

CONCERNING CULTURE, CONTEXTUALIZATION, AND THE GOSPEL

AFFIRMATIONS AND DENIALS (TOPIC NO. 13)

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Article I

We affirm that man is a cultural being.¹

We deny that any group of people can function apart from cultural realities.

Article II

We affirm that culture is the secondary environment men superimpose over their natural environment. Culture is the ways of thinking, willing, feeling, speaking and acting shared by a particular people group; culture is man-made, learned, integrated, and constantly changing, and is important to all considerations having to do with an understanding and communication of truth, especially of divine truth revealed in Holy Scripture.

We deny that human interpreters of the Bible, such as missionaries, pastors, and teachers, can ever be truly culture free, or that it is possible for them to transcend perfectly cultural limitations and considerations when obeying injunctions such as those having to do with studying and preaching the Word of God, and with discipling the nations.

Article III

We affirm that culture is created by human beings and that all cultures reflect both the image of God inherent in mankind and the sinfulness involved in Adam's fall.

We deny that there is presently any culture which conforms perfectly to God-ordained culture revealed in the Bible, or that there is any particular culture to which all others must conform.

Article IV

We affirm that the various cultures are relatively "good" or "bad" dependent upon the degree to which they reflect God's character and promote His purposes as stated in scripture both for their members and the larger good of creation as a whole.

We deny all cultural relativity that concludes that the ideas, behaviors and institutions of a given culture can be properly evaluated by members of that culture only, or simply on the basis of whether or not they function so as to promote its collective purposes.

¹ Other of the International Church Council Project Affirmation & Denial documents have been notated with verses pertaining to the principles contained in them. This document, however, is not so notated. Instead we refer the reader to several documents foundational to a Christian worldview necessary for understanding the principles that pertain to the Great Commission task with which this document deals. We refer the reader to: Topic #3 – Concerning the Essentials of a Christian World View; Topic #4 – Concerning the Kingdom of God; and Topic # 10 – Concerning the Lordship of Christ. We suggest careful attention be paid to those principles involving the nature of man, the advance of the Gospel among the nations by means of the Great Commission, and the reality of the sovereignty and exclusivity of Jesus Christ.

Article V

We affirm that all cultures are under the judgment of the Triune God and His revealed Word, the Bible, and that therefore Christ and culture are often in conflict.

We deny that the people of any culture are exempt from the moral obligation to conduct their individual and cultural affairs in obedience to the Bible and in ways that please the one, true God.

Article VI

We affirm that God is working out his sovereign will and desires that cultures be transformed so as to operate according to the principles of scripture in all areas of life and to thus make an optimum contribution to the ends of His divine purpose for all cultures and to the welfare of their members.

We deny that any culture has yet been fully transformed to its optimum potential, according to the pattern of God's will revealed in his Word, the Bible.

Article VII

We affirm that the primary purpose of the Church is to glorify God, and that her primary mission is to proclaim the gospel and disciple people of all cultures so that they in turn will be salt and light in the world, and work for cultural transformation that is in agreement with God's purposes and principles, thus filling the earth with godly culture to the glory of God.

We deny that it is a primary obligation of missionaries, missions or other Christian agencies foreign to a given culture, to attempt to transform a culture by imposing change from the outside, though it is legitimate and beneficial for missionaries and agencies to do this to the degree the New Testament calls for such changes, especially when these changes are inspired by the changed people within the respondent culture.

Article VIII

We affirm that the Christian's primary loyalty and obedience is to Christ and His Kingdom and only secondarily to the Christian's own culture and civil government.

We deny that this view means the Christian is not required to be in submission to legitimate earthly powers and systems so long as they do not require him to disobey biblical principles.

Article IX

We affirm that God's Kingdom is advanced whenever His people are governed by His authority, and by that authority promote biblical holiness, righteousness, justice, and truth, as well as grace, mercy, love, and liberty.

We deny that God's Kingdom is coming to earth within any culture by social, political, financial, sociological and educational action alone, without the working of the Holy Spirit through Christ's true Church. We further deny that the goal in discipling the nations is limited to presentation of a "simple gospel" of only saving people from hell and helping them to "cope" with life until they are taken from the earth.

Article X

We affirm that in the Great Commission task of discipling the nations it is essential that the biblical gospel be made understandable, meaningful and relevant to the people of any given culture by proclamation (preaching), as well as by verbal and nonverbal forms of communication normally utilized in that culture.

We deny that proclamation (preaching) is out of place in any culture. We further deny that any other cross-cultural forms of communication foreign to the ordinary intercourse of a given culture are adequate to the task of discipling its people.

Article XI

We affirm that to attempt to influence any culture for Christ by using missionary principles, methods or teachings which are foreign or contrary to the inerrant Scriptures as the Word of God and to historic Christian doctrine, diminishes the spread of the true gospel taught by Christ and the apostles and is destructive for individuals and for the respondent culture as a whole.

We deny that the teaching of the full, accurate message of the inerrant and infallible Bible and employing missionary principles and methods consistent with holy Scripture is ever damaging to the welfare of the people in the respondent culture even if that message and those principles and methods are considered politically incorrect or if they cause uncomfortable confrontation or greatly alter and replace large portions of that culture and destroy long-held, local beliefs.

Article XII

We affirm that the biblical theory of economics offers the greatest blessings to individuals and to all societies and includes the rights to own private property and the means of production; to engage in free enterprise minimally governed by civil authority, and the responsibility for the compassionate use of accumulated wealth and the implementation of all business transactions according to biblical justice and honesty.

We deny that any biblical missionary or cross-cultural minister may legitimately promote socialism, Marxism, Nazism, "Liberation Theology" or the redistribution of wealth by civil governments since these philosophies and activities are unbiblical.

Article XIII

We affirm that historic Western thought forms and lifestyles have developed to a great extent as a result of the influence of the Bible's worldview on Western cultures.

We deny that contextualization of the Gospel is only a disguised process of exporting Western thought forms and lifestyles in the name of Christianity. We further deny that it is legitimate to say that biblical Christianity is a uniquely Western system or that our definition of contextualization herein may rightly be called cultural chauvinism or paternalism.

Article XIV

We affirm that authentic Christian contextualization is primarily concerned with, though not confined to, the communication of the truth of divine revelation in the Scriptures, and as such is concerned with the translation, interpretation and exposition of the biblical text as understood in accordance with recognized principles of historical-grammatical interpretation.

We deny the validity of contextualization approaches based on experiences thought somehow to parallel the revelatory experiences of the biblical writers under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, or out of an effort merely to replicate upon contemporary respondents, the impact biblical text had upon its original hearers; or out of attempts to interpret Scripture on the basis of insights gained from the experiences, needs and expectations of contemporary culture. We further deny any contextualization approach that is considered to be on the same level of authority as the Holy Scriptures.

Article XV

We affirm that all truth is God's truth, the contextualization of the gospel is greatly aided by an understanding of the various related arts and sciences, and that those contributions of disciplines such as anthropology, psychology, logic, linguistics, communications and rhetoric that prove to be true, should not only be identified and utilized, but recognized as gifts of a gracious Creator and missionary God.

We deny that the findings of the various related arts and sciences alone provide a sufficient basis for, or be the final determining force for understanding, evolving or implementing contextualization attempts.

Article XVI

We affirm that God Himself provided the best models of contextualization when He revealed His Person and plan through human language in the Old and New Testament Scripture; when He sent His Son Jesus Christ to reveal Himself to the world as a fellow human being; and when, for our learning, He informed us by the ministries of patriarchs, prophets, apostles and others of Bible times who communicated divine messages to their contemporaries, and through the inspired text of Scripture, to all people everywhere and of all times.

We deny that models for authentic Christian contextualization may be taken from any source other than the Scriptures, except when such models parallel scriptural truth and thus elucidate and illustrate the scriptural models and truth.

Article XVII

We affirm that authentic Christian contextualization efforts convey the historical unfolding of divine revelation from Genesis to Revelation; display the centrality of Christ's person, words and works to the plan of God; and reflect the experiences of those men chosen by God to author Scripture and otherwise communicate the gospel to the peoples of the world.

We deny that cybernetic, dynamic equivalence, world view, decision process and similar models of communication and contextualization provide frameworks for Christian contextualization that are to be considered anything more than complementary to models already available in biblical injunctions and examples.

Article XVIII

We affirm that it is critical that the contextualization task be undertaken in conjunction with representatives of the respondent culture and that, ultimately, contextualization becomes the responsibility of Christian leaders and laity indigenous to that culture.

We deny that the representatives of the respondent culture are obligated to adopt the culture of the cross cultural worker or missionary, or that they have no responsibility to communicate Christ within and through their own culture.

Article XIX

We affirm that only those for whom the respondent culture is their first culture are in a position to understand the nuances of language and the meaning of such vehicles and aspects of communication as lifestyle, ritual, drama, architecture, media and the like as can best be expected to avoid that which is deleterious, utilize that which is redeemable, and institute such new forms as will be contributive to Christian faith and practice.

We deny that either communication experts foreign to the respondent culture, or experts within the culture acting independently of the larger body of Christ, are well prepared and positioned to work out adequate contextualizations of the gospel apart from the participation of the members of Christ and the local church.

Article XX

We affirm that the ultimate goal of Christian contextualization is the glorification of the Triune God Who desires to be known and is worthy of the worship of all His creatures.

We deny that Christian contextualization is designed so as to effect purely human and temporal purposes however desirable and noble.