

Contextualization that is Authentic and Relevant

Contextualization must balance faithfulness to the biblical text with meaningfulness to the audience. The process involves several steps which if overlooked can truncate the task of discipling the nations that still need to be reached.

by David J. Hesselgrave

It has become clear that a wide variety of meanings, methods, and models are attached to the word *contextualization*. Some of them are more consistent with Scripture and the historic Christian faith, and therefore are more authentic, than others. The Theological Education Fund (TEF), originators of the term did not hesitate to speak of “authentic contextualization,” but it seems that for most of them authentic contextualization had to do with contextuality—correctly reading, and relating to the context. Authenticity should have to do with God’s revelation first of all, with faithfulness to the authority and content of the will of God as revealed in his creation, in man’s conscience, and especially, in his Son and his Holy Spirit-inspired Word. We say especially because though all men already share in the testimony of creation, it is the particular task of the Church to share the Christ of whom the Scriptures testify (John 5:39). Of course, in and of itself, authenticity does not assure us that the message will be meaningful and persuasive to our respondents. Therefore we must also speak of effectiveness—of the kind of communication that grows out of an understanding of our respondents in their particular context and out of the active ministry of the Holy Spirit in us and in them.

From this point of view Christian contextualization can be thought of as the attempt to communicate the message of the person, works, Word, and will of God in a way that is faithful to God’s revelation, especially as it is put forth in the teachings of Holy Scripture, and that it is meaningful to respondents in their respective cultural and existential

contexts. Contextualization is both verbal and nonverbal and has to do with theologizing, Bible translation, interpretation and application, incarnational lifestyle, evangelism, Christian instruction, church planting and growth, church organization, worship style—indeed with all of those activities involved in carrying out the Great Commission. Something of what is involved can be seen by resorting to the use of a diagram proposed by Eugene Nida and modified somewhat for our purposes. (See Three Culture model on following page.)

The “three-culture model” illustrates that the biblical message came in language and concepts meaningful to sources (prophets, apostles, and Bible authors) and receptors (their hearers and readers) in the Hebrew and Greco-Roman cultures of Bible times. Whether consciously or unconsciously, it has been contextualized to be meaningful to people in cultures in which the Christian message spread, in which the Church emerged, and from which it sends out its cross-cultural missionaries. Their task as well as the task of the churches that grow out of their work, is to interpret (or decontextualize) the biblical message, to limit the intrusion of materials growing out of their own culture.

They then must recontextualize the message to communicate it effectively to respondents in their target culture. The principles and activities involved are complex, as they have already been illustrated in the course of our discussion.

At this point, we will summarize some of the more salient principles before concluding our study with some examples.

The Biblical Text

The adequacy of an attempted contextualization must be measured by the degree to which it faithfully reflects the meaning of the biblical text. Thus, the contextualizer’s initial task is an interpretive one: to determine not only *what* the text says but also the *meaning* of what has been said. It may be useful to think of contextualization as a process with three distinct elements, revelation, interpretation, and application, throughout which a continuity of meaning can be traced.¹

Revelation

The process begins with God’s revelation of His truth in language. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, a human author, using linguistic symbols to convey the meaning of that revelation, produced a text. Since the inscription of revealed truth took place under the direct inspiration of God’s Spirit, the correspondence between that which was revealed and the resultant text is guaranteed.

From the interpreter’s vantage point, it must be recognized that the range of possible interpretations which legitimately can be ascribed to the text is limited. Clues to that range of meaning are provided by the generally accepted use of the linguistic symbols at that time, by the author’s particular use of linguistic conventions, and by the original audience’s response, that is, the publicly observable aspect of language of which the author was certainly aware. These factors do not themselves generate meaning. However, they do indicate and limit the specific meaning assigned to the text by the author.

Interpretation

The second element is the reader's or hearer's perception of the intended meaning. The formation of this perceived meaning is affected by the two horizons of the interpretive task—the horizon of the interpreter's own culture and that of the text. The interpreter's own enculturation leaves an indelible stamp on his thought patterns and will certainly affect the way in which he interprets a given message. But in spite of the limitations imposed by the interpreter's ethnocentrism, human language, and the distorting effects of sin, the student of the biblical text is able to gain a more or less accurate understanding of its author's intended meaning. This is possible since the perspicuity of the text and the analytical tools of exegesis, theology and history work to keep the meaning which takes shape in the mind of the interpreter within the scope of meaning prescribed by the text itself.

Application

The third element involves two steps. First, the interpreter formulates the logical implications of his understanding of the biblical text for the culture in which it is to be received and lived out. Second, the interpreter consciously decides to accept the validity of the text's implications or to reject it (or some part of it) and superimpose his own meaning. If he rejects the claims of the text, the continuity of meaning is broken, and he loses touch with the truth embodied in the text. An acceptable contextualization is rendered impossible.

If, on the other hand, the interpreter accepts the claims of the text, he will be able to appropriate its meaning to his own sociocultural environment. The continuity of meaning of the text is unbroken, and Scripture takes on significance in a specific situation. This is not to imply that biblical content *becomes* true. Rather, because it

within the scope of meaning prescribed by the biblical text.

Respondent Peoples and Cultures

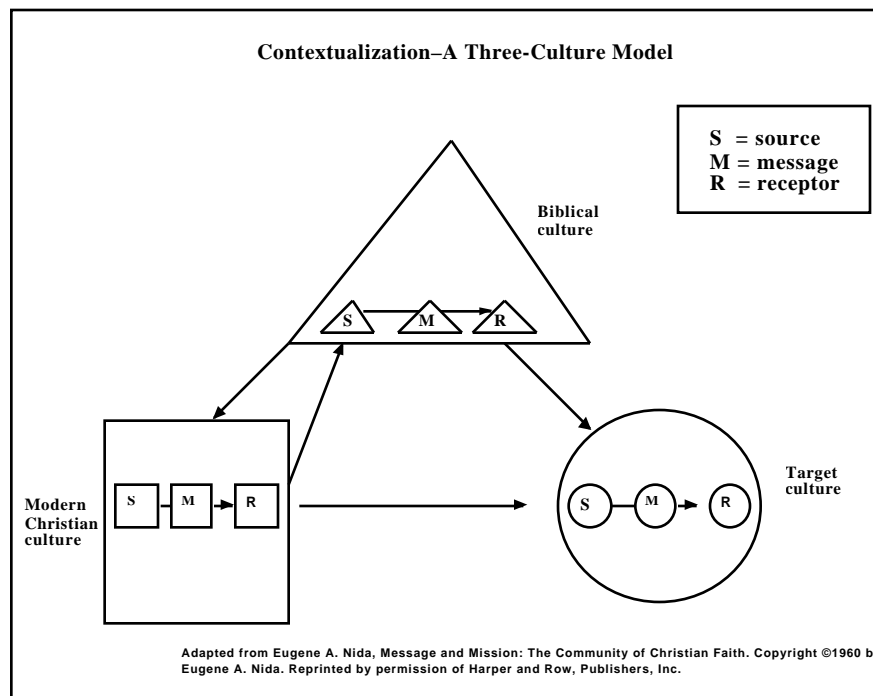
Contextualizers approach contextualization tasks in a variety of ways. The paradigms that they use for doing contextualization tend to reflect the

discipline(s) in which they are schooled (e.g., historical theology, anthropology). When one considers the vast amount of knowledge required to master the relevant communications and social science disciplines, and the diversity of cultural configurations among respondent peoples around the world, one realizes that there is no one correct way of doing contextualization. There are, however, parameters outside of

which Christian orthodoxy will not allow us to venture. In order to understand what is involved in communicating the Christian Gospel consider the following seven-dimension paradigm:

1. Worldviews—ways of viewing the world.
2. Cognitive processes—ways of thinking.
3. Linguistic forms—ways of expressing ideas.
4. Behavioral patterns—ways of acting.
5. Communication media—ways of channeling the message.
6. Social structures—ways of interacting.
7. Motivational sources—ways of deciding.

Eventually all messages must pass through this seven-dimension grid. There is no way contextualization can go around or otherwise escape it. Moreo-



is true it can, if properly understood, be repeatedly applied to specific contexts in an everchanging, multi-cultural world. At this point the interpreter already will have begun to classify biblical content according to its categorical and principial validity. The interpreter may now distinguish between culture-bound aspects of the Christian message which are open to modification from that which is revelatory content which has non-negotiable supracultural validity.

Thus, acceptable contextualization is a direct result of ascertaining the meaning of the biblical text, consciously submitting to its authority, and applying or appropriating that meaning to a given situation. The results of this process may vary in form and intensity, but they will always remain

ver, as the “funnels” between encoder source and the respondent decoder shows, the greater the differences between the source’s culture and the respondent’s culture the greater the impact of these dimensions upon the message and the more critical the contextualization task. Even so, we must keep in mind that these dimensions of intercultural communication interpenetrate one another. They may be separated for analysis, but they combine to form one holistic reality. All of this has been explained in considerable detail in *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally*.² Here we can only highlight the basic process.

Ways of Perceiving Reality

The concept of worldview has become commonplace in anthropological, theological, and communication materials, and in missiology. Worldview has been defined as the way we see the world in relation to ourselves and ourselves in relation to the world. Though much more is involved, perhaps it can be simplified in terms of a person’s understandings of supernature, nature, humanity, including time.

Hinduism/Buddhism

The monistic worldview of much of Hinduism and Buddhism offers examples. Hinduism (particularly the Vedanta of Shankara) insists that the only reality is the indescribable Brahman. The phenomenal world that we see and touch is illusory (*maya*); the inner Self (*Atman*) is identical with the Brahman, the human problem is ignorance (*avidya*), as a person is caught in an extended cycle of births and re-births (*samsara*) dependent upon his/her karma. Through enlightenment he can be reabsorbed into Brahman.

Buddhism developed in the Indian context and adopted much the same worldview with its ideas of karma, cycles of birth and rebirth, and vir-

tual ignorance of the true nature of the world. It replaced the idea of “self” with “no-self” (*anatta*) and the idea of Brahman with that of Nirvana. The differences between this understanding and the Christian understanding make it apparent that effectively communicating the Gospel to a Hindu or Buddhist requires contrasting Hindu-Buddhistic and Christian understandings of reality including God, the origin of the universe, the human problem, grace, the meaning of salvation, the importance of history, the nature of spirituality, and the destiny of humanity and the universe. Not to do so would invite misunderstanding and syncretism at the deepest level.

Tribal, Chinese, Naturalist

Analyses of tribal, Chinese, naturalist, and other worldviews reveal a similar necessity of “worldview contextualization.” We begin to appreciate the wisdom of Hans-Reudi Weber when he uses the larger biblical narrative to catechize and evangelize in Indonesia. If he did not, the Indonesians might simply fit bits and pieces of Christian information into the worldview picture of their own beliefs and myths.

Ways of Thinking

About the time of World War II, the anthropologist Franz Boas wrote *The Mind of Primitive Man*.⁴ After the war, the philosopher F. S. C. Northrop contrasted Eastern and Western ways of knowing in *The Meeting of East and West*.⁵ They were not alone in highlighting the different ways in which people “think” and “know.” Works emanating from various disciplines converged to demonstrate that while all cultures have their logic, the logic of the various cultures is not entirely the same. E. H. Smith explained those differences by elaborating three ways of knowing:

- 1) The conceptual—corresponding to Northrop’s cognition by postulation.

- 2) The psychological—corresponding to Northrop’s cognition by intuition.
- 3) The concrete relational in which “life and reality are seen pictorially in terms of the active emotional relationships present in a concrete situation”—more or less corresponding to Boas’s “primitive” thinking.⁶

Smith’s approach dispelled the naive notion that there is one “proper” way of thinking and even the more sophisticated idea that there are only two ways of thinking. He not only elaborated three ways of thinking; he clarified the relationship between them and insisted that people of *all* cultures think in these three ways. Differences among cultures in this regard, Smith said, are due to the *priority* given to one or another type of thought. Since all peoples think in these three ways, mutual respect is in order and cross-cultural understanding can be achieved.

Insights such as these constitute the stuff of which authentic and effective contextualizations are made. Armed with an understanding of the penchant for concrete relational thinking among Africans, Chinese, and various tribal peoples, the contextualizer will give more attention to the importance of history, myths, stories, parables, analogies, aphorisms, pictures, and symbols in communicating within these contexts. He will understand the psychological processes of Indians, the contextualizer will adjust to an approach to thinking and knowing that invests a kind of authority in the enlightenment experience that refuses to invest in any product of postulational thinking, whether it emanates from science or Scriptures. Knowing the classical Muslim mind, the contextualizer will be better prepared for Muslim willingness—and even desire—to engage in debate concerning the relative merits of the claims of Christ and Muhamma, including the integrity of the Koran versus that of the Bible.

Ways of Expressing Ideas

Arguments having to do with the degree to which languages differ from each other and the significance of those differences is a crucial one. If Sapir and Whorf are correct in concluding that linguistic differences are deep and abiding, cultural gaps become more difficult to bridge, and the common origin of man and culture in the divine tends to be obscured. On the other hand, if Chomsky and Longacre are correct that deep structures of languages betray significant similarities, cultural gaps can be crossed more readily, and the divine origin of man and culture is more readily seen. The debate, therefore, is most significant to the Christian believer. We assume that there is something to be learned from both emphases, and we will underscore several practical lessons that can be learned from them.

First, a simple truism: People everywhere like to communicate in their own “heart” language—in the language in which they were enculturated.

Second, though individual differences result in varying aptitudes for language learning, almost anyone can learn another language.

Third, in learning a receptor language we should remember that there is no one-to-one correlation between languages. Fourth, not only can we learn a receptor language; we can learn from it. European languages reflect the primary importance of time. A person was, is, or will be sick. Languages which do not require this distinction between past, present, and future may seem strange to us, but they are instructive at the very point of their strangeness.

Ways of Acting

An entirely new dimension is added to our understanding as we examine examples of the many behavioral conventions through which people of the world communicate. Specialists refer

to still other types of nonverbal communication, but kinesics, proxemics, and paralanguage are perhaps the most important. Contextualized communication, then, involves not only *what* we say but *how* we say it. Beyond that, it involves what we communicate when we say nothing or do anything. Even though, as we have said, the contextualization models we use will focus on verbal communication, that should not be construed to mean such behavioral patterns as those involved in gestures, rituals, positioning, tone of voice and the like stand apart from the contextualization process. In fact, when one *reads* Luther one can almost *hear* the tone of voice and *see* the intensity of the man who communicated Reformation truth to sixteenth-century Europe. Also when debating with a Muslim one must know too much agitation or any display of rancor or disdain will undermine the argument of the Christian advocate.

Ways of Channeling Communications

Though he held to stipulated definitions of “media” and “message” (the change of pace occasioned in human affairs), Marshall McLuhan shattered forever the notion that messages can be “put into” any medium and “come out” intact, untainted, and untouched. Not only do media affect the message; in McLuhan’s view they constitute the message. “The medium *is* the message,” said McLuhan.⁷ Literacy made it possible to communicate without the involvement of face-to-face involvement. Moveable type promoted sequential learning and government by law. Electronic media, especially television, are remaking the world into a global village.

But in less grandiose ways, attention to the predispositions and preferences of a respondent culture can help all of us to develop sensitivity in media selection and use. Initiators of programmed textbooks for theological educa-

tion in Africa discovered that even highly motivated African pastors dropped out of the program after several lessons. For one thing the approach used in the textbooks did not “make sense.” Students were required to work out certain problems before looking in the back of the book for the correct answers. From their point of view (concrete relational thinking) it was illogical to have to work out the problems if the answers were already known. For another thing, the books were singularly uninteresting because they contained no pictures. To include pictures and illustrations to the Western mind, would seem a simple thing, but a variety of studies indicate that this is not so.

Bruce L. Cook did extensive research in Papua, New Guinea, designed to answer the question, “What kinds of pictures communicate most effectively with people who can’t read?” He states his conclusion as “rules of thumb,” and his very first “rule” flies in the face of the Western tendency to overlook cultural differences in order to reach a mass audience. It is this: “Sociological and educational differences have the most effect on picture understanding. Picture content is more important than picture style, and pictures of people are most easily understood in non-literate cultures.”⁸

Ways of Interaction

People not only have ways of *acting* in accordance with culturally determined rules of conduct and meaning, they also have ways of *interacting* with each other on the basis of social conventions and understandings. The conventions of social structure dictate which channels of communication are open and which are closed, who talks to whom and in what way, and what kind of messages will be most prestigious and persuasive.

Lucien Pye tells of an election campaign in Jahore State, Malaya, involving two Westernized political candidates.⁹

One of them took his message “to the people” via rallies which attracted large crowds in village after village. Since his reception was so enthusiastic it was assumed, by many that he would defeat his opponent by a wide margin on election day. The election, however, was won by his equally Westernized opponent who had engaged in little direct campaigning. Why? Because in conducting his campaign the popular candidate had bypassed the opinion leaders in the villages he had visited. This omission resulted in distrust and cost him the election. Obviously, success in politics in Malaya is more than “taking your case to the people” or “competing in the open marketplace of ideas.”

Perhaps the classic case of a society where social conventions rule verbal and nonverbal communication is traditional China. About two and one-half millennia ago Confucius articulated the idea of the “rectification of names” and the ways in which rulers and subjects, fathers and sons, husbands and wives, and others should relate to each other. To this day, contextualized communication in Chinese culture either takes these conventions into account or runs afoul of them. This helps to explain why a tract written for individualistic Americans and given a gloss translation for Chinese with their emphasis on family relationships and obligations becomes more of an embarrassment to the Gospel than an embellishment of it.

Ways of Deciding

One reason for communicating interculturally is to encourage people to reach certain decisions which grow out of information and motivations which will be reflected in changed attitudes, allegiances, and courses of action. To a great degree the missionary task can be summed up in Paul’s words, “Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord we try to persuade men” (2 Cor.

5:11). But who is qualified to make decisions? What kind of decisions can they make? How are decisions made? The answers to such questions are largely dictated by one’s culture. In many cultures the decisions of children and even older “students” are not really taken seriously. It is only when young people have finished their education and are prepared to settle down and support a family that they are considered ready for serious decision making. To return to the context of traditional China once again, consider the case of an American missionary who presses a Chinese for conversion. Once the decision has been made the missionary is elated. But some days (or weeks, or months) later the Chinese “convert” does an about-face and gives evidence of a lapse of faith.

Conclusion

Christian contextualization that is both authentic and effective is based on careful attention to both the biblical text and respondent cultures. Authenticity is primarily a matter of interpreting the texts in such a way as to arrive, as closely as possible, at the intent of the author through the application of sound hermeneutical and exegetical principles. Biases occasioned by the interpreter’s own culture, can be gradually overcome and in that sense the message can be de-contextualized. Effectiveness is primarily a matter of contextualizing or shaping the Gospel message to make it meaningful and compelling to the respondents in their cultural and existential situation. Both the decontextualization and the recontextualization tasks are best accomplished by persons who are “expert” in the cultures and languages involved, who understand cultural dynamics, and who ideally are themselves bicultural. But both tasks are so important that all who labor in biblical interpretation, and all who undertake to minister cross-culturally, should make

an effort to understand the cultural dimensions of these tasks.

Endnotes and References

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[Editor’s Note: With permission this article is adapted and revised from Chapter 15 of *Contextualization, Meanings, Methods and Models* by David Hesselgrave and Edward Rommens, published by Zondervan Publishing House.]