

## **Contextual Bible Study: Characteristics and Challenges**

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At the Modern Church conference in February 2011 I gave a presentation on Contextual Bible Study, with reference to a research project I undertook with Revd Dr David Nixon at the University of Exeter in 2010. In this project we used Contextual Bible Study with a group of homeless and vulnerably-housed people at a soup kitchen in South-West England. The paper we wrote, which contains much of the same material as my Modern Church conference paper, was published in *Expository Times* 123.1 (October 2011), 12-19, and gives far more detail about the specificities of our project, as well as reproducing some of the excerpts from contributions by the homeless participants which I cited at the conference.

In this short piece, therefore, I will focus on the rationale behind Contextual Bible Study, and will then go on to give a short summary of the ways in which we deemed it both a useful and a problematic methodology for use with this particular group of people.

### **Characteristics of Contextual Bible Study**

John Riches' recent book *What is Contextual Bible Study?* (Riches 2010) provides a useful overview of the history and nature of Contextual Bible Study in more depth than I can here (and see also Lawrence 2009, West 1999, West 2005, West et al 2007). In brief, however, Riches has been instrumental in bringing CBS to Britain, having drawn on groundwork laid by Gerald West at the University of Natal. West had been involved with pioneering work in CBS done in South Africa in the 1980s, which had empowered groups of financially and politically disenfranchised readers to engage with the Bible and to acknowledge its scope as a liberative, transformational text. After West gave a public lecture in Glasgow in 1995, groups of readers in Scotland explored what it might mean to facilitate CBS-style Bible studies with groups of poor and marginalized people there (Riches 2010: 4).

What are the marks of Contextual Bible Study? As might be expected from its name, CBS is deeply committed to context, and to recognizing particular social, economic, cultural and class settings as legitimate sites of God's revelation. CBS affirms that accounts of God and the Bible are influenced by experience, and that those whose experiences differ from those of central or privileged readers will therefore bring a different kind of interpretation to the text. Justin Ukpong comments,

“People ... identified socioculturally as groups and defined in terms of their common identities and their concrete, sociohistorical life situations, constitute the *subject* of interpretation of the Bible in the methodology of inculturation hermeneutics. This means more than that these people do the reading. It means that their sociocultural-historical contexts provide the resources for the reading ... The reading is done from the perspective of the people’s context and reflects their concerns, values and interpretive interests.” (Ukpong 2002: 19)

In particular, CBS affirms the value of encountering the text-in-itself, even for readers who do not have formal training in theology, hermeneutics or biblical interpretation. In this way, proponents of CBS affirm that the Bible has a power in its own right to speak justice into situations of injustice, even where readers do not have training in historical-critical interpretation or detailed knowledge of the socio-political climate out of which the biblical texts were produced.

Contextual Bible Study also, however, recognizes that, in the past and still today, the Bible has often been used in the service of those who seek to dominate others or to justify their own power and privilege. This is another reason why it is so important that CBS occurs, since it is a way of giving space to hear from those who may not usually be recognized within mainstream biblical interpretation. It endorses the legitimacy of different ideas, and values all voices. Knowledge is exchanged, not transmitted. CBS is deeply interactive, encouraging creative, ludic readings of the text which are nonetheless grounded in serious political concerns and directed toward praxis. It is important to note that CBS does not suggest that the readings made by marginalized peoples “trump” those who do have formal biblical critical or theological training: rather, CBS acknowledges biblical interpretation as multiple. CBS does draw on background information where available – reading the Bible in its own historical context is important, but this is just one facet, alongside insights from literary criticism, contemporary politics, and the concerns and expertise of the reading group. Louise Lawrence comments,

“Whilst the historical-critical paradigm in biblical studies sanctioned against ‘place’ or explicit ‘presuppositions’ in exegesis, increasingly such perspective-less readings have been exposed as mythical. Everyone reads from somewhere. Moreover, readings initiated within base communities across the world have an important part to play in ‘democratizing’ the discipline of biblical studies and allowing alternative stories to be heard.” (Lawrence 2007: 535)

A reading made by a particular group is therefore a snapshot of the relationship between this group and this text at this time, but it should not be understood as single, final or ultimate. Indeed, comments Justin Ukpong, “The readings do not claim to appropriate the totality of the

meaning of the texts read ... In any given reading only *a certain aspect or certain aspects of a text* get appropriated” (Ukpong 2002: 26).

Since CBS takes place in community, it acknowledges in itself that Bible reading is never univocal: both the Christian reading community, and its broader social community, will reflect a range of concerns and interests. This is understood as positive: it leads to debate among the participants, and acknowledges dissent both among participants and within the biblical texts themselves. Nonetheless, CBS is still critical: it does not accept every idea as “right”, or deny that some interpretations are more life-giving than others. The key is that interpretations are tested and weighed by the reading group, which is likely to have a particular concern for social justice and praxis, grounded in the liberation theological conviction that the Christian tradition should give especial consideration to those who are poor and vulnerable (economically or conceptually).

One criticism sometimes made of Contextual Bible Study is that it is simply an exercise of making the Bible in our own image, and that it is naïve to suppose that someone who comes to the text cold with no knowledge of the setting in which it was produced, or of the broader history of the Judaeo-Christian story, will be able to make a rich reading which does justice to the text. Crucially, proponents of CBS do not deny the value of what goes on “behind” the text. However, they affirm that this is only one component, and that we should also read “in front of” the text – that is, in dialogue with contemporary social and political concerns – as well as giving due attention to the internal context of a particular narrative or passage (West et al 2007: 9). In this way, they believe, the Bible’s power to transform lives, and to highlight the need for change both in individuals, and the societies in which they operate, will be most evident. Discussing the early days of CBS in Scotland, John Riches says,

“In order for CBS to be genuinely open, there must be multiple readings and multiple answers. The group realized that in order to empower the process, it was necessary to sacrifice some control and direction. The sessions needed various entry and exit points, allowing people to approach the text from all kinds of contexts and permitting all kinds of answers.” (Riches 2010: 9)

Contextual Bible Studies operate with a conviction that some tradition modes of preaching and pedagogy have been unhelpfully hierarchical and may disenfranchise “untrained” readers from interactions with the text on their own terms. For this reason, CBS sessions have tended to operate according to certain conventions. For instance, CBS has often involved having a scribe to write up comments, questions or insights where the whole group can see them (West et al 2007: 14). This is understood as an endorsement of a variety of voices and readings: a

creative, multiple process, rather than one of a simple top-down transmission of knowledge. CBS operates with “facilitators” rather than “leaders”: facilitators enable the fullest participation possible from those present, but without imposing a monolithic agenda or excluding all but the “right” answers. West et al comment, “The facilitator’s role is to empower the group participants during the Bible study process to discover, acknowledge and recognise their own identity, and the value and importance of their contributions” (West et al 2007: 17). As a result,

“What is striking for most people who encounter the [CBS] method for the first time is that it is a (largely) non-directive form of reading ... It enables the group members to make the language and the imagery of the text their own, before they proceed to make connections between it and their own experience. For many this is empowering: people who have lost confidence in their ability to talk about their faith discover that the stories, images and ideas of the Bible can help to illumine their concerns and experience.” (Riches 2005: 23)

Nonetheless, CBS sessions are likely to have a set of questions “in the background”, and these may or may not be explicitly stated, depending on the group and situation. Some sample studies for Lent and Advent are outlined in Riches 2010, and each one begins with the question “What jumps off the page at you?” This is designed to encourage close engagement with what the text actually says (rather than what we assume or think it says), as well as to elicit initial highlighting of anything that seems unexpected, confusing or strange.

### Some Challenges of Using CBS with a Group of Homeless and Vulnerably-Housed Readers

David Nixon and I drew on and adapted “classic” CBS methodology with a group of homeless and vulnerably-housed readers in South-West England. Our broad research questions were:

- How do homeless or vulnerably-housed people interpret biblical passages about social justice?
- Does the experience of being homeless or vulnerably-housed consciously affect these individuals’ hermeneutical strategies?
- What, if anything, do homeless and vulnerably-housed people understand as the ethical imperatives in the Lukan Gospel message?
- What value, if any, is there in using Contextual Bible Study methodology with homeless and vulnerably-housed people?

Louise Lawrence, who had recently completed a major three-year project based at the University of Exeter, utilizing CBS methodology with different groups of people across Devon and culminating in the publication of her book *The Word in Place: Reading the New Testament in Contemporary Contexts* (Lawrence 2009), acted as a “critical friend” to the project. Lawrence had worked with five different study groups: one in an inner-city area, one in a rural village, one in a coastal village, one among Deaf people, and one among Anglican and URC clergy. Her study invited people to reflect on Gospel stories and the theme of place. This was linked to the CBS concern for community-making via sharing stories, face-to-face interaction and collectively interpreting the Bible in a particular context (Lawrence 2009: 122). Indeed, CBS sessions might provide an arena for the participants to speak not just about the particular texts in question, but about anything else they feel to be important – even if this can sometimes cause frustration both for the researchers and for other participants when a session seems to veer “off-topic”. In our own project, negotiating the needs of the whole group, the imperative of limited time, and the desire to allow individuals to complete their stories or contributions uninterrupted or uncurtailed, was sometimes a challenge.

One change from “classic” CBS in our own project was that, rather than arising from and being identified as potential topics for study by the group itself, all the texts used (from Luke’s gospel: 4:1-24; 5:1-32; 7:36-50; and 15:11-32) were chosen in advance. This was for largely pragmatic reasons: the use of CBS with this group was experimental, and those who took part did not necessarily understand themselves as a discrete or united group. Particular challenges arose from the transient nature of the homeless community in the research city. For instance, it was not possible to let all participants hear about the project in advance, and no participants attended all four sessions. A major emphasis of CBS is usually social change, with reading groups forming action plans for changing their community contexts (West et al 2007: 13-17; Ukpong 2002: 18), but this did not occur in any concrete way here, since most of the participants had limited attachment to the geographical area and to one another (although they did have plenty to say about what they perceived as the injustices perpetuated by politicians and the financial system). In one sense, therefore, the use of CBS methodology here was rather artificial.

Nonetheless, we felt that it had potential, not least because we were confident of the theological value in giving space to these particular voices in a way which would be open-ended and allow for contributions which were not neatly wrapped-up or tidied-away. CBS methodology recognizes value in the actual *process* of carrying out a CBS session, particularly with people unused to having their opinions heard in any group situation, not least a setting which might be deemed “religious” or “educational”. Several participants in our own project commented that

they had enjoyed reading the Bible in a new way or for the first time. Readings made by a group like that of homeless and vulnerably-housed people might be a conscious rebuttal to more privileged or legitimized readings.

Despite our endorsement of CBS, however, we were also aware that the very act of giving “special” space or consideration to homeless and vulnerably-housed people’s interpretations might contribute to their continued marginalization or caricaturing. Victoria S. Harrison notes that, within standpoint theory,

“The greater the number of warranted statements that any statement coheres with, the closer it is to the truth. Thus ... we should prefer the standpoint occupied by whichever social class is capable of generating the most total knowledge. Believing the proletariat to be in this position, [Georg] Lukács argues that their ‘knowledge’ is superior to that of the bourgeoisie ... They are epistemologically advantaged because their oppressed social position affords them a more ... comprehensive view of reality than is available to those occupying other social positions.”  
(Harrison 2007: 688)

In this account, it is important to heed the “knowledge” of those excluded from signification precisely because it is they who are aware both of the dominant, hegemonic “truths” of a society – since they have their faces rubbed in them every day – *and* of the fact that these “truths” are not the whole story. Lukács’ account might be deemed to chime with the assertion that poor and marginalized people may be especial conduits of God’s grace and revelation.

The problems here are, however, clear: if “experience” for marginalized people is privileged as a category because the people in question are deemed incapable of participation in “proper”, “intellectual” modes of discourses, this might endorse the value of acknowledging experience, but it might also contribute to the continued exclusion of this type of knowledge. If “experience” is only to be heeded when it is “naïve”, or when there is no more “rational” category available, this relegates experience safely to the realm of exception. As such, those of us who have more privilege, and who may belong to social, religious or educational elites, can “afford” to give space to the experiences of marginalized people because experience remains a niche category that does not really affect the work of “real” scholarship or biblical interpretation. Privileging the knowledge of “homeless people” as a discrete group may therefore repeat and reinforce their status as excluded and requiring special treatment (see also Jantzen 1996, Cornwall and Nixon 2011: 15-16). To suggest that homeless people’s readings are more “pure” than those of other people also risks patronizing and romanticizing them.

As such, we have asserted that CBS readings, both in general and in our own project with this group of homeless people, should not be understood as definitive; simplistically “better” than other readings; unproblematic; representative of a consensus beyond the group that actually takes part; or universalizable (Cornwall and Nixon 2011: 18).

### Conclusion

“The encounter with the stranger must be done from a position of equality, mutual sharing and shared humanity which includes vulnerability, freedom, and an attitude of discovering something larger than either person in the process.” (Erickson 1996: 34)

John Riches has asserted that, to be successful, Contextual Bible Study must allow “for the unexpected, for the Holy Spirit to work through Scripture in ways that none of the participants could have anticipated” (Riches 2010: 9). In this way, it has the potential to give room to new and unexpected encounters: between the participants and the Bible; between the participants and the facilitator(s); between the participants and their broader society; between the facilitator(s) and the Bible; between the participants, the facilitator(s) and God, and so forth. It makes strange again what may have become over-familiar, but also means that “encounters with strangers” – be they persons, reading strategies, God, or the texts themselves – are encounters where true exchange and transformation occurs. Contextual Bible Study has its problems, which are attested elsewhere (see e.g. Lawrence 2009: 125-6). However, in common with other contextual and counter-cultural reading strategies, it testifies to the Bible’s refusal to be pinned down to a single or univocal human stream of interpretation, pointing to its capacity to critique and speak into contemporary preoccupations and concerns as well as not being limited to them.

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