriching images from various times and places. There will be no search for an unchanging universal theology. Yet the gospel is the revelation and accomplishment of the goal of universal history. Since it tells the real story of the whole world, it will (should) shape the whole of the church's life including theological reflection.

All contextual theology must be done in conscious connection with the 'rule of faith' provided in the creeds of the history of the church.

Newbigin's most ringing affirmation of the importance of church history, tradition, and creeds comes in an interesting context worth noting. In the early part of the century, the Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Congregationalist traditions joined to form the Church of South India. Newbigin was one of the most articulate advocates of the union. The British Anglicans were most vocal in their opposition. These Anglicans continued to stress the importance of the history of the church and its traditions, creeds, and confessions. Newbigin's response is to affirm this but to say that the church is more than a historically continuous institution; it is also a body continually shaped by the word of God. In the context of this debate, the Anglicans accused the Indian church of not giving enough credence to church tradition. Newbigin's response was twofold.

On the one hand, over against the Anglicans he insisted that the church is connected to the living, risen, and exalted Christ. Thus the church lives by the gospel as it continually encounters us afresh in each generation. On the other hand, in sympathy with the Anglicans he maintained that the church also is connected to the historical Jesus; that is, it finds its identity in the events of Jesus of Nazareth. Therefore, the church is, as the Anglicans properly contended, a historically continuous institution, and the Bible can only be properly understood in fellowship with the church through history: 'The Bible can only be understood in the fellowship of the Church—and the Church means the whole company of Christ's people in all ages' (1948a:135). In other words, church history, tradition, confessions, and creeds cannot be

bypassed. This is part of understanding the Scriptures in fellowship with the church (Ephesians 3:18). As Geoffrey Wainwright says of Newbigin: The creeds ‘constitute a point of reference for all engagement with particular passages [of Scripture]’ (2000:319). There is even a sense in which, when crucial Biblical teaching is explicitly formulated, like the Trinitarian formulations, the church ‘may never go back on what it has decided’ (Newbigin 1995a:27).

Newbigin was adamant that all contemporary struggles with Scripture require a firm rooting in the tradition, creeds, and confessions of the church. His concern for the importance of context did not bring about an eclipse of the gains of history.

The church must constantly rethink and restate her confession and theology in each new generation and in each new cultural situation.

In Newbigin’s words: ‘The responsibility of the church [is] to declare to each generation what is the faith . . . This is always a fresh task in every generation, for thought is never still. The words in which the Church states its message in one generation have changed their meaning by the time the next has grown up. No verbal statement can be produced which relieves the Church of the responsibility continually to re-think and re-state its message. No appeal [to creeds and confessions] can alter the fact that the Church has to state in every new generation how it interprets the historic faith, and how it relates it to the new thought and experience of its time. . . Nothing can remove from the Church the responsibility for stating *now* what is the faith. It belongs to the essence of a living Church that it should be able and willing to do so.’ (1948a:137f.).

There are two important reasons for this need for restatement. First, continually reconfessing the faith in a relevant way will enable the church to ‘lead her members into a full and vivid apprehension of the faith’ (1948a:137). Theology that does not speak to the issues and needs of the present will not enable the church to take hold of and own the faith. Second, a relevant and contextual theology will challenge the current cultural idols that are destructive of Christian faith. Older confessions and theologies may have faithfully confronted the errors of their time with the gospel. In a new generation or a new culture different idolatrous cultural currents threaten Christian faithfulness. In sum then, Christian theology has a positive and negative task. Positively, the whole of Christian theology is to explicate the Christian faith in the present to enable the church to continually take hold of its confession in a living way. Negatively, ‘dogmatic statements are for the purpose of protecting the statement of this fact [Christ’s work] from distortion by various tendencies of human thought.’ (1948a:165).

Newbigin saw two dangers to theological faithfulness. On the one hand, if the church simply repeats

theological formulations from the past or from another culture her faith will be irrelevant to the current problems of the present. On the other hand, making relevance to the issues and needs of the present the primary concern harboured the danger of a compromising accommodation. The church would be syncretistically absorbed into the current idols of the culture. Newbigin expresses this twofold danger graphically in terms of a 'jelly fish' or 'petrified fossil' church: '. . . there are Churches which have so evaded the duty of articulate confession that they have become, like jelly fish, incapable of moving in any direction but that of the tide; but there are also examples of Churches which have so identified faith with blind submission to authoritatively prescribed formulae that they have become but petrified fossils, having the form of the Church but not its life' (1948:142; compare Moltmann's fossil, chameleon images, 1975: 3).

Two examples of 'contextual theology', one within the canon of Scripture and the other from the first three centuries of the church, provide examples of how Newbigin understood the call to relate to the culture in a 'challengingly relevant' way. The first is the gospel of John. 'Here the language and thought forms of that Hellenistic world are so employed that Gnostics in all ages have thought that the book was written for them' (1986:53). Clearly the use of language that employs Gnostic categories and addresses Gnostic questions would make John's gospel *relevant* to gnostics of all ages. 'And yet nowhere in Scripture is the absolute contradiction between the word of God and human culture stated with more terrible clarity' (ibid). The gospel of John also *challenges* the idolatry at the heart of Gnostic thought. A brief example can be offered. John opens 'In the beginning was the *logos*.' As he continues it becomes apparent that the *logos* is not the impersonal and invisible law of rationality that permeated the universe giving it order but rather the man Jesus Christ. John begins by identifying with the classical longing for the source of order expressed in the term *logos*, but subverts, challenges, and contradicts the idolatrous understanding that had developed in the classical world. In this way John is both relevant and faithful: relevant because he uses familiar categories that express existential struggles, faithful because he challenges with the gospel the idolatrous worldview that shapes those categories calling for repentance.

The second example is the Trinitarian and Christological controversies from the early centuries of church history. Newbigin once remarked that he wished he had been taught in seminary that these disputes were really just examples of contextual theology; it would have enabled him to understand these struggles more accurately. The formulation of the Trinitarian faith was the fruit of a missionary encounter between the gospel and pagan classical culture. The church was entrusted with a message that in the man Jesus Christ God had entered history to reveal and accomplish the salvation of the world that would be completed at the end of history. That message needed to be communicated to people in the

classical world whose thought-world was very different than that of the Old Testament. Foundational to the classical worldview were the dichotomies of the intelligible and sensible worlds, and of virtue and fortune in history. We cannot enter deeply into this very foreign worldview but suffice it to say that such a way of understanding the world required a whole range of intermediate beings to bridge the gap between pure being which was unknowable and unapproachable (intelligible world), and the ordinary world of things and events (sensible world). If God was pure being, then it was natural (as also in the Indian worldview, Newbigin notes) to place Jesus somewhere in this intermediate range—something less than God. The struggle of the church was to protect the gospel from being accommodated and absorbed into this pagan worldview. But further, the church also wanted to offer the gospel to her contemporaries as a way beyond these crippling dichotomies.

It was in this context that the theologians of the first three centuries, especially Athanasius, developed the gospel into a full-blown doctrine of the Trinity. The language in which the trinitarian faith was expressed was ‘necessarily the language of time and place’ (1995a:27). The crucial word on which the whole conflict turned was *homoousion*. According to the classical worldview one could accept Jesus as an intermediary who was *like* God (*homoiousios*) but that not that he was one in being with God (*homoousios*). The historian Gibbon mocked at the spectacle of Christians fighting over a diphthong. But that one diphthong meant the difference between faithfully expressing the gospel or surrendering to the classical pagan worldview. ‘The whole existence of the Christian faith hung on that diphthong’ (1993:229).

The theological articulation of the Trinity was simply making explicit what was revealed in the gospel in the context of a missionary encounter with classical culture. This is contextual theology in the sense that the church formulated its doctrine in interaction with the currents of the contemporary culture, and also in the sense that the language and thought forms of the time were employed to make known and protect the gospel.

Newbigin continues: ‘. . . the church can never go back on what was then decided. But it is also true that it is not enough for the church to go on repeating in different cultural situations the same words and phrases. New ways have to be found of stating the essential Trinitarian faith, and for this the church in each new cultural situation has to go back to the original biblical sources of this faith in order to lay hold on it afresh and to state it afresh in contemporary terms’ (1995a:27). Newbigin goes on to note that today many Christians simply repeat that early Trinitarian formulation but that their working concept of God is far from the living Trinitarian confession of the early church. There is a need to rearticulate the Trinity in fresh terms to protect the very thing that the Fathers of the first three centuries sought to protect. The

Trinitarian faith must come alive in the church today!

All contextual theologies must engage in dialogue with other theologies in other cultural situations.

This dialogue must be ‘open to the witness of churches in all other places, and thus saved from absorption into the culture of [any one] place’ (1989:152). There is a danger that any one local contextual theology will be absorbed into the culture of that place. There is a need, therefore, for a dialogue that is both mutually corrective and mutually enriching: mutually enriching since each cultural contextualization opens up new insights into Scripture and mutually correcting because each cultural theology has blind spots that arise from cultural idolatry. Newbigin writes: ‘The reference to mutual correction is the crucial one. All reading of the Bible and all our Christian discipleship are necessarily shaped by the cultures which have formed us. . . . the only way in which the gospel can challenge our culturally conditioned interpretation of it is through the witness of those who read the Bible with minds shaped by other cultures. We have to listen to others. The mutual correction is sometimes unwelcome, but it is necessary and it is fruitful’ (1989:196).

Conclusion

If the church’s faith is to be a living faith it must continue to confess its faith and theologize in a new contexts. To be faithful to that call, the church today has, at least, a fourfold task: it must continually rearticulate its faith in fresh terms so that that faith might remain vibrant and be protected from the current idols of the day; this articulation must be done by way of a fresh return to Scripture which is God’s revelation and therefore the final authority and judge of all contextual theologies; the church must recognize that historical theology, creeds, and confessions are crucial, so that in any contextual theology, gains from past doctrinal struggles are not lost; the church must pay attention to the critique and enrichment that come from theologies in other parts of the world. Different parts of the church have a penchant for protecting and emphasizing one or another of these four aspects. But all four will be critical for faithfulness to the gospel today in our contemporary world.

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