Mission and Contextualization

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ABSTRACT—This study explores the concept of mission and contextualization from biblical and cultural perspectives. It describes the mission of Jesus and the continuation of such a mission as an essential nature of the church. It is a mission entrusted to the disciples and the early church based on Jesus’ mission for the inauguration of the kingdom of God. As Jesus Himself taught as well as the apostles the gospels portrayed the mission from local to universal dimensions, a view also emphasizes in the document Road Map for Mission. This study addresses the issue of contextualization of the gospel as it was also viewed in the early church and the need for contextualization for sharing the gospel in Asia countries and cultures. The author uses the experience of the apostle Paul in Athens as an example of contextualization for a model of contextualization of the gospel in Japan.

Key Words: mission, contextualization, Jesus, Paul, Athens, church, Adventist.

I. Introduction

In the late twentieth century, major studies were made in this area in different Christian churches and organizations. Through the Lausanne Movement, Evangelicals held conferences on contextualization at Willowbank (1978) and Haslev (1997). In the Roman Catholic Church, the encyclical Redemptoris Missio (1990) defined the Church’s developing understanding of inculturation as an ongoing dialogue between Christian faith and human cultures.

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World Council of Churches held a Conference on World Mission and Evangelism at Salvador in 1996 which made a wide-ranging study of gospel and cultures. The relationship of gospel and cultures is recognized as a crucial question for Christian mission. This question is variously referred to as 'contextualization', 'inculturation' or 'dialogue of world views'.

Christians are engaged in a conversation about how to speak and live the gospel in today's traditional, modern and emergent cultures from Cairo to Calcutta, from Cochabamba to Columbus. The technical term for their efforts is contextualization. Missionary theorists have pondered and written on it at length. More and more, those who do theology in the West are also trying to discover new ways of communicating and embodying the gospel for an emerging postmodern culture, but few have considered deeply how the early church contextualized the gospel, yet the New Testament provides numerous examples. How the early Christians as well as subsequent generations did understand them? How do we, today’s Christians, understand ourselves? And what effect do these “self understandings” have on our interpretation of mission? These questions are the questions I will explore in this paper.

II. Mission

Mission among Christians had a fairly circumscribed set of meaning from the 1950s. It referred to (a) sending missionaries to a designated territory, (b) activities undertaken by such missionaries, (c) geographical area where the missionaries were active, (d) the agency who dispatched the missionaries, (e) the non-Christian world or “mission field”, and (f) the center from which the missionaries operated on the “mission field.” These connotations attached to the world “mission” familiar as they may be, are fairly recent origin (Bosch, p. 1). “The church is the body of Christ. Yet it is has no call to exist as an end in itself, but to fulfill God’s purpose, i.e., to carry on the Lord’s ministry in the world, to do what He would do if He were still on the earth” (Dederen, p. 549). Throughout the Bible, God is a God of sending and of mission. That mission is indeed the continuation of Jesus’s mission. “He taught that He was sent by the Father with the task of seeking and saving the lost and that—although he envisioned a future worldwide mission—His own mission was focused on the nation of Israel. Jesus’ teaching on mission, however,