



Al-Liqa' Center for Religious and Heritage Studies in the Holy Land

Basic Document

**Theology and the Local Church
in the Holy Land**

Third Edition
2015



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Preface for the Third Edition


This document was issued by Al-Liqa' Center in 1987. It was the first fruit of the new program of Al-Liqa' Center for Theology and the Local Church which was opened in the same year. This document did not come from void, rather it was crowning of a long march for Al-Liqa' Center since 1982, whereby this Center has worked, since its establishment on developing a local Christian thought, rather a local theological thought.

The credit goes to Al-Liqa' Center in positing in the ecclesiastical arena the concept of "The Local Church," as well as the concept of the local Palestinian theology. This made these concepts common in the local Christian dictionary. This direction has developed and branched in the subsequent years to become a perceptible reality on the Palestinian cultural arena. It is still continuing its march by means of the successive conferences of the "theology and the local church", and via Al-Liqa' Journal which has not stopped from developing this intellectual and theological furrow without cessation since its establishment in 1985.

This document also comes in the context of the growth of the Christian community in our country in the light of the grave challenges which the Palestinian people faced-and is still facing-, and which made theological thought an urgent necessity, not only for confronting Western theological challenges, but also to develop a theological thought which springs from the Palestinian sentiment itself and which responds to its queries, issues, concerns and aspirations.

This document was the first spark for such theology, and it is still the compass by which we are guided in our ecclesiastical and national march. Days have indicated that this orientation was not merely side thinking, rather it is in the core of the march of the Palestinian people which sees itself amidst theological attractions which made it impossible to leave it neutral. So, Al-Liqa' Center has been the forum which responded to these theological challenges and strove to respond to their calls. Our hope is that this thinking continues with all of its branches and sections so that it becomes one of the tributaries of the Palestinian struggle for the sake of the dignity of our people, its freedom and its independence and one of the tributaries of the Palestinian culture.

Al-Liqa Center
2015



Theology and the Local Church in the Holy Land: Palestinian Contextual Theology

PREFACE

The distinctive characteristics of our local church and the spiritual and social situation in which she has been living for many years have encouraged a group of clergy and laity from various denominations to think with a responsible and ecumenical spirit about how to understand the mission of our church, her existence and the nature of her witness in this historical period in which we live.

After much thought, they have formulated this document as a starting point, for a local theological movement and a call for research to direct believers, awaken their hope and deepen their faith.

The document published here was presented for study and discussion at a conference held at Tantur in Jerusalem in the summer of 1987 under the title "Theology and the Local Church in the Holy Land."

In addition to the ideas presented in the introduction and conclusion, the document concentrates on the following three points: the meaning of the universal Church and the local church, a definition of "contextual theology" and the characteristics of the church of the Holy Land.

Our contextual Palestinian theology does not mean isolating ourselves, withdrawing within ourselves or writing a new theology developed outside the general trend of Christian thought or in contradiction to it. What we mean is



a theology which can live and interact with events so as to interpret them and assist the Palestinian church in discovering her identity and real mission at this stage of her earthly life.

The intellectual orientations presented in this document were a great incentive for holding a second conference in the summer of 1988; it affirmed in one of its recommendations the need for holding such conferences annually with the aim of serving the church of the Holy Land.

I take this opportunity to extend my heartfelt thanks to my colleagues, members of the editorial staff of Al- Liqa' Quarterly Review, for working together to crystalize the ideas presented in this document and to prepare the programs of the conferences on "Theology and the Local Church": The Rev. Dr. Rafiq Khoury, Dr. Joseph Zaknun, Dr. Adnan Musallam, The Rev. Munib Younan, Mr. George Hantilian, Dr. Peter Qumri and Dr. Shukri Sambar.

Dr. Geries Sa'ed Khoury
Director of Al-Liqa' Center

INTRODUCTION

The Establishment of the Church in Our Country

The Christian community in our country arose from Jesus' preaching of the kingdom, His death and Resurrection. After the descent of the Holy Spirit (Acts,2:1-13), the Apostle Peter stood and addressed a crowd before him (Acts,2:14-26), whereupon a good number of people received his word and were baptized (Acts,2:37-41). Thus the Church of Jerusalem was established, taking a tangible form characterized by vitality and enthusiasm. Before long this church began proclaiming the good tidings, first in Palestine, then throughout the whole world, calling people to believe in Jesus Christ, the ever-living Lord of glory risen from the dead.

The Importance of the Church

Accordingly, our country remains the wellspring of Christianity, where the Incarnate God was born, grew up, preached, performed miracles, was crucified, died, was buried and raised from the dead and ascended into heaven to sit at the right hand of the Father and intercede for us (Romans 8:34). The Church of Jerusalem remains the source which filled the whole world with light and led it to faith. She is the "Mother of all Churches," as she is rightly called in ancient Christian tradition.

The Identity of the Church

Throughout the ages, the Christian community in our country interacted with the historical, social, cultural and religious circumstances prevailing in this sacred part of the world. It reaches us today in its Arabic identity, Palestinian structure, and ecclesiastical genuineness. The Palestinian environment is the immediate cultural context of our church. This environment, in turn, has been closely interrelated, culturally and ecclesiastically, with the wider and more general context of the entire Arab world and through it to the Third World and the whole of the contemporary world.



A Historical Turning Point

Today this Christian community stands at a historical turning point of interactions, changes and challenges on internal and external levels—the ecclesiastical community; Palestinian society; local and wider Arab levels, the Palestinian people and the greater Arab world; regional and international levels, the Third World, the international family. It stands at this turning point with all historical signs of weakness left behind and with the seeds of hope which the Spirit sows in its soil.

A Stop for Reflection

At this turning point the community must stop, think and meditate from the standpoint of these present historical circumstances, in order to find in its faith something to assist it to discover, understand, and deepen its identity, vocation, mission, the meaning of its existence and the nature of its witness at this critical historical period in which God calls it to live. It should be pointed out that this reflection is but an aspect of a serious and distinct search for Christian Arab identity being made by our brothers in faith in the whole Arab world. Simultaneously, it is part of a wider and more universal movement which is the search of the whole Arab world for a mode of existence and a role in the civilization of the present age.

The Role of Theology

This call for reflection is directed to all, pastors as well as laymen, each according to his position, vocation and mission in the church for a common goal. Theology, in this respect, occupies a distinctive position as it puts its potentialities at the service of the body of believers, to assist them in promoting their faith, hope and love at this stage of their growth.

Conference on Contextual Theology

Accordingly, the editorial staff of Al- Liqa' Quarterly Review, published by Al- Liqa' Center for Religious and Heritage Studies in the Holy Land, labored to bring about this conference on contextual theology that it might become one among other means for promoting this purpose in a framework of serious thinking, creative dialogue and humble faith. The preparatory committee presents this basic document as an attempt to define the general framework of this conference and lay the foundations for subsequent conferences. It is given here for discussion and exchange of views so as to become a true and genuine expression of what we all hope for in building the church and serving society.

UNIVERSAL CHURCH AND LOCAL CHURCH

The Universal Church

The Church is universal in her essence: "We believe in One Catholic... Church...." She is not confined to a race, language or nationality. She goes beyond limits of any kind, comprises various opposites and brings together the dispersed sons of God in One Christ: "There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

The Local Church

But the universal Church is manifested in a tangible form in the local church which God unites in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. He entrusts her to the "Bishop" with the priests and laymen around him, each according to his mission, and feeds her with the word of life and the body of the Lord. In the local church the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church actually exists and works. Thus the universal Church becomes not only a living presence in the local church but also a redemptive event, incarnate reality and visible truth. Hence, we can say that God puts what He wants for His Church in the local church and gives her those spiritual means which make her a sign and instrument of salvation, provided that she is not separated from the communion of the universal Church.

Incarnation of the Local Church

The local church does not live outside the scope of time and place with all historical, geographical, social and cultural considerations related to them. She is an incarnate church after the pattern of the Incarnate Christ. As the Son of God came to all humanity through His Incarnation under particular circumstances of time and place which were reflected in His speech, behavior

and message, the local churches, in turn, are called to carry the universal mission of Christ through their incarnation in tangible human reality with its particular language, distinctive cultural tradition, historical past, present conditions and future expectations. Accordingly, the local church, with the theological elements that constitute her divine self, interacts with all genuine conditions which form part of her incarnate being. This gives her, her distinctive marks, aspects and genuine way of understanding herself, her call and mission within the universal Church and in deep communion with her.

The Reflection of the Church's Incarnation on Aspects of Her Life and Mission
This incarnate call is reflected in various aspects of her life and finds applications in various areas of her existence and mission: liturgical expression, religious catechism, theology, spirituality and pastoral practices. But this is not new in the history of the Church. Historically the Christian faith has interacted with diverse civilizations without losing its identity. These interactions led to the emergence of a genuine local Christian tradition which enriched the universal Church and gave her the special quality of diversity. This indicates the universality of the Christian faith and the catholicity of the Church and her capability to be incarnate in diverse human civilizations for the glory of Almighty God and the welfare of man in his earthly life. The fact that this interaction is not devoid of such dangers as division, fanaticism and isolation is attributed to human weakness with all its narrow-mindedness and shortsightedness.

THE MEANING OF CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY

General Theology

The basis of faith is the Holy Bible as the Church has understood it and lived it throughout the ages, guided by the Holy Spirit which teaches her all things (John 14:26). On this foundation, the Church, working through the generations, formulated doctrine which serves to help understand and express adequately the Christian faith. In spite of the fact that this process took place in particular cultural and historical circumstances, it has produced a common tradition upon which all those who interpret and teach the Christian faith depend and by which they are guided, a common tradition to which all those who work to interpret and teach the Christian faith turn. This common thought remains the basis of which we boast, on which we depend and by which we are guided.

Contextual Theology

What is contextual theology within this general framework? Is there any justification for its existence? What is its role?

Although general Christian theology assists us to understand Christian doctrine properly, it cannot answer all queries that occupy the heart of believers in every time and place. This is natural, owing to the diversity of the circumstances and conditions under which the communities of believers live, whether they are related to time or place. Hence the role of contextual theology becomes the exploration of general theological thought rich in potentialities, under those conditions in which believers live. Thus they find in their tradition something to assist them in understanding, formulating and living their faith at a particular historical period with all its demands,

challenges, questions, hopes, difficulties and aspirations. On the one hand, this theology is not intended to be a parrot-like repetition of the past without consideration of present conditions. On the other hand, it should not be a novel theology which develops in isolation from, or in contradiction to, the general trend of Christian thought throughout the ages. For any particular Christian community, contextual theology is but an extension of general Christian thought, albeit within a limited period of time in a specific place, and under special conditions that might enable this community to live her faith in accordance with the prevailing requirements.

The Role of Contextual Theology

The local church lives under the limitations of time and place, from which she derives her particular characteristics. Theology, in this cultural context, accepts these characteristics with all their diversities and realities, analyzes them, probes their depth and sheds the light of God's word on them so as to discover the call of God to this church here and now, and, in the long run, help the church to discover her identity and real mission at this stage of her earthly life.

Reading the Events

In reference to the historical turning point at which our church stands, we can say that contextual theology is called to read the events, challenges, difficulties, aspirations and hopes that preoccupy the conscience of the community of believers in the light of faith and the everlasting word of God so as to find in them signs of God's call and a motive for the church's work and commitment in history.

Listening and Interacting

This will never be accomplished unless contextual theology listens to what takes place around it, coexists and interacts with events without false compromise and tries to interpret them in the light of faith and in a lively manner which promotes conscious, explicit and intelligent commitment without allowing the believer to lose his Christian identity.

SPECIAL CHARACTERISTICS AND QUESTIONS

Characteristics

Our Church of Jerusalem is distinguished by a number of special characteristics that identify her genuine face within the universal Church. The time has come for us to ask contextual theology to speak concerning these characteristics, that we may comprehend them and make them an integral part of our Christian personality. Otherwise, they may continue to influence us unconsciously rather than consciously and possibly even in a negative manner. If these characteristics are excluded from the liberating, life-giving and universal vision of faith, they will lead to uncontrollable practical and intellectual contradictions, or to attitudes and modes of behavior which do not originate in the pure springs of faith but come from the unconscious, psychological and social remnants of the past.

The Questions

Accordingly, the questions are: What are the special characteristics of our church? What does our Christian faith say concerning these characteristics? How can local Christian thought contribute to the linking of these characteristics with our Christian faith and daily practices?

The following characteristics cannot be exhaustive, nor sufficiently cover all aspects of life; they serve only as examples.

Arab Palestinian Christians

We are Arab Palestinian Christians. How do these elements come together to form our identity? What is the meaning of our presence here and now? What is the nature of our witness? What is the origin of our belonging to this geographical and cultural body which defines us? What is to be done to bring about this identity of our church?



Rift and Division

We are Christians distinguished by ecclesiastical diversity in addition to rift, division and fragmentation. What is our common vocation? What is our joint mission? What are the common factors that bring us together? What is the call that God directs to us in this respect? How can we turn a diverse tradition into a richness common to all of us? How can we live and work for unity within diversity? How can we move away from introversion, separation and isolation into openness, communion and cooperation?

Within a Nation

We are Christians belonging to a nation, the Palestinian people, with a special characteristic and diverse historical experiences, including all our sufferings and hopes. What is our contribution, along with that of our brothers, to the progress of our people and the building of our future? What is the genuineness of this contribution? Does our Christian faith assist us in understanding the tragedy of our people and in committing ourselves to Palestinian issues and aspirations?

Other Religions

We are Palestinian Christians living in close relation with other religions. What does this reality add to our Christian identity? How can we comprehend this aspect of our identity? What type of relations are we called upon to develop with other religions? What is our special relation with Islam? What is to be done to deepen the meaning of dialogue and fraternity among the sons of the one nation: Muslims and Christians?

The Holy Land

We are Palestinian Christians living in the part of the world which constitutes the geography of salvation, the Holy Land. What is our relation with this unique heritage? Besides our message to ourselves, what is our message to the universal Church linked spiritually with this unique heritage? How can we turn the existing churches of stones in the Holy Land into churches of human beings that are brought together?

In an Ever-growing Society

We are Palestinian Christians living in an evergrowing and developing environment. What are the aspects of this development and growth? What



are the problems that result from this reality? What does our Christian faith tell us concerning this reality and the problems arising from it? How can we express our commitment to the issues of social justice and human rights?

Guests

We are Palestinian Christians. Our churches embrace a great number of foreign guests. What is the meaning of their presence among us? What is our relation to them? What is their relation to us? How can they contribute to the highlighting of the real image of our church? How can we turn their presence into a reciprocal richness?

Pilgrims


We are Palestinian Christians. We receive in our Holy Land large numbers of believing pilgrims from all over the world. How can we establish genuine relationships with these pilgrims so that we can become acquainted with each other? What is our message to them? What is their message to us? How can we convey to them the message of the Holy Places?

Theological Seeds

These special characteristics and others require that we think through our faith; they call us to develop a local theology to assist us in motivating ourselves and pointing out the way of the future. Are we not called, within this framework of characteristics, to develop a genuine theological thought as a reply to our reality and the questions arising from it? Are we not called to develop a theology of communion and presence? relation and dialogue? Commitment and message? Dealing and understanding? It is noteworthy that this thought cannot be born in a vacuum but depends on the experience of those who came before us to this land. It is our duty to start from this experience and develop it in the light of the requirements of the present historical period.

Creative Interaction

As we see, the questions are many, but the intellect is fertile and lively. Everybody is called to participate in pointing the way so that a creative interaction between our faith and our real circumstances can be achieved. "And he who sat upon the throne said, "Behold I make all things new" (Revelation 21:5).



THE ANSWER THINKING TOGETHER

The Work of the Spirit

There are no ready answers available for all the questions raised and all the present challenges. We are at the outset of a road which might prove rough, thorny and filled with dangers. But the Holy Spirit that has worked in the Church throughout the ages and led her to fertile pastures is still working in us and directing our steps even through dangerous and difficult paths. We do put our trust in this life-giving and creative Spirit, which enables us to overcome our own weaknesses and shortcomings.

Thinking Together

We are called to think, and think together, in the spirit of God to develop a contextual theology in an atmosphere of fidelity to ourselves, our churches, our circumstances and the work of the spirit in us because we believe that "the Spirit gives life" (2 Corinthians 3:6).

Ecumenical Character: Its Requirements Its Difficulties

It is noteworthy here that we want this theological thinking to be distinguished by an ecumenical character. All Christians irrespective of their various ecclesiastical backgrounds are called to participate in it. It is true that our differences are a factual reality which we cannot disregard. But this painful reality cannot exempt us from thinking through our common situation together, we all face the same questions, challenges and future. This requires that we free ourselves from fears, prejudices and sterile fanaticism. It also requires that we not undervalue the doctrine that each party adheres to and that we avoid any useless dogmatic ambiguity. Simultaneously, we should hold firmly to dialogue without the fanaticism which makes it impossible for us to come together. Dialogue does not mean that we give up belonging

to our individual churches, but aims at deepening this belonging through discussion and exchange as we wait for the day on which we become one in full communion with the Church. Undoubtedly this ecumenical thinking is not void of difficulties and stresses; these we must accept, comprehend and work together in truth and love to overcome.

Spiritual and Human Aptitudes

We must add here that such a process can be achieved only within a framework of spiritual and human values that make it a life giving, fertile and creative movement.

The most important of these are:

1. Deep faith.
2. Intellectual modesty in the face of the richness of reality and its complexities.
3. Constructive critical spirit toward ourselves and the conditions that surround us.
4. Dialogue with all in truth and love.
5. Positive thinking and behavior without fear or anxiety.
6. Inner freedom.
7. Creative and genuine ecclesiastical commitment.
8. Clear vision, given by the Spirit to those led by its inspiration.

CONCLUSION

The Church moves along in history, tries to discover in it the presence of God and works to respond to His call. In the life of the people of God, theology puts its instruments at the service of the Church in order to contribute to her progress, vitality and growth.

Creative Dialogue

We hope that the conference on contextual theology will be a table around which participants meet in spiritual serenity to start a creative dialogue on issues that preoccupy the minds of the Christian community in our country. We hope that all good and constructive views combine to enrich the church at this stage of her course, and to assist her to deepen her identity and the meaning of her existence and witness. Accordingly, the task is to contribute, each within his specialization, to the building of the church and the serving of society. We hope that from this movement will result studies and research to guide believers, support their faith, awaken their hope and consolidate their course of life. "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth" (John 16:13).

P.S The document was translated from Arabic to English by
Mr. Lawrence Sammour / Bethlehem.