

Worship; Contextualization

I have entitled the outline “The Regulative Principle of Worship and Multiple Cultures.” I would like to start with what I think is the most significant teaching about worship as it relates to cultures of the day and time in which Jesus lived, as well as now. It is found in John chapter 4, a familiar passage regarding the encounter Jesus had with a woman from Samaria. It is interesting how different this woman was from Jesus in terms of her cultural experience at that time. And it is to this woman that He reveals, I think, the most significant teaching about worship. Looking in verses 19-26:

“Sir,” the woman said, “I can see that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.” Jesus declared, “Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.” The woman said, “I know that Messiah” (called Christ) “is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.” Then Jesus declared, “I who speak to you am he.”

Jesus as a Jewish teacher talking with a Samaritan woman was something that would have raised the eyebrows of even his closest followers and disciples. At that time, Jewish men, including rabbis, would not only not talk to women in public, but they would not even talk to their own wives in public. Jews generally avoided Samaritans as well. And so we here we have a Samaritan woman who would have been despised by most Jewish men. But this particular Samaritan woman is also despised by her fellow Samaritan women, because she had had five husbands and the man she was living with then was not her husband, as you look at the context of this passage. And so it is to a woman very different from Him, a woman he should not have even been talking with in the eyes of most of the people of His day, to whom He reveals this deep teaching about worship. I believe that where the passage says that the Father is seeking those who will worship Him in spirit and truth captures the heart of the regulative principle of worship. What does it mean to worship the Father in spirit and truth? Those are the kind of worshipers the Father is seeking. I think that where this passage uses the word spirit is not referencing the Holy Spirit but rather the human spirit, even though I do not think we can worship God rightly apart from work of the Holy Spirit. To worship God in spirit means to worship Him from the heart, from a heart that has its affections, love, motivation, and focus set on God Himself. Jesus said, “This people worships me with their lips but their hearts are far away.” So I think that He is saying it is possible to worship in truth, according to how God says He wants to be worshiped, but not in true worship, because the heart is not in it. So to worship God in spirit means to worship Him from our hearts, and I think that is part of the regulative principle of worship.

The regulative principle of worship basically says, “We should worship God as He commands.” Well, He commands us to worship Him from the heart. Sometimes that is overlooked when we look at forms and elements of worship. He also says we are to worship in truth. It is not an either-or. It is not that charismatic people worship in spirit and Presbyterians worship in truth. Rather, charismatic people and Presbyterians are to worship God in spirit and in truth. And to worship in truth means to worship according to all that He has instructed and told us in His Word about how He wants to be worshiped. Now, you can search the Scripture for the next year to try and find an order of worship for a worship service, and you will not find it there. So to say we worship God according to how He commands requires us to draw out from the Scripture biblical principles for worship that then have to be applied in

a particular context. I think that is a very important aspect that we must understand regarding the regulative principle of worship.

So where does this regulative principle of worship come from? Well, the Westminster Confession of Faith in chapter 21, the first section says this in the second half, "The acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by Himself and so limited by His own revealed will that He may not be worshiped according to the imaginations and devices of men or the suggestions of Satan under any visible representation or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture." Basically, it can be summed up like this: if the Bible does not command it, do not do it. It is really a negative formulation. It is prescribing worship in that way. Now, in the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) directory for worship, it says this, "Since the Holy Scriptures are the only infallible rule of faith and practice, the principles of public worship [notice the Book of Church Order says 'principles of public worship'] must be derived from the Bible and from no other sources." And then, in the last section of chapter 47 in the Book of Church Order, it says, "The Bible teaches that the following are proper elements of worship services, reading of the Holy Scripture, singing of psalms and hymns, the offering of prayer, the preaching of the Word, the presentation of offerings, confessing the faith, observing the sacraments and, on special occasions, taking oaths."

Now, not everyone will completely agree with me, but I believe that to worship as God commands means that in our worship services we worship with the elements of worship that God's Word commands us to incorporate into the way we worship Him. I think the regulative principle of worship has most to do with the elements that make up a worship service, like the preaching of the Word, the singing of psalms and hymns, and so on. And if that is what the regulative principle of worship is, if that is what God in His Word tells us He wants us to do in worship, then there is a lot of flexibility of application and arrangement and incorporation of those elements in a worship service. Does the Bible say we are only to have one sermon in a worship service? Could we have five? Of course we could! We may want to take into account how weary we might get if the five sermons were all an hour long, but in some parts of the world, people delight to have very, very long worship services. And in some ways it is a very North American cultural expression to say that worship has to be over in an hour, and even that within the North American context it is usually white, middle to upper class, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Episcopalian types. If you have had any experiences in black, Baptist churches in the United States, you know that it does not just go for an hour. Sometimes you bring your lunch to worship because it goes on for hours, and people love it and delight in it.

So, there are a lot of multiple expressions of the biblical elements of worship that fit different contexts in different ways. So, to me I think that is very, very relevant to our understanding of how we look at worship around the world among the people of God. In my dissertation, one of the things that I concluded was that a right application of the regulative principle of worship will incorporate two things: the richness of past expressions of biblical worship and the freshness of present expressions of biblical worship. The key is not traditional versus contemporary or North American and Northern European versus South American and Far Eastern. The issue is biblical worship and the wealth of what we have to draw on not only in our own tradition but also other cultures' history and tradition from the past. As a people, we can reflect on the Scripture and think through ways to creatively worship in a way that honors God and is faithful to the required elements of worship. I think this can be put together in a way that connects meaningfully to the people who are worshipping. We do not even think about that when we think about what language a worship service should be in. If the people who are gathered for worship speak only French, then we fully expect that the worship service will not be in English, but it will be in French. Anybody speaking English will have a translator translating for them into French. Well, there is a whole lot more to a cultural context for worship than just the spoken language.

I had the privilege this past summer to be part of a mission team that went to Ghana, West Africa. It was a delight and a great enjoyment to be a part of their worship experiences. It was quite different than the PCA in America, even though their doctrinal standards and commitments to theology are very, very similar to ours. But, they did things in their worship service that we do not normally do in ours in terms of participation of the people, expressions of joy, and movement during the worship service. (I will avoid the word “dance” here for the moment, but I do not think that is even an issue as an element of worship; I think it is an expression of other elements of worship, if you want my short version of that.) But there are a lot of different ways in which the biblically commanded elements of worship are expressed around the world. And what some people think is that what we need to do as Presbyterians is find the most biblical expression of the regulative principle of worship, freeze-frame it in history, and bring it forward to every culture around the world that the Gospel goes to in every future generation.

These churches in Ghana in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church were started by German Pietists and later also by Scottish Presbyterians. Basically, as they became Christians, they also had to become Northern Europeans in their dress and manner and ordering of worship and songs in worship. They basically had to deny their cultural expressions and become like Northern Europeans. And obviously I do not think that is consistent with biblical teaching; they should be able to be Ghanaians. They should be able to be a tribe of people within Ghana and use those things that are not inherently evil about their cultural way of life and incorporate them into the way they honor, glorify, and express love and adoration to God in worship. A generation or two ago, the Christians in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Ghana began to incorporate some of their own cultural expressions and dress and so on into their worship experience. But, as we found out as we worked with worship leaders and pastors and musicians in the workshop that we taught while we were in Ghana, there are struggles even within that. For them it is not a struggle as to whether or not there should be drums in the worship—that is true in their traditional services and in their more contemporary services. But there are tensions, generational tensions. And there are other kinds of issues for them in terms of what is the best expression of worship even from their own cultural context, just as we have here in places and churches within the PCA, for example. Visit all the PCA churches in the Saint Louis area, and you will find a variety of expressions of worship, all incorporating those biblically commanded elements but in a variety of ways in varying contexts.

One of the things that I like to emphasize is that one of the most insightful things I learned while preparing to write my dissertation was what John Calvin did in Geneva, Switzerland in the early 1500s. One of the reasons that he had to leave Geneva and go to Strasburg was because he wanted to have singing in worship. As the Reformation went into Switzerland in Zurich, there was a man by the name of Huldreich Zwingli, who did not allow any singing in the worship service. I think it was an overreaction to the abuses of song in the Roman Catholic Mass, but he read Ephesians 5 and Colossians 3 where it says, “making melody in your heart,” and he thought it meant only in your heart and not with your lips. Calvin said, “That is not the right exegesis of that passage. And there must be song and worship as one of the biblically commanded elements.” Part of the reason Calvin had to leave Switzerland was because he was insisting on that. When they invited him back, he made part of his agreement of his return to have the singing of songs and psalms in the worship services of Geneva, Switzerland. Now, how would he incorporate that? Well, the meter of the songs in Hebrew did not fit the French-speaking Swiss people. Thus the first thing Calvin had to have done was to have the psalms metered to Western meter so they could be sung. So he hired some French poets to rearrange the words and then the meter and the sound of the words so they could be put to music so they could make sense in that context of worship.

Part of what I am getting at here is that Calvin was an innovator: he brought freshness to worship even though he was drawing on the richness of the past, the biblical Psalter. Now, what are we saying? Well, at first Calvin thought he could write some music, but he discovered soon that it was not his gift to the body, though he had plenty of other gifts. And so he hired some French musicians to put these Western-metered songs to music, and he said to them, "Capture the emotion of the psalm in the expression of the music." He very much felt he was fulfilling Psalm 98, that "a new song" would be sung in his point in the history of what God was doing. So you have richness of the past (the Psalter) and freshness of the present (Western meter and new songs being written). These songs were sung in such lively ways that for some of them in Geneva, Switzerland, the critics of song in worship called them "Genevan Jigs." We do not think of psalms without musical instruments as being all that lively, but apparently the worship services in Geneva with those songs were quite lively in their day.

Whether it is within your own local church or in a church you may be called to in North America or in another culture around the world, it is important to understand the distinction between biblically commanded elements of worship and the appropriate application of that to a particular context. In this way the cultural, ethnic, and socio-economic expression and diversity is able to be expressed in the manner in which people worship. In this way, worship can connect to people. We want to see the heart expression of a particular people worshipping in a particular way or place at a particular time. To be able to distinguish between principle and application of principle is a very important thing that we sometimes miss. I think that one of the passages that captures heavenly worship is Revelation 5 and then again in chapter 7. In Revelation 7: 9 and 10 it says, "After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: 'Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.'" And then earlier in chapter 5:9-14 you see in verse 12, "In a loud voice they sang..." and the people who sang from verse 9 were those who had been purchased by the blood of Christ from every tribe and language and people and nation. They are singing both the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb. As you read through the passage, one thing we can say for sure about worship in heaven is that we will all participate in it, and that there is recognizable ethnic diversity expressed in heavenly worship. So to say that we do not need to be aware of that and understand it in the way we worship in this first-fruits period of the fullness to come I think robs us of something that is very much part of God's design. This anticipation of the new song is something that we need to stretch outside of our comfort zones, whether they are cultural or even theological to some degree. We want to be able to stretch toward heavenly worship and be willing to embrace and incorporate the diversity of worship and particularly song and worship.

Now, I would like to close this section with these two passages, Hebrews 2 and Psalm 22. I will not read Psalm 22, but I do want to read Hebrews 2. This particular passage revolutionized my understanding of what goes on in a worship service. Hebrews 2:10ff says, "In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering." Now who is the author of their salvation? Who is being spoken about here? It is Jesus. "Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers. He [Jesus] says, 'I will declare your name to my brothers; in the presence of the congregation I will sing your praises.'" What this passage tells us is that Jesus is the worship leader, standing in our presence as the ascended One who has gone to glory and is now present through the Holy Spirit, leading His people in worship. And somehow in the mystery of the incarnation, one of the present benefits of Jesus continuing to be fully man, without sin but still God and man, is that He, God the Son, fully man, worships God the Father. And He leads us in worship.

Look at Psalm 22, which we normally think of with the opening song of lament, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" If you keep reading, you see that the song of lament in the first half turns into a song of victory in verses 22 and following. At the end he takes the song of the nations, of the poor, and of the rich and incorporates it into his song that he presents to the Father. You see, worship is fundamentally about the Gospel. The only acceptable worship to God the Father is that which is presented to God the Father by God the Son. And our worship is only acceptable to the Father, no matter how much it conforms to biblical truth, if it is received and perfected by our older Brother and Mediator, Jesus, who presents it to the Father. And His ears are pleased to hear it, because the perfecting song of Jesus is mixed with our imperfect expressions of worship and made perfect by Him.

There is a story told of a concert pianist by the name of Paderewski, who was doing a concert and had not come out yet to begin. A young boy slipped away from his mother and went up to the stage where this concert grand piano was and started playing "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star." The crowd was pretty upset. What mother would bring a child to this very formal, highbrow event and then to let him slip away and go up and ruin the evening by playing "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star"? Well, this great concert pianist comes out from behind the curtain and motions to the crowd. He comes up and puts his arms around the little boy and says, "Keep playing," and plays this grand and beautiful counter-melody to "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" to the standing ovation of the crowd. And I am sure when they went home they did not talk about the other songs that the pianist played that night. Now, most of us think that our approach to worship is like the concert pianist. Well, I have news for us. Our worship is like the "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star." Now, play "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" with all your might, with as much excellence as you can, but recognize that the only reason that the equivalent of "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" in our praise to God is acceptable to the Father is because of our older Brother. He comes and wraps His arms around us and plays the grand and beautiful melody and counter-melody that perfects it and enriches it and makes it pleasing to our Father's ears.

As we think about what God is doing around the world in worship, one of the benefits of living in our time is that a song could be written in West Africa and sung here in the United States. In one of our upcoming chapel services, we will sing a song that one of our students at the workshop in Ghana wrote, called "We Need You." It is about our need for God. We brought that song back with us, and Henry says to play it, sing it, and teach it to others. Thus we will be experiencing the blessing of a West African song written this summer. This will be an enrichment to our worship and representative of heavenly worship that we are able to enjoy and experience now.

Are instruments appropriate to use in worship, and if so, how do you decide which ones? I think it is very important to understand the fullness of what is expressed in Scripture. It was the majority view in the Presbyterian tradition to not use instruments because, as the argument goes, there is no place in the New Testament where instruments are explicitly commanded to be used in worship. Thus if the regulative principle says we only do what is commanded, and there is no command in the new covenant for instruments, then we should not use them. Well, I think that is a cutting off of the continuity and flow of the whole of Scripture. In the Old Testament, particularly in the time of David, you have the introduction of musicians and instrumentalists. And almost every time instruments are mentioned in the Old Testament, it is a combination of winds, strings, and percussion, which are the three major musical groups. Also, if you look to heavenly worship, you see that harps are used. Is only part of temple worship fulfilled in Christ, the sacrificial system, but is the musical expression cut off because Christ has come? I do not think so. I think a biblical, theologically rooted understanding of the temple and of heavenly worship would say that musical instruments are appropriate and are part of the expressed and commanded worship of God. I think that just as there are a variety of musical expressions in melody and song, there are a whole host of musical instruments that can be used. That is true even just within

those three categories of winds, strings, and percussion. I like to tell people that we use percussion if we use a piano in worship, because the hammer bangs on the strings, so it is a combination of percussion and string. But, I think that you have to say, "What fits this worshiping congregation? What is an appropriate expression of this people?" And as you go from one part of the world to another, as you go from one socioeconomic group of people to another, there will be differences. And sometimes it is just a matter of convenience—who in your congregation can play which instruments? Right now we do not use the organ very much in chapel, not because we are against using the organ but because no one has come forward to play the organ. We have lots of other musicians playing lots of other instruments; if you come to chapel, you are beginning to see that.

I also do not think there is any musical instrument that is inherently evil. One of the big things in our culture or context seems to be the use of drums, as if that is a bad or evil thing. I think the important thing about instrumentation is whether it aids and enhance the expression of the content in musical form. I like to tell people that, with these huge organs we have around many of our PCA churches, any organist can drown out any drummer by playing the organ to the full extent of what it can play. And I have had the same troubling experience in worship when the drums are too loud that I have also had when the organ is too loud and I cannot hear myself sing. It is a matter of bringing the instruments based on the giftedness of the local congregation and using them to aid the song and worship. And I think for someone who is willing to stretch beyond what we are comfortable with and most like will allow there to be fuller expression.

I think we have much freedom within the form of what it means to worship in spirit and truth according to the elements that the Scripture commands. There is freedom to creatively and in fresh ways make use of forms and expressions that fit the worshiping context that we are in. This will vary from place to place, even within the PCA. One of the things that is happening right now, which has had a big impact on Covenant Seminary, is that a number of people have started writing new tunes to old hymns. It is done a lot in Reformed University Fellowship (RUF) circles, at Christ Community Church and other places, and it is spreading and happening all over the place. One of the greatest things that we as Presbyterians bring to the wider body of Christ is the richness of biblical content that is captured in a lot of our hymnody. But a lot of the greatest hymns of the church have been lost to the church, because they are attached to un-singable tunes. They were un-singable when they were first written, and they still are. So people are creatively, with fresh expression, saying, "I cannot write any better than these words, but I can write a tune that will carry those words more effectively." Or we can rearrange old tunes that we still use.

In Africa and in some African-American churches here, the element of the offering is very interesting and wonderful, because they all come forward to put their offering in and sing songs like "I Have Joy in my Heart, Deep, Deep, Joy in my Heart," for example. And it is kind of a half dance, half bringing of my offering and singing with "Joy in my Heart." I found that very exciting. Now, do I come back and go to a traditional PCA church and say, "This is the way we are going to do the offering this week"? Well, probably not. It probably would not fit that context very well. You would have a lot of opposition, and it would not be worth trying to make them do that. What is the element? It is the offering. What should be our heart attitude toward our offering? Well, there should be joy in our hearts; we should be cheerful givers. How do we do it in most Presbyterian circles? Quietly; the only movement is to my wallet or my purse while somber music is played on the organ. Maybe we should sing a song of joy, though perhaps while we are still in our seats rather than dancing around. I can learn from another culture and say, "Maybe they have captured something of the essence of the element of giving the offering that I can bring with some appropriate adjustments into my context. I do not have to do worship 'African' style, but I can learn from my African brothers and sisters and maybe make worship here more faithful to the

Scriptures and more expressive in a way that fits.” Would it be a stretch for some? Yes, it would be a stretch. Calvin had the singing of psalms during the passing of the elements in the Lord’s Supper. That is very disturbing to many Northern American Presbyterians. But is it wrong? Can we not sing while we are partaking of the Lord’s Supper? Do we ever sing at the dinner table? If we do not, maybe we should sing more. I think we should try to understand what the biblical principles are and then whether that is a valid expression in that context. In this way we can gain, from other cultures, insights that will actually enable us to worship in a way that is more faithful to Scripture and pleasing to God.

How do you keep worship from being a truncated model that only focuses on corporate worship on the Lord’s Day? I think that we need to start with the question, “What is worship?” It is a response of my entire being 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to the goodness and the greatness and the grace of God. It is living my life as a living sacrifice before God. And so, that is what enters into the corporate expression of worship and what should grow out of the corporate expression of worship. It is not that I start to worship and then stop. From a life of worship, I enter into corporate worship and then go back to that life of worship. That should bless the corporate experience, and the corporate experience should bless my week-long expression of worship to God.

Is drama appropriate in worship? I do not see a biblical command for an element called drama. I think that worship is intended to be dramatic. I think preaching has elements of dramatic presentation, and I think the Lord’s Supper and baptism are dramatic sacraments in some sense. I would argue to some degree that when we do not have the Lord’s Supper every week, that means we are taking out of what should be a typical worship service, from my perspective, elements of drama. In some ways I think drama can be used and the arts can be used very effectively to communicate the Gospel and instruct in the Gospel. The question is whether it should be done in a corporate worship service. I personally have reservations about it. The way it is used that I am most comfortable with or least uncomfortable with is when it is attached to the element of preaching. It may be the equivalent of an opening illustration to a sermon that is directly tied in with it. This might include a dramatic reading, a dramatic presentation of a story in that way. So I think there are limitations, but there are some freedoms. I think those who would argue what is often called the Lutheran view of worship would say drama is all right. The Lutheran view of worship is “If the Bible does not forbid it, it is ok to do it.” We, on the other hand, need to find a place rooted in the Scripture where drama is commanded as an element. And I do not think we find that. However, I think some forms of drama can be attached to the element of preaching without going to places that are inappropriate.

I think the issues of drumming and generational tensions are very important. We are called not only to worship the Father in spirit and truth, with the richness of past and freshness of the present, but we are to also worship in a way that holds the unity of the body together. I am personally not in favor of having separate contemporary and traditional services, because this basically creates two congregations in one church. I would much rather have the tensions present because people are trying to worship God in unity together and stretching toward each other in their expressions of worship. I think in some settings a drummer could be cut loose to play and everybody present would love it. Again, this should be done in a way that does not drown out the biblical content that is being sung. But there are other ways in other settings that you would do a lot less. Out of consideration for others, you may not be able to realize your full giftedness as a drummer, but the drum can support other instruments in a way that minimizes the likelihood of offense to certain people who are present. I think we have to be sensitive to the “weaker brother,” but also ask the “weaker brothers” to grow stronger in the process. It can be a wonderful way for people to learn how to get along with each other and love each other in the context of worship.

How do we come up with a regulative principle of worship, comparing the Lutheran and Calvin perspectives of “unless it is commanded, we do not do it” and “unless it is forbidden, it is ok”? I would argue a regulative principle for life first, just like worship is all life first. I think we would all say that we want to live our lives according to God’s command. God’s command talks about not adding to or taking away from the Law. And that is repeated throughout Scripture. You have very specific commands regarding worship in the Old Testament sacrificial system, and whenever there were priests who added to that or did more than what was commanded, they were punished. Sometimes the Earth opened up and swallowed them. This seems to be saying that God does not like us to do things other than in the way He has prescribed. I think you can make that argument pretty clearly in the Old Covenant around the sacrificial system. The question is, how much does that carry forward into the present? I think I would argue that it carries forward with much more freedom and latitude of application. But the part that is carried forward is around the elements in worship. Thus there are lots of different musical expressions, lots of different styles of preaching, lots of different ways of communing at the Lord’s Table. But to add elements beyond what the Scripture seems to indicate or what God asks of us and wants of us in worship is going outside the broader principle of staying within God’s commands. I think we do have a lot of freedom within those elements, often more than people think. We need to take more freedom in the areas we have without adding to what God commands in Scripture concerning elements of worship. That is my short version of the answer.

Dr. Mark Dalbey, guest speaker on the topic of the regulative principle of worship:

Well, in many ways the previous topic on worship involves matters of contextualization and how expressions of biblical principles of worship become appropriate in particular situations relative to ethnic, socioeconomic, and generational settings. I want to continue on that subject for a minute about comparing church bells and traditional drums, which are largely associated with many settings. Because of the associations with many of our hearts and minds of the histories behind those two means of communication, there seems to be an instinctive sense of the purity of the bells and something questionable about the drums. But if you think of those two means of communication simply as means of communication, of conveying messages before you had telephones and everything else, what is the difference? Seeing those sorts of matters as just somewhat coincidental or practical, I think, is part of the picture for us.

Now, when we move to Christology, we are in a similar world but maybe a different world as well. There is something about theologically proper topics and Christology in particular that makes us maybe a little more leery of diversity in comparison to a topic like worship. So while our next topic in Christology and contextualization follows in line with what we just said of worship, it has its own unique features as well. I brought just a few of the many books from our library here written in very recent years on Christology. These have all been written in the past decade on Christology and various developments, with few exceptions. There has been a virtual explosion of writings from various vantage points on Christology. These are people who would fall on various points on various theological spectrums, depending on how you would draw your scale.

At the most recent meeting of the International Association of Mission Studies (we met back in 2000 near Pretoria, South Africa), we had various study groups. I was able to attend one study group meeting on Christology. We discussed contextual theologies and dialogue. We examined a variety of perspectives through art and analysis of different sorts of contextual theologies, those that focus more on socioeconomic and political situations and those that focus more on cultural and religious matters. We talked about how we interact with each other across settings as the Lord’s people and how Scripture and

tradition interact with our contexts and vice versa. This was one of the many study groups that was carried out at that important meeting.

Contextualization, as I mentioned to you before, is a huge topic. Trying to define it is like trying to define the world culture—it is next to impossible. And when you start to look at the literature, you see thousands of different attempts at defining something. To me, the simplest place at least to begin is to see contextualization as particularization. These are basically the same. Remember the particular-universal dynamic that is always with us. And just as God comes to rest with us, to be with us, and to be intimate with us, we—who in concrete situations are always being approached by and loved by and cared for by God—are particular people in particular settings. Contextualization is just simply that: God coming close to us.

You can stretch contextualization outside of religious matters, of course. There is a McDonald's worldwide, for example. Thus it is not only in Christian theological matters that this will take place. I think one reason we might have trouble accepting a diversity of Christological understandings may be because of the necessary and proper commitment we have to orthodox, traditional formulations of Christology. We need to realize that those developments took place in the midst of controversy and in response to a need to define, if you will, the limits of orthodoxy. If you have the idea that these formulations are set, then if you somehow allow for diversity in any sense, you will seem to be shaking the foundations that have already been established. I am not sure, though, if that has to be the case.

First, you can realize the particular setting within which those formulations took place. And when you think about Christology in particular, just think about the very word "Christology." It is a Greek term. Issues and problems were arising in those Greco-Roman settings that demanded answers and qualifications. There was mainly the Arian controversy. This raised questions over who Jesus was, over whether He was God and man or only one or the other. Those questions had to be answered in particular ways in that setting. Now, just because that was particular does not mean that it is not relevant to other settings. That was orthodox. That was the way that issue had to be met. But to think, therefore, that that is the only and final definitive understanding of Jesus Christ, that all of the Lord's people throughout the ages and throughout the world can and should have that understanding, is, I would suggest to you, open to question.

Another reason why some of us might have trouble is that the nature of the Christian faith many of us embrace and experience does not incorporate in its essence the essential element of ethnicity and language. Somehow we have inherited the idea that the Christian faith is non-cultural and does not involve particular languages. Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead for human beings. But we need to remember that an essential part of the Christian Gospel is that this is for all people, all sorts of people, Jews and Gentiles—all sorts of Gentiles. There are multiple languages in the original Bible itself: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. These are particular languages. Thus the diversity of languages is built into the Christian faith. It is a part of the Christian faith. It is not just as a non-cultural religious soul that I and all other Christians are followers of Jesus Christ. I am a particular, whole person. We all are whole, particular people, which involves our particular and various ethnic and linguistic identities and characters.

Am I saying that cultures other than the Greco-Roman culture within which the Christological controversies were fought and resolved, because those other cultures did not face the same issues, those Christological formulations should not be forced on them? No, not really. I want to suggest that the particularity of the Greco-Roman settings within which the controversies developed needs to be remembered. But the particular-universal tension involves keeping these together. Those

controversies, while in a particular setting, were dealing with the universal God-Man, Jesus Christ. Therefore they are certainly relevant, and I would say they are definitive. But to say that that is all that can be said about who Jesus Christ is—that is squeezing this out. What else can be said about Jesus Christ? Jesus Christ, as developed in the Christological controversies debated in the ecumenical councils, was both God and man. He is both God and man, truly God and truly man, of the two natures, the one person Jesus Christ. These were the basic formulations we gained from these councils. Much of what many people in places outside the West in recent years have had to deal with is “Ok, this man Jesus was a first-century Palestinian Jew. But we are not Palestinian Jews, so how is it that we relate to this man, this God-man, culturally?”

Thus one other thing that you can say about Jesus Christ is that, as the God-Man, He somehow embodies in Himself the capacity to relate linguistically and ethnically to all of His people. I do not want to imply in any sense—and this is what can happen, and this is where we have to be careful—that our ecumenical councils and our traditional orthodox Christian formulations and Christological formulations are not important and definitive for all Christian people. But I do want to suggest that to say that those have said everything that needs to be said about Jesus Christ is not taking into account some of the other questions that people have had to ask and that demand answers as well. Again, just because those settings were particular settings does not mean they did not have universal significance. They did, and they continue to. But there are the matters of His ethnicity, for example, or the matter of His capacity and interest in being compassionate toward, that is, suffering alongside those who are poor and destitute. And specifically incorporating that into your Christological formulations and understandings becomes acutely important for numbers of people. That is what I want to suggest: that there needs to be an openness and flexibility to allow all of the people of God together to add to our fuller understanding of the greatness of who Jesus Christ is.

Are we saying that to understand Jesus Christ in a Greco-Roman context is to particularize Him? And then if you restrict Him to that context, that is a way of particularizing? Yes, I would say that. But I would clarify that by saying that I do not want at all to diminish the universal significance of the ecumenical councils. But we can learn from the testimony of a non-Western setting such that as teachings of Jesus Christ came through Western channels and were restricted to that seems to have had a limiting factor on how Jesus Christ was understood by people. It has made it harder for them to see how He could be relevant and involved in their lives in their particular setting.

On the outline, first, I have an introductory remark from Andrew Walls speaking of the incarnation as a translation. I think that is one helpful rubric—not the only one, but a helpful one for understanding what new and fresh understandings of Jesus involve in new settings. Namely, it is a translation, a re-entanglement, an expression of an understanding of Jesus shouldering His way into a new setting that takes place. When you look at the incarnation as the divine Word becoming flesh for all humanity, He is translated again and again in every culture where He finds acceptance among His people. He is translated from being the eternal Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, into being a particular expression of a Palestinian Jew. And that is part of the nature of the Christian faith, for Jesus to be particular and concrete among us. That is what it means for God to dwell among us. That is what it means for the particular, unique, character of old Covenant Israel. But that does not mean that just because God was working in a particular, unique, and salvific way in old Covenant Israel that God was not at work among all peoples of the world at that time. But in a particular, significant way, in a unique way, He was working in old Covenant Israel. And He came as the Son of God in Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus of Nazareth alone is the Savior of the world. But He was a particular concrete man. And for people who are in different settings, He comes to us in our setting. He does not do this in the same way He came in the first setting, but He comes to us in ways that we can understand as well. If He came to me

only as an Aramaic-speaking country carpenter, if that was the only Jesus Christ I knew, He would not be *my* savior. How could He be? But as the Savior of the world, He is the one who comes to us in our particular ways in His magnificence, in the full glory of who He is.

Let me give you a few examples of trying to understand Jesus as relevant to us in our particularity. These include books such as (there have been many of these written in recent years, this is just one of several): *Asian Faces of Jesus*. This was written by a variety of Asian scholars, most of whom would not embrace views of Scripture that we would embrace. These sorts of theologians, while having some insightful comments to make, would be ones whom Ramachandra, for example, would take issue with. For example, many of them would not focus on the unique particularity of Jesus of Nazareth in terms of His universal significance as the only savior for human beings. Ramachandra, as an evangelical, would insist on that while being able to list some of the significant points they raise.

You read about the different “Hispano-American Christs” in Latin America. This was from a chapter in a book written by Emilio Nuñez, who is an evangelical Latin-American scholar. He summarizes the Spanish Christ who was brought in through the Conquistadors. He shows us the images that people create of Jesus as the one who suffers and comes among people, the Christ of the minorities in many peoples. The Christ of Protestantism has a particular focus on the text, but Nuñez points out some limitations of that, of being individualistic—for example, the Christ of what he calls the new theology, which emphasizes the Christ of social justice. That is just a summary of different understandings of Jesus in Latin America that Nuñez gives. He mentions in those readings about how Christ needs to be understood biblically. And he points out that often with Protestantism and evangelicalism there is a particular focus on the biblical Christ, and a problem that they can have is not being contextualized enough.

When you think about the universal-particular dynamic, you can almost see an equivalent dynamic that may be more familiar to you: the interaction between text and context. This is where we as evangelicals are committed to the supremacy of the text of Scripture. We see the text as normative. But the situation becomes a little more complicated when you accept the reality that the text of Scripture, by a Protestant understanding, has to be translated into particular contexts. So the connection become closer; the text becomes more enmeshed in the context, if you will. That is a risk of the Protestant understanding of the translation of the faith, even to the very Word of God itself. So as that text becomes a part of that context, it brings change. It remains normative, but at the same time it becomes entangled with the context. So how is it that you understand the Jesus described in that text, within that context? Do you remember the diagrams of missional theology we encountered right at the beginning of the course? These diagrams have us look at the text, at the context, and at the family of the faith that is being communicated to. Thus you look at Christology as text, context, and faith interact. We hold to the supremacy of the text, yes, but the text of Scripture is speaking the language of this context. And so this dynamic of the universal-particular and the text and the context becomes, well, “queasy”—that is one word that strikes me as appropriate for some of us, maybe. It is not that we have to be all that worried. We should just recognize that this is part of the glory and beauty of the Christian faith, to come so close to us.

When we talk about text and context being translated into the context, are we talking about the original cultural locations of the Scriptures, or are we talking about the new context into which the Scriptures are translated? Both. You really do not have a text that is outside the context. But here is where our understanding of Scripture being the very Word of God who Himself is the Creator standing above while being involved in but being the transcendent and immanent God, this is where that will help inform us. We know that He is not simply enmeshed in all cultures, so we do not need to go down that

postmodern route. Again, we see the particularity and diversity while affirming that there is the universal character. You know, languages are different, but there are similarities among languages as well. We are all human beings. There is a universality there, and there is a particularity as well.

Why do some of us feel new formulations in Christology are a danger? The danger that some of us can feel is that it begins to threaten the traditional, orthodox formulations of the ecumenical councils. The feeling can be that the settled orthodoxy is over here, and new heretical notions can arise if left unchecked. We fear this because of theological controversies of the past, deviant groups in the present, and because of the duty to guard the faith. All of those things factor in. That could be one danger of being concerned about new translations producing new heretical ideas. But then the question is, who decides that? Who takes the initiative, who has the final say in what is heretical and what is not? When you talk of cross-cultures, it becomes a more fluid situation, and that is where some of the uneasiness can come in. I do not want to make you unnecessarily unnerved—that is not the point. The point is to open us up to the full glory of how great God is. Thank you.