CONTEXTUALIZATION AND CHRISTIAN MISSIONS

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In recent decades, the evangelical community has wrestled with the issue of contextualization in Christian missions. There have been and are currently many discussions stirring about the concept in general and the popularization of the term.¹ This paper will focus on the concept rather than the term and its derivation. The challenge of contextualization is the difficulty of taking the gospel to new peoples that possess worldviews and live in cultures that are different from the Christian missionary. Missionaries have observed that people are less likely to receive the gospel and follow Jesus Christ if they have to completely forsake their culture. Simply stated, there is a need to present the gospel in an understandable way and establish a church among the people group that is relevant to them. As a result, contextualization is vital to the advancement of God’s kingdom. The goal of this overview is to explore definitions of contextualization, to identify different approaches to contextualization, to highlight dangers associated with failed contextualization, and to present a biblical and culturally informed approach to contextualization.

A Working Understanding of Contextualization

As one seeks to understand contextualization, the biblical mandate to make disciples of all nations is a major consideration. It is Jesus’ command to make learner/followers of him that shapes the end goal of missionary activity. Any form of contextualization that avoids this command is not valid. In addition, one’s understanding cannot be helpful if it does not seriously consider the cultural practices of the targeted people group and the missionary. If ignored,

barriers for the gospel can be erected and bridges for the gospel will be left untraversed. In an attempt to understand contextualization, one should investigate various definitions. One author defines contextualization as the “process of making the gospel and the church as much at home as possible in a given context.”\(^2\) Josophat Yego says, “It simply means the never-changing word of God in ever-changing modes of relevance. It is making the gospel concepts or ideals relevant in a given situation.”\(^3\) This understanding adds the concept of relevance. The desire to be relevant values the understanding of the target people. A culturally relevant gospel is communicated in their language using their signs, symbols and other cultural identifiers as tools of communication. As a result, the church does not mirror the church of the missionary, but is indigenous to the region. Scott Moreau’s summary is helpful here:

From an evangelical perspective, then, contextualization captures the tension of Christians having biblical revelation that is universally true and applicable while living in a world of societies that are widely diverse in their religious identities. (He quotes Stan May next) ‘Simply stated, contextualization means that the message (or the resulting church) is defined by Scripture but shaped by culture.’\(^4\)

One can better understand the topic by these definitions. Another avenue to a more complete grasp is to highlight different approaches. Seeing examples can help identify strengths and weakness in order to suggest a faithful approach.

**Different Approaches to Contextualization**

As with most areas of Christian practice, there are multiple approaches posited by various groups. For the purposes of this paper, it will be most helpful to introduce two models that describe approaches. The first model is Paul Hiebert’s. He highlights three main types of

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contextualization strategies: minimal contextualization, uncritical contextualization and critical contextualization. In the first type the missionary maintains their own culture and actually introduces new cultural forms or symbols into the target culture as the Christian norms. For example, the missionary would encourage his disciples to dress like him or teach them songs and music from his culture. This approach is often described as non-contextualization and is a product of colonialization. In this mindset, non-Western cultures were deemed inferior and missionaries believed that other peoples not only needed the gospel, but also advances in culture. Heibert’s second type, uncritical contextualization, reveals a near opposite position to his first. In this case, the missionary accepts the target culture as it is, often including areas that are clearly contradictory to the gospel. Various aspects of culture are integrated with Christian ideas and beliefs. This unhealthy mixture of Christian and non-Christian ideas is called syncretism. It is not an authentic, biblical expression of Christianity, but the invention of a new religion. Hiebert’s third type is critical contextualization, which is faithful to authentic Christianity, yet aware of the target culture. In this approach, the missionary looks for cultural forms that can help communicate the gospel without compromise. An example of this is the use of the peace child myth among the Sawi people in New Guinea by Don Richardson. In addition, as people convert to Christ, the missionary helps the people discern what aspects of their culture should be kept, discarded or modified in order to develop a faithful Christian witness.

Another model of contextualization that some use to explain different approaches is the C1-C6 Spectrum. John Travis (Pseudonym) developed this model to describe work in

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Muslim contexts. This model identifies six levels of contextualization and explains practices under each level. The categories and corresponding activities are listed below:

1. C1 - Missionaries establish a church that is basically identical to wherever they are from. Services are conducted in the language of the missionaries. They call themselves "Christians" and have very little cultural connection to the region where they plant the church.
2. C2 - The same as C1, except the services are conducted in the language of the region.
3. C3 - They have incorporated many non-religious cultural forms of the region into their community, such as dress, art, etc. They still reject any purely Islamic religious elements. They may meet in a traditional church building or in a more religiously neutral location. They call themselves "Christians" but try to have a more contextualized presence in the region.
4. C4 - They are similar to C3, but they incorporate some Islamic religious elements into their community – like avoiding pork, praying in a more Islamic style, using Islamic dress and employing Islamic terminology. They call themselves "Followers of Isa" or something similar. Their meetings are usually not held in traditional church buildings. They are not considered to be Muslims by the Muslim community.
5. C5 - They retain their legal and social identity within their Muslim community. They reject or reinterpret any part of Islamic practices and doctrine that contradict the Bible. They may or may not attend the mosque regularly, and they actively are involved in sharing their faith in Jesus with other Muslims. They may call themselves Muslims who follow Isa al-Masih, or just Muslims. They may be viewed by their community as Muslims that are a little unorthodox.
6. C6 - They keep their faith secret because of an extreme threat of persecution, suffering or legal retaliation. They may worship secretly in small groups. They do not normally share their faith openly and have a 100% Muslim identity.9

There are some pertinent observations that one should note from the models above. One, there is a continuum of views on contextualization. Two, those that are thinking about contextualization are usually doing so for good reason: to the reach the lost with the gospel. The following quote communicates the dangers of not considering contextualization, “If those ministering in the world deny the reality of contextualization, the gospel becomes more about the cultural norms used to transport the gospel than the gospel itself. In the end, we risk losing the gospel”10. Three,

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there are dangers in the extremes of each spectrum. In essence, failure lies at both ends of the continuum.

**Dangers of Failed Contextualization**

There are two primary dangers that exist when contextualization fails, yet the net effect is that the people remain essentially unreached with no clear gospel witness or biblical local church. One should note that failed contextualization is measured on a continuum between the following two extremes: the missionary imposes his culture upon the target people and the missionary fails to call the people to abandon unbiblical aspects of their culture.

**Foreign Religion, Few Converts**

In the first extreme, the missionary does not see that aspects of culture are not necessarily evil or he erroneously believes his culture is the best. As a result, barriers are erected. In this case, a small number of the targeted group may come to Christ and identify with the missionaries. However, the majority will not and will likely view Christianity as the religion of the missionary. Because of the barriers, the targeted people are not necessarily rejecting the claims of the gospel, but the missionary’s culture. This approach does not recognize the phenomenon Donald McGavran highlights here: “peoples become Christian fastest when least change of race or clan is involved”\(^\text{11}\). Therefore, they reject Christianity as a foreign religion. Another aspect of this extreme is that converts are normally severed from their immediate family, extended relatives, friends and community either by choice or ostracism. This disconnection hinders the spread of the gospel because it bolsters the perception that the gospel is not really for their culture. Therefore, after the initial converts, there will be few conversions over the life of the missionary endeavor. The implications for missions in this regard are that this approach leads toward the following: the good news is not heard or understood, discouragement

for the missionary is almost inevitable, converts conceal cultural practices from the missionary, and there are wasted resources.

In the second extreme, a biblically genuine community does not exist, because the missionary fails to call the target people from sinful aspects of their culture. Though in many cases, the converts are larger in number, biblical depth and authenticity lack as a result of this uncritical approach to contextualization. The people are Christians, but they do not act or look any different than before. The net effect is syncretism, which is the compromising blend or mixture of Christianity and sinful components of another culture or religion. The mixture that results is an unfaithful witness for Christ. For example, those that promote Insider Movements among Islamic peoples encourage their converts to continue to call themselves Muslims. The question remains, “Can we be both Christian and Muslim? Jeff Morton uses the following table and elaboration to make an important point based upon 1 John 4:13:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Christianity</th>
<th>Islam</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The teaching: God has a son and in the son is life</td>
<td>The teaching: God has no son and saying so brings a curse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The result: Having the Son means having life</td>
<td>The result: delusion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When the Christian uses the Bible to weigh the message of Islam, I believe there can be no confusion. I’m sorry this next statement is not politically correct, that it’s not sensitive to the vast majority of Muslims who are wonderful people and truly likeable; that it may not be the most civilized way of speaking, but the Word of God makes it quite obvious: Islam has the spirit of the antichrist. As one can see, the dangers of failed contextualization in this regard are dire. The result is a fuzzy religion that does not reflect biblical Christianity. In addition, many of the converts will be false because they did not accept the claims or Christ and give up the sinful elements of their religion and culture. The implications for missions in this case are as follows: there is a loss of the gospel due to syncretism, there is a false sense of success, the false convert will cause more

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problems in the church, and there are wasted resources. In summary, the results of failed contextualization are devastating and should be avoided.

**Biblically Faithful and Culturally Relevant**

If there is a desire to be faithful to the Bible, one should want an authentic expression of Christianity in the target culture. This expression should not place unnecessary barriers before possible converts. Simply stated, the need is wisdom and balance. The goal is to be biblically faithful and culturally relevant by developing an approach that avoids the extremes mentioned previously. It is important to note that there is a false dichotomy in the phrase “biblically faithful and culturally relevant”. The reality exists that to be faithful to all of Scripture in this area, once must present the gospel and establish the church in a way that is culturally relevant. The revelation of Jesus Christ itself illustrates this: God sent his truth into the context of humanity in a way that mankind could understand. Therefore, a presentation of the truth expressed in a cultural irrelevant way, is not faithful.\(^\text{13}\) In summary, the missionary should present timeless truth in a manner that is understandable to the hearers, without compromising either concept. With this in mind, there are three parts of the contextualization process. They are as follows: exegesis of the target culture, exegesis of the missionary’s culture and exegesis of the Scriptures within a hermeneutical community. The remainder of the paper will identify the practical importance of these and give some practical examples.

**Exegesis of the Missionary’s Culture**

The missionary learned the gospel within a certain context. It came through an understood language and a particular worldview. In other words, the gospel is wrapped in the culture of the missionary. Therefore, the missionary has to work through the process of

understanding which aspects of his theological construct are culturally adapted and which are unchanging truth.\textsuperscript{14} The first step in this process is awareness of the reality of the influences of culture on the gospel. A second step is to speak with or read about Christians from other cultures. Third, the missionary should be studying the Scriptures. Lastly, as the missionary studies the target people group, he should be seeking to learn about his own culture. This is not a one-time exercise, but something that will be perpetual as he interacts with those from other cultures. The next part is similar as it relates to observation and discovery.

**Exegesis of the Target Culture**

The second part of the contextualization process is to exegete the target people group’s culture. In this case, the missionary should observe the norms and practices of the target culture. This should be done in an uncritical way in order to understand why people do what they do. It is vital for the missionary to avoid being judgmental about the culture and its traditions. Criticism will likely cause the targeted people to avoid discussing the issues for fear of rejection.\textsuperscript{15} Once the missionary has some understanding of the culture, the application of the gospel and Scripture is the next part of the process.

**Exegesis of the Scriptures with a Hermeneutical Community**

The gospel and the word of God should infiltrate the culture in such a way that the people group, believers and unbelievers, realize that it transcends the missionary’s culture. The church should be other-worldly, but not foreign to them. Therefore, there should be a process to determine what to do with various expressions of culture. The missionary should develop a hermeneutical community to work through this process.\textsuperscript{16} The goal of this community is to

\textsuperscript{14}Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*. 58.

\textsuperscript{15}Ibid. 89.

\textsuperscript{16}Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts*. A hermeneutical community is a concept promoted by Paul Hiebert is some of his works. It consists of the missionary or pastor, leaders from the people group and possibly
develop practical applications of the Scriptures that are appropriate to their culture. This process includes the evaluation of customs in light of the new biblical data. Van Rheenan’s summary of Matheny’s categories of Arab culture exemplify the potential results of this type of group:

*Biblically supported items should be retained:* honor of parents, hospitality, strict regulation of sexual behavior, giving to the poor, fasting, loyalty, ban on drunkenness

*Neutral items which can be maintained:* types of clothing, sitting on the floor, way of greeting, ways of making decisions, removing shoes in places of worship, circumcision, bowing prostrate when praying, ways of getting married, religious gatherings on Fridays.

*Items which must be rejected as contrary to biblical principles:* polygamy, animistic superstitions, belief in Muhammed as Prophet, maintaining honor at any price, fatalistic practices.

Over time, the goal of having a Christian church within the target culture becomes a reality. It is important to note that once the church is established, it will continue as the hermeneutical community. The same principle will continue to guide this local body of Christ toward a more accurate reflection of biblical truth. This is a necessity for two reasons. One, the depth of the Scriptures exclude the arrival at complete knowledge and understanding in this life. Second, culture inevitably changes and new issues arise. As changes occurs, the community should make adjustments in a biblical manner. As the church continues in this process, they prove to be faithful followers of Christ.

**Closing Thoughts**

The nature of the gospel is to be communicated so that it can be heard and understood. It cannot be good news to ones that cannot grasp its beauty because it is not shared in a way that is understandable. Therefore, contextualization is not a matter of choice if the servant of Christ desires to be faithful to his calling. There are dangers on every side in this matter. As a result, the

other believers. The missionary acts as a guide for the process, not the final authority.

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minister should remember that it is a spiritual process. In all of the details of contextualization, prayer and dependence upon God must not sink into the shadows of neglect. If one seeks the glory of God by the power of God and does not shirk his human responsibility to love the people by giving the gospel to them in a culturally appropriate manner, God will bless this endeavor. In conclusion, one must remember that to be biblically faithful is to be culturally relevant.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


