

The Contextual Argument

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Closely related to the missional argument is what I call the contextual argument. If the missional argument says both that prosperity is given for the purposes of world mission and evangelization, and that to some degree prosperous missionaries and evangelists are needed to bring the gospel to the affluent, then the contextual argument says that the theme of prosperity is particularly important in light of popular understandings of what it means to be saved prevalent among the masses who inhabit the global South. Put alternatively, whereas the missional argument presents the perspective of those who are engaged in missionary or evangelistic work, the contextual argument emphasizes the viewpoint of those who are missionized and evangelized. There are at least two levels of prosperity underneath this claim.

First, people are being drawn to Christian faith across the global South because they or someone they know have experienced healing in some significant way. Consultation with local medicine-men or women or even Western doctors ? or in some cases, not having access to the latter ? did not alleviate their physical or psychosomatic condition, but an encounter with Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit did. The gospel, or good news, in this case, refers to physical healing, blessing, and, by extension, prosperity.

Second, the center of gravity of Christianity is shifting from the West to Latin America, Africa, and Asia in part because people have experienced God as savior not only in their bodies but also in the concrete circumstances of their lives. God is providing them with jobs, enabling payment of bills, rescuing them from debilitating debt, promoting them in the workplace, the church, or the public domain, bringing about a higher quality and standard of life ? in short, hearing their prayers and transforming their situation. Thus are the masses finding God?s salvation addressing the particularities of their physical, material, and economic needs. Christian redemption thus is not abstract for specific, resulting in the overall prosperity and well-being of those who walk in the way of Christ and his Spirit.

Prosperity in this scheme of things might be understood as being the most recent form of the contextualization of Christian faith in the non-Western world. If previous generations of missionaries sought to Christianize their environments, more recent missionary strategies have emphasize the indigenization or inculturation of the gospel instead. But what does it mean to indigenize or inculturate good news in contexts marked by poverty, disease, and under-development? In these situations, the gospel that makes a difference must heal bodies, enable socioeconomic lift, and bring about prosperity. Such prosperity surely might involve the achievement of affluence even when measured by Western standards, but it might also surely mean nothing more than that those would couldn?t pay their bills in the past now can do so, or that those who did not own their own homes in the past now do, etc.

The point that prosperity advocates in the global South insist on, thus, is this: why shouldn?t African, Asian, and Latin American Christians be recipients of the prosperity and blessings enjoyed by Western Christians? Why is it implausible that God should transform the poverty of his people into affluence across the Southern hemisphere as God has done so in the Western world? Of course, such "contextual," even "missiological," rationales could be no more than self-serving theological rationalizations. But the problem of globalization and transnationalism means that inevitably the lines are blurred in terms of self-understandings. Of course, non-Western Christians, even prospective believers, are going to gauge the power of the gospel according to its long term fruits in the lands of Christendom. If prosperity marks the quality of life in Christian nations, why shouldn?t it be expected that personal conversion to Christ might bring about collective, even national, wealth understood broadly?

The economic implications of the contextual argument include the capacity of the Christian gospel to mobilize the masses to make lifestyle changes, perhaps embrace a kind of Puritan work ethic, engage in entrepreneurial or other forms of economic activity, and perhaps assume responsibility for development projects. So if the missional argument spurs Westerners to ?invest,? perhaps with the hopes of enjoying some kind of economic return in the future, the contextual argument motivates local partnerships with development efforts to work for the betterment of life, perhaps in the hopes of experiencing redemption in the form of socioeconomic prosperity and lift, if not in one?s lifetime, then perhaps by the generation of one?s children or grandchildren.