

Contextual Bible Study: Essential Elements

Introduction

While the Bible in the Life of the Church (BILC) project has shown that Anglicans read the Bible in many ways, it has also revealed that one particular and distinctive method, known as Contextual Bible Study, is practised communion-wide. This paper sets out the characteristic features of the method, as used by the Limuru consultation, held in East Africa in 2011. Other practitioners of Contextual Bible Study, such as John Riches and Gerald West, articulate the method using slightly different terminology, but the essence of the approach remains fundamentally the same.

The Four “C’s” of Contextual Bible Study (CBS)

The first element is context, and identifying the readers’ context is commonly the starting-point for this method. This is because the text and its readers inhabit actual historical contexts which must be opened up for exploration in the act of reading the Bible. In this method, then, the text is not merely the object of study but rather the sacred resource for its readers’ lives. In the act of reading, the contexts of text and reader may fuse or clash; either way, in the encounter, the way the text of the Word of God interacts with the lives of its readers will create new understandings of the text and new challenges to the lives of its readers.

The second element is community. While contextual Bible study can obviously be conducted by individuals the BILC project is concerned with the elements of communal Bible study, with the various occasions on which Christians gather together to read the Bible in order to deepen their personal and communal relationship with God. Wilson¹) makes the point that CBS constitutes a recovery of the priesthood of all believers in its principle of lay participation. Wilson also makes the point that contextual Bible study is closer to the oral traditions which lie behind and shape the biblical texts; it therefore recovers the importance of testimony within the biblical text as well as within its readers’ lives.

The third element is critical study. This is where the historical contexts of text and reader are explored by the use of recognized critical tools, and is where the trained reader’s role becomes central. Because context is central to the CBS method, the starting-point is normally the issue the community wishes to address; the trained reader or facilitator will therefore help the group to choose the right text to address this issue. In addition, the trained reader facilitates good exegesis of the biblical text.

The fourth element is change. This is the purpose of Bible study: not to know the text as an object which the reader possesses through study, but rather to be transformed by what has been learned in the engagement with the biblical text and with other participants. In other words, Bible study will open up paths for personal and social transformation on the part of the participants.

This basic outline can be explored further through the publications set out in the following bibliography.

¹ See Wilson

Bibliography

The theme of context is addressed in:

The Anglican Communion website www.anglicancommunion.org is where readers will find some of the various reports referred to. "For the Sake of the Kingdom" and the Kuala Lumpur Reports can be accessed on <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/ministry/theological/iatdc/index.cfm>.

The process as described by the East Africa Regional Group at Limuru can be found in the Regional Reports' section of these Additional materials

Examples of CBS practice may be found in the following:

Lawrence, Louise J.. *The Word in Place: Reading the New Testament in Contemporary Contexts*. London; SPCK, 2009

Riches, John, "Refreshing Bible Study" on: (<http://www.grow-with-the-bible.org.uk/pages/data.asp?layout=page.htm&Type=&Id=959>)

What is Contextual Bible Study? London; SPCK, 2010

West, Gerald in a multitude of publications.

Biblical Hermeneutics of Liberation: Modes of Reading the Bible in the South African Context (New York: Maryknoll 1995, and Cluster Publicationsce, 1995)

The Academy of the Poor: Toward a Dialogical Reading of the Bible (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999)

GW & M.W. Dube (eds), *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories and Trends* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2000)

GW (ed), *Reading Other-Wise: Socially Engaged Biblical Scholars Reading with Their Local Communities* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature Semeia Studies, 2007)

GW & Hans De Wit (eds), *African and European Readers of the Bible in Dialogue* (Leiden; Brill, 2008)

The fruits of the work of West and his collaborators can be seen in summary and very accessible form on the Ujamaa Centre website, <http://ujamaa.ukzn.ac.za/Practical.aspx>, from which the Centre's "Introducing Contextual Bible Study" and "Contextual Bible studies" can be downloaded. The latter is a marvellously clear, easily-accessed resource showing in detail how the process works in practice.

Wilson, Karen Maria. CONTEXTUALIZED BIBLE STUDY AND THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION IN MERU SOCIETY: LIBERATION THEOLOGY PRINCIPLES IN THE DEVELOPMENT CONTEXT OF EAST AFRICA: A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of The University of Manchester for the degree of MASTER OF ARTS IN THEOLOGY) (<http://www.oikoumene.org/fileadmin/files/wcc-main/documents/p5/ete/Contextualized%20Bible%20Study%20and%20Theological%20Education%20in%20Meru%20Society%20-%20TEE%20in%20East%20Africa%20-%20Karen%20Wilson%20-%20TEE.pdf>)