

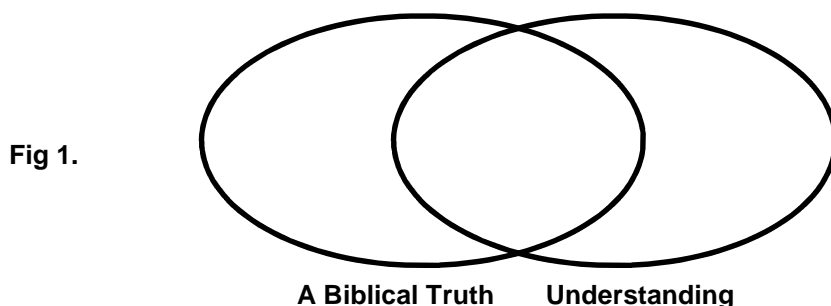
Doing Collaborative Biblical Contextual Theology: Lessons from Thailand by Steve Taylor

I am more of a practitioner than an academic. Maybe it's because of my engineering background that I like to make things simple and see things work. For decades there has been a persistent challenge from evangelical quarters regarding the need to do contextual theology. As a cross-cultural missionary working alongside the Thai, I also recognise this need and have, myself, written extensively about it (e.g. *"Gaps in beliefs of Thai Christians"* EMQ, 37 no 1 Jan 2001). But I have not seen very much actually implemented on the ground. At the same time I've had the opportunity to teach "Contextual & Asian Theologies" for the AGST Alliance (a consortium of seminaries in S.E. Asia of which Bangkok Bible Seminary is a part). As I taught the various models for doing contextual theology (e.g. those suggested by Bevans, Schreiter, etc.) I became aware that they all appeared complex and difficult to implement.

What I would like to share with you is a very simple but effective approach we have started to use here in Thailand. It has arisen from my involvement with a small group of mature Thai leaders called the "Thai Christian Thinkers Forum". I shall explain using three headings: Why, Who and How.

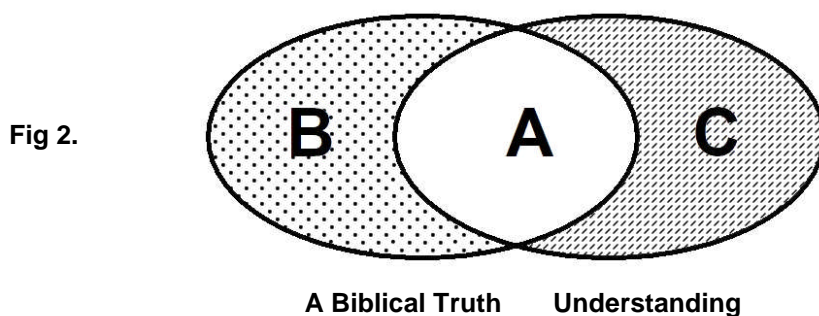
WHY?

The reason for doing contextual theology can be explained in a nutshell by observing these two overlapping circles (Fig 1).



The left circle represents "A Biblical Truth" (e.g. sin, repentance, prayer, giving, God etc. as the Bible actually reveals it) the right circle represent the "Understanding" of that truth within a given culture.

We can break the diagram down into 3 sections (as in Fig 2)



A = those parts of the Biblical Truth that are understood correctly

B = those parts of the Biblical Truth that are missing from the understanding

C = misunderstandings that are thought to be true but are not according to the Biblical Truth

It is evident that parts B and C require special attention in teaching Biblical truths. Aspects of the truth in the B section that are missing from the understanding will need to be emphasised and explained more clearly. Misunderstandings in the C section will need to be exposed and explained why they should to be corrected. Each culture will have different B elements and C elements stemming from prior religious belief, philosophy, worldview and values.

Take, for example, communicating the Biblical truth concerning "Sin" in the Thai Buddhist context. While most Thai individuals grasp that sin can encompass actions that harm others (part of the A section), they often overlook its fundamental nature as an offence against God (so this missing element will need emphasising as part

of the B section). Additionally, due to Buddhism's Five Precepts, they may perceive killing animals as sinful as well (so this non-Biblical element will need clarification as part of the C section).

When Christian teachers, preachers and writers endeavour to make Biblical truths more understandable within their culture, then they are actually *doing* this much needed task of contextual theology. This is what I mean in this article by *doing* Contextual Theology. It's Biblical because the whole exercise is aimed at bringing people more and more to the actual truth as revealed in the Bible (i.e. to make the two circles overlap as fully as possible).

WHO?

Who are the most suitable individuals to engage in theology within a specific context? For sure the national Christians, who best understand their "mother" context, should be the primary people doing theology in their context. If we use technical terms first introduced by Wycliffe / Summer Institute of Linguistics, the national Christians are the "emics" (easily remembered because of the "m" for mother!). They are able to *feel* the problems and issues arising from the culture within which they have been raised.

But we should also include the "etics" i.e. those who have entered the culture from the outside but have integrated sufficiently to understand the dynamics of that culture. While not being able to *feel* the same as those who grew up within the culture, they can often *see* or *identify* issues or problems more clearly or more objectively.

Consider the challenge of defining Biblical leadership within the Thai context. This issue presents an opportunity for collaboration between Thai leaders, who may be deeply influenced by cultural norms such as patronage, indebted relationships, and seniority, and experienced missionary outsiders, who bring a nuanced understanding of the context without the same emotional ties to cultural norms. In this scenario, both groups can contribute valuable insights. Thai leaders offer firsthand knowledge of cultural dynamics and societal expectations, providing essential context for understanding local perspectives on leadership. Meanwhile, missionary outsiders bring a fresh perspective, unencumbered by emotional attachments to cultural norms, enabling them to identify potential areas of tension between cultural practices and Biblical principles. By working together respectfully and collaboratively, these two groups can navigate the complexities of cultural adaptation and find authentic expressions of Biblical leadership that are both culturally sensitive and free from practices that might lead to indebtedness or dependency.

Ideally, therefore, both national Christians and non-national Christians (e.g. long term missionaries) can together take on the challenge of doing theology in their context. Personally, for over a decade, I have had the privilege of being a member of the Thai Christian Thinkers Forum, comprising approximately 20 individuals, 80% of whom are Thai. The aim has been to think through issues relevant to our context and ^{write} books that will be helpful for Thai Christians and churches.

HOW?

The Thai Christian Thinkers Forum has already published two main series of books and is currently working on a third.

The first series is called "Can a Christian Do This?" and deals with ceremonies in the Thai culture. It proposes a simple mode of operation using 4 basic guidelines which can be applied to any part of a ceremony: 1. Accept 2. Adjust 3. Adapt and 4. Avoid. The first book in this series was to do with funerals and has become a very helpful resource to Thai Christians who often need to attend a Buddhist funeral. Two other books are on the Thai New Year festival and the Loy Krathong festival (held annually when a small boat and candle are floated out onto water to thank or appease the goddess of the water).

The second series is "Questions and Answers" on key topics such as the Holy Spirit, Giving & Tithing, LGBTQ+. Questions encountered in the Thai context are raised and then answered from the scriptures.

The current third series is "Communicating the Gospel in the Thai Context" and is the most relevant to our article here. The aim is to produce a tool-kit for Thai Christians to be able to better explain the Gospel in their context. The main components of the Gospel have been broken down into the following chapter titles: God, Man & Man's condition, Jesus & the cross & resurrection, Man's response of faith, etc. Various members of the group are writing one chapter on their chosen heading. Unfortunately we did not have a clear procedure for writing the chapters from the start, giving rise to different approaches. But what has emerged is a 3 step approach to each section as follows:

1. PROBLEM: List the problems within the Thai context (i.e. the B's and C's in our circles illustration)
2. BIBLE: For each problem find the relevant Bible teaching(s)
3. COMMUNICATION: Suggest relevant and meaningful ways for communicating these truths in the Thai context

Example:

1. PROBLEM: In the chapter entitled "God" the following "Problems" or questions in the Thai understanding were identified: Which God?; God has not yet escaped the cycle of birth and death; This world has no God or if there is, then God is not relevant to us humans (more radical Buddhists); God is "ignorant" (or imperfect) because he created a world full of suffering; How can one supreme God be three persons?; God is the God of westerners.

2. BIBLE: Subsequently, relevant Bible content is identified for each 'problem' or question. This may be a combination of several passages, enough to provide a biblical and theological basis for the explanations which will follow.

3. COMMUNICATION: Since the Bible was written within and for the cultural contexts of its day, we need to find relevant and meaningful ways of expressing the content found in number 2 for Thais living in the 21st century. Sometimes the chapter writers have their own suggestions, but it's at this stage that the collaboration of the group is most helpful. Apart from our regular 3 monthly meetings (normally only 2 or 3 hours), we have an annual 3 day retreat near the seaside. These are very special times when we are able to bring together our decades of ministry experience to discuss ways that have been effective, or that could be effective, in communicating the relevant Biblical content to the Thai. These are then collated and included in the chapter.

CONCLUSION

It is only more recently that Thai leaders have felt the freedom to start to look for contextual ways to communicate their faith. All recognise that these are early days and in some ways experimental. But it is done with the anticipation that both we and others will build on what has been started, taking what works and refining it further. Similar to the hermeneutical spiral, each subsequent endeavor should aid the Thai church in attaining a deeper understanding of their faith and communicating it more effectively.

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