

Contextualization: Hermeneutical Remarks

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Introduction: Dialogue between the West and the Third World

In 1996 the Finnish New Testament scholar Heikki Räisänen wrote an interesting article 'Liberating exegesis?'¹ on the difference in approach to the interpretation of the Bible between Western scholars on the one hand and theologians from the Third World on the other hand. The whole issue concerns the fact that the historical approach to the Bible is being challenged by alternative approaches from the Third World, such as Liberation Theology. Räisänen himself fully embraces the historical-critical method, and it is precisely this approach which is being challenged by Third World theologians. In their view, such a historical approach does not meet the actual need of the church today, because it fails to apply the biblical message to today and it does not contribute to the relevance of the Christian faith to a Christian's daily life. Therefore, there is, they argue, an inadequacy in Western exegesis. Räisänen refers to the volume *Voices from the margin*, edited by R.S. Sugirtharajah,² which is indeed a good example of a programme by biblical scholars from the Third World. 'One of its hallmarks, especially conspicuous in the editor's contributions, is vehement criticism of Western exegesis which has subjected the Bible to "abstract, individualized and 'neutralized' reading", but has "very rarely ... focused on people's experience of hunger, sickness and exploitation"'.³

¹ In *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester*, 78 (1996), 193–204.

² *Voices from the margin: interpreting the Bible in the Third World* (New York: Orbis Books, 1991).

³ 'Liberating exegesis?', 193. For both quotations Räisänen refers to *Voices*, 1. 'Currently, Christian Scripture is at the centre of the theological agenda. This has been by and large due to the hermeneutical endeavours of Latin American liberation theologians. It was they who developed a new way of interpreting biblical data, and rescued the Bible from abstract, individualized and "neutralized" reading. The day-to-day struggle to survive in a situation of injustice and oppression prompted them to scrutinize scriptural texts in the light of their awareness of their own social context ... Generally, the dominant biblical scholarship has shied away from the needs of the weak and the needy. Very rarely has it focused on people's experience of hunger, sickness and exploitation', *Voices*, 1.

From a New Testament perspective I would like to make a contribution to this dialogue on interpretation between Western scholars, in this case Räisänen, and theologians from the Third World by making some hermeneutical remarks concentrating on the concept of contextualization.⁴ My position as a missionary in the Third World may enable me to make such a contribution, since the fact that I live in a culture very different from that of the West and that I teach at an ecumenical College may perhaps enhance my sensitivity to the concept of contextualization. There is also another reason why I want to take this opportunity to contribute to the dialogue as pointed out above. In 1996 I wrote a dissertation on the question whether Paul is a consistent writer by confronting my own hermeneutical model with Räisänen's view on Paul.⁵ Thus, when Räisänen gives his comment on a Third World programme, I feel all the more challenged to make my own contribution to this dialogue.

All my remarks made in this article are hermeneutical remarks, because the concept of contextualization belongs to the field of hermeneutics. The term hermeneutics itself will be used not only in the traditional sense of a systematic study of principles and methods of interpretation, but also in the sense of a study of the methods by which the texts in the past become existentially significant in the modern world. I want to show that hermeneutics used in this latter sense is already present in the New Testament texts because of the existence of the contextualization concept in these texts. The so-called hermeneutical gap between the past and the present can be bridged by using this concept. In other words, I want to show that the historical-critical method and the Liberation Theology proposed by Third World theologians are not really alternatives, and that we therefore do not have to make a choice between these two different approaches. I do not mean that we can have them both, but there is another way, not a *via media* but a *via optima*. Although the literature on contextual hermeneutics in the sense of, for example, Liberation Theology is vast, contextual studies of the New Testament have been minimal. I hope that my contribution may challenge others to make their contributions to the dialogue between the West and the Third World.

Historical-Critical Method. Exegesis Versus Application

First, it is advisable to focus on one side of the dialogue, namely on the historical-critical method as used, for example, by Räisänen.

⁴ With special thanks to Mrs Diane Ray and to my colleague, Dr Charles S. Morrice, who have kindly made suggestions regarding the improvement of my English.

⁵ T.E. van Spanje, *Inconsistentie bij Paulus? Een confrontatie met het werk van Heikki Räisänen* (Kampen: Kok, 1996). My dissertation is written in Dutch with a summary in English (English translation forthcoming).

Only a few remarks are necessary on the presuppositions and implications of this method which are important within the context of the dialogue between the West and the Third World in order to come to a proper concept of hermeneutics.⁶

F.C. Baur (1792–1860) is commonly regarded as the first scholar who tried to approach the Bible through ‘objective’ means.⁷ He thought that the use of human reason is one of the best tools to study the Bible. It is obvious that he inherited this rationalistic method from seventeenth-century scholars, who believed that history could be explained and interpreted in terms of natural laws. One of Baur’s aims was to look for the sources of the New Testament and to try to retrace and describe the development of early Christianity without being unduly prejudiced by dogmatic statements and theological limitations. Development is one of the key words within this method, because it is believed that the whole rise of early Christianity can be viewed as an evolutionary process.⁸ It is evident that according to the historical-critical method the Bible records only the religious experiences of Jews and Christians rather than the divine timeless revelation, and since the Bible is seen as merely the result of theological writers, interpreters do not refrain from treating it precisely as they do other ancient religious literature. So this general comparative religious approach is the fundamental presupposition of the historical-critical method.

It would be the end of this discussion if we were to reduce the whole issue to the question of whether we are willing to consider the Bible as God’s revelation, although this is the core of the whole issue (see below). Not only can it not be proved that the Bible is God’s special revelation to humanity, but there are also other religious documents which make the same claim. In other words, the Bible as God’s revelation is a matter of faith. Nevertheless, the

⁶ There is considerable literature on this topic. E.g., I.H. Marshall, ‘Historical criticism’, in I.H. Marshall (ed.), *New Testament interpretation: essays on principles and methods*, revised edn (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1979), 126–38. See for a discussion of this method and for the importance of presuppositions about methodology: W.W. Klein, C.L. Blomberg and R.L. Hubbard, jun., *Introduction to Biblical interpretation* (Dallas-London-Vancouver-Melbourne: Word Publishing, 1993), 44–5 and 95ff. In this article I owe many of my insights to this volume (henceforth: *Interpretation*), which I recommend to others who do research on hermeneutics. For German literature see L.G. Goppelt, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1981), 24ff. See also the Dutch article written by M. de Jonge, ‘De Historisch-Kritische Methode’, in A.F.J. Klijn (ed.), *Inleiding tot de studie van het Nieuwe Testament* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1982), 71–85. See for a very critical discussion of the historical-critical method: E. Linnemann, *Historical criticism of the Bible: methodology or ideology? Reflections of a Bultmannian turned Evangelical* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993).

⁷ In the eighteenth century J.S. Semler had already presented a programme for this method.

⁸ Räisänen, who intends to write a Theology of the New Testament, does not want to describe such an enterprise as a Theology any more, but rather as the rise of early Christianity viewed from the basis of a sociological development in terms of tradition, experience and interpretation. See his *Beyond New Testament theology: a story and a programme* (London-Philadelphia: SCM Press, 1990).

question is legitimate whether the historical-critical method rules out such a statement *beforehand*. To put it differently, are the preunderstandings of the historical-critical method justified?

Preunderstanding concerns what interpreters expect to 'find' when they interpret the Bible. Historians, using the best methods of rational inquiry, expect to uncover something about the ancient world. But most historians will not expect to discover *God*⁹ or be able to speak about God as the result of that inquiry. They will demur, saying that their methods of inquiry cannot investigate such matters. Using historical methods, they can say only what a certain *people*¹⁰ believed or wrote about God.¹¹

The fact that historical criticism presupposes a naturalistic world view, which interprets everything in terms of natural laws, logically implies that the possibility of supernatural intervention is excluded,¹² because the historical approach always compares events with already known data. There is great scepticism regarding the possibility of supranatural occurrences, for such events cannot be explained in natural terms.¹³ To be more precise, the historical method always explains events by *analogy*, and therefore a unique event such as God's revelation or intervention in history cannot be explained and will be even ruled out in due course.¹⁴ Another important and logical implication in the context of the dialogue between the West and the Third World is that according to historical criticism the Bible can no longer be a guide for today, because the contents of the Bible are nothing more than a human theological utterance of, in the best case, pious Jews and inspired Christians.¹⁵ In the words of R. Morgan and J. Barton, 'Historical understanding of the texts does not provide contemporary religious guidance unless one is already convinced of their authority ... Rational methods are indispensable, but they read the texts as human utterances, and cannot themselves speak normatively of transcendence'.¹⁶ If a historian treats the Bible merely as a collection of ancient religious documents, in which he does not expect to hear the voice of God, then he does not find it necessary

⁹ My italics.

¹⁰ My italics.

¹¹ *Interpretation*, 102.

¹² See *ibid.*, 44.

¹³ 'To accept the supernatural would mean giving up the usual methods of establishing historical probability and leave no firm basis for historical investigation, since no grounds would exist for preferring one account of an event to another', I.H. Marshall, 'Historical criticism', 129.

¹⁴ A significant example of this ruling out is Räsänen's interpretation of the word *μυστήριον*, Rom. 11:25. Although this word belongs to the standard apocalyptic vocabulary Räsänen does not interpret it as such. See my *Inconsistentie bij Paulus? Een confrontatie met het werk van Heikki Räsänen*, 91 n. 28 and pp. 100–1.

¹⁵ L.G. Goppelt states on the historical-critical method: 'Es besagt: Auch die Bibel bzw. ihre Schriften müssen zuerst als historische Urkunden der Vergangenheit gesehen werden, nicht als ein die Gegenwart beanspruchendes Wort', *Theologie*, 24.

¹⁶ Quoted by W.W. Klein et al., *Interpretation*, 102–3.

to make an application from those same documents to the world today.¹⁷ And is such an approach fair to a document which claims to be God's special revelation?¹⁸

Does all this imply that the historical-critical method is totally illegitimate in every sense? To say that would be naive. There *is* a certain limited legitimacy within this method for the simple reason that the message of the Bible comes to us in and through *history*. And besides, the biblical texts originated within a certain *historical* framework. This method is useful '... in order to elucidate the historical statements made in the NT. There *are* problems of interpretation in the NT that cannot be solved apart from historical study, and it does no good to ignore them and try to move on straight to a spiritual or devotional exposition of a passage'.¹⁹ The use of the historical-critical method can thus be defended *only* in so far as it concentrates on the *historical* aspects of a passage. To put it differently, I do *not* defend the use of the well-known historical-critical method but only a *historical* study as such.²⁰

There is also another reason for the necessity of historical study. Räisänen uses in his article a distinction proposed by K. Stendahl between what the text *meant* and what the text *means*.²¹ We could also draw another popular and similar distinction, namely between textual meaning and significance. "Meaning" refers to the ideas the biblical text originally intended to communicate to its readers; "significance" refers to the implications of that meaning in different, later situations'.²² Sugirtharajah, however, rejects such a

¹⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, 100.

¹⁸ I refrain here from discussing another consequence of the historical-critical method, namely that certain events described in the New Testament did not take place as they are recorded. See I.H. Marshall's article 'Historical criticism'.

¹⁹ I.H. Marshall, 'Historical criticism', 131. On the same page he continues: 'There are, for example, two *prima facie* different datings of the crucifixion in the Synoptic Gospels and John: it is impossible to study the Gospels seriously and avoid trying to discover *when* Jesus was crucified and *why* the Gospel records differ on so important a date'. On page 132 of this same article: 'The Bible needs interpretation, and historical criticism is part of that process. This is not, of course, to say that the Bible is hopelessly obscure until the scholars have done their work on it; its broad meaning is clear enough, but the details of interpretation need scholarly skill'.

²⁰ In this sense it could be argued that there is hardly any other method available than the historical-critical method because of the historical aspects of the Bible. Cf. I.H. Marshall: 'Historical criticism is both legitimate and necessary', 'Historical criticism', 131. See also *Interpretation*, 96 n. 29: 'D.A. Hagner puts it well: "Because revelation comes to us in and through history, historical criticism is not an option but a necessity ..."'. Yet if one still prefers to use the common term 'historical criticism' as a legitimate option, then 'criticism' ought *not* to be understood as the denying of historicity but to be *re-defined* as *the making of informed judgments on the historical context of a historical event*. See *Interpretation*, 96 n. 29.

²¹ See 'Liberating exegesis?', 194.

²² *Interpretation*, 401. 'Textual meaning' is: 'that which the words and grammatical structures of that text disclose about the probable intention of its author/editor and the probable understanding of that text by its intended readers', *ibid.*, 133 (originally in italics). See also *ibid.*, 121 n. 10 and p. 131.

division of labour ‘between biblical scholarship and theological enterprise’, and he even calls such a division ‘the original sin of the historical-critical method’.²³ Räsänen responds to this accusation by saying: ‘If this dichotomy be the original sin of the historical method, then I must plead the chief of sinners, having written a programmatic defence of that approach’.²⁴ In my view, Räsänen is correct when he states: ‘The proponent of division of labour should be recognized as a friend, rather than enemy, of contextual theology’.²⁵ It is impossible to say anything about the significance of a text without having a proper insight into its meaning. Textual meaning goes *before* significance. Without such a proper insight the texts can easily be used as *dicta probantia*. This is the danger Räsänen is pointing at when he says: ‘I can think of another possible motive which is more problematic. Could it be that in the background lurks the desire to back one’s own stance with the authority of “the Bible”, a method with which historical Christianity is thoroughly familiar?’²⁶ He terms this the ‘danger of false “biblicism”’.²⁷ Exegesis might, in my view, indeed serve to liberate readers and interpreters from false expectations concerning the Bible, and also within this context historical study can be recognized as a friend rather than an enemy, for this friend gives us necessary background information in order to gain proper insight into the textual meaning.

However, even our best friends have their shortcomings. My point is that, although historical study is necessary to find the textual meaning of a text, it has its limitations, because, as we have seen above, such a method can by its very nature never consider the Bible as God’s special revelation, and therefore this method can *sui generis* never lead to valid normative conclusions about the significance of the Bible for today. Räsänen is right in asserting that the slogan ‘Exegesis Versus Application’ can be applied to the historical-critical method.²⁸ This method increases the gap between

²³ See ‘Liberating exegesis?’, 194. ‘One of the vexing problems of biblical interpretation is how to make the interpretative trek from the biblical milieu to the present day. This problem is specifically the creation of the historical-critical methods. Historical criticism tends to introduce into the task of interpretation a division of labour between the exegete and the expositor, between the scholar and the preacher, and between biblical scholarship and theological enterprise. This is the original sin of the historical-critical method’, *Voices*, 436.

²⁴ ‘Liberating exegesis?’, 194. See his *Beyond New Testament theology: a story and a programme* (London-Philadelphia: SCM Press, 1990).

²⁵ ‘Liberating exegesis?’, 194. ‘It is my contention that a division of labour between exegesis and application actually facilitates the task of contextual theology. Then why is it so strongly opposed?’, *ibid.*, 201.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 201.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 201.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 201ff. In his *Beyond New Testament theology*, 97–8, Räsänen even defends the view that we have to give up the bond between exegesis and preaching.

the past and the present by limiting the meaning *and* significance of the text to the past.²⁹ *Statements of the New Testament become automatically non-binding and contemporary in their relevance as a result of the fundamental presupposition of the historical-critical method (general comparative religious approach), and the denial of the existence of a text's significance for today is due to this fundamental presupposition.* Now every method has its own limitations and blind spots. It is more important, however, that we should be *aware* of its shortcomings³⁰ and that we must try to *compensate* for these by using other methods at the same time. Historical study can be recognized as a friend of contextual theology only with regard to the elucidation of the textual meaning of a text. But this same friend becomes a complete stranger when it comes to the application of the textual meaning to today.

Towards a Justifiable Hermeneutics. Interpreting the Bible on its Own Terms

The first task of the interpreter is to do full justice to the texts themselves. Therefore our models of hermeneutics have to be deduced from the texts and our presuppositions have to be consistent with the Bible's view of itself. They must correspond with the biblical data. In short, the Bible must be interpreted on its own terms.³¹

It is obvious that the Bible claims to be God's special revelation, and it states clearly that it owes its origin to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and to divine revelation, not to human invention (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:20–21).³² Together with W.W. Klein, C.L. Blomberg and R.L. Hubbard, jun., and many others, I adopt the presupposition that 'the Bible is a supernatural book, God's written revelation to his people given through prepared and selected spokespersons by the process of inspiration'.³³ I am well aware of the fact that not all interpreters are willing to adopt this presupposition; but even then we have to work within the Bible's own framework if we want to do full justice to the texts.³⁴ After

²⁹ L.G. Goppelt: 'Von der Kirche her gesehen erweist sich die Entstehung der historischen Schriftforschung heute als das einschneidendste kirchliche Ereignis seit der Reformation. Die Schrift wurde aus dem gegenwärtigen Gesprächspartner der Kirche zunächst zur fernen historischen Urkunde. Aus dem theologischen Gegenüber wurde die historische Distanz', *Theologie*, 24–5.

³⁰ Sometimes scholars have been astonishingly blind to the alarming conclusion mentioned in the text. Much attention, however, has been paid to another consequence of the historical-critical method, namely that some parts of the New Testament would not be historically reliable any more. There is no need to discuss this last aspect here.

³¹ See *Interpretation*, 95.

³² See *ibid.*, 88ff. and 378 n. 2.

³³ *Ibid.*, 88. Originally in italics.

³⁴ See *ibid.*, 94.

having stated this we could concentrate our discussion on the doctrine of inspiration by pointing out several levels or modifications of inspiration. But in that case we would miss the point I want to make here. By using the term inspiration I only want to argue that the Bible has a *divine status* and that ‘... it would be illegitimate to subject it to methods that deny or reject its divine status’.³⁵ It is bad hermeneutics if we do not interpret the Bible on its own terms, regardless of the question whether we are personally convinced of the Bible’s divine status.

One of the consequences of the divine status of the Bible is that it has authority not only for the first recipients but also for later generations. In other words, if God speaks his words in the Bible, then these words must also be valid and relevant to modern people.³⁶ The Bible itself also claims that its message is not only relevant to its first readers, but also to subsequent generations (Matt. 28:19; John 17:20; Rom. 15:4; 1 Cor. 10:6; 2 Tim. 3:16).³⁷ It is not my wish to adhere to the so-called new hermeneutic, which is mainly built on R. Bultmann, according to which the Bible interprets its readers, not *vice versa*.³⁸ In this way the textual meaning is being deemphasized, which is incorrect.³⁹ As far as I can see the task of the interpreter is to navigate between the Scylla and the Charybdis. On the one hand we have to keep a distance from the Scylla which argues that the Bible has no impact today, interpretation of the Bible being merely an exercise in ancient history on the basis of general comparative religious research.⁴⁰ The Bible is, however, *more* than just a description of the rise of early Christianity. ‘Yet to abandon the historical reference and seek only for some felicitous significance for today is equally misguided’.⁴¹ In that case our investigation would become stranded on the Charybdis arguing that we have to read the Bible literally, as it were. But we have already seen that we need a certain historical approach. The Bible is not like a parachute which lands

³⁵ Ibid., 95–6.

³⁶ ‘We presuppose the goal of hermeneutics to be the meaning the biblical writers “meant” to communicate at the time of the communication, at least to the extent that those intentions are recoverable in the texts they produced. As a corollary to this, God’s role in inspiration assures that the Bible spoke not only to its original readers or hearers, but it also speaks to us today’, *ibid.*, 98.

³⁷ See *ibid.*, 401ff.

³⁸ See, e.g., A.C. Thiselton, ‘The new hermeneutic’, in I.H. Marshall (ed.), *New Testament interpretation: essays on principles and methods*, revised edn (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1979), 308–33. See also *Interpretation*, 50–1 and 105–6.

³⁹ ‘Hence, it runs the risk of losing its roots in the biblical text’, *Interpretation*, 51. ‘But what about the objective message conveyed in the Bible? ... What about the meaning the text had for its original readers?’, *ibid.*, 105.

⁴⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, 83.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 83.

in the twentieth century, and it cannot be read like a newspaper, for there is a distance in time and culture between the Bible and modern interpreters. Biblical passages need to be interpreted first in their original historical context. In sum, we have to pay attention to the textual meaning and to the significance of the text *equally*. If we are willing to adopt the view that on the one hand the biblical message is relevant to all times and that the truth of the Bible has supracultural validity,⁴² and that on the other hand there is a difference between the historical context of the Bible and ours, we have to look for a hermeneutical model which takes into account both sides. The concept of contextualization is such a model.

Contextualization: a Hermeneutical Model

The term contextualization has arisen within missiological circles. Missiologists became aware that culture had been too much neglected in their studies,⁴³ and by using the term contextualization they tried to throw fresh light on the question how to apply the Bible cross-culturally from a Western to a non-Western context. The term was first introduced probably in the early 1970s.⁴⁴ Since then this term has been widely used within missiological circles, but, unfortunately, it has been variously defined. Various terms like transculturation, incarnation, accommodation, adaptation, acculturation, indigenization, inculturation, translation, etc. have been added to this term.⁴⁵ In recent literature the term liberation has also been used to denote contextualization,⁴⁶ and 'liberation' and 'contextualization' are not seldom used as synonyms. In my view, however, Liberation Theology cannot, from a hermeneutical viewpoint, be labelled as a form of contextualization (see below). Although there is to a certain extent confusion regarding the

⁴² Cf. Acts 2:9–11.

⁴³ See, e.g., D.J. Hesselgrave (ed.), *Theology and mission. Papers given at Trinity consultation no. 1* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), 103ff.

⁴⁴ According to J.O. Buswell, III, the term 'contextualization' was first introduced by Byang Kato at the International Congress on World Evangelization in Lausanne, Switzerland, in 1974. See J.O. Buswell, III, 'Contextualization: theory, tradition, and method', in D.J. Hesselgrave (ed.), *Theology and mission. Papers given at Trinity consultation no. 1* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), 87. G.L. Archer, jun., however, thinks that this term was first introduced by Shoki Coe in 1972. See G.L. Archer, jun., 'Contextualization: some implications from life and witness in the Old Testament', in D.J. Hesselgrave (ed.), *New horizons in world mission. Evangelicals and the Christian mission in the 1980s. Papers given at Trinity consultation no. 2* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), 199. See also D.J. Bosch, *Transforming mission: paradigm shifts in theology of mission* (New York: Orbis Books, 1995), 420ff.

⁴⁵ See also J.O. Buswell, III, 'Contextualization: theory, tradition, and method', 91ff and C.R. Taber, *The world is too much with us. 'Culture' in modern Protestant missions* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1991), 174–9.

⁴⁶ See, e.g., Räsänen's article 'Liberating exegesis?'. Cf. D.J. Bosch, *Transforming mission*, 420ff.

definition of this term a short overview of some definitions⁴⁷ shows that there is a certain consensus: contextualization refers to the way the Gospel is being communicated, whereby the relevance of the Gospel to the specific cultural situation is pointed out. Contextualization is, in my view, in the first place a matter of communication, and therefore attention must be paid to a local culture,⁴⁸ for example its language, in order to be able to use

⁴⁷ Byand Kato explained: 'We understand the term to mean making concepts or ideals relevant in a given situation Since the Gospel message is inspired but the mode of its expression is not, contextualization of the modes of expression is not only right but necessary'. Gadiel Isidro of Manila defines contextualization as 'the attempt ... to analyse the situation and then from an absolute perspective of the Gospel make this absolute unchanging Gospel speak with relevance ...'. Both definitions are quoted by J.O. Buswell, III, 'Contextualization: theory, tradition, and method', 87. J.O. Buswell himself states in his reply to other contributions in the same volume *Theology and mission*, 124: 'Contextualization of the gospel begins with the very translation of the words, continues with the rendering of ideas into familiar idioms, and proceeds through the language and the rest of the culture to put the unchangeable gospel content into the thought forms of the receiving society'. D.J. Hesselgrave asserts: 'As for *contextualization*, it is needed to make the message meaningful, relevant, persuasive, and effective within the respondent culture', *Communicating Christ cross-culturally: an introduction to missionary communication* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978), 86. B.J. Nicholls defines contextualization as 'the translation of the unchanging content of the Gospel of the kingdom into verbal forms *meaningful* to the peoples in their separate cultures and within their particular existential situations', quoted by D.J. Hesselgrave, *Planting churches cross-culturally: a guide for home and foreign missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991), 208–9. In another place Hesselgrave summarizes: '... cultural contextualization of Christian truth involves a dynamic process of sympathetic understanding leading to empathetic identification with the culture so that Christianity may be "inculturated" within the indigenous forms of the recipient peoples', D.J. Hesselgrave (ed.), *Theology and mission*, 329. '... contextualization can be thought of as the attempt to communicate the message of the person, works, Word, and will of God in a way that is faithful to God's revelation, especially as it is put forth in the teachings of Holy Scripture, and that is meaningful to respondents in their respective cultural and existential contexts. Contextualization is both verbal and nonverbal and has to do with theologizing; Bible translation, interpretation, and application; incarnational lifestyle; evangelism; Christian instruction; church planting and growth; church organization; worship style — indeed with all of those activities involved in carrying out the Great Commission', D.J. Hesselgrave and E. Rommen, *Contextualization: meanings, methods, and models* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), 200. G.R. Osborne defines contextualization as 'the crosscultural communication of a text's significance for today', quoted by W.W. Klein et al., *Interpretation*, 19 n. 25. W.W. Klein, C.L. Blomberg and R.L. Hubbard, jun., say that the term contextualization 'describes the process of "packaging" the gospel (and other biblical truth) in ways that are relevant to the diversity of modern cultures', *Interpretation*, 174 n. 29. 'The process of contextualization reexpresses the ideas presented in a biblical passage in the language of today so that they convey the same impact to modern hearers', *ibid.*, 174. See further B. Hoedemaker, 'Contextual analysis and unity of perspective. An exercise in missiological method', in J. Van Nieuwenhove and B. Klein Goldewijk (ed.), *Popular religion, liberation and contextual theology* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1991), 200–9. See also D.J. Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ cross-culturally: an introduction to missionary communication*, second edn (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 131–44.

⁴⁸ The term culture could be defined as: '... a more or less coherent set of ideas (symbols, taxonomies, definitions, explanations, values, attitudes, and rules) which are created and shared by a group of people and transmitted to their children, and which enable them to make sense of their experience and to cope with their natural and social worlds to their collective advantage', C.R. Taber, *The world is too much with us. 'Culture' in modern Protestant missions*, 3. In this article I concentrate mainly on the *nature* of a culture (its ideas).

adequate contemporary idioms to convey the kerygma⁴⁹ of a biblical passage. In other words, the kerygma must be made understandable and intelligible. And because contextualization is also a matter of indicating the kerygma's relevance to a specific situation within a local culture, attention must be paid to that specific historical situation as well. In other words, the implications of the kerygma in a given situation must be indicated. Therefore, I define contextualization as *the process of communication by which the unchanging kerygma ('text') is made relevant to a specific historical situation within a local culture ('context') in forms with which the recipients are familiar*. In my view, contextualization is more than just the packaging⁵⁰ of the kerygma, since the relevance of the kerygma in a given situation also determines the *contents* of the application to that specific situation. Contextualization is not an empty form. So there are, it seems to me, three steps within the process of contextualization in this order: (1) There is a certain kerygma which the missionary or preacher wants to convey. This kerygma can be labelled as a *universal principle*, since it is valid for all people at all times. (2) Before this kerygma can be applied, the missionary needs to know (a) the historical context or the specific situation of his people, because he wants to make his kerygma relevant to these people in this specific situation,⁵¹ and (b) the culture of these people in order to be able to make his kerygma understandable. These two aspects can be taken together and can be labelled as the *historical and cultural context*. (3) The last step is the application of this kerygma by using the idioms and terms of that culture. Such an application can be labelled as a *specific principle*. So the universal principle is, as it were, being translated into a specific principle.⁵² The universal principle and the specific principle must not be confused, because the historical and cultural context has determined the way the universal principle has been translated into the specific principle.⁵³

⁴⁹ In this article I use the term kerygma in the sense of 'the intended message of a biblical passage'.

⁵⁰ Contra, e.g., D.J. Hesselgrave (ed.), *Theology and mission*, 330. On this same page it is stated that the missionary's question must be 'What is content — the scriptural revelation of the gospel — and what is "packaging"?' In my view, the distinction between content and packaging is not precise or even wrong when referring to the principle of contextualization. I prefer to distinguish between universal principle and specific principle. See below in the text. Cf. *Interpretation*, 421ff.

⁵¹ The question can be asked whether this specific situation is the first step within this process. Although the specific situation gives the immediate *occasion* for preaching the Gospel, it is not the *reason* for preaching it. See also my remarks on Liberation Theology below.

⁵² A universal principle *must* be translated into a specific principle, for the kerygma cannot exist apart from any context or culture. The kerygma (Gospel) is always a *concretissimum*.

⁵³ One of the consequences of contextualization is the sheer variety within Christianity. Thus the different traditions within Christianity are sometimes due, because of contextualization, to various cultures. Hence, contradictions between traditions are also sometimes culturally determined. Cf. H.M. Vroom, 'Contextualiteit en criteria voor goed christelijk geloof', in J. Tennekes and H.M. Vroom (ed.), *Contextualiteit en christelijk geloof* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1989), 33 and 41.

This process of contextualization is, however, not as simple as it seems, not only because the missionary needs to know all the characteristics of his own culture (e.g. Western culture) and the so-called target culture (e.g. Asian culture), which is no sinecure, but also because the contextualization concept already occurs in the Bible itself. There are in fact three cultures which must be taken into account: the missionary's own culture, the target culture, *and* the Graeco-Roman-Hebrew culture of the Bible.⁵⁴ As has already been stated above, we cannot read the Bible as a newspaper, since there is a distance in time and culture between the Bible and modern interpreters. The concept of contextualization highlights this distance. In short, when a missionary is faced with the question how to apply the biblical kerygma to a specific historical and cultural situation, he also has to scrutinize the texts from a viewpoint of contextualization in order to be able to find the biblical kerygma.

A few examples of contextualization in the Bible itself may, first, be briefly considered.⁵⁵ The supreme example of contextualization is the incarnation of Jesus Christ, by whom the heavenly kerygma of salvation is made understandable and even visible.⁵⁶ The world view of the Old Testament, for instance the division of the whole world into the three levels of heaven, earth, and water under the earth (Exod. 20:4), with the earth as the centre of the whole universe, is also an example of contextualization. Thus regarding this division, the idioms of the Hebrew culture are used to convey the universal principle that no image or any likeness of anything that is in the *whole universe* shall be made to refer to the transcendence of God who cannot be represented by *any* possible image. Similarly regarding the earth as the centre of the whole universe, idioms of the same culture are used to convey the universal principle that God's salvation is in the first place related to the *earth* within the universe (the earth as the central focus of God's salvation).⁵⁷ A very general example is the use of the Hebrew and Greek language, because the kerygma is communicated by means with which the recipients are familiar (their *own* language). Also the New Testament documents themselves can be viewed as examples of cross-cultural encounters by which the New Testament writers try to make the transition to

⁵⁴ See e.g., D.J. Hesselgrave and E. Rommen, *Contextualization*, 170–2.

⁵⁵ See also N.R. Ericson, 'Implications from the New Testament for contextualization', in D.J. Hesselgrave (ed.), *Theology and mission*, 74–9.

⁵⁶ The terms by which the kerygma is made intelligible, namely flesh and blood, are *constant* factors which, of course, are always components of human beings, independent of a culture, and therefore all can understand the heavenly kerygma. Hence, the specific principle, which can be described as Jesus's whole ministry, can be applied to every situation at all times. See also D.J. Hesselgrave (ed.), *Theology and mission*, 329.

⁵⁷ See also Th.C. Vriezen, *An outline of Old Testament theology* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1970), 331ff.

other cultures. For instance, the Gospels themselves are examples of contextualization, because they reflect the cultural orientation of their authors and they are addressed to a specific people. Thus the Gospel according to Matthew is addressed to the Jews.⁵⁸ Although there is hardly any reference made to it in the relevant literature, the use of the *logos* idea in the Prologue to John is, in my view, also a very clear example, because the pre-existence of the Son of God and the fact that he is the divine expression of God are conveyed by using idioms of the contemporary Hellenistic world.⁵⁹ The use of the term εὐαγγέλιον can also be viewed as an example, since it was not created by the New Testament writers themselves but had already special association with the Hellenistic Emperor-cult.⁶⁰ It is similar with regard to the use of the word κύριος. Thus if it is not to be associated with the Hellenistic mysteries (W. Bousset), the religious background of the LXX determines its association and connotation, for κύριος is the Greek translation of the tetragrammaton YHWH. A further illustrating example of contextualization is Paul's speech on (before?) the Areopagus (Acts 17:22–31). Throughout his speech Paul uses in an emphatic way adequate contemporary idioms to convey the kerygma, quoting explicitly, for example, the Stoic poet Aratus *Phaenomena* 5 in Acts 17:28b.⁶¹

Can we give a hermeneutical concept that will assist in applying the biblical message (kerygma) to a certain historical situation today with a specific cultural background? In other words, can we answer the question how to bridge the hermeneutical gap between the past and the present? In the biblical text we find, as it were, a combination of a universal principle (kerygma) and a specific principle (application). The universal principle is contextualized into a specific principle by using contemporary idioms of the Graeco-Roman-Hebrew culture of the Bible. This universal principle (*not* the specific principle) must be applied to a present specific and cultural situation which, of course, differs in very

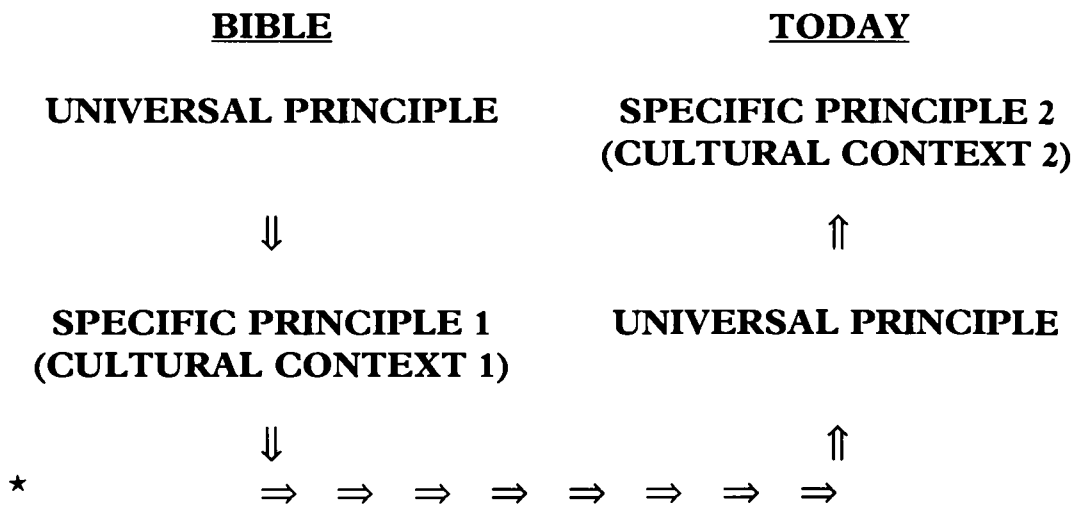
⁵⁸ See D.J. Hesselgrave and E. Rommen, *Contextualization*, 8.

⁵⁹ See e.g., G. Kittel (ed.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament. Volume IV* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 69ff.

⁶⁰ See e.g., C.E.B. Cranfield, *A critical and exegetical commentary on the Epistle to the Romans I* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1990), 55.

⁶¹ I find it still very strange that E. Norden (and after him many other scholars) denied the Pauline authenticity of this speech by referring to Paul's use of Stoic material. The opposite, however, is rather true, for Paul as a missionary knew, of course, how to contextualize the kerygma by using terms of the cultural background of his listeners. See E. Norden, *Agnostos Theos. Untersuchungen zur Formengeschichte religiöser Rede* (Leipzig-Berlin: Teubner, 1913). Compare also M. Dibelius who came to another interpretation, namely although Paul was not the author of the speech on the Areopagus, Luke presented it as an almost perfect example of a mission speech because of the use of Stoic material! '... Lukas hat diese Rede als Beispiel einer vorbildlichen Heidenpredigt geschaffen ...', M. Dibelius, *Paulus auf dem Areopag* (Sitzungsberichte der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften. Philosophisch-historische Klasse. Jahrgang 1938/39. 2. Abhandlung), 53.

many aspects from the biblical culture. In the process of applying the biblical universal principle to today we have to use the idioms of our own culture. Consider this diagram:⁶²



Specific principle 1 and specific principle 2 do not need to be the same principles. They can differ or even form a contrast,⁶³ since it all depends upon the historical and cultural context. But the *one* universal principle of the biblical text is applied to the situation today. The most difficult part within this hermeneutical process is the procedure indicated by an asterisk in the diagram above. This procedure (between specific principle 1 and universal principle of today) shows that specific principle 1 cannot be applied to our situation today, because the application of the biblical kerygma within the Bible is dependent upon the biblical culture which differs from ours. It does not make any sense to transfer, for example, the Old Testament world view (see above) to a Western culture. Basically, the Old Testament world view did not even differ from contemporary ancient culture. Therefore, such 'idioms' were extremely appropriate to communicate the biblical kerygma.

From the point of view of 'natural philosophy', the Old Testament offers little that can be called new, little that the other nations did not have already. It would, therefore, be absurd to attempt to maintain this world-picture as an element of revelation in the Old Testament: it is wholly derived from the ancient oriental world-picture and it has no independent value as a revelation of God. It is no use trying to protect this 'Biblical' world-picture against modern scientific

⁶² Cf. *Interpretation*, 424.

⁶³ Even within the Bible itself there are contrary *specific* principles. For instance, the fact that Titus *must not* be circumcised (Gal. 2:3) and that Timothy *should* be circumcised (Acts 16:3). These two specific principles form a contrast, because the cultural contexts differ (circumcision is viewed here as a cultural phenomenon) while the underlying universal principle is the same, namely to adjust to people with a certain cultural background to whom the Gospel is preached according to the rule in 1 Cor. 9:19ff. Cf. *Interpretation*, 424–5. The section 1 Cor. 9:19–23 as such is an outline for, as it were, a missionary's 'contextualized' attitude.

conceptions. Yet, unfortunately, such attempts are still made only too often, even in these days, to say nothing of former times (Galilei).⁶⁴

Hence, during this procedure (indicated by an asterisk in the diagram above) the combination of the universal principle and specific principle 1 is being disengaged. At this point, the use of a missiological term for our interpretation of biblical texts may be suggested, namely the term *de-contextualization*. Within *missiological* circles this term highlights the fact that we have to make a distinction between the supracultural content of Christianity and its expressions in our own culture. In the words of J.O. Buswell, III:

This situation has been a problem in virtually every society and subculture where men and women have received the gospel or theological training from European or American teachers. One of the principal reasons for this is the twofold difficulty of, first, making the distinction between the supracultural content of Christianity, and its forms and expressions in *our own culture*; and second, once this crucial distinction has been made, attempting to disengage (decontextualize?) the supracultural or noncultural doctrines of Christianity from our Western cultural forms and expressions. *Only a supracultural message disengaged from any cultural context is free to be inculturated in another.*⁶⁵

The missiological term decontextualization can also be applied to the decoding procedure indicated by an asterisk in the diagram above, although I slightly prefer to use it in combination with another term, namely *de-culturation* to emphasize the fact that the contextualization concept is in the first place a matter of *communication* by which the kerygma is made relevant to a local *culture*. So, in order to find the biblical kerygma we have to decontextualize and 'deculturate' specific principle 1. Only then are we able (and allowed) to make the transition of the kerygma from the biblical culture to a non-biblical culture.⁶⁶ Here, in this decoding procedure, historical study comes in and can be regarded as a friend, for it clearly indicates the historical and cultural background of biblical texts.

The question can be asked whether such an approach of decontextualization and deculturation does not reduce the authority of the biblical kerygma. In other words, cannot the communication itself contain a certain kerygma? For instance, can there also be a message in the Old Testament world view that the whole universe is divided into three parts? Without answering this

⁶⁴ Th.C. Vriezen, *An outline of Old Testament theology*, 333.

⁶⁵ J.O. Buswell, III, 'Contextualization: theory, tradition, and method', 103. '*Decontextualization* is needed in order to arrive at the supracultural message which is conveyed in culturally meaningful forms', D.J. Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ cross-culturally: an introduction to missionary communication* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978), 86 (see also second edn, 203). Cf. C.M. Sell, 'Response', in D.J. Hesselgrave (ed.), *Theology and mission*, 118-9.

⁶⁶ Again, Buswell has stated correctly that only a supracultural message disengaged from any cultural context is free to be inculturated in another.

specific question a general affirmative answer may probably be given. However, as long as we are aware of this possibility we will not fall into this pitfall.⁶⁷ It is my contention that in using the hermeneutical model of decontextualization and deculturation we do more justice to the texts than without this model, because it opens our eyes to the combination of universal and specific principles. And this aspect is extremely important with regard to the view that the Bible gives only time-bound statements without any relevance to today. The historical-critical method, for example, states that the biblical message was formulated in another time and culture, and that the biblical text represents merely a form of human utterances about God. Therefore, in this view, the Bible cannot provide us with timeless norms.⁶⁸ It is evident that the Bible originated in a certain time and culture, but the decontextualization and deculturation concept demonstrates that there is *not only* a specific principle *but also* a universal principle, and, therefore, the biblical texts *do* provide us with timeless norms.

Another problem arises. How can we distinguish between universal principles and specific principles?

Many passages in Scripture do not clearly indicate whether they convey universal principles or only culture-specific applications. As a result, more liberal interpreters argue that unless something in the text specifically indicates that the passage teaches a timeless truth, we should assume it to be 'occasional,' that is, limited in its specific application to its original context. More conservative writers, on the other hand, often reply that the reverse is true: unless specific textual data support a 'culture-bound' perspective, we should assume the originally intended application remains normative for all believers of all times.⁶⁹

I agree with W.W. Klein et al. that both views are wrong. 'The former makes it difficult to establish the timelessness even of fundamental moral principles such as prohibitions against theft or murder; the latter would seem to require us to greet one another with a holy kiss (1 Thes 5:26) or drink wine for upset stomachs (1 Tim 5:23)'.⁷⁰ W.W. Klein et al. give useful guidelines by which the interpreter is able to distinguish between universal principles and specific principles.⁷¹ Within another (*in casu* missiological) context, missiologists discuss the same issue by asking themselves which aspects of the Christian message are absolutely nonnegotiable. In other words, which aspects of the Bible are

⁶⁷ I have already stated above that contextualization is more than just the packaging. See also my view below that there is an inherent significance in any specific principle.

⁶⁸ See also my remarks on the historical-critical method above. Cf. *Interpretation*, 107–8. Räsänen also thinks that Paul's statements on the law are context-bound, for they are due to historical events like the conflict with the Jewish-Christian restorers in Jerusalem. See my *Inconsistentie bij Paulus?*, 108 and 115.

⁶⁹ *Interpretation*, 410.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 410.

⁷¹ See *ibid.*, 411–21.

universal and consequently cross-culturally transferable?⁷² Unfortunately, all criteria to distinguish between universal principles and specific principles seem to be more or less arbitrary and subjective *unless* we again make use of the concept of decontextualization and deculturation, especially this latter aspect. If ideas characteristic of a certain culture (or contemporary culture) are used to convey (contextualize) the kerygma, then these ideas are not universal principles, because cultural phenomena, which are always time-bound, cannot be cross-culturally transferred — that would be a contradiction in terms. This seems also to have been the issue at the Jerusalem Council where the relevance of the Jewish ceremonial law, *in casu* circumcision for non-Jewish believers, was discussed (Acts 15). As appears from the Apostolic Decree (Acts 15:23–29) circumcision must be viewed not from a soteriological perspective but merely as one of the *cultural* (Jewish) ‘identity and boundary markers’⁷³ which cannot be cross-culturally transferred because of its (religio-)ethnic nature.⁷⁴ But, and here again is a pitfall, this does not mean that a specific principle within the biblical context is without any significance. It is important that instead of *separating* universal principles from specific principles we should *distinguish* between these two kinds of principles, because a specific principle *contains* a universal principle, for it is *not* merely the packaging of the message, as I have already stated above.⁷⁵

Two examples might further illustrate the statements above. In 1 Cor. 11:5–6, 10 Paul says that a woman who prays or prophesies should wear a veil. Most scholars interpret this as a cultural issue. The view that in Paul’s time women’s uncovered heads connoted an invitation to lust seems convincing.

⁷² See e.g., D.J. Hesselgrave and E. Rommen, *Contextualization*, 172ff. They state that, for instance, ‘aspects of the truth *necessary for justification by grace*, such as the sacrificial death of Christ, faith, repentance, and conversion’ have a categorical validity (172), and that, for instance, ‘those elements of the truth of the gospel which have *explicitly stated and logically necessary implications* for godly living, walking worthy of our calling, separation from the world, and keeping the moral law’ have principial validity (174). Cf. also G.L. Archer, jun., ‘Contextualization: some implications from life and witness in the Old Testament’, 215–16.

⁷³ This term is borrowed from J.D.G. Dunn. See e.g., his article ‘Works of the law and the curse of the law (Galatians 3.10–14)’, *New Testament Studies*, 31 (1985), 523–42.

⁷⁴ Some authors see this issue of circumcision as discussed at the Jerusalem Council as an example of contextualization. See e.g., D.J. Hesselgrave and E. Rommen, *Contextualization*, 10–1; N.R. Ericson, ‘Implications from the New Testament for contextualization’, 74–5 (cf. G.L. Archer, jun., ‘Contextualization: some implications from life and witness in the Old Testament’, 214ff). In the strict sense of the word, however, the issue as discussed at the Council at Jerusalem is not an example of contextualization, because there is no kerygma which is made relevant to a cultural situation in forms with which the recipients are familiar (see my definition of contextualization above). For example, which idiomatic cultural forms with which the recipients are familiar would be used here? To be precise, the Jerusalem Council is an example of a *correction* of one aspect within the contextualization process: the Council made clear that a specific principle must not be confused with a universal principle.

⁷⁵ Cf. 2 Tim. 3:16.

The issue in the Corinthian church may thus have been a clash of cultural values concerning modesty ... Most women in Greco-Roman statues and other artwork from this period have uncovered heads, because most of the families who could afford to commission such works were well-to-do and presumably more concerned with current fashion than with lower-class women's interpretation of modesty.⁷⁶

And,

Since most members in the Corinthian church were not well-to-do, people from very different social classes would be brought together. Many of the other issues in 1 Corinthians revolve around this clash between the socially powerful ('the strong') and the socially weak members of the church, and the issue of head coverings may be one further example of this problem.⁷⁷

Within this historical and cultural context Paul is trying to persuade the Corinthian women to wear head coverings, which was *already* a wide-spread⁷⁸ cultural phenomenon in the *Hellenistic*⁷⁹ world. So we conclude that Paul does not want to make here a transcultural point. But *within this specific principle* there is still a universal principle. More concretely, the reference to head coverings is nothing else than an application of the kerygma of *avoiding division among the Christians* (see above), and here Paul makes a transcultural point. Paul argues, as in so many other places in this same letter, that one must not endanger the unity of the church, for instance, by one's clothing style. Or, it is also possible to emphasize the so-called pneumatic character of the Corinthian church. The non-wearing of head coverings by the women could be an expression of this pneumatic character. In this case, Paul conveys the kerygma of *remaining in the state in which he (she!) is called* (1 Cor. 7:20) such as marriage (cf. 1 Pet. 3:1ff.). Division among the Christians in Corinth and the pneumatic character, however, are closely related to each other, because

⁷⁶ C.S. Keener, *Paul, women and wives: marriage and women's ministry in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1995), 30.

⁷⁷ C.S. Keener, *ibid.*, 30.

⁷⁸ Although the universal Greek-Roman practice in regard to head coverings cannot be unequivocally stated for the simple reason that the fashion varies (cf. W.M. Swartley, *Slavery, sabbath, war and women: case issues in biblical interpretation* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1983), 169), there are many examples of the existence of this Greek-Roman custom. See H. Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians: a commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 185 n. 40. 'The evidence seems sufficient to show that the wearing of a head covering by an adult woman in public and especially in a ritual context was a traditional practice known to Jews, Greeks, and Romans alike ... Paul was not likely to impose any alien or uniquely Jewish customs on the ethnically mixed group in Corinth. He may, however, have been endorsing a traditional Greek and Corinthian practice that he found theologically significant and useful, a practice some of the female "spiritual ones" may have abandoned', B. Witherington III, *Women and the genesis of Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 166–7.

⁷⁹ It does not make any sense to look for parallels in the *Jewish* world, for we have to deal here in the first place with a Hellenized city (Corinth) and a Roman colony. The Christians in Corinth had scarcely any Jewish background. See also C.S. Keener, *Paul, women and wives*, 19–69.

pneumatic convictions could easily disturb the unity within the Corinthian church. In this way the text has been 'deculturized', and now the way is open to apply this universal principle to our own historical and cultural situation.

The second example is Paul's exhortation to greet all the brethren with a holy kiss (1 Thess. 5:26). We could lay such a text aside by saying that this way of greeting was common in the Middle East and not applicable any more, for instance, in England. In that case, this text would be contemporary in its relevance. But if we concentrate on the culture of Paul's time, we are able to find the rationale of this verse. To kiss each other was a cultural phenomenon and therefore, as such, not cross-culturally transferable. To greet each other with a holy kiss, however, can be interpreted as an application of the kerygma of *greeting each other warmly*. Within a Western culture such a universal principle could be communicated (contextualized) to people by saying that Christians have to 'shake hands warmly', which is indeed offered as a paraphrase by the Living Bible.⁸⁰

Liberation Theology. Not a Form of Contextualization

Finally, we have to turn to Liberation Theology as defended, for example, by theologians from Latin America. At the beginning of this article we made some critical remarks on the historical-critical method. Now we have to concentrate on the other side of the dialogue between the West and the Third World.

Without making comments on the contents of Liberation Theology, W.W. Klein et al. are, in my view, correct that it is based on bad hermeneutics, especially because in this concept experience takes precedence over theory.⁸¹ In their own words,

Liberation theology has developed a three-part hermeneutical agenda ... a liberation hermeneutic begins with the experience of the injustice of poverty. Second, it attempts to analyze or assess the reasons for this impoverished existence. Third, actions take precedence over rhetoric. Liberationists seek to determine a course of corrective measures on the basis of their previous observation, insight and judgment. In the liberationist hermeneutic, the Bible does not normally come into play at the beginning in step one but only to aid in steps two and three.⁸²

⁸⁰ See *Interpretation*, 415.

⁸¹ Sugirtharajah writes: 'Asian, Latin American and black hermeneuts, on the other hand, do not begin with theories or concepts, but with a praxiological commitment to redress poverty and the oppressive status of women and blacks. The experience and the concerns of the poor, women and blacks become the privileged hermeneutical focus. It is from the perspective of the losers of history that the biblical materials are read and re-read and re-heard. Identification with the underprivileged becomes the first step in understanding the Christian Scripture. Such a concentrated effort to interpret the Bible from the standpoint of the disadvantaged is new in biblical theology. In fact, the poor as the hermeneutical focus must be the *starting point* for any theology', *Voices*, 437 (my italics). It is very clear that also in Sugirtharajah's own view experience takes precedence over theory.

⁸² *Interpretation*, 451; cf. also *ibid.*, 106.

One of the major problems with this hermeneutic is that it ‘... tries to impose on society ethics that were originally limited to God’s people. Neither in OT Israel nor in the NT church were “believers” mandated to make God’s laws or principles the laws of every nation’.⁸³ Liberationist hermeneutics also

... do not seem adequately to preserve the ‘spiritual’ element of salvation. Mark 8:36 stands out poignantly at this juncture: ‘What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?’ They may overlook that ‘the poor’ in Scripture are consistently not *all* the physically dispossessed or oppressed but those who in their need turn to God as their only hope. In so doing they create a *de facto* ‘canon within the canon’ and ignore or deem as not as authoritative those texts that do not support their agenda.⁸⁴

The thought that God has a preferential option for the poor is made into a hermeneutical key *par excellence*. From a hermeneutical point of view, Liberation Theology confuses soteriology with ethics, and ethical issues are made the very heart of soteriology. Hence, some vital soteriological issues have been deleted simply because they have been replaced by ethical issues.⁸⁵ In short, although there are some important and not to be neglected implications of the texts towards social justice etc., Liberation Theology is based on bad⁸⁶ hermeneutics, because the presupposition of liberation is made the common denominator of all interpretations, and therefore, this dominant presupposition has obscured the meaning and significance of many other texts.⁸⁷ It may be clear that Liberation Theology cannot be viewed as a form of contextualization, for it transforms a specific principle into a universal principle which functions as an all-embracing hermeneutical key to open and interpret all texts. Hence, the hermeneutic of liberation is not a form of contextualization, but rather a *distortion* of it.

Conclusions

It becomes more and more important to develop hermeneutical concepts which do full justice to the biblical texts. The dialogue between the West and the Third World as described in Räisänen’s article ‘Liberating exegesis?’, whereby the West stands for the historical-critical method and the Third World for Liberation

⁸³ Ibid., 452.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 453.

⁸⁵ Cf. D.J. Bosch, *Transforming mission*, 432ff.

⁸⁶ Perhaps I should use the term ‘inadequate’, because Liberation Theology opens our eyes to important aspects of the Gospel, which have often been neglected.

⁸⁷ The same form of bad hermeneutics also occurs in the West at this moment, namely when ethical issues like peace, milieu, minority groups, women, homosexuality, immigrants, the so-called new poverty etc. take precedence over theory and when they are made an all-embracing hermeneutical key. I do not deny, of course, that these issues are important, but here I am dealing with hermeneutics. Unfortunately, such bad hermeneutics have also affected influential missiological studies like D.J. Bosch’s *Transforming mission*.

Theology, contributes to such a development. The hermeneutical model of contextualization as defined in this article is an example of one of the fruits of that dialogue. This model elucidates the combination of universal principles and specific principles. The universal principle can be detected by using the concept of decontextualization and deculturation. Within this (new?) model a historical approach can be recognized as a friend although such an approach, especially the historical-critical method, has its limitations and serious shortcomings. The Liberation Theology is based on bad hermeneutics and cannot be viewed as a form of contextualization. Further dialogue between the West and the Third World can open ways for new concepts of good hermeneutics.