

Evangelism as Risky Negotiation

by Michael Frost

For too long we have made assumptions about evangelism that have moved it as a ministry initiative to the fringes of much church life. Rather than being infused throughout the culture of a local church, it is often seen as a "sideline" for those few who feel called to it.

Without wanting to fall into the thinking that suggests that every Christian has the gift of evangelism, I would want to suggest that for the church in the first-world to function biblically it has to recover its role as a mission movement. Only when it sees itself as a peripheral religious community placed within its milieu to reach the lost can the church properly exercise its gifts, including evangelism.

Further, I would suggest the role of the evangelist is a gifting to the local church and involves not only preaching to the unchurched, but also equipping the Christian community to see itself with greater clarity, both biblically and historically. The evangelist is the one (or more than one, of course) who is able to teach a congregation to see its place within its context and to fashion ministry initiatives accordingly. This way, evangelism is not a "department" of the church, but a *raison detre*, and all giftings; all ministries are infused with its passion.

Sadly, the church seems to be functioning in the West on the now outdated assumption that it belongs. I will contend that it doesn't belong and only when we see ourselves as not belonging do we come alive to a more foundational understanding of the New Testament.

Feeling Like a "Motherless Child"

In his book *Cadences of Home*, Walter Brueggemann suggests that the most appropriate biblical paradigm for understanding the church's place in Western civilisation today is that of exile. He has implied as much in several books and articles, but in *Cadences of Home* he makes his fullest case for this idea. In short he suggests that the Christian community is in exile in the West; no longer the dominant institution it once was; no longer able to take its central place in Christendom for granted. I think his suggestion is a helpful one.

Brueggemann says that we can realistically think of Christians as sharing the experienced anxiety of "deported" people. We might not be imprisoned in a foreign land, but we are finding ourselves increasingly trying to operate in a culture that fails to recognise the values, ideas and goals to which we must hold if we are to be true to our calling in Christ. We are, in effect then, in a land not our own.

He puts it this way, The exiled Jews of the Old Testament were of course geographically displaced. More than that, however, the exiles experienced a loss of the structured, reliable world which gave them meaning and coherence, and they found themselves in a context where their most treasured and trusted symbols of faith were mocked, trivialised

or dismissed. Exile is not primarily geographical, but it is social, moral and cultural. (1997:2)

It sounds familiar, doesn't it? The Christian church now finds itself in a time in history when the structured, reliable "world" is gone and when our treasured symbols of meaning are mocked and dismissed. We are exiles in a postmodern Western civilisation. Brueggemann, writing in a southern US context, wouldn't know the half of it. In places like Scandinavia, Western Europe and Australia the evangelical Christian community has been in exile for many more years than in the American church. His suggestion of exile as a metaphor for the contemporary Christian experience and its commitment to evangelism and preaching is highly pertinent.

Of course, the New Testament writers would have seen and interpreted the Exile in a somewhat different way, as a time of discipline by God, sent to punish Israel for her stubborn refusal to follow His law. They saw Jesus as enduring the ultimate exile, the most complete punishment for the sins of humankind, in his death on the cross. In this sense then, we can not really see ourselves as exiles in the truest sense in which the Exile was viewed in Scripture. However, as a metaphor, or motif, for seeing ourselves as God's people in a hostile empire, I think it is nonetheless very useful, as long as we don't press the metaphor too far. When in exile, God's people continued to struggle to find Him and to discern His purposes even when under the domination of a godless empire. Their experience, as recorded in the exilic literature, has much to teach us about our place as aliens and sojourners in this world (1 Peter 2:11).

In Cadences, Brueggemann makes several suggestions on how to preach in an exiled church environment, using in particular the relevant Old Testament texts. They are worth repeating here.

Preaching Among Exiles

Brueggemann (pp.4-11) enumerates six aspects of exile as a metaphor for the Christian church and six implications of this for the ministry of preaching:

- Exiles must grieve their loss and express their resentful sadness about what was and now is not and will never be again. Implication: The use of such biblical material as Lamentations is likely to resonate with the sadness of an exilic people. He suggests developing, through preaching, communities of honest sadness. Evangelistic ministry can reasonably recognise this sense of loss by the Christian community and affirm it as valuable. It is the honest recognition that things are not as they should be.
- Exiles feel like a "motherless child", that is, an abandoned, rootless, vulnerable orphan. Implication: Don't be afraid to make use of the genealogies and the extended histories in Scripture to help recover a sense of heritage and family. Surely, evangelistic ministry should include the important element of inviting the lost to join the family of God, a family with a rich history!
- The most obvious reality and greatest threat to exiles is the power of despair. Implication: Preach especially texts like Isaiah 40 - 55 to recover the good news that Yahweh has triumphed over the power of exile, and over the doubts exiles feel about God's faithfulness and power to save.

- Exile is an experience of profaned absence. Implication: In your preaching seek to recover the exilic ideas of circumcision (thankfully, he replaces this with baptism for our times), Sabbath and tabernacle.
- Exile is an experience of moral incongruity. Implication: Take on the issue of theodicy head on. Brueggemann suggests that an honest surfacing of the issue of theodicy in Joban terms, lest anyone perceive the current situation is "our fault".
- The danger in exile is to become so preoccupied with self that one cannot step outside oneself to rethink, reimagine, and redescribe larger reality. Implication: Analyse, in particular, biblical stories like Joseph, Esther and Daniel. Brueggemann suggests such stories refuse to allow us to embrace some fundamentalist us-versus-the-world model, but seeks to embrace "an endlessly cunning, risky process of negotiation."

As I said earlier, I think the metaphor of exile is a very helpful one to describe the current state of affairs and the above six suggestions are filled with possibilities. All six suggestions, in effect, invite the people of God to be brutally honest about our waning influence in contemporary society, but at the same time refuse to allow us to retreat into some woe-is-me, holier-than-thou spirituality. Brueggemann's sixth suggestion to take Joseph, Esther and Daniel seriously as exile-heroes is most pertinent. To quote him at length again, he says,

a. The story of Joseph concerns the capacity of an Israelite to cooperate fully with the established regime (perhaps too fully), but to maintain at the same time an edge of discernment that permits him to look out for his folk. He does not fully adopt the "reality" defined by his overlords.

b. The tale of Esther shows a courageous Jew willing and able to outflank established power, to gain not only honor for herself but well-being for her people.

c. The story of Daniel shows a young man pressed into the civil service of the empire, able to exercise authority in the empire precisely because he has maintained a sense of self rooted outside the empire. (1997:11)

This will be our chief dilemma in the days ahead; how do we embrace the endlessly cunning, risky process of negotiation with our world, a world that mocks our symbols and offers us neither hope nor reward? How will we evangelise this world if we don't belong to it?

I have previously spoken of the imperative of the church to develop contextualised evangelistic mission in Australia. I encouraged readers to consider that we now no longer fulfill the role as chaplains to a far-flung outpost of European Christendom, but that we are uninvited, unwanted missionaries in a first-world context. We are exiles on a mission from God. If we are to evangelise our nation we must understand our current position.

If we are to undertake the process of negotiation with a foreign power, while at the same time engaging as citizens of that power (a la Esther, Joseph, Daniel), we need some skills to ensure that we neither capitulate to the values of the society in which we are exiled, nor appear strange, but quaint fundamentalists. How do exiles do evangelism? The short answer is, contextually. But that seems too obvious. How do we contextualise our message in a disinterested, even hostile, culture without giving away too much in the negotiation process?

In 1987, missiologist, Paul Hiebert proposed a framework for the critical contextualisation of the gospel in un-Christian contexts. His model has been embraced around the world by those involved in cross-cultural mission. It is a four-step method that is transferable to a variety of contexts, including Australia and its various sub-cultures. If we were serious about reaching these sub-cultures with the gospel we would think more systemically about how to contextualise our evangelistic efforts. It is to his work that I now turn.

Critical Contextualisation

Many evangelicals have viewed the concept of contextualisation with suspicion because it has been often championed by the more liberal ends of the church spectrum. The evangelicals have often seen contextualisation quoted by liberals to validate what they (the evangelicals) have seen as a watering down of the gospel and a preparedness to put non-Christian culture before the claims of Christ. Irrespective of whether or not their fears were well founded, it must be noted that to be Daniels or Josephs or Esthers in contemporary western culture is to court the possibility of putting the context over the gospel. It is a risky prospect, and the source of the risk is in the possibility of syncretising the gospel.

Hiebert's model attempts to build safeguards that minimise the risk and limit the possibility of syncretism or a betrayal of the gospel. It doesn't rule them out, but it takes their possibility more seriously than many liberal thinkers have done in the past.

The four steps are as follows:

1. Exegesis of the Culture

Hiebert proposes a thoroughgoing study of the culture into which the gospel is to be presented. He believes that the culture must be examined phenomenologically by both local church leaders and the missionary leading the process. In a cross-cultural setting (Hiebert was most fully aware of the Indian context) this means that the locals and the missionary would gather as much data about the host culture as possible. This part of the process is done with the congregation who "uncritically gather and analyse the traditional beliefs and customs associated with some question at hand." (1987:109)

Note the two-fold emphasis on both congregational involvement and situation-specific questions. The missionary is not the only expert; the whole Christian community becomes involved. Also, rather than a wide-ranging investigation of a particular cultural milieu (which would require the skills of an anthropologist), the locals are asked to centre their inquiries on important issues raised in the day-to-day living out of faith.

In other words, a congregation ought to be taken through a serious and thorough examination of certain aspects of their culture, its language, the longings of its

people, its pathways of communication etc. Heibert emphasises that this ought to be done uncritically. The congregation oughtn't to jump to any conclusions or judgements. This step of the process involves simply listening and collating information.

There are traces of this approach found in the church-planting models of American Christian leaders like Rick Warren (Saddleback Community Church) and Bill Hybels (Willow Creek Community Church). However, Hiebert is proposing something more systematic than simply asking non-churchgoers to identify what they want in a church. He is proposing an ongoing analysis of the context in which a church exists. Therefore a group of Christians in St. Kilda, Melbourne or Newtown, Sydney will be ever involved in the gathering and analysing of traditional beliefs and customs, as much as a congregation in East Africa or southern India. Rather than asking what people want in a church program and then giving it to them, the contextualiser is always analysing cultural shifts and trends, bearing in mind that certain Scriptural injunctions will prohibit us from always just giving people what they want.

Hiebert encourages congregations to especially include new Christians in this process, by asking them about their beliefs and views. Again, it ought to be noted that Hiebert condemns a critical reaction to their views. He says, "The purpose here is to understand the old ways, not to judge them. If at this point the missionary shows any criticism of the customary beliefs and practices, the people will not talk about them for fear of being condemned. We shall only drive the old ways underground." (1987:109)

I am reminded here of the evangelistic efforts of such thoroughly contextualised ministries as Christian Surfers or Youth For Christ, both of whom spend considerable time informally and formally listening to the surfers/young people to whom they feel called. As the ascerbic Australian journalist, Max Harris, once said, "Christians are a dim, ego-tripping minority which is dead set on telling everybody why they ought to become Christians, instead of finding out why they're not." It can be concluded that listening is justifiably part of any evangelistic efforts by the church.

But further than this, in a culture where the church has been active for hundreds of years, it will serve that church well to seriously examine its own customs, language, traditions and beliefs. Part of the evangelist's role will include the questioning of long held sacred cows, not just for the sake of iconoclasm, but with a view to intentionally contextualising the gospel.

2. Exegesis of the Scripture and the Hermeneutical Bridge

In the second step the evangelist/missionary leads the congregation in a study of the Bible related to the question at hand. When he says 'second step', I don't take Hubert to mean that the study of the Scriptures can't/shouldn't take place until a

certain level of sociological study has taken place in the previous step. They are not mutually exclusive concerns. The study of the Bible and the study of culture can happen simultaneously.

It's here that Hubert sees the evangelist/missionary as having a more key role than in the first step. He says,

"This step is crucial, for if the people do not clearly grasp the biblical message as originally intended, they will have a distorted view of the gospel. This is where the pastor or missionary...has the most to offer in an understanding of biblical truth and in making it known in other cultures. While the people must be involved in the study of Scripture so that they grow in their own abilities to discern truth, the leader must have the meta- cultural grids that enable him or her to move between cultures. (1987:110)

So the role of the evangelist includes the teaching of biblical truth to a local congregation. This will involve the process of reminding Christians not only of what the Bible says about soteriology and Christology, but of ecclesiology. Many evangelical Christians believe a white, middle-class suburban morality is in fact ordained by Scripture and that most of the traditional practices of Protestant churches are biblical. An examination of New Testament ecclesiology would free congregations to be more open to negotiate with their host empire about their worship practices. In the same way that Peter had to examine his biblical view on circumcision to allow gentile Christians greater access to the first century church, so does the church today have to take a good look at what the Bible says are the essentials of Christian corporate life. I think we'd be surprised.

3. Critical Response

"The third step is for the people corporately to evaluate critically their own past customs in the light of their new biblical understandings, and to make decisions regarding their response to their new-found truths." (Hiebert 1987:110)

Hiebert's next step sounds easy, but is in fact very demanding. After emphasizing the importance of the expertise of the evangelist/missionary in the second step, he now turns the process back to the people. This is an important feature of his model; it is congregationally based. It is not reliant on "experts". It validates the contribution of new converts and older committed Christians. Only at the stage of Bible teaching does he emphasise the role of the leadership. He says,

(The gospel) is a message to which people must respond. ...it is not enough that the leaders be convinced about changes that may be needed. Leaders may share their personal convictions and point out the consequences of various decisions, but they must allow the people to make the final decision in evaluating their past customs. (1987:110)

Hiebert's assumption is that the new converts understand their culture better than those of us who examine it from without do. If we teach the Bible effectively and if we have examined the culture creatively, then we must trust the Christian community to evaluate the changes in language, customs, practices and beliefs that need to be embraced in order to critically contextualise the gospel.

This is where Hiebert is at his most radical. He wants us to trust the congregation, something that clergy have been notoriously poor at doing in the past. If the process is guided effectively, he suggests a number of ways a congregation might respond to old beliefs and customs:

- a. *Keeping that which is not unbiblical*
Many cultural practices are neither Christian nor non-Christian. They are neither sanctioned nor condemned in the Bible and therefore Christians can be ambivalent about them. In keeping such practices the church can reaffirm its own cultural identity and heritage.
 - b. *Rejecting that which is unbecoming for Christians*
Sometimes we might be surprised by what is rejected because we don't understand the significance of the rejection of certain songs, customs, beliefs etc. On other occasions the evangelist will need to probe why certain customs have not been rejected to help the congregation remain aware of any cultural "blind spots".
 - c. *Modifying practices to give them explicitly Christian meaning*
Hiebert mentions here Charles Wesley's use of popular pub songs, to which he set Christian lyrics and the fact that the early Christians used the synagogue form of worship, but modified it to fit their beliefs. In our context, if we were trying to reach young people, we might reject "moshing" as an aggressive form of dancing that emphasises individuality and includes a lot of pushing, shoving and jumping. Or we might validate it, but modify it to express togetherness, community and vitality. Hiebert suggests two other ways of doing such modification:
 - i. *Reject current practices but replace them with borrowed ones;* For example a tribal culture might reject polygamy and replace it with Christian marriage. The custom of marriage is not rejected. It is simply replaced with a borrowed form of monogamy.
 - ii. *Adopt rites drawn from our Christian heritage;* Naturally the adoption of the Lord's Supper and baptism connects any congregation with their new history as Christians. Culturally sensitive expressions of the communion feast and the rite of entry through baptism need to be thoroughly and biblically by the church.
- *Creating new symbols and rituals*
Finally, there may be the development of new, fresh expressions of the Christian experience. The Jesus Movement of the 1970s - forms of which are experiencing a revival in the '90s – developed a series of hand signals, sayings, slogans and even jewelry to communicate Christian beliefs. Today the five-coloured beads are still popular among younger Christians, as is the "What Would Jesus Do?" paraphernalia.

4. New Contextualised Practices

After the arduous, but important process outlined above, the congregation, under the leadership of the evangelist/missionary will seek to arrange the practices they have chosen, modified and created into a new set of rituals that contextually expresses Christian meaning.

Here in Australia there are some fine examples of contextualised evangelism. I will outline a handful:

GyMEA Anglican Church, Sydney – Soul Revival: an Anglican church in the southern Sydney suburbs has attempted to contextualise their outreach to young people from the surfer set around the southern beaches. The Soul Revival ministry features its own unique Christianised surfer jargon, clothing, jewelry, slogans and worship and teaching experiences. Owes a great deal to the Jesus Movement in the US.

South Melbourne Restoration Community and Exodus Ministries: a Church of Christ in South Melbourne that seeks to reach the more urbanised city-dwellers than the average suburban church. Has planted churches in Melbourne's western suburbs and to those who live on the street in St. Kilda. Also very committed to ministering to the homosexual community through Exodus Ministries.

Celebrate Messiah, Glenferrie, Melbourne: Christian mission to the original messengers of the gospel – the Jewish community. Has had significant impact with Russian Jews in Melbourne.

The Late Service, Adelaide: Not so much a church or a mission, but a fishbowl worship experience designed to engage non-Christian seekers in a consideration of the gospel. In arty Adelaide, these guys use multi-media like slide image, film, music, elaborate set design, various visual arts, poetry, dance etc to create a spiritual ambiance that directs those involved toward Christ. Very much targeted at the arts fringe community.

Youth Alive, national: High tech, event-based rallies (to use an old-fashioned term) designed to reach the youth dance culture. A very sympathetic article in Rolling Stone magazine indicates how much Youth Alive has insinuated themselves into youth culture in Australia. Very effective at gathering young people to hear the gospel, with all the attendant limitations of rally-style evangelism.

Christian Surfers, national: One of the best and most consistently contextualised mission initiatives in Australia. By running surfing contests and interacting informally on Australian beaches among young surfers, CS has had remarkable results.

The God Squad, national: With their association with Care & Communication Concern and St. Martins Church in Melbourne, The God Squad remains innovators of contextual mission. They, like Christian Surfers, have stuck to their guns for many years and seen many among the biker fraternity find faith in Christ.

This is by no means an exhaustive list. Others include The Waiters' Union (Brisbane), Glebe Café Church (Sydney), Youth for Christ (national) and Fusion (national). At first glance, it can be noted that a good number of the initiatives mentioned above are not local churches. And here lies my concern; the church has to take much more seriously its mandate as a mission movement and think missionally about reaching the community into which God places it.

Risky Negotiation

The above process is a difficult and painful one. It invites us to do what the Jews in exile in Babylon were forced to do; be the people of God in a foreign land. But the mission imperative placed upon us as Christians is even more urgent because of Christ's injunction for us to make disciples. It is risky because we run into the ever-real possibility of compromising the gospel in our attempts to be contextually appropriate.

Missiologists refer to such compromise – putting the context over the gospel – as syncretism. The four-step method outlined by Hiebert has several checks against syncretism built into it.

Hiebert says, critical contextualisation:

- a. takes the Bible seriously;
- b. recognises the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of all believers;
- c. sees the church as a hermeneutical community;
- d. sees each church operating within a global network, thus ensuring a broader international perspective.

Conclusion

So we will be well advised to recover the idea of the church as a missions movement in a hostile and unreceptive empire. We are exiles, in a sense, from a world that mocks our symbols and disregards our God. The only way forward is to finally be honest about our situation and to thoroughly contextualise the gospel within the culture and sub-cultures to which Christ has called us.