

CONTEXTUALIZATION IN POST-CHRISTIAN GERMANY:  
MISSIONARIL CONSIDERATIONS IN REACHING NON-CHURCHED GERMANS

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SEPTEMBER 2008

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## INTRODUCTION

Having worked in Germany for almost twenty-five years as a church planter, I have observed with interest the various methods and approaches used in attempting to reach Post-Christian Germany with the message of the gospel. Whether utilizing street meetings, tent crusades, literature distribution, special courses, seeker-sensitive church services and various other methodologies, most of these approaches have meager success.

Sherwood Lingenfelter and Melvin Mayers emphasize how missionaries are more often than not oblivious to their own cultural prejudices, which makes them ineffective agents of transformation. “Through the history of the Christian church, believers have struggled against the hounding of society to conform the gospel message to the pervasive bias of the day. To become agents of transformation requires significant self-awareness with regards to one's cultural bias.”<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this paper is to present helpful insight in the area of cultural interaction and contextualization, which will facilitate a transforming ministry in Germany. As missionaries and ministers we must be cognizant of our own cultural blind spots. Scripture speaks to all people and all cultures with Jesus Christ being the most pure and faithful example of divine love in our communication with one another. Jesus is God with us — the reality of the love of God in human experience.<sup>2</sup> Germany desperately needs an effective proclamation of God’s eternal love, which exceeds human understanding and human experience. The gospel must be contextualized in such a way that it will be comprehended by the listening host culture. Missionally, we desire

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<sup>1</sup> Sherwood Lingenfelter and Marvin Mayers, *Ministering Cross-Culturally: An Incarnational Model for Personal Relationships* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003), 10.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 14-15.

to “transform the societal water into the new wine of the Spirit.”<sup>3</sup> Dean Fleming sets the stage for presenting the gospel in way that truly makes sense to the listener. “Every church in every setting, every preacher or teacher of the Word, must consider how to articulate the gospel in ways that allow it to come to life for their particular audience.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Winston Ayong Tjong, “Die Relevanz der Kirche in einer Zeit des Gesellschaftlichen Wandels: Missionarische Kirche in postchristliche Kontext.” (Ordination thesis, Bund Freikirchlicher Pfingstgemeinden, Erzhausen, Germany, Juni 2007), 20.

<sup>4</sup> Dean Fleming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 321.

## PART 1

### THE POST-CHRISTIAN GERMAN SETTING

#### The Contextual Challenge

Concerns over issues of contextualization have been a part of the Christian church from its inception, even though the vocabulary of contextualization dates back only to the early 1970s.<sup>5</sup>

The real point before us is how best to lead men and women to seek salvation in Jesus. Contextualization is, first of all, concerned with communicating by appropriate and understandable means that salvation is in Jesus only.<sup>6</sup>

Effective contextualization means it is imperative that we precisely understand the setting of our ministry. Winston Tjong states rightly that though the Reformation reformed theology the structure of the Protestant church that was created differed little from the Catholic Church it had left behind.<sup>7</sup> When a local German duke in the sixteenth century changed his confession from Catholic to Protestant, so did the people living in his jurisdiction. This type of forced conversion has left a profound mark on those living in Germany today. Many of the geographic boundary lines between Catholic and Protestant areas during the reformation are still in place today. Through the influences of globalization, secularization and pluralism the church in Germany, as well as all of Europe, is becoming more a *Randerscheinung* (marginalized appearance).<sup>8</sup> Christian culture in Europe has been degraded to a sub-culture that has very little common

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<sup>5</sup> Darrel Whiteman, "The Appropriate Function of Contextualization in Mission." In *Appropriate Christianity* ed. Charles Kraft (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2005), 50.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>7</sup> Tjong, 13.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

ground with a postmodern mind-set.<sup>9</sup> Rick Wade's definition of postmodernism is helpful when we consider contextualization in Germany from a missional perspective.

Postmodernism isn't a philosophy as we typically think of philosophies. It isn't a single, well thought out philosophical system which seeks to define and answer the big questions of life. Postmodernism is more of a report on the mindset of Western culture in the latter half of the twentieth century. Some call it a mood. We might say it is a report on the failures of modernism along with a hodgepodge of suggestions for a new direction of thought and life.<sup>10</sup>

### The Spiritual Climate in Germany

Survey data gathered by the Emnid-Institute found that in 1999 only ten percent of all Germans felt that personal faith was of any significant value.<sup>11</sup> In 2005, further research data indicated that only about one-half of Germans believe in the existence of God.<sup>12</sup> These statistics are quite remarkable in light of the fact that almost two-thirds of all Germans are nominal members of either the Catholic or Lutheran church. The German newsmagazine *Der Spiegel* best summarized the present spiritual dilemma facing church leaders of all denominations: "A once Christian land has now become a pagan land with a few Christian remnants."<sup>13</sup>

It is worth noting that pagans also do believe in mystery-type religions. New age and other forms of non-Christian faith expression are to be found in Germany, as well as throughout all of Europe. A postmodern society does not see these religions as a contradiction. It is not uncommon to find many of these "newer" mystery religions being propagated by the established European Protestant churches themselves.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>10</sup> Rick Wade, "Where Did "I" Go? The Loss of Self in Postmodern Times," *Probe Ministries*, <http://www.probe.org/theology-and-philosophy/worldview--philosophy/where-did-i-go-the-loss-of-self-in-postmodern-times.html> (accessed August 19, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> "Umfrage: Ist Deutschland gottlos geworden?," *Idea Spektrum*, 36 (1999): 6.

<sup>12</sup> "Umfrage: In Deutschland glaubt jeder Zweite an Gott," *Austrian Broadcasting Network*, [http://religion.orf.at/projekt02/news/0507/ne050726\\_umfrage\\_fr.htm](http://religion.orf.at/projekt02/news/0507/ne050726_umfrage_fr.htm) (accessed August 24, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> "Religion in Deutschland," *Der Spiegel*, 25 (1992).

Samuel Escobar reminds us that even during the early New Testament church, the gospel message of the risen Savior not only had to confront Greek philosophy and the politics of Rome, “but also the questions that came from the mystery religions that pervaded especially the ideas and practices of popular culture.”<sup>14</sup>

The church has become one of many options in an increasingly complex world in which world religions, new spiritualities, and secular therapies compete in a multicultural market place. The cathedrals and church buildings are considered by some, especially in Europe, to be relics of the past.<sup>15</sup>

Even though church edifices are still very prominent in Europe, the church itself as an institution has become ever more marginalized in society, especially during the past sixty years. Church buildings and religious edifices are relics of the past that give a sightseer the feeling that he or she is in a museum. David Kettle has depicted the dilemma of Christianity in England, which is not unlike Germany. “The church is like the pattern on wallpaper. Religion is visible but meaning has faded, and no longer invites attention.”<sup>16</sup> In postmodern Europe questions of faith and spirituality are in, but church is out. Due to globalization one is confronted by diverse religions that get high media attention through the internet or television.

#### Contextualization in spite of German nominal Christianity

As mentioned above almost two-thirds of Germany’s eighty-two million people are members of either the Lutheran or the Catholic Church. In 2006 there were just over twenty-five million Germans who were affiliated with either the Catholic or Lutheran Church. There are 1.2 million Orthodox Christians in Germany along with a total of 327,000 Germans belonging to one

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<sup>14</sup> Samuel Escobar, “The Global Scenario at the turn of the Century,” in *Global Missiology for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Iguassu Dialogue*, ed. William D. Taylor (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000), 1.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>16</sup> David Kettle, “The Haze of Christendom,” *The Gospel and Our Culture* 14 (March 2002): 1.

of the free<sup>17</sup> churches.<sup>18</sup> In 1990 only about twenty-one percent of all Catholics attended mass on a weekly basis, in 2006 this figure dropped to fourteen percent.<sup>19</sup> In 2006 only about four percent of all Lutherans attended church on a weekly basis.<sup>20</sup> However, in 2006, over one-third of all Lutherans did attend church on Christmas Eve.<sup>21</sup> This author has spoken often with nominal Catholics or Lutherans who do not accept the doctrinal position or practices of their respective Church, yet remain paying members.<sup>22</sup> Why is this so? The two *Großkirchen* (major churches - Lutheran and Catholic) for most Germans are closely identified with family tradition that is deeply rooted in culture rather than rooted in religious conviction itself. For many Germans to leave one of the *Großkirchen* would be the equivalent of rejecting or denying one's family heritage.<sup>23</sup> For example, in the Catholic tradition, when a child celebrates first communion at age eight or nine, an all-day celebration is held for family and friends. The child receives many gifts and this family tradition is a precious moment to cherish. In the Lutheran tradition, at age fourteen children attend confirmation classes over a period of several weeks, which leads up to a special confirmation of faith service in the local church.<sup>24</sup> Here too, family and friends come

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<sup>17</sup> Both the Lutheran and Catholic churches are state churches as they enjoy a very close relationship working with the German government at the national, state and even local level. As one example, special agreements are in place that both churches use taxpayer money to fund their religious instruction in the schools as well as fund departments Lutheran and Catholic theology at many state universities. The various Evangelical denominations in Germany are considered free churches because of the fact of their minority status and do not enjoy the close historical relationship to government as the much larger Lutheran or Catholic churches.

<sup>18</sup> "EKD: Steigende Tendenz bei Gottesdienstbesuch," *EKD Press Release*, June 20, 2006, [http://www.ekd.de/aktuell\\_presse/news\\_2006\\_06\\_20\\_2\\_statistik.html](http://www.ekd.de/aktuell_presse/news_2006_06_20_2_statistik.html) (accessed August 19, 2008).

<sup>19</sup> "Eckdaten 1990 – 2006," *Deutsche Bischofskonferenz*, [http://www.dbk.de/zahlen\\_fakten/statistik/index.html](http://www.dbk.de/zahlen_fakten/statistik/index.html) (accessed August 19, 2008).

<sup>20</sup> "EKD: Steigende Tendenz."

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> The Lutheran and Catholic churches in Germany are financed through a church tax that is directly withheld from the salary of each member. The German finance ministry charges about 1% of the total which is collected as a service fee. The amount of church tax paid is proportionate to one's salary.

<sup>23</sup> Members who want to leave the Lutheran or Catholic Church in Germany must go to the city hall or an equivalent governmental office to be taken off the church rolls. A fee is usually charged for this service.

<sup>24</sup> Generally one finds only a handful of people who attend a typical Lutheran Sunday church service. However, if you happen to attend a Lutheran church on Confirmation Sunday, the church will usually be full.



together, for an all day celebration where many gifts are given. The scope of this celebration is similar to a high school graduation party in the United States. From a sociological perspective the first communion and confirmation could be considered a rite of passage. The young person is now attaining full social status in the Catholic or Lutheran church.<sup>25</sup> At the age of fourteen by German law a young person can decide to join or leave one of the *Großkirchen* without parental consent.

Even though most Catholic and Lutheran church members do not attend church, they, as the rest of German culture, continue to be suspicious of other Christian groups. Christian groups that are not affiliated with the Lutheran or Catholic Church are viewed generally as a cult. This perception of the free churches in Germany makes the task of sharing the good news of the gospel for Evangelical Christians a very challenging endeavor indeed. Even though there is mandatory Catholic and Lutheran religious instruction in German public schools, most students are never taught that there are other Christian churches outside the *Großkirchen* in Germany. This lack of education continues to foster the cult prejudice that is propagated in German society about other Christian groups. Sharing one's personal faith journey causes many Germans to be uneasy, since this is not generally practiced or taught by the *Großkirchen*. It may occur when someone begins to attend a free church that a concerned family member will contact the *Sektenbeauftragten* (theologian cult expert) of the Catholic or Lutheran church in his area to receive information about dangers of the free church being attended.<sup>26</sup> Often the concerned family member will then warn a family member of the dangers of attending a free church.

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<sup>25</sup> Allan Johnson. *The Blackwell Dictionary of Sociology: A User's Guide to Sociological Language* (New York: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 262.

<sup>26</sup> The *Großkirchen* have hired *Sektenbeauftragter* who specialise in understanding the teaching of diverse religious groups and world views of other organisations outside of their own church. Primarily their function is to warn and educate church members about the dangers of such religious organisations

Advertising our first Alpha Course as a new church in the local Bad Dürkheim paper resulted in having the *Sektenbeauftragter* from the Lutheran church call me personally. I asked him if he was aware of the Pentecostal movement in Germany which he said he knew nothing about. Following up on our phone conversation I sent him an information brochure about the German Pentecostal movement. Probably a concerned Lutheran church member in our area saw our church's ad and immediately contacted his church to begin an investigation. It is important that anyone doing missional work in Germany understand the cultural prejudice against free churches, as this does influence the contextual approach that one must take.

As a side note Pentecostal and charismatic migrant congregations from Africa, Latin America and Asia are often permitted by the Lutheran or Catholic churches to use their facilities to hold worship services. Generally a local Catholic or Lutheran church would never allow a German speaking Evangelical church to meet in their building. Due to the social engagement of the *Großkirchen* to help the poor and newly arrived immigrants, such a practice would be acceptable. The Rhineland Lutheran Synod has established a ministry department to work specifically with the needs of immigrant church groups, who mostly have a Pentecostal or charismatic background.

### Syncretism in Germany

According to Gailyn Van Rhee, syncretism occurs when church leaders surrender biblical truths consciously or unconsciously to the dominating worldview in their culture.

Syncretism then is the conscious or unconscious reshaping of Christian plausibility structure, beliefs, and practices through cultural accommodation so that they reflect those of the dominant culture. Or, stated in other terms, syncretism is the blending of Christian

beliefs and practices with those of the dominant culture so that Christianity loses its distinctiveness and speaks with a voice reflective of its culture.<sup>27</sup>

In observing the practices especially of the Lutheran church in Germany, one is struck by its close alignment with the prevailing cultural mood. The following are several examples where syncretism has taken a firm hold in the Lutheran Church.

- The approval of gay marriage ceremonies in the church
- The approval of gay marriage for pastors and bishops
- Carnival celebrations, similar to Mardi Gras in the United States, are held on church grounds
- The approval of abortion
- The approval of cohabitation
- Many Lutheran leaders label Evangelical Christians as extreme Fundamentalists due to their stand on biblical morality which many see as a sign of intolerance

In the German context the preaching of the gospel is becoming ever more challenging as men and women distance themselves from a biblical worldview. The sad point remains that the liberal church is leading the way in the exodus from an orthodox Christianity worldview.

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<sup>27</sup> Gailyn Van Rheenen, "Syncretism and Contextualization: The Church on a Journey Defining Itself," in *Contextualization and Syncretism: Navigating Cultural Currents* ed. Gailyn Rheenen (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2006) 7-8.

## PART 2

### TOWARD A CONTEXTUAL MINISTRY IN GERMANY

#### Pentecostal and Charismatic approaches in Contextualization

In Germany, as well as all of Europe, there are nasty head winds that the missional church is sailing directly into as it attempts to proclaim the good news of the gospel. These head winds, as already discussed, are to be found in a post-Christian and a postmodern worldview. Today, many dedicated German Christians are frustrated and disappointed, after having tried so many different methods to reach men and women with the claims of Christ.

The church and all Christians are predestined as full-participants in God's saving mission. That is why we do not need to hide or excuse his or our task that is to be accomplished. In humble brokenness and in the knowledge of our own guilt and failure, we still have something to say to the world about its salvation as well as without hesitation proclaim that the kingdom of God is truly near.<sup>28</sup>

Pentecostal and charismatic services give expression to human feelings and this should be viewed as a holistic ministry approach. The postmodern man or woman is not just concerned about reason and logic, but matters of the heart. Tjong points to Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch who stress that the church must move to a more Hebrew approach which is emotionally based as opposed to the Greek approach that is logic and reason driven.<sup>29</sup> For Jean-Daniel Pluss, Pentecostals and charismatics offers opportunities for those of the twenty-first century European mind-set in that Biblical teaching represents tradition on the one hand and the Holy Spirit's leading on the other, which is significant for personal experience. From this perspective, the

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<sup>28</sup> Wolfgang Günther, "50 Jahre missio Dei," [http://www.ekkw.de/angebote/mission/missionsfestival/deutsche\\_version/hintergrundinfos\\_guenther.htm](http://www.ekkw.de/angebote/mission/missionsfestival/deutsche_version/hintergrundinfos_guenther.htm) (accessed September 14, 2007).

<sup>29</sup> Tjong, 23.

modern European is better equipped through Pentecostalism to deal with secularization, in that one can integrate tradition and experience in a balanced manner.<sup>30</sup> For Pluss, globalization is one possible expression of secularization that reaches to all ends of the world. Since Pentecostalism has become in the last fifty years a global phenomenon, its form of religious expression is able to better adapt to the major societal and cross-cultural transitions that are taking place. In this sense, globalization presents more of an opportunity than a hindrance for the spread of the gospel through Pentecostal movements.<sup>31</sup>

Jeremy Rifkin in his book the *European Dream* attempts to describe what he believes occurring on the European cultural stage.

If the post-modernists razed the ideological walls of modernity and freed the prisoners, they left them with no particular place to go. We became existential nomads, wandering through a boundaryless world full of inchoate longings in a desperate search for something to be attached to and believe in.<sup>32</sup>

Peter Aschoff, a charismatic Lutheran pastor in southern Germany, is a strong proponent of the emerging church. Aschoff has developed in his own parish an incarnational approach to ministry, which attempts to give answers to the existential questions that Rifkin has raised. "I do not expect that you come into my world and become one of us, rather I desire to come into your world and become one of you so that God can change and heal this world."<sup>33</sup> Pentecostal churches too must develop a missional paradigm that is in keeping with an incarnational theology based upon New Testament teaching. Scriptural truths that are found in John 1:14 and

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<sup>30</sup> Jean-Daniel Pluss, "Globalization of Pentecostalism or Globalization of Individualism? A European Perspective," in *Globalization of Pentecostalism: a Religion Made to Travel*, ed. Murray W. Dempster, Byron D. Klaus, and Doug Petersen (Carlisle, U.K.: Regnum Books International, 1999), 177-178.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Jeremy Rifkin, *The European Dream* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2005), 5.

<sup>33</sup> Peter Aschoff, "missioninkarwiebitte?," <http://www.elia-gemeinschaft.de/wordpress/2006/05/02/peters-gedanken/theologie/missionalinkarnawiebitte> (accessed September 11, 2007).

Philippians 2: 5-11 emphasize and underscore that God is with us and he is an integral part of our servanthood ministry to a lost and dying world.

Hiebert calls for the church to move beyond both the colonialist and the anticolonialist approach to embrace a responsible, global prospective that acknowledges both commonalities and differences among peoples and that admits both positive and negative elements of local cultures and religious traditions. The arrogance of the past is to be replaced by an incarnational witness that lives out the unchanging truth of the gospel in local settings.<sup>34</sup>

Dean Fleming rightly assesses that some of the most helpful discussion today about contextualization is coming from those pastors and leaders who are attempting to provide insight into reaching out to the postmodern person in the western world.<sup>35</sup> Many of these leaders are not aware of the issue of contextualization itself. The missional approach of the emerging church means “values in ongoing relational-incartional presence” among neighbors and friends as opposed to an occasional “event-attractational possibilities at some other location.”<sup>36</sup> Here follows a list of approaches emerging church leaders take in their ministry to postmodern men and women, which I believe to be applicable for appropriate contextualization in the German setting.

- Choose organic principles over programmatic approaches.
- Choose to create a culture of producers instead a culture of consumers.
- Choose the contextual local approach over generic universal materials.
- Choose the intentional and strategic over the experimental and pragmatic.
- Choose gradual change and impact, unless the Holy Spirit presses for urgency.
- Choose corporate participation over institutional ownership.
- Choose an external/Kingdom focus over an internal/Christendom focus.
- Choose narrative theology over systematic theology.
- Choose mentoring systems approaches to multiplication discipleship over informational program approaches to discipleship.

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<sup>34</sup> Harald A. Netland, “Introduction: Globalization of Theology Today,” in *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity* ed. Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 29.

<sup>35</sup> Dean Fleming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 14.

<sup>36</sup> “Paradigm Profiling in The Missional Zone Part 1: Missional SynchroBlog Post,” <http://futuristguy.wordpress.com/2008/06/22/paradigm-profiling-in-the-missional-zone/> (accessed July 23, 2008).

- Choose words of Jesus over those of other biblical authors.<sup>37</sup>

Along these lines, Doug Oss proposes that Pentecostals preaching incorporate images rather than traditional illustrations in sermon communication. For Oss the use of sermon illustrations have probably out-lived their time.

It is much easier for a listener to recall an image (photograph, movie clip, song, story) than other kinds of illustrative material. An image linking a key analogy to the central biblical principle of a sermon helps plant that principle firmly in the right – not just the left – hemisphere of one’s brain.<sup>38</sup>

For Pentecostal ministers it is important that the images used reflect German culture, causing the audience to quickly understand the point that is being made. At the same time, it must be pointed out that many images from Hollywood movies and English language pop and rock music can provide symbolic meaning for a German audience that is very much influenced through cultural globalization. Today in German youth ministries there is a mixing of English vocabulary with German sentences that is almost embarrassing at times.

#### The Priority of Personal Relationships in Contextualization

In the Buddhist context, Alan Johnson stresses that personal relationships are the primary key to bringing people to faith in Jesus Christ. The methodology used in presenting the gospel message is not as important as the quality of the relationship, which has been established to the sincere seeker.<sup>39</sup> As a church planter I would wholeheartedly concur that Johnson’s assessment is valid even within the German context. Recently I learned how four German believers attending our home group began their faith in Jesus Christ. One person had established a relationship with

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Doug Oss, “Real Life Preaching: Creating Suspense,” *Enrichment Journal* 13, no. 3 (Summer 2008), 158.

<sup>39</sup> Allan Johnson, “The Need for Contextualization in the Buddhist World” (Lecture with Power Point presented at the Assemblies of God Theological Seminary, Springfield, MO, June 2008).

a Christian neighbor, while the other three had first established a relationship with a Christian colleague at work.

In the last fifteen years the Alpha Course developed by Anglican Pastor Nicky Gumble has been probably become one of the most successful tools used by Evangelical churches in Germany to reach men and women for Christ. This ten-week course on the Christian faith begins each session with participants enjoying a well-prepared meal with the goal of establishing personal relationships. Toward the end of the course, participants will spend a weekend together for teaching as well as relationship building. Approximately two million people in the United Kingdom and nine million people worldwide have attended an Alpha Course.<sup>40</sup> Through my own personal observations in Germany I am aware of many men and women who have come to faith in Jesus Christ through the Alpha Course.

Johnson concludes that these personal networks of evangelism are very important as non-believers can observe more closely the lives of believers that help them to be more open to the gospel message.

The most important thing is the relationship you build with another person. They want to see something that works, they want to see integrity and a changed life. Your life is the music that sets the context for the words of the Gospel and illustrates them to help them make sense.<sup>41</sup>

### The Priority of Dialogue in Contextualization

Alan Johnson brings out that dialogue is more effective in presenting the gospel to Buddhists than simply holding a long monologue.<sup>42</sup> In the German context, the missional approach must include effective dialogue that is grounded in a contextual apologetic. Often

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<sup>40</sup> “Ever wondered what it’s all about?” *The Alpha Course*, <http://uk.alpha.org/> (accessed August 18, 2008).

<sup>41</sup> Johnson, “The Need for Contextualization.”

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.



before moving to an adequate presentation of the gospel in Germany one must effectively give answer to the misconceptions that prevail concerning true biblical Christianity. The following list presents some of the misconceptions that Germans have concerning the gospel message. The serious student of German contextualization must find an answer to these questions so that he or she can lead the interested person to faith in Christ.

- The Bible is a book of many contradictions and countless myths.
- Science is to be valued above faith and religion.
- The institutional church effectively engages in social work but beyond that it is totally out of touch with the real world.
- Church is only for older people:
- Any so-called Christian group that is not Lutheran or Catholic must be a cult.
- The free churches of Germany are an American invention.
- Free churches are viewed in the same category as the Jehovah Witness, Mormons, and Scientology.
- The negative label of “Fundamentalism” is utilized by the media to describe free churches. Many Lutheran church leaders and theologians alike utilize this Evangelical bashing technique to degrade the free churches.
- What is so special about Christianity since all religions lead to the same God?

It is imperative for missionaries and ministers that we listen as well as speak and find out areas of confusion and anticipate objections so that we can create clarity of understanding.

### The Priority of Locality in Contextualization

Striving to present the gospel means we must find points of local identification to help the seeker more effectively understand Christianity’s true meaning. As a church planter I have intentionally incorporated into my communication ideas and pictures that relate to the immediate cultural context of ministry. For example, during ministry in the Saarland region I would from time to time make reference to regional dishes and cultural practices that seem to always bring me closer to the listening audience. Simply using a phrase in the local dialect can help to make a

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special connection with people we are trying to reach. In our attempt to speak about local culture, we are communicating that we want to reach their culture and we are genuinely interested in the culture itself.

Recently I met with the mayor of Bad Dürkheim where we are planting a church. I intentionally brought along one of the men from our congregation who was born and raised in the area and thusly he could speak the local dialect. The mayor needed to know that our new church is an integral part of the local culture that does not just attract cultural outsiders. During church services I intentionally have people from the local area share how Christ has changed their life in their cultural context. When this occurs, the non-believer in the audience can not use the excuse this is a foreign faith from Berlin or Munich or the United States, but must admit that someone from his or her local culture are on a faith journey. Dean Fleming believes that human cultures are not just to be seen as part of the Fall.

Paul affirms cultural particularity and uses it to bring the message of Christ to the world. In his celebrated statement of flexibility for the sake of mission in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, Paul declares he is willing to adapt his social behavior to either the Jewish or a Gentile („those outside the law,“ 1 Cor. 9: 21) cultural setting in order to win both Jews and Gentiles to Christ.<sup>43</sup>

As a church planter I often use the personal testimonies of Germans who have come to Christ because the listener can not say this is a foreign religion and can generally relate to several parts of the narrative. Often I have shared the spiritual journey of my wife, Mechthild, who grew up nominally Catholic, but as a teen-ager considered herself to be an atheist, wanting nothing more to do with the Catholic church. At the age of twenty-one she moved to Wiesbaden to take a new job and became friends with her neighbor, Sabine, who was a new Christian. Sabine openly shared her new found faith and Mechthild responded, as most Germans would, thinking Sabine

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<sup>43</sup>

Fleming, 126-127.

must be in a cult. Finally, one day, Mechthild bought her first Bible thinking that she could better argue against the claims that Sabine was making. Several months later Mechthild surrendered her life to Christ. This narrative is very effective as many Germans do not believe in a higher being and at the same time are almost antagonistic when it comes to speaking about the two *Großkirchen*.

Charles Van Engen goes one step further as he tries to explain in a somewhat theoretical manner that the local is of priority but it is connected in a global context.

I have chosen to use the word *glocal* here as a way to signal a kind of simultaneity in the nature of the church of Jesus Christ that is at once global and local in a number of senses. I will suggest that in the twenty-first century the church of Jesus Christ needs to become more explicitly what it already is: *glocal* in its essence, *glocal* in its theologizing, and *glocal* in its missional calling.<sup>44</sup>

*Glocalization* is a way in which the local contextual perspective seeks to better understand the world through the “lens of the simultaneous interaction, the interweaving influences, the dynamic, always-changing multidimensional interrelatedness of the global and the local.”<sup>45</sup> This dynamic recognizes that the local church must always see itself as part of a global Christian community that is sharing the good news of the gospel in a more universal way. As men and women come to Christ locally their faith will have expression first at the local level but it will have influence upon the “global” Christianity.

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<sup>44</sup> Charles E. Van Engen, “The Glocal Church: Locality and Catholicity in a Globalizing World,” in *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity* ed. Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 157.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

## CONCLUSION

No one culture can grasp all the truths that are found in the Scriptures. One culture will identify biblical truths that another culture may overlook.<sup>46</sup> The pursuit of intercultural theologizing is one aspect of ministry that I find as a missionary to be very rewarding. Knowing at least two cultures well helps the missionary to get a better handle on the “whole counsel of God.” “Believers from every nation can enhance their understanding of God’s revelation and correct their own blind spots by listening to the theologies of churches from other cultures.”<sup>47</sup>

There cannot just be one approach to ministry in Germany. There will be multiple means and various avenues yet to be discovered, that indeed will foster effective contextualization. In recent years the introduction of the Alpha Course and the Willow Creek seeker-sensitive church service have done much to bring the Evangelical church in closer proximity with the prevailing German cultural mind-set. Being in the forefront of twenty-first century evangelism means much more than simply handing out a track or setting up a tent on an open field where the gospel will be preached. The priority of establishing personal relationships in the postmodern era will become ever more important. Seekers are more concerned about who we are in our approach to life than the message communicated with words. Jesus proclaims that we are indeed the salt of the earth as well as the city set on a hill for all to see.

Finally, Dean Fleming reminds us that contextual theology is never a finished product.

We may attain clear theological understandings for a particular time and place as a result of critical reflecting on the gospel. But cultures and societies change. New questions

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<sup>46</sup> Steven Strauss, “The Role of Context in Shaping Theology,” in *Contextualization and Syncretism: Navigating Cultural Currents* ed. Gailyn Rheen (Pasadena, CA:William Carey Library, 2006), 118.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

arise. We must remain open to the need to reevaluate and reformulate our theology in light of fresh insights into Scripture and altered external circumstances. Like the book of Acts, contextualizing the gospel is an open-ended story.<sup>48</sup>

May the Lord of the harvest help us as missionaries and ministers to grasp what priorities are to be established as we share the good news of the gospel in Germany within the context of our own locality. Methods and approaches will always change as to how we share the good news, which in a nutshell is what effective contextualization is all about. The message never changes as the words of Jesus are just as relevant today as they were two thousand years ago when he encountered a tax collector who was desperate for redemption. "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost." (Luke 19:10)<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Fleming, 322.

<sup>49</sup> *The Holy Bible, New International Version* ((New York: Zondervan, 1978).

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