

Contextualizing the Power and the Glory

Contextualization is more than the initial presentation of the Gospel, it involves the evaluation and reintegration of life impacted by the revelation of God's truth; allowing the opportunity to create new and much needed local theologies for the newly emerging church.

by R. Daniel Shaw

Contextualization is an extension of the old 'indigenous' concept. It came into vogue in the late 1970s and has been the subject of many articles in journals such as *Missiology* and numerous books in recent years (Gilliland 1989, Hesselgrave 1989). It is no accident that contextualization theory and world view theory have developed side by side. This growing literature focuses on the need to take the local culture and its world view seriously and use the concepts vital to a people's daily living to present the Gospel. In this way the Gospel has relevance within the context of presentation. Therefore the nature of the Gospel and the church that develops within a cultural context will vary.

Contextualization however, is far more than an initial presentation of the Gospel. It extends to cultural issues with which the fledgling church must grapple and suggests the development of a local theology. This raises the double sided concern of 1) the necessity of critique within a cultural context and (2) the need to protect against syncretism. Both must be taken seriously.

Development of Contextualization

Charles Taber epitomized the importance of contextualization in mission activity when, in 1978, he inaugurated a new journal called *The Gospel in Context*. Articles dealing both with theory and applications to various contexts all over the world graced its pages. Unfortunately the expense of publication and a limited budget brought about a premature collapse of the venture, but the concept was firmly entrenched in the minds of missiologists. David Hesselgrave (1978) included a chapter on

it in his best selling book, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally*, and subsequently developed the concept into an entire book bearing the title *Contextualization* (1989). The faculty of the School of World Missions at Fuller Theological Seminary also took the concept seriously and under the leadership of Dean Gilliland created an entire volume (1989) dealing with the concept as it pertained to their respective fields of specialization. Though not always in agreement, these two volumes put the concept on the lips of every missiologist.

Gilliland (1989) defines contextualization as:

The way in which the Word as Scripture, and the Word as revealed in the truths of culture interact in determining Christian truth for a given people. For the purpose of missions there must be a maximizing of the meaning of Christian truth for the particular situation in which and for which the message is developed (11-12).

Thus there is a constant tension between God's truth and cultural truth, i.e. context, on the one hand and relevance of the Word within a context on the other. Without a perception of relevance, a message is often ignored because it is not perceived as meaningful.

Recognizing the interaction between these anthropological and theological issues, Paul G. Hiebert has developed the need to approach contextualization critically from God's point of view rather than from other cultures' or from a human perspective. His contribution made a significant difference in reducing relativistic approaches and recognizing God's place in the human context extending from the very fact that He made human beings and, therefore by extension, created culture (Shaw 1988:11).

The cultural diversity extant around the world today is a wonderful expression of God having created humanity with a propensity for great variety.

Being part of the hermeneutical process, contextualization always interprets God's truth within a specific culture, giving the development of a church within a particular culture meaning. Gilliland continues;

Contextualization is the dynamic reflection carried out by the particular church upon its own life in light of the Word of God and historic Christian truth. Guided by the Holy Spirit, the church continually challenges, incorporates, and transforms elements of the cultural milieu, bringing these under the Lordship of Christ. As members of the Body of Christ interpret the Word, using their own thoughts and employing their own cultural gifts, they are better able to understand the Gospel as incarnation (1989:13).

This presents the centrality of a community of believers within a culture interacting with their particular world view and allowing the Word to reflect upon that view in such a way that cultural practices based on it are critiqued. Thus the biblical world is in constant interaction both with the world of those who receive the Word and the world of the one who communicates it. This cultural mix often resembles a child's game of "telephone" with the message passing through several links and changing along the way. What those at the far end of the communication chain understand about the intended message is not necessarily what it started out to be. To the extent possible this must be avoided and the various means for doing so form the basis of true communication. It is the interrelationships between elements of all these worlds that is crucial to effective understanding;

not a linear progression but an interactive and relational model.

It is the need for critique in the contextualization process that draws our attention. Although crucial, contextualization should never simply be a matter of adapting Christianity to a particular cultural context in order to make sense. It must also be the interaction of people with biblical values which in turn judge the human context and impact relationships among those who subscribe to the cultural rules of that society. Where the beliefs and values of the Word interact with those of human society, critique takes place. Critique, then, is a meeting of God's truth and cultural truth (theological and social reality) at a deep structure—the deep world view level.

Critical Contextualization

One of the problems facing new Christians and the missionaries among them is how they should handle their old beliefs and rituals. Several approaches have been tried, resulting in variations of meaningful understanding of the Gospel in a cultural context. These variations range from syncretism to a viable church.

Rejection of all Traditional Beliefs and Rites

Attempting to avoid compromising the Gospel, some believe that all tradi-

tional culture is pagan and must be rejected. However, this approach leads to the Gospel appearing foreign for it is expressed only in imported symbols, rituals and thought patterns. It is, therefore, incomprehensible to ordinary Christians as well as to non-Christians.

Another product of this approach is that traditional beliefs and practices are driven underground. Often if the old ways are not dealt with openly or people do not understand the meaning of that which is introduced, people will continue to practice their traditions in the context of their homes, out of sight of missionaries. This lack of understanding leads to what Schreiter (1985) calls dual religion—an underground traditional structure with its manifestations of deep beliefs and values, appearing to accept Christianity but without true understanding.

Uncritical Acceptance of Traditional Beliefs and Rites

In order to avoid being foreign, and in an attempt to become indigenous, some have suggested that the new Christian community retain all of the old cultural forms, and find in them the means to fully express the Gospel. This approach, however, also leads to syncretism. Uncritical use of old beliefs and forms leads, in the end, to a mix in which the essence of the Gospel may be lost in the meaning of traditional

religious structures. Christianity then becomes a veneer covering the old religious ways. This is what has happened in much of Latin American Catholic Christianity of the past.

The rejection of these two approaches leads to a third approach, which Hiebert has called "critical contextualization" (1982b). This third approach seeks both to avoid the pitfalls of syncretism and to enable local believers to understand the meaning of the Gospel within their own cultural context.

Critical Contextualization

When questions regarding old beliefs and practices confront new Christians, people have opportunity to deal with the particular topics at hand in a unique and exciting way. The topics should come directly from their cultural context, and will often pertain to the relevance of Christianity to deal with issues people in the society regularly face—rituals and ceremonies, moral issues, immorality and other matters of license. Handling issues in a responsible way (maintaining fidelity to biblical and cultural contexts alike) encourages appropriate responses to all this.

Thus at the birth of a child the question will arise as to how Christians should handle births. The same is true of rituals and ceremonies relating to death, marriage, and any number of other circumstances in which human inter-

action with spiritual elements is appropriate or considered necessary. These issues provide new Christians opportunity to interact both with Scripture and with their culture in order to determine appropriate practice in the church. It is also important for the emerging church to demonstrate the relevance of Christianity and behave in a manner befitting individual Christians in the particular culture. By so doing they let their lives shine before other members of their society (Mt. 5:16), and develop an answer for their behavior that will point others to the reality of their faith (I Pet. 3:15).

The Process of Contextualization

To critically contextualize initiates a process by which Christians can come to determine what God will allow and where adjustments need to be made. This process has several steps: (1) discuss old beliefs and practices, (2) determine God's view regarding these same issues, (3) evaluate the old in light of biblical teaching and, finally (4) create a new contextualized Christian practice.

Discuss Cultural Practices

People should be encouraged to openly discuss their old practices and the meaning these have in the traditional culture and/or religion. By denying them opportunity for open discussion, without censure, we drive those practices underground. So, for example, they may collect old songs, or old myths, or discuss the meanings of any cultural practice thereby giving insight to the deep structures behind particular behavior patterns. Such discussion may be used to convey scriptural teaching about the subject at hand and show how this teaching differs from the beliefs of their old religion.

Understand God's View

What does God's Word say about these same issues? On some issues, such as those pertaining to the Decalogue, God is very clear—every culture has

its "thou shalt not" list. How these relate to God's list is the issue.

On many issues the Bible is silent. Scripture is not a cultural manual of acceptable and unacceptable practices. Often God is neutral on cultural issues, apparently opting to work with people in their circumstances even

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when practices are viewed as marginal (Kraft 1991). Slavery is an example throughout Scripture, and it is only near the end of the revelational period that God, through Paul's experience with the runaway slave Onesimus, deals directly with the Christian response to the issue. In such cases decisions must be made based on the interaction of biblical and cultural principles.

Evaluating Cultural Practices

This third step provides the critique for cultural practices from a biblical perspective. To the extent possible people need to see the way God looks at their cultural practices. Where the practices are directly contrary to God's

law, these should be stopped. However, it is important for missionaries and others interacting with people to understand the rationale behind such practices. The world view of a people needs to be understood and appreciated resulting in new ways of fulfilling their needs. So-called "functional substitutes" should come about as a result of thorough research by outsiders as well as insiders—interaction is essential.

Converts and members of newly developing churches should be encouraged to decide how to express their new beliefs. In so doing they should review their old practices and decide: (1) which are not usable because the forms and symbols are too closely tied to the specific beliefs of the old religion, (2) which can be used without modification because they are general forms, rites, and symbols that can serve as the media for expressing the Gospel, or for expressing their cultural identity (in terms other than religion), and finally (3) which can be used with new meanings given to them. This redemption of old forms has been used widely in the West to result in modern Christmas celebrations with a Christmas tree, the place of bridesmaids, candles and rice at weddings, Easter celebrations, preaching styles, and many other cultural adaptations resulting in communicating Christian meanings.

Western Christians need to remember their continued use of old songs such as "Home, Home on the Range," national anthems, art, and other secular cultural forms even after becoming Christians. Missionaries also need to remember that many cultural forms including music, drums, art, drama, dance, speech, and many more are media that can be used to express a great many different messages, including Christianity. In other cultural contexts missionaries need to be cautious in rejecting a medium just because non-Christian religions use it. While preaching is used in many religions,

Christians have clearly not abandoned this form of communication. People often reinterpret forms and new meanings are frequently given to old forms. While risk is always inherent in such adjustment, it provides Gospel incarnation as well as continuity with the past (hence a sense of peoplehood and cultural identity) and can be very meaningful both to people establishing their Christianity in a new context and to non-Christians observing these new expressions of culture. For instance in the West, Greek art forms have been freely used in homes though they were originally religious in character.

As people evaluate their behavior patterns by the truth of the Gospel, it can set them free. Change that results from critical evaluation, however, should be conscious and the ongoing implications clear as they impact the culture. This leads to the final step in the process of critical contextualization.

Create New Contextualized Practices

This is a crucial missiological step. Contextualization enables people to use their creative understanding of their culture in conjunction with their new found faith and understanding of Scripture. It enables them to create Christian practices that are meaningful to people in that society. Missionaries need to recognize that new indigenous rituals can be created by the use of existing symbols along with the creation of new symbols, which can be integrated and arranged into new practices.

The occasion and means of celebrating the “Lord’s supper” provides a case in point. Should this be regularly incorporated into the worship service or be a separate celebration in believers homes? How should the ‘elements’ be represented—by local materials such as coconut meat and milk or possible imported items like grape juice (or even wine) and bread? To answer these questions, Christians need to appreciate the concepts and symbolic meanings

of the elements, local and imported, and how their use may impact people’s understanding of Christian celebration.

Often the use of imported items is only possible so long as there is outside influence and people may be forced to cease this crucial celebration when missionaries leave because they have not been taught how to think through the critical contextualization process. It is crucial then, as part of the development of a church, to introduce them to this process. This will enable them to think through the Christian implications of many cultural forms as well as the incorporation of new forms that must be critiqued in light of cultural and biblical meanings.

Contextualization Leads to Theological Development

The entire process of analysis, based on cultural/biblical forms and meanings, leads to the development of theology within new cultural contexts. Gilliland (1989b:64) makes this clear when he presents four key questions that track with the critical contextualization framework presented here:

What is the general background?
What are the presenting problems?
What theological questions arise?
What directions should the theology take?

As people develop their theology it must be understandable, not simply incorporated from an outside perspective. Theological understanding then comes as a result of the contextualization process.

True theology is the attempt on the part of the church to explain and interpret the meaning of the Gospel for its own life and to answer questions raised by the Christian faith, using the thought, values, and categories of truth which are authentic to that place and time (Gilliland 1989 11-12).

Such a recognition of the relationship between a particular context, Scripture and the church enables the theology that develops to serve the

church. It is not, then, a foreign entity interjected onto the consciousness of people as a “system” for understanding God, but rather a means of recognizing the dynamic impact God has upon a working culture caught up in rapid change in the world. Thus without local logic and reason generated from a people’s world view, theology will make no sense and people will correctly question their need to pay any attention to it. Such irrelevance, in turn, could seriously damage the reputation of Christians whose ideas and practices make little or no sense from the cultural perspective.

With all this in mind we can say that contextualization is both a product—what people should understand about the meaning of the Gospel as represented by the forms in their context—and a process—an application of the truths of a culture and truths of Scripture to the development of new expressions of Christianity. These new expressions are what Schrieter (1985) calls “local theologies” and present within a context the meaning of the Gospel in new and exciting ways.

The model of critical contextualization recognizes the need for cross cultural communicators to understand the contexts in which they minister. It also encourages mono-cultural messengers to relate their culture to biblical perspectives that deal with the same or similar practices on the one hand or deeper level beliefs and values on the other. God, in infinite wisdom, has provided a plan for people in all times and places. This plan has been used by the Church to both justify cultural practices in the context of a developing church and as a means of forcing change upon those who do not subscribe to those particular interpretations of the Word. It is to this matter of theological tradition which further impacts a developing hermeneutical community that we now turn our attention.

Reducing Syncretism

Syncretism can be defined as an incompatible mixture of biblical truth and local beliefs and practices. Incompatibility should be judged by God's view not another cultural perspective. There are many cultural concerns that can influence the development of relevant forms within a growing church. Those forms must reflect an understanding of the meaning of Christianity within the community in question. That community is formed by believers interacting with each other on the basis of their worldview and cultural practices. It is a hermeneutical community within which the gospel is understood.

The text of the Gospel—all that is biblically communicated—only has meaning within a particular context—a local culture. That culture, as the church emerges, in turn, is represented by a group of believers who accept the message and attempt to understand and apply it to their lives. This group of believers forms the local church and serves as an extension of God's kingdom in a new context. Syncretism is avoided to the extent that local beliefs and practices are adjusted to come in line with the intentions of God's injunctions. Such deep level meaning necessitates the adjustment of surface forms within each Christian context. Hermeneutics comes as a result of understanding world-view issues which, to some degree, reflect pan-human concerns but are manifested in culturally specific ways. Believers, with their understanding of culture specifics, also serve to interface between the Church at large and their particular culture, thus providing a buffer for change and interaction with the broader world around them.

Familiarity with particular practices

may affect how willing people are to apply them to new beliefs. Those for whom the practices were part of daily life may so closely associate the form and meaning that to use them in reference to another set of beliefs is inconceivable. This is often the case with first generation Christians who may reject their old rites and symbols in an effort to separate themselves from their old relig-

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ious lifestyle. Such a response may be affected by missionaries who may or may not understand the meaning of these beliefs and practices.

Second generation Christians begin to evaluate their new beliefs in an effort to understand where they have come from and where they as a community of believers are going. As the process continues each generation tends to look back to their past to find cultural roots and may try to revive old symbols and rituals. They often do so with no idea of reviving old religions, but of finding continuity with their cultural past.

Sadly, some missionaries unaware of cultural dynamics totally reject old cultural forms because they appear so different from those that are familiar to them. The problem today is how to remove the old bias of mission, while helping the church deal with its cultural past in order to express the Gospel meaningfully but faithfully in indigenous forms. Here is where the interaction of tradition and Scripture can greatly assist people in the process of evaluating their cultural practices in

light of the Gospel message. The result should be a reduction of syncretism and an increase in the relevance of Christianity.

Ground Rules for Effective Contextualization

Based on critical contextualization as the methodological structure that enables a church to determine relevant beliefs and practices while avoiding syncretism, we can suggest several ground rules for effective contextualization.

1. Cultural relevance is crucial to the Gospel making sense.

Relevance implies the need to make sense, for that which makes sense

will not be viewed as nonsense. People will be motivated to understand the message and relate it to what they already know. Their knowledge provides the grid through which they will filter all new information and its meaning to them.

2. Contextualization is both a product and a process.

In the development of a Christian hermeneutical community, contextualization must be viewed as both an end product and a process. The end product can be seen as a group of believers impacted by Christian guidelines established throughout Scripture. The process by which that community makes the Gospel theirs is also crucial. It is that process which enables an on going dialogue between God's truth and cultural truth and addresses the need for relevance as well as a recognition of culture change.

3. Critique based on biblical truth is crucial.

A focus on Scripture provides critique of cultural beliefs and practices. Such critique may, in fact, come from the traditions of the Church as people

have struggled with the realities of conflict between faith and culture over to millennia. However tradition informs the developing church in each context, it must relate back to biblical truth as it has influenced other contexts. Those contexts can serve as a guide for young churches struggling with similar issues.

4. Contextualization impacts culture change.

As the hermeneutical community interacts with the world around it, change is inevitable. The contextualized church may well form a buffer for the society as it undergoes change. Many churches have served to preserve cultural traditions while maintaining the integrity of the Gospel. The orthodox Church in the former Soviet Union is a case in point. As that society undergoes radical change, people are turning to the Church for a sense of stability and a demonstration of meaning in life.

5. The missionary vision of the Church is part of contextualization.

A contextualized church should be ready to communicate its understanding of the message not only within its own context, but by taking the message into new contexts. With an understanding of the Gospel within a particular context as a foundation, the process should be replicated in ever widening circles of influence in other cultural contexts.

Conclusion:

As people acknowledge their relationship with God, and desire to enjoy Him forever, they fulfill their

created desire for relationship with Him. That relationship, however, is only relevant when lived within the boundaries of a particular cultural experience. God brings meaning to and fulfills human longing, while culture enables understanding and implementation of the relationship in any context where it takes root. To this end I pray that those who implement these principles will both experience and communicate the joy of the Lord and the power of the Spirit as they live a contextualized life in accordance with God's will.

[Editors Note: This article is adapted from a chapter in a forthcoming book from Baker Book House, co-authored with Paul G. Hiebert on missiological issues affecting the study of religion.]

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