



Faith Pulpit

Contextualization in Missions Today

The very mention of the word “contextualization” in evangelical circles has engendered a variety of reactions. For some, contextualization is absolutely indispensable in cross-cultural ministry. For others, it is a word fraught with compromise that diminishes the purity and clarity of the gospel message. What accounts for these two opposite reactions? In this edition of the Faith Pulpit, Professor Mark Lounsborough, chair of the Missions and Evangelism Department at Faith Baptist Bible College, examines the issue and gives clarity in this important debate.

By definition contextualization is putting a word, a thought, or a concept in its proper context. That concept seems innocent enough, so why do some object to its use? Part of the reason for the objection is that the word was popularized in an ecumenical context and so broadly applied that essential elements of the gospel were altered or omitted for the sake of making the message of Jesus more palatable to unwelcoming people groups.

Is there a Biblical warrant for contextualization? The fact is, contextualization is something we practice every day. Someone teaching primary children in a Sunday School class will present John 3:16 in a different manner from one instructing adults. The truth of the verse is not altered, but the emphases, illustrations, and applications employed will be noticeably different from one age group to another. The same concept is true as one moves from culture to culture.

A variety of factors will determine how God’s messenger goes about communicating the gospel message. In this article I highlight four guidelines to help in applying contextualization with Biblical integrity.

SCRIPTURAL PRIORITY

First and foremost, contextualization must be true to Scripture. God's truth is transcultural. His eternal holiness, justice, omnipotence, wisdom, and love do not change from time to time and from place to place. The Bible teacher who in any way diminishes these truths in order to build bridges to people has committed the most basic offense which an ambassador of Christ can commit: misrepresentation of the One who has sent him. There can be no room for such alteration.

There would be no point in taking the gospel message to the whole world if basic Bible truth needed to be modified from culture to culture. The gospel would soon cease to be the gospel. It would take on one new look after another, until the original message had been stripped of its identity altogether.

We must remember that the very fact that God has destined His message to spread to the ends of the earth implies that it will retain its essential character amid a kaleidoscope of places, cultures, languages, and ideologies. That's part of the beauty of God's truth. It withstands the ever-vacillating whims of human existence, because the basic spiritual need of mankind has never changed, and the God Who alone can meet that need is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

It is here that contextualization is most commonly abused. In an effort to build bridges to people and find common ground, missionaries have sometimes sacrificed essential doctrinal teaching for fear that including it may run the risk of alienating people from the gospel. One need not travel beyond the borders of the United States to witness this tendency firsthand. When a preacher decides to eliminate the doctrine of repentance from his pulpit ministry in order not to offend his listeners, he is committing the same error as the missionary who avoids references to Jesus as the only way in a polytheistic culture. Such sacrifice of key doctrines is known as syncretism, and has resulted in a watering down of the gospel message in many cross-cultural ministries.

If one truly believes that the truth of the Scripture will set sinners free, then fear of speaking the whole truth must be dispelled by the firm conviction that the Spirit of Truth does His work in the sinner's heart by means of the Word of Truth. Whatever else contextualization may mean, it cannot mean a change in the essential gospel message. It may, however, signify other kinds of change, to which we now turn our attention.

CULTURAL RELEVANCE

A few decades ago the phrase "cultural relevance" became popular in some evangelical circles, while causing others a great deal of alarm. Part of the reason for the alarm is that cultural relevance was fast becoming the standard for determining the nature of ministry activity. It seemed to stand alone as an unchallenged and subjective measuring rod for determining what the church should look like in today's world. The problem with this approach is that cultural relevance usurps the place of Scripture as the pacesetter for missionary work. The truth of God's Word becomes subservient to what appears to function well in a given cultural context.

Take, for example, the concept some missiologists call Power Encounter, which states that “power-oriented people require power proof, not simply reasoning, if they are to be convinced” (Charles H. Kraft, “Power Encounter,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, gen. ed. A. Scott Moreau [Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000], 775). This statement was made with reference to animistic cultures, most of which are accustomed to visible, tangible manifestations of spiritual power. The thought is that unless missionaries accommodate this insistence upon confirming signs in order to give credibility to the message, there is little hope of seeing people come to Christ. The power of the gospel is rendered powerless before the demands of a given culture. Cultural relevance hijacks the sufficiency of God’s Word and decides what will bring people to Christ.

Having said that, must we now assume that cultural relevance, having no role to play in Biblical contextualization, should be jettisoned? Certainly not. Cultural consideration has always been a key player in sound hermeneutics. Bible students are constantly making two trips as they interpret Scripture. They travel back in time to visit the cultural settings in which Bible passages were written in order to understand what the writers were saying to that audience. Then they travel back to the present to make application in today’s world. But in doing so, they understand that the message, not the culture, is preeminent. Culture must always assume a subservient role in Bible interpretation and application. It does not have the authority to alter Scriptural meaning. It seeks only to apply the unchanging truth of God in ever-changing life contexts. As long as the truth of God’s Word remains supreme for the interpreter, cultural applications will be limited to the parameters established by that truth.

Returning to the statement cited above regarding power-proof, the notion that the power of the gospel message cannot stand alone is a contextual misapplication that must be discarded. This can be demonstrated from passages such as Romans 1:16, John 8:32–36, and 1 Peter 1:23. A Biblical approach to an animistic culture does not demand a visible power manifestation of some sort, because the power of God resides within the message itself. That does not mean, however, that we simply ignore the culture in which the gospel is proclaimed. The missionary must seek to understand the reasons why a given culture believes as it does and offer Scriptural insights that lead them to the truth. All too often missionaries have simply written off the question of spiritual power as psychological or mere fabrication and failed to respond to issues that deeply affect people where they live.

RELIGIOUS SENSITIVITY

The thought behind this idea is that upon entering a foreign culture, the missionary must make every effort to understand the religious system which dominates the people to whom he or she is ministering. A one-size-fits-all approach to evangelism neither makes good sense nor reflects the nature of gospel ministry in the New Testament.

Take, for example, the preaching ministry of Paul in two very different locations. In Acts 13, while in Antioch of Pisidia, he preached in a Jewish synagogue, quoting five significant passages from the Old Testament to demonstrate that Jesus had fulfilled Messianic prophecy. But in Acts 17, when he spoke in Athens on Mars Hill, not only did he not quote a single passage of Scripture, but he also quoted two pagan sources to support his truth claims. This approach has led some to conclude that Paul failed in Athens, and for that reason the fruit of his ministry there was scarce.

Such a conclusion is not warranted. The religious context in the Antiochean synagogue was radically different from the Grecian paganism of Athens. The Jews acknowledged the authority of Scripture, so Paul could begin there and move forward with his defense of Jesus as the fulfiller of prophecy. But the Athenians had no regard for the Jewish Scriptures. Paul, seeking to build a bridge to reach them, cited sources with which they were familiar, extracting truths common to all. In so doing, he was in no way placing pagan Greek writings on a par with Scripture, but he understood that general revelation led fallen people, who bear the image of God, to draw certain conclusions that reflect God's truth. So he approached his listeners with statements regarding the nature of God and His providence in history, and he acknowledged that even their own writers understood these fundamental ideas. From that point he led them to the special revelation of Jesus, Who is the apex of human history and the One to whom humankind is ultimately accountable.

This reality is why the missionary must resist the temptation to enter another culture with his ready-made "Romans Road" method of evangelism, refusing to consider the religious mindset of the people. Yes, the gospel is the power of God to salvation, but getting through the cultural door so that the gospel may be comprehended requires careful consideration of that people's religious history.

LINGUISTIC DISCERNMENT

When God confused the languages at Babel, He did a good job! Yet, in spite of incredible linguistic diversity, He has graciously made it possible for people to transmit His written revelation into virtually any language on earth. Biblical contextualization must carefully analyze the proper use of language in order to avoid miscommunicating God's message to people in various cultural settings.

To illustrate the challenge of linguistic hurdles, one may consider the question of what to call God in certain cultures. Americans are accustomed to using the word "God" (upper or lower case "g") generically in reference to a variety of deities. It rarely enters the American mind that finding a word for God could be complicated for believers in other cultures. In Hindu or Buddhist cultures, for example, the concept of the God of the Bible is virtually unknown to the majority. Myriads of deities in various forms fall far short and often amount to little more than glorified human beings. With what title shall the missionary refer to the Biblical God?

A variety of approaches have been taken to engage this challenge. Some have been content to use a word already in use which most closely approximates the idea of the true God. While this may seem inadequate, we must remember that the New Testament writers also used preexisting terminology to refer to God. Words like “theos” and “logos” were not created by the Biblical writers, but they used these words currently in use and clarified them to express the nature of the one and only true God.

Another example may be found in the Japanese word for “sin.” The English word “sin” is generic enough to cover a broad spectrum of wrongs, but an exact equivalent cannot be found in Japanese. The word often used for sin actually refers to the committing of a crime, something which most Japanese people will deny having done. In this case, Biblical contextualization means employing a number of words, phrases, or ideas which help the Japanese individual understand the all-encompassing meaning of sin as expressed in passages such as Romans 3:23 and 1 John 1:8.

So whether it is the name of God, the nature of sin, or some other concept, Biblical contextualization seeks to understand how such an idea is perceived in a given culture and how it may be aptly defined and illustrated.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

I was in Atlanta a few years ago participating in a roundtable discussion among missions professors of various colleges. The subject of contextualization consumed a good deal of one morning’s discussion. After a lengthy time of interaction, someone said, “If you can come up with a better word than contextualization, I will gladly use it.” The fact that some have abused its application does not mean that another word must be substituted. It would only be a matter of time before that term was also assigned a new connotation. Contextualization is a Biblical concept. The missionary’s task is to use it Scripturally, employing guidelines such as those presented here, so that the gospel may be heard, understood, and embraced by people of every tribe, tongue, kindred, and nation.

Dr. Mark Lounsborough

Associate Pastor at [Community Baptist Church, Ankeny, IA](#) | lounsboroughm@faith.edu | [Other Articles](#)

Mark Lounsborough (D.Min., Faith Baptist Theological Seminary) was the chair of the World Missions Department at Faith Baptist Bible College until 2024 after 16 years of service. Mark has degrees from Faith Baptist Bible College, Faith Baptist Theological Seminary, and Northwest Baptist Seminary. Prior to joining the Faith faculty in 2008, Mark and his wife, Becki (also a Faith alum) served for 19 years as missionaries in Brazil with Baptist Mid-Missions. The Lounsboroughs are active members of Community Baptist Church in Ankeny where Mark now serves as an associate pastor.