

Are We Syncretizing the Gospel?
A Reflection Upon Lesslie Newbigin's Definition of Syncretism
for the Church's Missionary Encounter with Culture

A Paper

Presented to the Evangelical Theological Society,
Eastern Conference

by

Steve Hu

March 23, 2007

When the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci first set foot in Macao in 1582, China's political, social, economic, and religious development had reached a zenith. In naming herself as the "Middle Kingdom," the Chinese considered foreigners to be uncivilized brutes. Ricci found himself working in this hostile environment as he engaged in the missionary task of preaching the Gospel to the Chinese.¹ Ricci had spent considerable time in prayer for an opportunity to enter China prior to 1582. When the opportunity came, he did not take the divine providence lightly.² Ricci learned as much as he could about the sophisticated Chinese culture so he could effectively communicate the Gospel. By the end of his life in China, Ricci had translated into Chinese several Western classics and wrote several theological treatises and tracts for the sake of propagating the Gospel.³

Ricci knew from the beginning that the Chinese were a highly literate society who valued education, philosophy, and knowledge. His aim was to penetrate the intelligentsia as a way of seeding the Gospel in China. To this end he adopted Buddhist mannerism and clothing, even shaving his head to identify himself as a Buddhist monk. Precious time was lost before Ricci realized that he had assimilated into the wrong group of people.⁴ This mistake served as an important lesson to him: the importance of understanding the Chinese mind and culture for the effective presentation of the Gospel. Other than taking on the garb of a Confucian scholar, Ricci knew that he needed to contextualize the Gospel to gain any hearing among the Chinese

¹ For a fascinating account of Matteo Ricci's life and work in 16th-century China, see Jonathan Spence, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* (New York: Penguin Books, 1984).

² During the 16th century when the Ming Dynasty ruled China, the Chinese government forbade Westerners to enter the country in fear of espionage and sedition. Throughout her history, China saw Westerners as uncouth and having very little to offer. See Spence's *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* and also Minh Song, "Apologetics of Matteo Ricci: Lessons from the Past," *Journal of Asian Mission* 4, no. 1 (2002): 79-95.

³ Ricci's translation work includes sections from the Old and New Testament, Euclid's *Elements of Geometry*. His original writings in Chinese include *Tianzhu Shiyi*, or *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven*, a text designed to engage his Chinese readers in philosophical discussions on the existence of God and immortality. See New Advent's entry on Matteo Ricci at <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13034a.htm>.

⁴ Spence, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*, 114-116. Buddhist monks were low on the Chinese social strata and taking on Buddhist garb did not accord the honor and "prestige" Ricci had hoped to garner in order to reach the intellectuals of China. Ricci eventually took the clothing of a Confucian scholar as one who was honored in Chinese society.

intellectuals. Ricci's methods were not without controversy. In what became known as the "Rites Controversy," Ricci's contextualization method allowed newly converted Chinese Christians to honor their deceased ancestors.⁵ This practice caused a great deal of controversy not only within the Jesuit order but also Franciscan and Dominican missions.⁶ Some scholars have called Ricci's approach an "accommodation" of the Gospel to culture.⁷ Others have gone as far to label Ricci's method as a form of "syncretism."⁸

Is "syncretism" a suitable label to describe Ricci's missionary work? Recently, this same term has been applied to the emerging church movement.⁹ While many critics of the movement would not use this term explicitly, much of their criticism points to the fact that the emerging church is employing some form of syncretism in their theology, worship, and apologetics. For example, D.A. Carson notes the emerging church "goes out of their way to find good things about every other 'ism,'" and "the rhetoric of these discussions is almost always over the top: the church must adapt to the postmodern world or it will die."¹⁰ In a paper on the emerging church, John Hammett also observes leaders of the movement "have not yet carefully critiqued postmodernism. Without such critique, there is a real danger that the movement will appropriate elements of postmodern thought that cannot be integrated into a genuinely evangelical Christian

⁵ For a synopsis of this issue, see New Advent's entry on Matteo Ricci at <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13034a.htm>. In summary, Ricci allowed new Chinese believers to bow and prostrate themselves to honor their dead parents and ancestors. This caused immense disagreements and controversy in the Catholic mission societies for the next 150 years. Pope Clement XII would eventually issue a papal bull condemning this practice in 1742.

⁶ The tension between the Jesuits and the Franciscans and Dominicans were also due to rivalry and political reasons. See Song, "Apologetics," 90 and also Spence, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*, 51-52.

⁷ For example, see Joseph A. Adler, "Confucianism as Religion, Religious Tradition, or Neither: Still Hazy After All These Years" presented at the American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting on November 18, 2006.

⁸ As quoted by Song, cf. Joseph Levenson, *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), 121.

⁹ A search of the terms "emerging church" and "syncretism" via Google yielded 905 results. The discussion of syncretism in the emerging church is a hot topic in the blog world. For example, see Glenn Innes, "The Emerging Church," found at http://ginnes.blogs.com/glenn_innes/files. Ryan Bolger, "D.A. Carson: Becoming Conversant with the Emergent Church," http://thebolgblog.typepad.com/thebolgblog/2005/05/d_a_carson_beco.html. Andrew Jones, "Hammett on Emerging Church," http://tallskinnykiwi.typepad.com/tallskinnykiwi/2005/12/hammett_on_emer_1.html.

¹⁰ D.A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant With the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 69-70 and 84-85.

worldview.”¹¹

These concerns are valid and the charge of syncretism and accommodation leveled against the emerging church is a serious one. Syncretism is always a real danger that may occur when the Gospel encounters culture. Embodying the Gospel is risky business. Any serious and authentic attempts of incarnating the Gospel will put the church in difficult and uncomfortable places where she must ask herself, “Are we diluting and accommodating the message of the Gospel in order to have it accepted by this culture?”

But is the use of the term “syncretism” warranted when critics describe the emerging church? Does this labeling of the emerging church contribute to the current discussion on how we should best contextualize the Gospel in an ever-increasing postmodern and post-Christian world? While the charge of syncretism may be valid in some quarters, the contention of this paper is to examine the word “syncretism” and the connotation it carries. I want to call attention to the fact that usage of this word has long been associated with the negatives of diluting the Gospel in missionary encounters. As some missiologists have pointed out syncretism is a “power” word Western missionaries use to ascertain the boundaries of Christian orthodoxy. Before this label is applied to the emerging church, we should be aware of how “syncretism” has been used in missiology. This field of study offers us valuable insight to the missionary encounter the Gospel has with our own post-Christian context. In this paper I will also examine that despite our best efforts, our own presentation of the Gospel is also syncretistic. Here, much insight can be gained from Lesslie Newbigin who has pointed out that the church in the West is also guilty of syncretizing the Gospel. Having examined these two issues, I hope to present a way to move beyond this labeling which has often caused both the emerging movement and their

¹¹ John Hammett, “An Ecclesiological Assessment of the Emerging Church Movement.” This paper was presented at the annual Evangelical Theological Society meeting in November 2005 and has received much attention in the emerging church blog world.

critics to lose focus on the essential task of the church – to faithfully present and to incarnate the Gospel of our lord Jesus Christ.

A brief history of the word “syncretism”

Although the word “syncretism” has long carried with it a negative connotation, its usage did not start out that way. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as the “attempted union or reconciliation of diverse and opposite tenets or practices, esp. in philosophy and religion.”

Various scholars have defined the term both as a process and a result.¹² Plutarch was the first to employ the term, συγκρητισμος, in his *On Fraternal Affection (De Fraterno Amore)* in describing the Cretans who, as a factious bunch, came together to stand against a common enemy.¹³ It was not until the Reformation that this word took on a negative meaning. *The Oxford English Dictionary* points out the term syncretism also came to be known as “the system or principles of a school founded in the 17th century by George Calixtus, who aimed at harmonizing the sects of Protestants and ultimately all Christian bodies.” Calixtus used the term to exhort Protestant churches to reconcile their doctrinal differences. But critics of Calixtus saw his use of syncretism to mean an “unprincipled jumbling together of religions.”¹⁴ By the start of the Protestant missionary movement, the term syncretism slowly evolved into a pejorative term with its definition placing an emphasis not on the “unification against a mutual enemy, but on the incompatibility of different forces.”¹⁵ According to Eugene Heideman, Western missiologists in the 19th century began to define the concept of syncretism as associated with “pathology, hazard, decline, and loss” and there were many references in missionary literature concerning the

¹² Irina A. Levinskaya, “Syncretism – the Term and Phenomenon,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 44, no. 1 (1993): 117-128.

¹³ Ibid, 118-119. The Greek word appears as a *hapax legomenon* in Plutarch’s work. According to Levinskaya, Erasmus later used “syncretism” in the same vein as Plutarch to describe the act of uniting to fight against “mutual enemies together despite the differences of opinions which existed in the Humanist camp.” Both Plutarch and Erasmus’s use of this word was a positive one.

¹⁴ Eugene Heideman, “Syncretism, Contextualization, Orthodoxy, and Heresy.” *Missiology: An International Review* 25, no. 1 (1997), 38.

¹⁵ Levinskaya, 119.

“dangers of syncretism.”¹⁶

As missionaries began to encounter the non-Western world, missiologists increasingly applied syncretism to non-Western contexts to judge what conforms to Christian orthodoxy. To the locals, Western missionaries were perceived as those possessing “orthodox truth of the Christian faith.”¹⁷ This is due in part to the fact missions was often linked (sometimes purposefully but also inadvertently) to colonialism where Western culture and the Gospel were both propagated together. In this setting missionaries were seen as ones from a dominate culture. For the missionary entering into a new culture and expecting a missionary encounter, he must determine how he is to navigate the new culture so that the Gospel can take root. For early missionaries, the only thing they had to go on was what they knew from their own Western context. Missionaries “brought to the situation a prior understanding of what is orthodox and what is correct worship.”¹⁸ Nevertheless, this orthodoxy was couched in Western style, a form that is outside and foreign to the indigenous people.

With this background, one can see how the term syncretism became a word used by Westerners to delineate true and false worship. According to Heideman, for non-Western Christians the act of labeling something syncretistic becomes a “control” issue. Thus syncretism becomes a political or “power” word to “maintain benevolent theological control on behalf of orthodox Christian truth, making sure that the younger Christians do not fall into the errors that were once made in the West.”¹⁹ This is indeed a serious charge but an accurate assessment. Consciously or unconsciously, this occurs often in the mission field. As someone who spent years in Africa, Allan Anderson notes that early Western observers of Pentecostal African

¹⁶ Heideman, 38.

¹⁷ Ibid, 40.

¹⁸ Ibid, 40.

¹⁹ Ibid, 40.

churches took issue with their pneumatology, calling the African understanding of the Holy Spirit “syncretistic” since the practices of African churches are perceived as incorporating pre-Christian pagan elements such as ancestor worship. Thus Western missionaries would say that the pneumatology of the African church is inaccurate and “misunderstood.” Anderson goes on to say that “one wonders how many ‘sophisticated’ Western Christians really understand biblical pneumatology as accurately as some would like to see the African churches understand it.”²⁰ If any inaccuracy or misunderstanding exists, Anderson continues, “it is never deliberate, and usually disappears after biblical teaching.” The issue at hand in this situation is the imposition of Western understanding of the Holy Spirit on the African context. Anderson concludes that any pneumatology needs to be thoroughly biblical but also contextual: “Such a biblical and African pneumatology is surely needed. Observers have not always acknowledged the vital contributions that African Pentecostal churches have made to a dynamic pneumatology.”²¹

The importance of cultural context should be mentioned here. Any time when the missionary enters a new culture, two things will take place. The missionary must first determine how he must navigate through culture and determine which cultural elements to adopt or discard for the sake of contextualizing the Gospel. Before the missionary can even do so, he must first read the culture and exegete its meaning and significance. Second, as the missionary comes to learn and understand the culture in which he is working, he slowly appropriates the message of the Gospel in culturally relevant forms so his audience may understand what he is attempting to communicate regarding the life, work, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Here the missionary is doing theology and his theologizing is never done in a vacuum. He utilizes Scripture, reason, tradition, and experience as his texts. The missionary is also always guided by

²⁰ Allan Anderson, “Stretching the Definitions? Pneumatology and ‘Syncretism’ in African Pentecostalism,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology*, 10, no. 1 (2001), 100.

²¹ Ibid, 100-101.

his context, mindful that he is always theologizing from that context. In essence, the missionary is doing theology *in* that context, *for* that context, and *by* that same context so that theology is something that is relevant in that situation. To this end the missionary must be an expert student of the context he resides in so that he becomes an insider. Stephen Bevans calls this “contextual theology” and argues that all theology must incorporate the human experience (context).²² For Bevans, contextual theology takes into account two things: the teaching recorded in Scripture that has been faithfully passed down to us from generations past; and our present experience so that theology becomes “appropriated.”²³ Bevans goes on to define context as comprised of four things: the personal and communal experience of a community, the culture in which that community resides, social location, and social change.²⁴

If the context should serve as a text that informs the missionary’s theology, then he must be an expert interpreter of the text. Because the missionary must first read the text in order to faithfully communicate and appropriate the message of the Gospel, he has to make sense of it. Anytime one reads and interprets a text, this becomes a “political” act since he is engaged in ascribing meaning and significance to the text.²⁵ If this interpretation is not done in dialog with the indigenous people without solid Scriptural basis, humility, and prayer, then accusations of power play will certainly be hurled against the missionary. Heideman is correct in pointing out the use of syncretism has become a power word since it is used by the Western missionary to

²² Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2006), 4.

²³ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 5-7.

²⁵ See Peter Rabinowitz, *Before Reading: Narrative Conventions and the Politics of Interpretation* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1987), 1-11. Rabinowitz outlines a type of reader-response theory that calls for an “authorial reading” of texts. This type of reading looks to the devices and structures of a text as guideposts for interpretation. Thus a reader must understand how the structure is designed for the intended reader which the author had in mind. To achieve a proper reading, the reader should put himself in the shoes of the authorial reader so to understand the text as the author intended it. In other words, the reader first put aside his own interest and prejudices in order to properly interpret the text. Rabinowitz also argues that readers can still read a text in a way that was not intended by the author and still be valid. Rabinowitz’s argument is that when we interpret a text, this act is a political one since it is “caused by the political systems around it (although not completely determined by), and in turn situates itself with respect to those systems (for instance, by reinforcing or by contesting them).”

determine true or false worship. Even before this determination of orthodoxy is made, the very act of reading and interpreting a context is in itself inherently political and contentious. The missionary should be careful to read and interpret the context not on his own wisdom, but with the partnership of those who are inside that context.

Lesslie Newbigin's missionary insights

While Western Christians may be quick to use the syncretism label in a missionary encounter, the church in the West rarely applies this term to their *own* context in order to discern whether their understanding of orthodoxy and forms and practices of worship are syncretized. The church in the West is often unaware of her own syncretistic tendencies. If we in the West are to apply this standard to those outside the West, we ought to take stock of our own traditions to see if we are also guilty of these same charges. Western Christians often cannot discern the “contextualized character” of the Gospel because they consider their forms of worship and theology “normative” and are “blind to the interplay between the gospel and their culture(s), the ways in which their faith shapes and is shaped by the context where they live.”²⁶ How then can the church in West come to realize their understanding of the Gospel is also shaped by context and perhaps syncretized?

For insight and guidance on this situation, we can turn to Lesslie Newbigin. Throughout his writings, he contends the church in the West has capitulated to modernism in its understanding and presentation of the Gospel. According to Newbigin, the Western church has lost its missionary vocation by syncretizing the Gospel. Newbigin realized this dire situation of the church after years of missionary service in southern India. Returning to the West proved to be no easy adjustment for him. As he settled in England, Newbigin began to observe and analyze the interplay between the Gospel, Western culture, and the church. He became more and more

²⁶ Carlos F. Cardoza-Orlandi, *Mission: An Essential Guide* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 18-19.

uncomfortable with the “confusion” the church had about the post-Enlightenment “assumptions” of the Gospel.²⁷ What Newbigin observed is this: the assumption that the message of the Gospel can be understood only through Western forms, styles, and epistemology. Newbigin became aware of these same assumptions only through working with his Indian brothers and sisters. Thus, he “wanted to challenge the arrogant assumptions of our post-Enlightenment culture and show that the church need not to be afraid to offer an alternative understanding of the human situation which rests on a faith commitment openly acknowledged and not camouflaged as ‘self-evident truth’.”²⁸ If we ourselves reside in this very context, then how are we to recognize these “arrogant assumptions?” Newbigin asks, “How can I stand outside myself and study the way I see things? Can there be an ‘Archimedean point’ from which I can look at the worldview of which I am part of? Can I as a Christian really have a dialogue with myself as a specimen of this ‘modern’ world?”²⁹

Newbigin’s soul searching came from the fact that while Western missionaries have done a very good job at exploring the issues of contextualization, indigenization, and adaptation in non-Western contexts, little has been written about these very same issues in the culture that is most “widespread” and most “resistant” to the Gospel – that of modern Western culture.³⁰ Newbigin goes on to say that nowhere besides the West is the advance of the Gospel regressing. If the church is to recapture its vitality and effectiveness in this world, if the church is to rediscover and return to its one and only vocation, she must recognize she is called to be a missionary wherever she finds herself, including the West. As Newbigin points out, the church must seriously examine “what would be involved in a genuinely missionary encounter between

²⁷ Lesslie Newbigin, “How I Arrived at the ‘Other Side of 1984’,” *Selly Oak Journal*, 2, (2005), 6-8.

²⁸ Ibid, 8.

²⁹ Ibid, 7.

³⁰ Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 2-3.

the gospel and this modern Western culture.”³¹

For Newbigin, the church in the West must enter into a genuine dialog with herself and with outsiders so that the assumed frameworks of knowing and understanding the Gospel are called into examination. This examination is for the purpose of determining whether the church in the West has syncretized the Gospel. According to Newbigin, syncretism is not just an issue missionaries face in Asian, African, South American contexts, but also a real problem in the West. What does syncretism look like in Western churches? Newbigin points out the fact that the church has latched Christian faith onto modern thought and explained the Gospel using modern scientific worldview is the essence of syncretism.³² Specifically, the problem of syncretism in the Western church has manifested itself as the wall of false dichotomy which has been erected between faith and reason, values and facts. Newbigin notes the most obvious symptom of syncretism is the ineffectiveness of the church in all spheres of existence since she has accepted “relegation to the private sphere in a culture whose public life is controlled by a total different vision of reality.”³³ Newbigin’s contention here is that modern Christianity as espoused and practiced in the West is highly dualistic. How did this dualism come about? To answer this question one must realize that the church is a product of the culture in which she resides. The dualistic nature of modern Christianity is something the church inherited from the Enlightenment. If this dichotomy between belief and fact really holds, then what right does the church have in proclaiming and advancing the Gospel? This “co-option” is what renders the Gospel ineffective and holds tremendous implications for the task of the church.³⁴ After all, are

³¹ Ibid, 3. See also Newbigin’s *The Other Side of 1984: Questions for the Churches* (Geneva: Consul Oecumenique, 1983), 27-30.

³² *The Other Side of 1984*, 31-32.

³³ Ibid, 23. Newbigin also works out this thesis in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* where he argues that the dichotomy between faith and reason is an obstacle that the church must overcome by faithfully embodying the message of the Gospel.

³⁴ Geoffrey Wainwright, ed., *Signs Amid the Rubble: The Purposes of God in Human History* (Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 89-90. This volume is a collection of lectures Newbigin given early on in his career.

not all truths like the Gospel relative and personal? The Gospel is only a private matter and has no place in the public sphere. To preach the life, work, death, resurrection of Christ, to say that he is the only way to the Father, to advance the cause of the Gospel all would be seen as intolerance. To talk about Christ's rule in our culture is to be arrogant and narrow-minded. Thus the church would only want to present the story of the Gospel in a way without stepping on any toes. If man is to progress, then he must be set free from dogma. This very prevailing attitude about the Gospel is what makes the task of the church much like a walking a tightrope. While no one would ever consider the calling of the church in the West to be that of a cross-cultural missionary, Newbigin argues the church in any context has to navigate through the twin perils of making the Gospel completely foreign to its hearers, or completely diluting the message by making "the point of contact" between the Gospel and the context as the *only* way the Gospel is heard.³⁵

Newbigin points out that true discipleship, the pursuit and following after Jesus Christ is not at all an interior act. Discipleship makes the invisible, the "inward foretaste" visible.³⁶ The dichotomy between the spiritual and the physical is a form of dualism that the author of 1 John cautioned his audience to avoid. If the church proclaims a message that is only concerned with the salvation of souls, then she may be practicing a dualism that truncates the message and power of the Gospel. The message of the Gospel is more than the washing away of sin. The scope of the Gospel is comprehensive since it seeks to redeem all of creation, not just the souls of men. God's plan for salvation is both physical and spiritual; redemption is holistic and encompasses all of

³⁵ Lesslie Newbigin, *A Word in Season: Perspectives on Christian World Missions* (Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 67. Newbigin points out the task of the church is to "steer" between "the Scylla and Charybdis. On the one side there is the danger that one finds no point of contact for the message as the missionary preaches it, to the people of the local culture the message appears irrelevant and meaningless. On the other side is the danger that the point of contact determines entirely the way that the message is received, and the result is syncretism."

³⁶ Newbigin, *The Other Side of 1984*, 37.

existence and reality. How the church proclaims and embodies the Gospel should also reflect this reality.³⁷ Perhaps this is why Newbigin believes the church has been “relegated” to the private sphere, that we as Christians in the West have compartmentalized our lives. Newbigin warns the church to steer clear of this perennial heresy which is really a form of Gnosticism.³⁸ If the church continues to practice this dualism then she will surely lose her “saltiness.” To combat the danger of co-option, the church must examine whether she has capitulated to the dualism of faith and reason. If the church does not humbly undergo this reflection and self-examination, then she would be embodying a faith much like that of Hinduism than biblical Christianity.³⁹

Steering clear of “Scylla” and “Charybdis”

What can be gained from the foregoing discussion? While some see those using the syncretism label as people with a “political agenda designed in the one case to express disapproval of what someone else is innovating, and in the other case to claim legitimacy for what is being done in the face of potential traditionalist disapproval,”⁴⁰ I would not call critics of the emerging church as those who desire to exert control over the movement. However, there is much to be said about how the term syncretism is used in describing the emerging church. The purpose of this brief but important discussion is to call attention to how syncretism could potentially be leveraged to describe true or false worship without first examining the inherent negative nature of this word and our own syncretistic tendencies. The church should be aware and be sensitive to how this word is used.⁴¹ As Robert Schreiter suggests, due to the negativity

³⁷ This is Newbigin’s argument as presented in his *Foolishness to the Greeks*. In that book, Newbigin outlines and calls for a “genuinely missionary encounter” as the Gospel engages and affects all areas of human life.

³⁸ I am indebted to Ken Myers of Mars Hill Audio for this idea.

³⁹ Newbigin, *The Other Side of 1984*, 38.

⁴⁰ Heideman, 37

⁴¹ I am in agreement with Heideman here that a thorough understanding of the history of how syncretism is used in the field of missiology can help the church move beyond divisive name-calling and labeling. See Heideman, 39.

its definition carries, it is time for the church to redefine syncretism.⁴² Schreiter calls for a responsible definition of syncretism because in the present global context, the church needs to “come to an understanding of culture and the Christian faith that is responsible to both” for this very issue has been with the church past and present, and will continue to challenge her at the “very juncture of culture and Christian faith.”⁴³ I also want to point out that the critics of the emerging church movement are theologians and churchmen who have the best intention for the church in mind. Indeed they express a valid concern regarding the possible accommodation and dilution of the Gospel for the sake of easy acceptance by all. As God’s people who are called to proclaim the kingdom of God, we need to faithfully live out and embody the Gospel with relevance and without compromise.

How does this discussion pertain to the emerging church? First, a good starting point for the church is to recognize syncretism has long had a pejorative meaning attached to its definition. Care must be taken before the label of syncretism is thrown around. If we point out the syncretistic tendencies in the worship, theology, and apologetics of others, we ought to also examine our own practices as well. Newbigin came to this realization when he served in India as he saw syncretism manifested everywhere in Indian churches. Newbigin recalls how theological terms such as salvation and sin “received their entire content from the Hindu religious tradition” and he thought he was the one to “correct” this syncretism.⁴⁴ But in time he began to see *his own* conception and practice of the Christian faith also as syncretistic. Such realization could scandalize the church, but Newbigin quickly understood he could not have come to this conclusion without the help of his Indian brothers and sisters. Newbigin’s sentiments regarding

⁴² Robert Schreiter, “Defining Syncretism: An Interim Report,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 17, no. 2 (1993), 50-53.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁴⁴ Newbigin, *A Word in Season*, 68-69.

the church's blindness to her own syncretism are not unique. Others who have served in missionary contexts also share a similar outlook.⁴⁵

Naturally the most vocal critics of the emerging church are also those who are outside of the movement. They offer constructive criticism, bringing to light both the strengths and weaknesses of the emerging church.⁴⁶ The nature of this ongoing debate between the emerging church and their critics illustrates the fact that we need *allelon*, or one another, to point out our own blind spots. We need to engage and listen to each other. Because his time in India so inculcated him in Indian culture, Newbigin is able to identify the syncretistic tendencies of Western Christianity. When he returned to England, he became in essence an outsider to the West.⁴⁷ As Newbigin noticed the syncretistic tendencies of the church, he engaged the insiders of Western Christianity through his lectures and writings on this subject. This engagement is an ongoing dialog that must take place between the insiders (emerging church) and outsiders (the critics). This discussion needs to move beyond labeling and criticism so a genuine partnership may result and the church, through the work of the Holy Spirit is "joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work," can faithfully incarnate the Gospel with relevance and boldness.⁴⁸

Secondly, we need to recognize how time consuming is the difficult task of encapsulating the Gospel in culturally relevant forms. Mistakes certainly will be made by those who are

⁴⁵ For example, see Leonard Boff, *Church: Charism and Power – Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1985), 89-107. Boff observes "Pure Christianity does not exist, never has existed, never can exist. The Divine is always present through human meditations which are always dialectical.... What exists concretely is always the Church, that is, the historical-cultural expression and religious objectification of Christianity." Walter Hollenweger, "A Plea for a Theologically Responsible Syncretism," *Missionalia* 25, no. 1 (1997), 5-18 in which he writes, "One forgets all Christian churches are by definition syncretistic. The problem is only that we do not recognise our own syncretism as such." Heideman also points out on page 40 of his article that "Roman Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestants from North America, Europe, and the Middle East are often remarkably insensitive to their own long contextualizing, syncretizing traditions."

⁴⁶ Take for example Hammett's paper "An Ecclesiological Assessment of the Emerging Church Movement" and Carson's *Becoming Conversant* in which he dedicates a chapter to the strengths and weaknesses of the movement.

⁴⁷ In a sense, Newbigin became a missionary to the West as he engaged those in the church in dialog on this subject. At the same time, he was also an insider of Western culture because he was raised and educated in England.

⁴⁸ Ephesians 4:15-16.

engaged in this work. Those outside the emerging church should be patient and grant the movement room for error. If emerging church leaders are truly embodying the Gospel by engaging the culture through Scripture, prayerful reflection, humility, and obeying the leading of the Holy Spirit, then only time will judge whether the movement is successful. As Paul Hiebert observes, “the missionary and leader must allow the people the greatest privilege we all allow ourselves, namely the right to make mistakes. Much of what we all know theologically we have learned through failure and forgiveness.”⁴⁹ This practice of giving and receiving forgiveness is something we need to do with one another. The consequences of disregarding cultural context would dash the church on Scylla where the Gospel becomes completely “irrelevant and meaningless.” Without contextualization, the Gospel will become completely foreign to its hearers. If the Gospel is presented by a church who sees herself as “technologically, historically, and intellectually superior,” then old customs and beliefs will simply go underground and resurface once the dominate belief system (Christianity) disappears.⁵⁰

To conclude, we return to the example of Matteo Ricci. Although Ricci has been accused of accommodating the Gospel and his contextualization practices were later condemned by the Pope, his efforts were not without fruit. In 2001 on the fourth centennial of Ricci’s arrival in China, Pope John Paul II delivered a message celebrating Ricci’s achievement, praising him for pioneering the field of contextualization and formulating “the conditions” necessary “for making Christ known and for incarnating the Gospel message and the Church within Chinese culture.”⁵¹ Ricci’s “deep empathy” for the Chinese won him respect among the people he lived and worked with. The methods Ricci employed, although misunderstood, were based on the fundamental

⁴⁹ Paul Hiebert, “Critical Contextualization,” *Missiology: An International Review* 7, no. 3 (1984), 294.

⁵⁰ Paul Hiebert, “Critical Contextualization,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 11, no. 3 (1987), 106.

⁵¹ See “Message of Pope John Paul II to the Participants in the International Conference Commemorating the Fourth Centenary of the Arrival in Beijing of Father Matteo Ricci.” This address, given on October 24, 2001, is found at the Vatican website at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/2001/october/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20011024_matteo-ricci_en.html.

understanding that God’s revelation “in no way destroyed but in fact enriched and complemented everything beautiful and good, just and holy, in what had been produced and handed down by the ancient Chinese tradition.”⁵² Ricci took risks and made mistakes, but he faithfully persevered so he could embody the Gospel to the people he had come to love and care for. When he died in 1610, Ricci’s work in China had resulted in some 2,500 conversions.⁵³ Syncretism or not, one must acknowledge Ricci’s work made it possible for future missionaries to continue the work of the Gospel in that country. Like Ricci, the emerging church’s pioneering work in our own time will be judged by history as well.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Song, 93.