

The Perils and Promise of Contextual Theology: A Critical Engagement – Brendon Naicker

Abstract

Contextual theology emerged as a vital corrective to Eurocentric theological frameworks that marginalised the experiences and cultures of non-Western peoples. It has allowed the Church to express the gospel meaningfully within diverse socio-political realities. However, I argue that when context becomes the source rather than the setting of theology, the sufficiency and authority of Scripture are compromised. This paper critically examines contemporary manifestations of contextual theology—ranging from the Prosperity Gospel to postcolonial theologies in South Africa and the United Kingdom—and offers a constructive framework for faithful contextualisation rooted in Scripture and guided by the Holy Spirit.

1. Introduction

Contextual theology has played a critical role in enabling the Church to engage meaningfully with specific cultural and social settings. It rightly resists theological imperialism and affirms that the gospel must be communicated in ways that make sense to local people groups. Yet the danger arises when culture is no longer a conversation partner but becomes the final authority. In such cases, theology is no longer shaped by divine revelation but by human ideology.

In this paper, I argue that while contextual theology is necessary, it becomes distorted when it elevates experience, politics, or social trends above Scripture. My goal is to affirm the importance of contextual theology while offering a robust theological framework that ensures its faithfulness to the gospel.

2. Contextual Theology and the Sufficiency of Scripture

The sufficiency of Scripture, as affirmed in *2 Timothy 3:16–17*, grounds theology in God’s revealed Word. “All Scripture is God-breathed,” Paul writes, “and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.”¹ When theological authority shifts from Scripture to context, the result is not just distortion but idolatry—where cultural assumptions take the place of divine revelation.

This temptation is especially pronounced in contemporary theology, where affirmations are increasingly shaped by cultural consensus, identity politics, or ideological pressures. As David Wells notes, “The fundamental problem in the evangelical world today is... the loss of

¹ The Holy Bible, English Standard Version (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001), *2 Timothy 3:16–17*.

the centrality of biblical truth.”² When churches conform to cultural norms under the guise of relevance, they risk becoming echoes of the world rather than voices shaped by the Word.

A historical illustration is found in the German Church’s capitulation to Nazi ideology in the 1930s. Many theologians subordinated biblical truth to political expediency, erasing references to Israel and Jesus’ Jewish identity. The Confessing Church responded with the Barmen Declaration, which asserted, “Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death.”³ This declaration stands as a reminder that faithful theology always begins and ends with the voice of Scripture, not the spirit of the age.

3. Contemporary Distortions of Contextual Theology

3.1 The Prosperity Gospel and Hyper-Capitalist Contextualisation

In many global contexts, particularly across Africa and Latin America, the Prosperity Gospel presents a deeply distorted form of contextual theology. It equates divine blessing with financial gain and physical health, transforming the message of the cross into a promise of cash. Drawing from J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, I note that churches often mirror consumerist values, adopting corporate structures and promoting seed-faith offerings that commodify grace.⁴

This theology:

- Centralises texts like *Philippians 4:19* while neglecting *Luke 6:20–26* and *2 Corinthians 8:9*.
- Reduces faith to a transaction rather than trust in Christ.
- Fails pastorally when poverty persists, often blaming individuals for lack of faith instead of resting in God’s sufficient grace (*2 Corinthians 12:9*).

3.2 LGBTQ+ Affirming Theology and Cultural Progressivism

In Western contexts, contextual theologies often reinterpret Scripture to accommodate contemporary understandings of sexuality and identity. Scholars like James V. Brownson argue for a reframing of Christian sexual ethics, appealing to love and inclusion.⁵ However, such approaches frequently subject the biblical text to modern anthropology. Matthew Lee

² David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 4.

³ Karl Barth, “The Barmen Theological Declaration,” in *The Church’s Confession Under Hitler*, ed. Arthur C. Cochrane (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), 237.

⁴ J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, *Contemporary Pentecostal Christianity: Interpretations from an African Context* (Oxford: Regnum, 2013), 45–50.

⁵ James V. Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church’s Debate on Same-Sex Relationships* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 87–92.

Anderson notes the inconsistency of applying suspicion to prohibitive texts while affirming others without critique.⁶

This tendency results in:

- *Experience functioning as a theological canon.*
- *A redefinition of sin and human nature.*
- *A diminished view of biblical authority.*

Faithful contextualisation does not require the Church to mirror the values of the dominant culture but to prophetically challenge them through the lens of God’s Word.

3.3 Nationalist and Identitarian Theologies

Christian nationalism is another distortion of contextual theology. In the United States, it has merged the gospel with political identity. Gorski and Perry observe that this movement often baptises ethnocentrism and exclusion under a divine narrative.⁷ Similar trends are evident in Russia’s “Russian World” theology and India’s attempts to harmonise Christianity with Hindutva ideology.

These theologies:

- *Subordinate the Church’s catholicity to national myth.*
- *Use Scripture to validate empire rather than critique it.*
- *Obscure the gospel’s call to transnational unity (Galatians 3:28; Revelation 7:9).*

4. Faithful Contextualisation in South Africa and the UK

4.1 South African Post-Liberation Theology

In South Africa, the Kairos Document was a landmark of prophetic contextual theology during apartheid, grounded in Scripture and committed to justice.⁸ However, in the post-apartheid era, parts of the Church have drifted toward political accommodation. Biblical fidelity is sometimes sacrificed for national unity, economic prosperity, or cultural restoration. As Tinyiko Maluleke warns, the danger is that the Church may trade its prophetic voice for political comfort.⁹

Contextual theology must continue to confront corruption, economic inequality, and moral compromise—without capitulating to political power.

⁶ Matthew Lee Anderson, review of *Bible, Gender, Sexuality*, by James V. Brownson, *The Gospel Coalition*, accessed 30 May 2025, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/review/bible-gender-sexuality>.

⁷ Philip S. Gorski and Samuel L. Perry, *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 55–60.

⁸ Kairos Theologians, *The Kairos Document: Challenge to the Church* (Braamfontein: Skotaville Publishers, 1985), §2.1–2.3.

⁹ Tinyiko S. Maluleke, “African Theology,” in *Global Dictionary of Theology*, ed. William A. Dyrness and Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 21–23.

4.2 British Contextual Theology and Secular Drift

In the United Kingdom, contextual theology is shaped by moral pluralism and secularism. While interfaith dialogue and multicultural sensitivity are important, they sometimes mute the Church's evangelistic calling. The Church of England's *Living in Love and Faith* project, for example, attempts to integrate contemporary sexual ethics into church doctrine.¹⁰ Yet without biblical boundaries, pastoral care devolves into moral confusion.

Postcolonial critiques also challenge the legitimacy of inherited doctrine. While such critiques can be helpful, they sometimes abandon orthodoxy under the weight of cultural relativism. As Andrew Walls reminds us, the gospel is always translatable, but it must also remain transformative.¹¹

5. Digital Culture and Fragmented Theologies

The digital world presents new contexts for theology. On one hand, platforms like YouTube and TikTok democratise theological voices and expose users to diverse perspectives. On the other, they foster echo chambers, anti-institutional sentiments, and influencer-led interpretations. The #Deconstruction movement, often born of trauma, can devolve into doctrinal nihilism when severed from Scripture and ecclesial tradition.

As John Dyer notes, technology is not neutral; it both shapes and expresses theology.¹² Therefore, contextual theology in the digital age must not merely “go viral” but must remain biblically rooted and pastorally wise.

6. Reclaiming a Faithful Contextual Theology

Faithful contextual theology must be:

- **Canonically anchored**, submitting to the authority of Scripture.
- **Pneumatologically informed**, relying on the Holy Spirit to guide discernment (*John 16:13*).
- **Historically aware**, drawing from Church tradition.
- **Communally discerned**, rooted in the body of Christ.

As John Calvin taught, the Spirit and the Word must never be separated.¹³ Without the Spirit, theology becomes cold legalism; without the Word, it becomes cultural mysticism.¹⁴

¹⁰ Church of England, *Living in Love and Faith: Christian Teaching and Learning About Identity, Sexuality, Relationships and Marriage* (London: Church House Publishing, 2020), 92–115.

¹¹ Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 7–10.

¹² John Dyer, *From the Garden to the City: The Redeeming and Corrupting Power of Technology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2011), 45–50.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 49–55.

¹⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), I.6.3.

Lesslie Newbigin put it best:

“The gospel must be constantly translated into each culture, but it cannot be assimilated by any.”¹⁵

7. Conclusion

Contextual theology is both necessary and dangerous. When rooted in Scripture and led by the Spirit, it enriches the global Church and communicates the gospel across every tribe and tongue. But when governed by cultural pressures, it distorts the gospel into a mirror of human desires. The task before the Church is not to abandon contextual theology, but to discipline it—ensuring that context always bows before canon, and that every tongue confesses Christ, not culture, as Lord.

¹⁵ Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 3–6.

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