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RESPONDING TO CONTEMPORARY ISSUES: A GOSPEL-CENTRED CONTEXTUALISATION

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Abstract
This article looks at various attempts in the recent history of biblical interpretation that seek to make the Bible relevant to us today. Among the views surveyed will be: Hans-Georg Gadamer's idea of the "fusion of horizons"; Rudolf Bultmann's observation that exegesis without presupposition or pre-understanding of the text is impossible; Karl Barth's idea of "entering the strange new world of the Bible"; Wolfhart Pannenberg's idea of history as revelation, in which history's true meaning is found in the end which comes proleptically to us in Christ's resurrection; Gerhard von Rad's notion of typology; Martin Noth's *re*presentation of past truths in terms of religious festivals; Paul Ricoeur's *re*configuring our lives as the proof we have understood a given text; N. T. Wright's ongoing retelling of narratives; and others whose views may be found relevant to this article's purpose. These scholars express the essential value of the problem with which we are dealing in the theological enterprise, not only here in the Pacific, but also in the broader theological context. In this the first of three articles, I will draw on their wisdom to construct a gospel-centred contextualisation as a tool for responding to contemporary issues. The three articles were presented as the keynote lectures at MATS 2014 and I have elected to retain much of the feel of the original papers.

Keywords
Contextualisation, theological interpretation, Pacific, Gadamer, Bultmann, Barth, Pannenberg, Noth, von Rad, Ricoeur, Wright, gospel

I. RESPONDING TO CONTEMPORARY ISSUES IN THE PACIFIC, WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO MELANESIA

This conference summons us as Pacific theologians to give a gospel response to issues we are facing in Melanesia and the wider Pacific. The response, as the topic indicates, has to be biblical, theological, and missiological in character. So it is mandatory for you and me – Pacific theologians – to leave at the end of this conference saying to ourselves, "This is how to respond to

issues today, not only here in Melanesia, but in Polynesia, Micronesia, and Pasikasia (the Asian Pacific)."

Let me outline to you how I plan to proceed in this series of articles. A story is told here in Melanesia that if you were to give a family some fish, then they could eat fish for one day. But if you can teach the family how to fish, then they will eat fish for the rest of their lives. So, in these three papers, my aim is not to "fish for solutions" to our contemporary problems, but rather to show you "how to fish for solutions" in any given "rough situation" you may be facing here in Melanesia or elsewhere.

In this first article, I will outline the scholarly foundation upon which we will build a gospel-centred contextualisation model for Pacific theology. In the second article, I wish to show from the Bible how the word of God spoken to past "situations in life" can also be the word of God to us in our present situation in life here in Melanesia, in the Pacific and, more broadly, in the world. In the final article, I propose to demonstrate what I will call a Pacific Biblical Theology – the aim of which is to bring the whole Bible to bear on any issue that we may face today or in the future here in the Pacific or in other parts of the world.

II. Contemporary Issues and Current Responses

There are currently many ways in which the world is responding to the problems we face, not only here in Melanesia, but also all over the Pacific. Most of them are to do with education and training, but there are also other forms of response.

For the problem of corruption among our political leaders (besides the effort to bring Prime Minister O'Neill to justice here in Papua New Guinea), there is now a Pacific Leadership Program funded by Australia and other nations to train future leaders.

For the problem of the poor and of a struggling economy, world leaders come to the Pacific Forum meetings to talk to our leaders and even to offer financial assistance where it is needed. Despite the claim that the Papua New Guinean economy has been growing strongly, I am told that local people, especially those running small businesses, are really struggling to survive on a daily basis.

For the problem of tribal conflicts and civil unrest, our Pacific neighbours have organised peacekeeping forces comprised of army officials and police

officers to calm local situations. Yet most social contexts here in the Pacific are unpredictable and can run out of control even for the law-enforcement officers.

For the rising problem of sexually-transmitted diseases, we have been provided with condoms and training on "sex education" and "(un)safe sex". Yet, abortion and teen pregnancies appear to be rising everywhere in the Pacific.

For the rise of theft and robbery, our governments are looking into ways in which education is made more accessible and employment is increasingly available. Yet the crime rate seems to be rising like a jet plane taking off.

The world and even some of our own Pacific neighbours have, indeed, responded to the current issues that we are facing. Yet problems remain.

III. Responding as the Church of God in Melanesia and in the Pacific

What about Christians, the church, and Pacific theologians? How best can we respond to current issues in our world here in the Pacific? To construct a gospel response to our problems, biblically, theologically, and missiologically is to seek to understand what God has to say in the Bible about our problems. God, of course, is able to speak to us directly. But new revelation from the Holy Spirit and new words from God must not contradict the Bible since God does not contradict himself (cf. 2 Tim 2:13; Heb 6:18). Our question should primarily be, "What does God say to us today about our problems? What does the Bible say to us about our problems?"

1. What the Bible Says = What God Says

It is one of the hallmarks of the apostolic witness to Jesus to presuppose that "Thus says the LORD God" is the same as "Scripture says." Paul claims (in Rom 9:17) that the Scripture speaks to Pharaoh, quoting Exodus 9:16. In the context of Exodus 9:16, it is actually "Thus says the LORD God" (Ex 9:13). Again, Paul says that the Scriptures foreseeing the justification of the Gentiles by faith, proclaim to Abraham, "All nations shall be blessed through you."[1] In the original context in Genesis 12:3 it is actually God who speaks to Abraham

[1] Unless otherwise stated, all Bible quotations are taken from the ESV.

promising him the blessings of the nations. This blessing, according to Paul, is justification by faith (Gal 3:8).

In resisting Satan three times Jesus quoted Scripture and asserted, "It is written" (Matt 4:4, 7, 10). Jesus the incarnated Word of God draws on the authority of the written word of God to resist Satan who eventually flees from him. The Scriptures are not only the voice of God, but also bear the authority of God ultimately to bring defeat on the source of all our problems, the devil.

In one of his shorter writings, Rudolf Bultmann outlines the historical role of the church in presenting the Bible as God's word:

> The Bible does not approach us at all like other books nor like other "religious voices of the nations" as catering for our interest. It claims from the outset to be God's word. We did not come across the Bible in the course of our cultural studies as we come across, for example, Plato or the *Bhagavad-Gita*. We came to know it through the Christian church which put it before us with its authoritative claim. The church's preaching, founded on the Scriptures, passes on the word of the Scriptures. It says: God speaks to you *here!* In his majesty he has chosen *this* place! We cannot question whether this place is the right one; we must listen to the call that summons us.[2]

So, in order to "weave" theological mats upon which we, as Pacific theologians, would gather to discuss our contemporary issues and search for solutions we must turn to the Bible to provide the "raw materials" as well as the shape of our "theological mats."

There are, however, several misunderstandings of the Bible's place in our thinking that tend to undermine its authority to speak to our problems in the Pacific. So, we need to respond to these perceptions before we continue to seek God's will for us today from the Bible.

2. Bible-Plus View

People who hold this view accept the authority of the Bible *plus* human resources as having the same authority. Human resources come in the forms of scholarship, church traditions, spiritual experiences, religious sacred

[2] R. Bultmann, "How Does God Speak Through the Bible?", in *Existence and Faith. Shorter Writings of Rudolf Bultmann* (trans. and ed. S.M. Ogden; London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1961), 168 (166-170), emphases his. Here Bultmann appears to be promoting a high view of Scripture. However, he seems to have thought that the voice of science must accompany the voice of God in the application of the Bible (see § VI.1 below).

writings, or visions and dreams. For example, the Wesleyan Quadrilateral affirms that human reason, experience, tradition, and the Bible are all on the same level of authority. In addressing a particular issue, whichever of these things proves more persuasive should, therefore, be taken as the will of God for that issue. Hence, homosexuality is now acceptable in some quarters of the church because of people claiming to be "more fulfilled" in their experience of a homosexual rather than heterosexual relationship. In that case, the apparently clear voice of Scripture is silenced as the church chooses to listen to some of its members own self-centred experience.

The Roman Catholic's magisterium is another example of this Bible-*plus* view where the authority of the Pope and church traditions are placed on a similar platform to that of the Bible. However, when we accept another authority as similar to that of the Scriptures we will eventually reject the Bible as God's voice in the church today.

The Book of Mormon and the Koran are excellent examples of sacred writings that are upheld by their adherents as having the same authority as the Scriptures or even as complementary to the Scriptures. However, as we have seen, the Bible claims that "what God says, Scripture says". There is a uniqueness in the Bible's claim to its authority in relation to these other religious documents. Even within the Bible there are claims that no other supplementary or complementary works are needed in addition to it (Rev 22:18-19).

So, we must not let go of God's Word in order to uphold human traditions (cf. Mark 7:8). We can certainly draw on human resources. For instance, later on in this article we will draw on what scholars have said in relation to our subject matter in order to help us understand the Scriptures better. The Bible also draws on human wisdom to help people better understand God's word. For example, Solomon in Proverbs 30 and 31 adopts the words of Agur and King Lemuel. Even Paul, in his preaching in the Areopagus in Athens, draws on the philosophers to explain some fundamental ideas of the Bible (Acts 17:17-31).

3. The Bible-Minus View

This view is held by people who in their hearts would say, "The Bible no more!" They consider the Bible as the "letter that kills" (cf. 2 Cor 3:6). This claim is sometimes made by believers who have had a bad experience with

people who insisted on the authority of the Bible alone, to the extent of denying the present activity of the Holy Spirit in believers' lives. Both views – Bible without the Spirit and the Spirit without the Bible – are mistaken. They both think that God speaks to us, ***either*** in the Bible, ***or*** by his Spirit. The Bible, on the other hand, states that the Spirit of God speaks through the Bible since "all Scriptures are God breathed" (2 Tim 3:16). Since God cannot lie, the present activity of the Holy Spirit cannot contradict what God had said in the Scriptures.

Theological liberalism's formulation of this view is to believe that the Bible is a kind of tradition that is enslaving and, therefore, we need to liberate ourselves from it and move on to other more personal means of knowing God. But to move from the Bible to personal revelation and personal experience of God is to leave the house which is founded on the rock and choose the house built upon shifting sands (cf. Matt 7:24-27). The Bible tells us that "everyone is a liar" (Ps 116:11 NIV), but that "it is impossible for God to lie" (Heb 6:18 NIV). The New Testament church in Corinth had believers with personal revelations, but they were subjected to the prophetic word of God, presumably in the Scriptures (1 Cor 14:29-32).

Likewise, one of the underlying convictions of postmodernism is that the Bible is "God-limiting," in the sense that God cannot be fully contained in a book. This is true ontologically in that one must say that the God of the Bible is the Trinitarian God who is unfathomable, even with our well-rounded verbal expressions. Yet, as a book the Bible conveys to us an unlimited, inscrutable God.

It is also worth reminding ourselves here in the Pacific that the current drive towards contextualisation in Pacific theology had its starting point in thinking that the Bible is irrelevant to us unless we redescribe it using cultural expressions more familiar to our people. Thus, we are told that, in order to construct a Pacific theology, we must look into our physical surroundings, our social interactions, our myths and legends, and other cultural categories as the basis for redescribing the gospel message in a Pacific way.[3] We will see in the next article that biblical writers apply biblical stories directly to new contexts

[3] This is the initiative of Sione 'Amanaki Havea in Pacific Theology: see M. Palu, "Dr Sione 'Amanaki Havea of Tonga: the Architect of Pacific Theology," *MJT* 28.2 (2012): 67-81.

without resorting to any of the contextual models utilised in missiological literatures today.[4]

4. The Bible Within

Today some people turn to the quiet inner voice of God for instructions, visions, and directions about specific issues in their lives or in their surroundings. So, in a misinterpretation of Psalm 46:10 ("Be still and know that I am God"), we are told to be silent and God will speak to us. Undoubtedly, God is able to speak directly to us today. But the Bible tells us that Jesus is God's final word for us in these last days (Heb 1:1-2). It is because of our refusal to believe in Jesus as God's last word to us in the Bible that we tend to look for fresh revelations. As previously mentioned, in the New Testament church personal revelations were to be assessed by the prophetic word of Scripture (1 Cor 14). But, also in the New Testament church, there were people who thought themselves to be above other believers because they attained visions and dreams of angels and other supernatural beings. Paul rebuked them saying that such experience does not make some believers more godly than others (Col 2:23).

We must also remind ourselves that prayer is essentially talking to God and not listening to God. If God speaks through the Scriptures, as we have seen, then we can listen to God by reading the Bible. In relation to prayer, however, when Jesus taught his disciples to pray, "He said to them, when you pray, say …", and then he gave them the words of the Lord's prayer (Luke 11:2).

IV. THE BIBLE AS GOD'S VOICE IS FOUNDATIONAL FOR A GOSPEL RESPONSE BY PACIFICIANS

In this series of three articles, my aim is to construct a gospel response to issues in Melanesia from the biblical, theological, and missiological viewpoint of, what I have termed, a Pacifician. A theological reflection by a Westerner is referred to as Western theology. So, a theological reflection by a Pacifician might be called Pacific theology.

[4] S.B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1992), as summarised in J. Meo, "How Do We Do Contextual Theology," *Pacific Journal of Theology*, Series 2, 27 (2002): 41-60.

In general, our culture in the Pacific is Christianised. Among many other things, this implies that our people are still very conservative in their Christianity, as well as their attitude towards the Bible. The Bible is generally upheld as God's word. In a very real sense, our people in the Pacific embrace this conviction. They are happily unaware of most sceptical and critical views of the Bible and of the Jesus advocated by biblical and theological scholarship. So, for a Pacific theology to be true to the context common to our people, it is crucial that it uphold the Bible as God's word.

1. A Gospel Response and the Gospel Message

As mentioned previously, the theme of this conference calls us to a "gospel response." What is a gospel response? Is it a response in line with the gospel message? Is it a set of instructions, derived from the gospel message itself, used to address specific issues here in Melanesia? These questions express the centrality of the gospel message in any given response that we may offer to the broken situations in which we live here in the Pacific and, more specifically, in the Melanesian context.

Paul is the one who popularised the word "gospel" even though the origin of its usage can be traced to Jesus (cf. Mark 1:15).[5] To him, the gospel is not only a revelation from Jesus Christ but it is also a tradition passed on to him as of first importance. He declared that the gospel is that "Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures" (1 Cor 15:3-4).

Here, the source of the gospel is the Scriptures. In fact, all of Scripture is about the gospel. It was promised beforehand in the Old Testament, but was realised in the person of Jesus Christ to whom the New Testament bears reliable eyewitness testimony (Rom 1:3-4). In fact, Jesus says, that the Old Testament was written to testify to him so we may come to him and find life (John 5:39-40). For this reason the gospel is the centre of the Scriptures. In order for us, therefore, to give a "gospel response" we must listen to what God says to us through the Scriptures about our specific situations in Melanesia and in the Pacific.

[5] M. Palu, *Jesus and Time: An Interpretation of Mark 1.15* (Library of New Testament 468; London: T&T Clark, 2012), 207.

2. The Bible was Written for our Instruction

Even though the Bible is God's word spoken to a historical context in the past, Paul says that it was "written for our instructions" (Rom 15:4).[6] Its relevance is affirmed by saying that it is indeed the "living and active" word of God (Heb 4:12). So, it seems to me, that contextualisation, understood as an attempt to make the Bible relevant to us, is to be built upon this starting point. As the living and active word of God, the Bible is relevant to us because in it we can hear God speaking to us in our specific situations in every age and cultural context.

V. TOWARDS A GOSPEL RESPONDING TO CONTEMPORARY ISSUES IN MELANESIA

We have seen that the gospel is the centre of the "big story" of the Bible. Therefore, the method taken here will be a whole-of-Bible approach to issues, not only here in Melanesia, but also in the rest of the Pacific and the world. In dealing with contemporary issues here in Melanesia and even in the rest of the Pacific we need to begin with the gospel.

To be more specific, I wish to propose a gospel-centred contextua-lisation approach to the issues that we face here in the Pacific. This means that we begin from the standpoint of the gospel in order to understand how the Bible fits together from its beginning to the end. We also need the gospel in order to understand the issues that we are facing as well as the proper response that is required.

1. We Need a Gospel Understanding of the Issues

We also need a gospel understanding of the specific issues that we are facing here in the Melanesia and also in the Pacific. That is, whether the problems may be political, social, economic, or religious, we need to start by understanding that the heart of any problem is the problem of the heart. What you are facing in the contemporary situation here in Melanesia is the same problem as those that we, in Polynesia, are facing and the same as those facing the rest of the world. The underlying problem is the sinfulness of the human heart. We are naturally born as sinners not saints (Ps 51:5; Rom 3:10-

[6] B.S. Rosner, " 'Written for Us': Paul's View of Scripture," in *A Pathway Into the Holy Scripture* (ed. P.E. Satterthwaite and D.F. Wright; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 81-95.

12). We are born enslaved to sin and not with a free will (John 8:34). The proper study of our problems is, therefore, to know ourselves. That is, to know that we are sinners and that given the right kind of opportunities we will sin. This conference is calling us to a gospel response to sin and to the sinfulness of men and women in Melanesia. If we want to deal with the root of our problems, we need to know what God has done about sin.

2. We Need a Gospel Perspective for Responding to the Issues

Understanding that our problem is the sinfulness of the human heart is the proper starting point for finding a solution. God has provided a solution to our problems, whether it is here in Melanesia or elsewhere. Indeed, God has given us a gospel response to our problems. Paul says, "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures" (1 Cor 15:3-4).

This is the basis for God's solution to the problems that you are facing here in Melanesia as well as for those in the rest of the world. God has dealt decisively with sin. Christ died for our sins. This is God's atoning provision to all our problems. Our people need to be confronted with Christ crucified. Paul tells the Galatian believers that, before their eyes, "Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified" (Gal 3:1). To preach the gospel of Christ who died for our sins is to portray him as publicly crucified before people. It is this message of Christ crucified that anoints our hearts with the Holy Spirit who affirms in our hearts the assurance of being justified by faith and thus partaking in the blessing promised to Abraham.

So, the proper gospel response to our problems, not only here in Melanesia, but in the rest of the Pacific and in the world, is the message of the cross of Jesus. To the Greek, whose hope was in the wisdom of this world to help solve his problems, the cross of Christ was foolishness. To the Jew, who thought that there should be a miraculous and more supernatural response, the cross of Christ was a stumbling block (cf. 1 Cor 1:18). To believers, the cross of Christ is the power of God for the salvation of people, situations, tribes, languages, social status, and governments, simply because it is God's power to rescue us from perishing in hell (cf. Rom 1:16-17).

If the gospel is God's response to our problems, then our theological colleges should have the vision of training theologians to be evangelists and

evangelists to be theologians. Paul's charge to Timothy, which has now resulted in the spread of Christianity for more than 2,000 years, is also the charge we must keep: "I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead and his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching" (2 Tim 4:1-2). To know God is to know that we study, move, and exist in the presence of the judge of the world. He will judge us. So preach the word. Do the work of an evangelist. Preach the word, be ready, in season and out of season. The inspired Scripture is able to make our people wise towards salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

VI. Scholarly Reflections: the Bible Speaks to the Contemporary Situation

The preacher's question is, how to speak the word of God afresh to every situation to which he is called. How can the word of God given to Moses, to the prophets, to the Psalmist, to the Gospel writers, and to Paul be God's living and active word for us today? As Pacifician preachers we believe that every word is inspired by God and is, therefore, useful for instruction, for correcting, for rebuke, and for training in righteousness. Preachers also believe that the Bible is the living and active word of God and so speaks the word of God to us today. In order to enrich our gospel response to contemporary issues, we now turn to scholarly reflections on how we may fulfil our tasks as faithful preachers of God's word in responding to issues we face here in Melanesia and in the rest of the world.

1. Rudolf Bultmann

Bultmann suggests that we need demythologisation to make the Bible relevant to us today.[7] Demythologisation includes the process of removing biblical elements which do not find support in modern science, things like heaven and hell, healings and exorcisms, and so forth. In order for the Bible to speak to us today, says Bultmann, its biblical content has to accommodate technological and scientific progress. We do not die and continue either in heaven or hell. Death is the end of existence and there is no more. He rightly

[7] R. Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), 18.

observes that it is impossible to do exegesis without presupposition or pre-understanding. But Bultmann thinks that the right pre-understanding is one that is shaped by the scientific worldview which is to be imposed upon the biblical text. The effect of this method of interpretation is to let the Bible speak to us with the voice of modern science. This principle is similar to the kind of contextualisation that allows the voice of culture to dominate the biblical text.

2. Karl Barth

Barth is more Bible-centred in his approach. He observes that from the "in the beginning" of Genesis 1 to the prayer "come Lord Jesus" at the end of the Bible we are exposed to a "strange new world".[8] It is strange to us because in the "world of the Bible" God's purpose of setting up his kingdom is the ultimate goal. He invites us by grace to "enter" by faith the strange new world of the Bible and partake in bringing his purpose to realisation. While Bultmann seeks to strip the Bible of its worldview, Barth wants us to "enter" the biblical world and partake in God's purpose of setting up his kingdom. This, in my judgment, is one way in which Gadamer's "fusion of the horizon" can take place (see below).[9] By entering the strange new world of the Bible we allow our ideas of God to be shaped ultimately by the Bible's worldview.

3. Wolfhart Pannenberg

Pannenberg argues that all of history (and not just the "history of special revelation") reveals God's purpose.[10] Yet, the meaning of history can only be found at the end of history. However, the end of history has broken in

[8] K. Barth, "The Strange New World Within the Bible," in *The Word of God and The Word of Man* (trans. D. Horton; Gloucester Peter Smith, 1978), 28-50, esp. 31-32.

[9] H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1975), 415. For a concise discussion of Gadamer's idea and its implication for hermeneutics see A.C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Bible Reading* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 313-30.

[10] W. Pannenberg, *Revelation as History* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1969), 131. Due to the fundamentally historical orientation of the kind of biblical theology advocated by the Moore School (see below), Pannenberg's view of history is understandably adopted as essential; see G. Goldsworthy, *Gospel-centred Hermeneutics: Biblical-theological Foundations and Principles* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2006), 56-61.

proleptically in Jesus and his resurrection. So, history is a mode of living towards the resurrection.[11]

4. Gerhard von Rad

Gerhard von Rad observes a typological relationship within the Old Testament in which God's activities in Israel's history provide "types" of more glorious new activities which are fulfilled in Christ. So there is a "new exodus," "new heavens and new earth," a "new covenant," and a "new David" to rule over God's people. Similarly, the story of God's activities in Israel until the Exile is to be a "type" of the new activities of God that ultimately find their fulfilment in Jesus Christ. We will see later that von Rad's scheme has become foundational in developing a biblical, theological framework for understanding the whole Bible. In this typological relationship von Rad also observes that books like Deuteronomy were preached to an Israel living in a situation between the promise and the fulfilment, not only in the wilderness and in Canaan, but also after the return from the Babylonian exile.[12] The similarities of the two different historical situations set up a typological relationship that makes the word spoken to a past historical situation relevant to a later historical situation. We will see that von Rad's observation is very helpful in preaching the message of biblical books to us today.

5. Martin Noth

Noth is perhaps well known for his theory of the Deuteronomistic historical framework of the history of Israel from Joshua to 2 Kings. According to Noth, Deuteronomy to 2 Kings is a single literary work composed by a writer who upholds the viewpoint of Deuteronomy. Blessings and curses depend very much on Israel's kings and their relationship to the Law. However, he also observes that the way in which the Law was recalled and contemporised in the community of Israel is by means of the "re-presentation" of Israel's experience of God in their contemporary contexts through religious

[11] Palu, *Jesus and Time*, 232.

[12] G. von Rad, *From Genesis to Chronicles: Explorations in Old Testament Theology* (ed. K.C. Hanson; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 89-98.

festivals.[13] For example, the Passover is a way of re-presenting the exodus to later generations, and so forth. To bring it closer to us, the Lord's Supper is a "re-presentation" of the death of Christ whereby we proclaim the death of Jesus today until he comes.

6. Hans-Georg Gadamer

Gadamer speaks of the horizons of understanding – the horizon of the text and the horizon of the reader. In order for the reader to understand the text there has to be a fusion of the horizons of text and of the reader. This can be done by means of the process of distanciation in which the reader distances himself from his own understanding of what the biblical text is saying in order to move closer and closer in line with the biblical text's meaning in its biblical context.[14] It is through this "fusion of horizons" that the biblical text can speak to the contemporary issues that we face. Gadamer's view means that in order to understand the Bible, we need to leave our own cultural bias and be open to understanding the Bible in its own biblical literary and historical context first.

7. Paul Ricoeur

Ricoeur argues that meaning should not be projected to the "world behind the text" but, rather, to the "world in front of the text". In other words, meaning is found not in its correspondence to a reality behind the text – whether historical or otherwise. Meaning, rather, is to be found in its correspondence to our lives. The hermeneutical question is no longer what did it means to them in the past. Rather, what does it mean to us today? He picks on poetic languages to exemplify his view. He observes that poem re-describes reality by way of replotting it in such a way that it inspires us to take their examples as a mode of living in this world. In a poem, understanding is no longer a word-to-world correspondence, but, rather, a word-to-life correspondence. In accordance with this linguistic schema, "truth no longer means verification

[13] M. Noth, "The 'Re-presentation' of the Old Testament in Proclamation," in *Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics* (ed. C. Westermann; trans. J.L. Mays; Richmond: John Knox Press, 1963), 76-88.

[14] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 407-23. For a concise discussion of this notion, see D.A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 120.

but *manifestation*, i.e., letting what shows itself be."[15] In the word of Kevin Vanhoozer, the interpreter is the "bearer of the Word" and the text aims at producing real effects on readers: at transforming them into the image of the Word: "It wants not only to be followed but to be, as it were, incarnated. The end of interpretation, I submit, is *embodiment*."[16]

8. N. T. Wright

Wright is convinced that the biblical drama was concluded with Jesus and the apostles. In order to contemporise the story of the Bible we need experienced "performers" who have immersed themselves in the biblical drama of God, and so, continue living the drama of God in our midst today.[17] Wright seems to be upholding the same view as those of Ricoeur in terms of the importance of validating the truth claims of the Bible in its application – its godly performance by believers who have thoroughly acquainted themselves with the biblical worldview.

9. Graeme Goldsworthy

Goldsworthy insists that the proper key to interpretation of the Bible is the gospel of Jesus Christ our Lord. In response to Bultmann's insistence on the impossibility of an unbiased exegesis, I believe that the right kind of bias to the interpretation of the Bible is the gospel message of Jesus Christ.[18]

10. Pacificians as Gentiles as Our Starting Point

As Pacificians, we do not belong to the historic Israel. We approach the Bible always from a starting point outside the sphere of God's promised blessings in the Bible. As Barth observes, however, the gospel has extended God's gracious invitation to us through the blood of Jesus to enter by faith the

[15] P. Ricoeur, "Towards a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation," *Harvard Theological Review* 70 (1977): 25 (1-37).
[16] K.J. Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning in This Text?: the Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 440. His italics.
[17] N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Christian Origins and the Question of God, 1; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 140-43.
[18] G. Goldsworthy, *Gospel-centred Hermeneutics: Biblical-theological Foundations and Principles* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2006), 47-48.

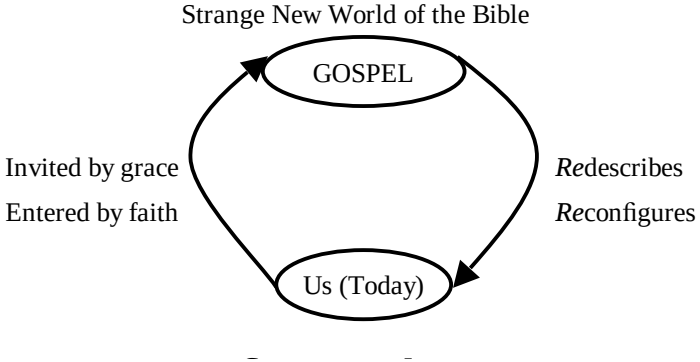
strange new world of the Bible and partake in the blessings of God's people.[19] In fact, as believers in Jesus we become heirs of Abraham (Gal 3:29).

VII. CONSTRUCTING A GOSPEL-CENTRED CONTEXTUALISATION

Here let me attempt to tie together the loose ends of these scholarly views and to derive for us a gospel-centred approach that, in my judgment, could help us Pacificians appreciate the biblical data in a manner more faithful to biblical terms and more helpful in addressing the issues we face today. That is, I am going to show you how to "fish" for solutions to problems from the "ocean" of the biblical storyline. And there is always plenty of "fish" in the "sea." So, we must "fish" with a view to success.

With Pannenberg, we assert that all of history is indeed embraced in God's purpose, the end of which confronts us in the fulfilment of time with the risen Jesus.[20] This means that every human is living their personal story as progressing towards the general resurrection – "for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice, and come out – those who have done good will rise to live and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned" (John 5:28-29 NIV).

GOSPEL-CENTRED CONTEXTUALISATION



[19] Barth, "The Strange New World Within the Bible," 50.

[20] W. Pannenberg, *Revelation as History* (ed. D. Granskou; trans. E. Quinn; London: Sheed and Ward, 1969), 125-58.

With Bultmann we can affirm that exegesis without presupposition is actually impossible because in a very true sense our pre-understanding shapes us.[21] Yet, with Barth we must say that rather than stripping the Bible of its so-called mythological elements (as Bultmann suggests), the Bible does indeed convey to us "a strange new world." It is a world that reveals God's plan for us and not our plan for God. It tells us that God is in the process of establishing his kingdom. So, we are invited by grace to enter by faith into this "strange new world" and to be God's "co-workers" in living out his vision in our personal lives on a daily basis. Thus, a gospel-centred contextualisation observes that the gracious invitation offered to us by the strange new world of the Bible comes through the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel message of Jesus Christ becomes the right pre-understanding for entering the strange new world of the Bible.

With Gadamer and Ricoeur we agree that entering the strange new world of the Bible is achieved by a fusion of the horizons of the text and the reader. Ricoeur helps us to see that the fusion of horizon Gadamer wishes to achieve should rightly occur in the world in front of the biblical text. That is, the fusion of horizon is only seen when we surrender ourselves to the biblical storyline in order to discern how the biblical text can be faithfully applied to our lives. In fact, faith seeks understanding, but understanding is rightly shown in performance; in a life lived, as Wright observes, fully immersed within the drama of God.

The application of God's word to us makes good use of von Rad's observation of the typological relation between "situations in life" in the biblical texts and our contemporary situation in life. Just as Israel is addressed in Deuteronomy as a people living in the history of salvation between promise and fulfilment, so is the church of God in Melanesia and in the Pacific. We too are people living with the hope of entering the promised land still in our future. This application of God's word to our lives agrees with Noth that preaching, shaped and informed by the gospel framework is indeed a "re-presentation" of the activities of God in the past to our contemporary contexts.

[21] Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, 46.

VIII. Concluding Remarks

In summary, a gospel-centred contextualisation takes the Bible as a whole in conveying to us a strange new world (Barth) into which we have been invited by grace to enter by faith in Jesus Christ. The strange new world of the Bible embraces all of history, the end of which has been forecast in the resurrection of Jesus at the centre of history (Pannenberg). This history can be personally experienced in living with the expectation of the general resurrection. Our situation in life in the Pacific between the promise of Jesus' coming again and its fulfilment in the return of Jesus in the general resurrection resembles the life situation found in the Law and the Prophets in the Old Testament (von Rad). We will see in later papers that this situation in life embraces all of the Bible. Its application is the fusion of the horizons (Gadamer) which can be achieved through entering the strange new world of the Bible and fully immersing ourselves in it (Wright) in order to allow the strange new world of the Bible to re-describe and re-configure the realities of our lives (Ricoeur). On a weekly basis our preaching re-presents the mighty acts of God in the past into our contemporary situation (Noth). For lack of better terms, I wish to refer to this gospel-centred approach to contextualisation as a contextualisation of surrender. We surrender ourselves and our pre-understandings to the strange new world of the Bible and allow the world of the Bible to re-configure and re-describe ourselves and the issues that we are facing in order to transform us more and more into the likeness of Christ.