

Talk 1: “The challenge facing world mission” (Acts 15:1-35) aprince70@outlook.com

1. The challenges facing world mission

If I were to survey each person here this morning and ask, ‘What do you think are the biggest challenges facing world mission today?’ – what sort of responses do you think I’d get?

- **i. People.** Maybe some would say **people** – or more precisely – a **lack** of people willing to go as missionaries. That’s a big challenge. Well, if current statistics are anything to go by, there may well be some merit to this suggestion. For example,
 - The Joshua project recently compared the number of cross-cultural missionaries in 2000 and 2018. In the year **2000** there were 420,000 cross-cultural workers. In 2018, that number had increased by only 20,000 – to 440,000 – an annual growth rate of **0.26%**. A quarter of a percent. That’s more than 4 x slower than the world population growth rate for that same period.¹
 - The mission workforce has plateaued. And **percentage**-wise, we are sending less missionaries **today** than we were twenty years ago. So people **going** is a real challenge.
- **ii. Money.** Other people though might point to money. Or more precisely a **lack of money** amongst the general Christian community as a major challenge currently facing world mission.
 - There are people willing to go – they might say. But there just isn’t the same money around to support them as there used to be. So a lack of money is what is driving the lack of people.
- Counter to these suggestions of lack of people and money is the argument of at least one group who states that the Church has roughly **3,000** times the **financial** resources and **9,000** times the **people** resources needed to finish the Great Commission.
 - In fact, they reckon that if every evangelical Christian gave 10% of their income to missions we could easily support 2 million new missionaries – around 5x the current number of missionaries.² Certainly food for thought.
- **iii. Accessibility.** A third challenge facing world mission that people might give is accessibility. **Accessibility.** There are people willing to **go**. And people willing to **finance** them. But they just can’t get **into** the places they need to.
 - A large number of the world’s unreached live in places that are difficult to live in and difficult to even get **into** – with missionary visas not able to be granted. Afghanistan. North Korea. Yemen. To mention just a few.
 - You may well even know someone where that has been the case. So it is a real challenge – particularly with the rise of religious extremism.

¹ <https://joshuaproject.net/assets/media/handouts/global-mission-trends.pdf> 2018 world population growth rate is 1.07% (it has slowed).

² <http://www.thetravelingteam.org/stats/>

- People. Money. And accessibility. Are **real** challenges facing mission today. As they have been to varying degrees throughout 2000 years of Christian history.
- But this morning I would like to suggest a fourth challenge – that I believe our reading from Acts 15 raises – that might not have been a common response in my survey. Or even have been mentioned at all. Not a lack of **people**. Or **money**. Or **accessibility**. But of **contextualisation** – biblically-shaped and Spirit-driven **contextualisation**.

1.1 Contextualisation

- What do we mean by contextualisation? And why is it a challenge in mission today – even the **biggest** challenge according to some?

Definition

- Contextualisation lies at the intersection of gospel and culture/ where the gospel kisses culture. Contextualisation is how the gospel authentically comes to life in each new cultural, social, and religious setting. [Flemming, 13-14]
- The big question contextualisation seeks to answer is: how can I communicate the unchanging gospel in a changing world? How can I make the Christian faith as a whole — not only the **message** but also the lifestyle that flows out of that message — understandable to whatever group of people God places before me – without changing or distorting the gospel?
- Let me give a few examples
 - There are some missionaries who tell people from a Muslim background who have become Christians that they can still say the Shahada (“There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his messenger”), still do prayers 5x day facing Mecca, still go to the mosque on Fridays, but go to a Christian gathering at another time of the week to read the Bible, sing Christian songs etc. Is this OK or not? And based on what criteria?
 - The Dinka people of central South Sudan often use cattle rather than sheep for trade and for sacrifices. In a Dinka Bible translation, would it be OK to replace Jesus as the ‘lamb of God,’ with Jesus as the ‘the ox of God? Would you be communicating the same thing or would you now have introduced a distortion of the gospel?³
 - What about if you were giving an evangelistic talk to children/ to surfers/ to migrants. What words, illustrations can you use that have the best chance of resonating with your listeners and yet still remain biblically faithful?
- A lot has been written about contextualisation in the past fifty years since the word first started being used in a mission context. It’s been a big deal. And still is. And you’d think that by now people would have agreed on how to go about faithful, biblical, Spirit-driven contextualisation. But they haven’t.

³ <https://missionexus.org/ behold-the-ox-of-god/>

- People still strongly disagree on how to go about contextualisation, or what's acceptable or what's not. Some even think you shouldn't contextualise at all, simply giving people the 'pure, culture-free gospel.'
- Engaging in contextualisation therefore means doing the hard thinking about what things are gospel (and so unnegotiable) and what things are cultural (and so flexible).
- Acts 15:1-35 is an example of the church at work actually doing contextualisation. The contextual issue they wrestle with is whether Gentiles have to adopt Jewish practices such as circumcision and obedience to the Law in order to be a Christian. Or do they only need faith in Jesus Christ and nothing else.
- But as the church works through the issue seeking to determine the lines between what is gospel, what is cultural, and the relational implications of this, the principles that they use to come to a decision I believe can guide you and I, and the missionaries we support, in how to faithfully contextualise the gospel today.

2. Taken by surprise (Acts 10-14)

Acts 10

- To provide a context for understanding Acts ch 15, we need to understand that it is the final bit of a larger story that begins in chapter 10 and is all about how people who were not Jews in any way, shape or form i.e. Gentiles, start becoming Christians.
- In **Acts 10** when Peter preaches to about 50 gentiles from the extended family of a Roman soldier called Cornelius and they all get converted and receive the Holy Spirit. This was **unprecedented**, and takes Peter completely by surprise. In his mind, Gentiles weren't supposed to become Christians. They weren't supposed to become part of the people of God – at least without having renounced their 'gentileness' and adopted the Jewish religion and all that went with it – circumcision, obeying the Law.
- But Peter's experience gives him a fresh understanding of what God was doing in this new era since the resurrection of Jesus, as we read in Acts 10:34 (have a look at this with me): "34 Then Peter began to speak: " *I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism 35 but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.*"

Acts 11:1-18

- And yet, while Peter may have had his thinking about Gentiles and conversion turned upside down, many of his fellow Christians back in Jerusalem had not.
- Word had got around that Peter had gone and stayed in a Gentile home – something no good Jew would ever do.
- So Peter is forced to defend himself by recounting his experience of the events that had happened in the conversion of Cornelius and his whole household:
- Key verses: vv17-18. "17 *So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?" 18 When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, God has granted even the **Gentiles** repentance unto life."*

- The result is that not only Peter but the whole Jerusalem church **accepts** that Gentiles **can** become Christians. And many do, as Acts 12-14 records. A Gentile church starts in Antioch – some 540 kms to the north of Jerusalem. It grows quickly. Sends out its first missionaries – Paul and Barnabas. And many Gentiles come to faith in Christ.
- Everything seems to be going great. Until Acts 15:1.

3. Gospel or culture? (Acts 15:1-35)⁴

i. Dissent (Acts 15:1-5)

- Acts 15:1 “*Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: “Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.”*”
- Illust: So often when we are really growing as Christians. Or seeing great fruit in our ministry. Or are on the verge of an evangelistic breakthrough with a family member, or friend. The evil one likes to get in and make life hard for us. Difficult. Stressful.
- That’s what we see in v1. Where, in this period of **tremendous** mission growth. A **crisis** comes. The crisis is caused by zealous Jewish Christians, who had made the 540 km trek **from** Jerusalem **to** gentile Antioch, and began teaching that circumcision is essential for salvation (Acts 15:1).
- In v5 we meet a second group of zealous Jewish Christians who were basically saying the same thing: “*Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, “The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses.”*”
- These Jewish Christians sincerely believed that in order to be accepted by God as a genuine Christian you needed faith in Jesus Christ. **PLUS** you had to keep the Jewish laws found in the Old Testament. **PLUS**, for the men, be **circumcised**.
- When someone tries to add something to the gospel. Says that you need faith in Jesus Christ **PLUS**. It shows you that they really don’t understand the gospel at all.
- Illust: One Sunday night in Sydney while I was walking along the street, a couple of guys approached me and said that if I wanted to become a Christian I had to have faith in Jesus, **PLUS** be baptised, **PLUS** attend **their** church. They had added to the gospel. And so distorted it. Corrupted it. Just like these Jewish Christians were doing in Acts 15.
- Paul and Barnabas get pretty hot under the collar about this. Because they knew how devastating this wrong teaching would be to their ministry. How many gentile men for a start would agree to become Christians if they knew that they would have to get circumcised in the process? Not likely!
- So Paul and Barnabas, and a group of other Gentiles from the Antioch church, head down to Jerusalem to meet with the apostles, and the elders of the Jerusalem church (including James – Jesus’ brother). In order to settle the matter once for all.

⁴ Material here draws on Flemming, *Contextualization*, 43-53.

ii. Debate (Acts 15:6-18)

- Some weeks later this special meeting – this Council – is held. Resulting in **vigorous** debate between the two groups (think of some of the TV images of debates in Parliament) – because the stakes are very high.
 - Because if Gentiles are required to become circumcised and keep all sorts of Jewish religious rules then as well as being a **major** stumbling block for Gentiles to come to faith, it would also invalidate the conversion of uncircumcised Gentiles who had already become Christians.
 - You see, in terms of contextualisation, the Jewish Christians were saying that circumcision, not eating pork, keeping the Sabbath etc were **gospel** requirements and therefore **essential**, whereas Paul and Barnabas were saying that such things were just **cultural** and so **optional**.
 - If a person comes to faith in Christ from a Muslim background. Would praying to Jesus facing Mecca be simply **cultural** and so a matter of preference? An acceptable form of contextualisation? Or is it a gospel issue – something that undermines the gospel and so is prohibited? What's **gospel**? What's **cultural**? And how do you decide?
- Well, in Acts 15, the crisis is resolved through three speeches. Illust: A bit like a pitcher in a baseball game – each speech is a ‘strike’ against the Jewish Christians who demanded circumcision and law keeping as essential for salvation:
 - **Peter (vv7-11)**
 - As Peter was the first one to bring the gospel to the Gentiles, he is given the opportunity to speak first, in vv7-11.
 - As first pitcher (if you like), Peter retells the story of the journey God had taken him on through the events with Cornelius and his family back in Acts 10. And in particular how God had poured out his Spirit on these Gentiles simply based on their faith in Christ.
 - His conclusion is found in v11: “*We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.*” **Strike 1**
 - **Paul and Barnabas (v12)**
 - Second to the pitcher’s mound, in v12, are Paul and Barnabas.
 - They plainly and simply recount the signs and wonders done amongst the Gentiles during their ministry over the previous couple of years – silencing everyone in the room. v12 *The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them.* **Strike 2**
 - **James (vv13-21)**
 - The final pitcher is James – the half-brother of Jesus and head of the church in Jerusalem. He’s as Jewish as they come and yet delivers the knockout blow in vv13-21 by arguing from the Old Testament – the very Scriptures that the Jewish Christians said they followed.
 - James quotes Amos 9:11, 12 as proof that even the Old Testament says that the new people of God will be made up of Jews **AND** gentiles – accepted on the same basis. **Strike 3**

iii. Decision (Acts 15:19-29)

- Leading him to pronounce in vv19-20 "*It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. 20 Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood.*".
- Based on what God had already done amongst the Gentiles through Peter, Paul and Barnabas, and also based on Scripture, James declares the Council's decision to be that Gentile converts are **not** required to be circumcised or to keep the Mosaic Law (Acts 15:19). Gentile Christians are members of God's people *as Gentiles*, forming part of the new people of God. [PAUSE]
- It is one thing for a theological decision to be made, but decisions often have relational consequences. James is conscious of this and wanted to find a way by which Jewish and Gentile believers could relate to one another, and enjoy Christian fellowship together, whilst maintaining unity in the church.
- So what James does is add four concessions to the Jewish believers: that the Gentile Christians are to abstain from things polluted by idols, sexual immorality, meat that has been strangled, and blood.
- James states that Gentile believers will do well to abstain from these four things – not because the Gentiles are under the Law but because they would be acting out of love towards their Jewish brethren as they show cultural sensitivity – and help preserve fellowship.

iv. Dissemination (Acts 15:30-35)

- This information is then disseminated through a letter sent from the apostles and elders to the Gentile believers back in Antioch, as well as the regions of Syria, and Cilicia – as recorded in vv30-35.

4. Implications for world mission

How might this contextual crisis some 2000 years ago help us in our ministries today, along with the missionaries and agencies we support, navigate the challenges of contextualisation? I'd like to suggest six signposts or boundary markers from Acts 15 that might **inform** and **shape** our contextualisation today. Because there are so many spurious, harmful and unbiblical practices going on today right round the world under the guise of being "contextual." And I was greatly helped by my friend Dean Flemming's book *Contextualization in the New Testament* here.

i. The role of the Holy Spirit

- The first boundary marker we find in Acts 15 is the essential role of God the Holy Spirit in the church community.
- Throughout Acts 15 Luke emphasises that God through His Spirit was actively involved in bringing the gentiles to faith in Jesus (e.g. v4b, v7, v8, v9, v12, v14). For e.g. vv8-9: 8 **God**, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by

giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. 9 He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith.

- But not only was the Holy Spirit active in the hearts of the non-Christian **gentiles** as they heard and responded to the gospel. But the Spirit was actively at work in the hearts and minds of the **believers** there in the Jerusalem Council, guiding them church in its decision-making process.
- Humanly speaking, the church leaders made the final decision, but the primary influence was the Spirit. So, in v28, as part of the letter the apostles distribute to the Gentiles they write, *“It seemed good to the **Holy Spirit** and to **us** not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements.”*
 - The **Holy Spirit**. And **us**. The order in which these two are mentioned is important and leaves us in no doubt that the church’s role is subordinate to that of the Spirit.
- Because the church was sensitive to the Spirit’s leading it was able to resolve the issue at hand and come to a fresh understanding of how to live as the people of God. [Flemming, 48]
- Any genuine contextualisation today needs to be sensitive **to** and driven **by** the Holy Spirit.

ii. The role of Scripture

- The second boundary marker we see in Acts 15 is the crucial role that Scripture plays in guiding the church community.
- A key part of James’ argument is that Peter’s experience of seeing Cornelius and his family become Christians shouldn’t come as a surprise because God had said some 600 or so years before in Amos chapter 9 that the Gentiles would become part of the new people of God: *“14 Simon has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself. 15 The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written:...”*
- So for any contextualisation to be faithful it needs not only to be Spirit-driven but also **shaped, directed**, and in full **agreement** with Scripture.
- You might think that the Bible would be an obvious tool for Christians to use to help them work through a contextual issue. But not so. As part of my PhD on contextualisation I read hundreds of books and articles on the topic. What shocked me was how little the Bible featured in the contextualisation literature – at least in any detailed or systematic way.

iii. The role of experience

- The third boundary marker that shapes the Jerusalem Council’s contextualisation is a consideration of the church’s own experience of God’s activity. By experience I mean that they sought to determine where and how God may have been at work in some particular event.
- Some people feel a bit nervous in saying that experience may have a role to play in contextualisation. In fact, I’m one of them. Because experience can be so subjective. So, some proponents of contextualised approaches adopted in Muslim-dominated cultures – where new believers don’t identify themselves as Christians,

still go to the Mosque each Friday etc., claim that **thousands**. **Tens** of thousands. Even **hundreds** of thousands. Of Muslims coming to faith through this approach. And therefore that God is affirming and blessing this approach. Well, that's their interpretation of the experience anyway.

- Others have equally interpreted it as a deceptive, misguided approach which is not producing genuinely converted Christians.
- So, two **very** different interpretations of the same contextualised experience. Experience can be so subjective.
- Well, Acts 15 challenges me to think that there may be a place for considering experience – albeit a subservient to the role of Scripture and the work of the Holy Spirit. But as part of the total package, experience can be a piece of the jigsaw and make a useful contribution to the whole.
- Certainly, experience forms part of the decision-making process in Acts 15 at any rate. Peter talks about his experience with Cornelius. And Paul and Barnabas talk about their experiences of Gentiles coming to faith through their ministry.
- So, reflection on experience has its place. But here's the key observation: who does the reflection and evaluation of the experiences of gentiles coming to faith? Importantly, the reflection is not done by the **individual**, but by the **group**. The church community itself has an important role – our 4th boundary marker.

iv. The role of the community

- You see, the church's decision is made as a part of a group or community and in consultation with its leaders.
- Both church leaders (top down) and the church community as a whole (bottom up) are involved in the theological decision-making process. While James, as the recognised church leader, plays a leading role, the community of believers are also very involved in the process – leading to a unifying position.
- Therefore, the collective mind of the whole church – not just some members of it – are necessary for the contextualisation process.

v. No compromise on essentials

- Fifthly, in contextualisation there can be no compromise on the essentials of the gospel.
- In Acts 15 we find Jewish Christians who claim that circumcision and obeying various Jewish laws is essential for salvation – something that both Peter and James point out is false teaching and a denial of the gospel. Salvation is by grace through faith for both Jews and Gentiles alike (Acts 15:9, 11).
- Despite the pressure applied by these Jewish Christians the church leaders held firm on this essential gospel truth.
- The uncompromising truth of the gospel is worth standing firm for. And false teaching and practices cannot be accepted – even for the sake of unity.

vi. Compromise on non-essential issues for the sake of unity and fellowship

- The final boundary-marker for faithful contextualisation is that we should be open to compromise on non-essential issues for the sake of unity and fellowship.
- The Jerusalem Council had two issues to resolve: i. Could Gentiles be saved without being circumcised and following the Jewish OT laws? ii. Could Gentiles be included into a single Christian community alongside believing Jews?
- To the first issue, no compromise was possible. The second issue, however, required a different approach.
- The decision of the Council is evidence of the church seeking to grapple with the reality and challenge of a culturally mixed community. The prohibitions they gave, while they had scriptural warrant, are best considered “temporary and context-specific measures designed to avoid unnecessarily offending the Jews, thereby opening the door to full fellowship between Jewish and Gentile Christians.” [Flemming, 50]
- Illust: Hudson Taylor – missionary to China and founder of what is now called OMF – famously (and scandalously for the mid 1800’s) declared the types of clothing worn, a person’s hairstyle, and the food they ate as non-essential to the gospel. This led him (and the missionaries in his organisation) to look like the Chinese (hair-colour/ clothing), to eat like them (rather than eat European food), and to live like the Chinese (in their types of houses) so as to remove as many barriers as possible to the Chinese people hearing and accepting his uncompromising gospel message.

5. The guiding principle - All things to all people (1 Cor 9:19-23)

- Paul’s own missionary approach appears to bear this out – where he uses his freedom to serve, and feels free to adopt different practices based on the context (1 Cor 10:23-31 v Acts 21:17-26).
- His guiding principle of being all things to all people is summarised in 1 Cor 9:22: *To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.*
- There are clear limits to Paul’s contextualising – to what constitutes “all things.” As Ben Witherington states, “He does not say that he became an idolater to idolaters or an adulterer to adulterers. But in matters that he did not see as ethically or theologically essential or implied by the gospel, Paul believed in flexibility.” [Witherington, *Conflict and Community*, 213]

Conclusion

- World mission faces many challenges today. People. Money. Accessibility. But greater than all that. Is the need for women and men who are prepared – under the influence of the Holy Spirit, through community-guided study of Scripture and evaluation of experiences – to be uncompromising on the essentials of the gospel, but flexible on the non-essentials – so that by all possible means some might be saved. Are you willing to be one of them? Let’s pray.