

Measuring Contextualization in Church and Missions

Mission leadership should not take for granted that their church planting efforts are indeed the local expression of faith, but rather submit it to evaluation and scrutiny in light of the following indicators for measuring contextualization.

by Douglas Hayward

One of the beautiful features of the old three-self formula was its simplicity. Because missionaries could count the number of pastors, evangelists and church leaders who were operating under their own support systems, governing their own churches and proclaiming the Gospel to their own people, it was so very easy to measure whether you had accomplished your three-fold objectives. Unfortunately the old three-self formula did not really measure indigeneity, it only measured independence. Every trait of the three-self formula could be fully operational, but the church might, nevertheless, still be a foreign organization with an alien message.

As dissatisfaction with the three-self formula grew, missiologists began to cast about for a new term to capture the dynamic of what transpires when the Gospel enters into a culture and is embraced by a people group. Among the most popular contenders in this new search has been those who uphold the concept of "contextualization".

It first appeared in mission literature in the early 1970s, and in the more than two decades since, mission evangelicals have adapted, defined and defended its proper use. While all of this discussion has been most helpful we still need to ask, how can we tell when we have a contextualized message and a contextualized church?

In response to this need for some measurable guidelines by which to determine whether contextualization is taking place in a given culture or people group, I propose various characteristics that ought to be evident in and integral to the process of making the Gospel at home in a given cultural con-

text. I would propose that church planters, mission executives and frontier missionaries carefully examine their ministries for evidence of developments within each of these factors and that they evaluate their strategies accordingly.

Local Vernacular

To be truly at home in a culture, the people must be able to hear the Word of God, as well as expositions on it, and descriptions of appropriate responses to it, in their own language in which they feel the most comfortable. As such, Bible translation and preaching in the local language are foundational for contextualization to take place. For those societies that are highly literate, the production of Christian literature by national believers will become still one more marker that the Gospel has become an integral part of a culture.

A legitimate question to ask in this respect is does the whole Bible, both Old Testament and New Testament have to be translated in order to have a contextualized church? The answer is: It is possible to have a contextualized church which only has in its possession a translation of the New Testament, but such a church will be vulnerable to an overemphasis on New Testament themes without the basis and perspective that comes from God's earlier revelation as found in the Old Testament.

My own experience and that of other missionaries who have worked in cultures where the New Testament was translated first and was then followed up with a translation of the Old Testament has been that if contextualization was already at work in the culture, the addition of the Old Testament further

deepened and matured the contextualization process that was already underway. However, it has also been the experience, that if contextualization has been thwarted by an overly controlling mission agency or church body seeking to establish a Westernized church, that the introduction of the Old Testament has resulted in break-away churches patterned after Old Testament models by believers in search of their own form of contextualization.

Expression of Faith

Someone has declared that the most segregated place in America is the Sunday morning worship service. It might be equally true to declare that the most ethnocentric practice in the world has been the forced replication of Western church services. Western worship patterns, translations of Western hymns and monologic preaching are the standard fare in churches all around the globe. A contextualized Gospel on the other hand requires that worship be performed in a manner that truly excites and elicits adoration, praise, submission and obedience to Almighty God. Contextualized worship, therefore, may have to move outside the confines of a church building, spend more time in singing and dancing than in preaching, incorporate new liturgies or rituals that speak to the needs of a people that evoke prayer times and confessionals and would speak to the deepest needs of the human spirit.

Worship Patterns

How then, does one go about measuring contextualized worship patterns? By noting, among other things, the music

of a believing community. Is it only the music of other cultures and peoples, translated into the local language, or is it music whose words have been written by national believers, sung to the accompaniment of indigenous instruments and in the ethnomusicological style of the culture. Furthermore, is it still being written, reflecting the dynamic faith of the current generation of believers. Interestingly enough, our own Western music tradition reveals that virtually every revival and awakening in the West has resulted in a burst of new hymns and praise songs that express the spiritual renewal of God's people.

Other worship practices that we need to evaluate and compare in respect to local practices versus Western practices are the use of dance and rhythm, the making of vows, the giving of gifts and offerings, the timing and content of worship events, and the focus of worship which ought to reflect a people's perception of God and the manner in which they can most meaningfully apprehend Him. In this respect I am reminded that a dominant theme for worship in the North African Church of the early Church Fathers was obedience and submission, whereas in some areas in Asia I sense a worship theme centering upon reconciliation and restoration in keeping with the shame nature of their cultures. I am also reminded that in Native American cultures purity and personal communion are central focuses in traditional worship patterns that Native American Christians would do well to recognize and practice.

Theological Reflection

Systematic theology as we know it in the Western world has emerged as a response to the philosophical, intellectual and religious challenges of the Mediterranean world. Our theology has become distinctly propositional and apologetic in addressing the challenges to biblical teaching arising from this cul-

tural context. As a consequence of this focus, there is little contemporary reflection in Western theology on ancestor veneration, dialogic teaching, the principles of ying and yang, the biblical practice of divination, the testing of oracles, and a host of other issues that arise in believing communities in the non-Western world.

The development of local theologies, therefore, without necessarily abandoning the achievements of Western theology, must address new themes, new concerns and incorporate new discussions pertinent to their new cultural environments. These new developments must of necessity address such issues as God among the local gods and spirits, the meaning of salvation vis a vis the promise of competing faiths—which offer freedom, release and power; the nature of the believers' behavior and practices as they live Godly lives in their particular cultural settings, i.e. bride wealth, dowry, polygamy, communal houses, disparity in wealth, etc. There must also be lengthy and profound discussions on theological terminology in the languages of their respective cultures as words are molded and brought into the service of describing the transcultural nature of God and His revelation.

Local Metaphors

One of the interesting assignments that I give to students in my classrooms is that of asking them to read 50 of the Psalms and to record all of the images of God that they can find. This typically includes terms such as "my high tower, my shield and my sword, a rock and a high place" along with a host of others all indicating mental and cultural images that were important to a pastoral culture and an emerging nation-state. Then I ask them to record all the images of God in the Gospel of John. They discover there that God is spoken of as: the Word, the Way, the Truth and the Life, the Door, a Vine

and its branches, as well as other images that reflect a mercantile culture, an educated elite and questions of philosophical importance. I then ask them to list the images of God that are important to our culture.

This last question indicates whether contextualization at the conceptual level is taking place in a culture. It takes place when people can perceive God in images that are a part of their lives. For some this will be to image God as being like a great Banyan tree, or the Gospel as a bamboo shoot thrusting out of the soil, or the comforting work of the Holy Spirit as being likened to a pole supporting a sagging stock of ripening bananas. It happens when people can praise God for His long arm of salvation that reached out to them, a people farthest from God, or when they compare the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit to the paltry power of man. These new and powerful images of God and His purposes, are constantly being reinforced by a people's daily contact with the ubiquitous presence of these images and their faith is reinforced in the mundane surroundings of their lives.

Symbols and Images

One of the chief characteristics of what it is that makes humanity different from the animal kingdom is our ability to create and communicate through symbols. Mankind is an inveterate symbol maker. Symbols express ideas, focus motions, encapsulate complex concepts and inspire devotion. Symbolic representations are a part of every culture's religious behavior and when contextualization takes place appropriate cultural symbols and artistic representations are bound to emerge.

The nature of these representations will vary from culture to culture. It may be an actual art form that utilizes a cultural art style to portray biblical materials. As such the image of the Madonna and Child emerged out of

Egypt as a Christian adaptation of the ancient imagery of Isis. In China there are artistic representations of the life of Jesus in which Chinese scholars are portrayed as worshipping wise men or inquiring scribes. On the other hand, many African church men have created elaborate symbols to be placed on holy vestments and worn on their bodies, while in Bali and New Guinea believers have adapted the architectural styles of their culture to create new places of worship that symbolically prepare people for worship and point toward the God of the Scriptures who is the object of their worship. Whether it be an elaborate Celtic cross, or the simple sign of the fish, believers need a visual focus for their faith. One that speaks to their hearts and can become uniquely their own.

Normative Communication Channels

As any class in communication theory will declare there are a variety of ways to communicate information, ideas, feelings or needs to someone else. Our concern here is with the task of communicating spiritual truth which is often hedged about with cultural restrictions. At least one missionary I know almost lost his life for starting to tell a Bible story to uninitiated young people who their elders did not believe were ready to hear the "spiritual secrets" of mature adults.

While our culture tends to rely on teaching and preaching (expository preaching at that) as the chief form of conveying religious truth, this is not acceptable in all cultures. One of the boldest examples of contextualization in communicating the Gospel is that of the Heliand, in which the Gospel was re-written as a ballad and was sung in the mead halls of Saxon Germany in the

9th Century. In other cultures preaching may indeed be appropriate but more in the style of a harangue, and in some instances would be carried on more as an interactive dialogue of questions and answers. Narration and story telling, dance and drama are yet other variations which are being used by believers in

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Indonesia, Asia and Africa. It is these culturally appropriate communication styles that need to be explored, encouraged and developed in order to facilitate the transmission of God's truth in a manner suited to its hearers in their cultural setting.

Ethics and Values

Every culture has its own concepts of right and wrong and sometimes these have to be altered and brought into conformity with biblical standards. In other instances specific behaviors and values must emerge from biblical principles that have been carefully thought through and applied to the culture. In such instances the question emerges, what does a godly believer do in this culture to facilitate being "in the world," but not enslaved by it or contaminated by it?

In answer to such a question believers have to ask themselves what constitutes modest dress even if men

in the culture only wear a gourd and the women a grass skirt. Does incest and marriage regulations have to follow a standard society system that places half of the women of the tribe into the category of being classified your sister? Do incest and marriage regulations apply to New Testament believers? Can

Christian young people choose their own marriage partners, and is burial of the deceased more pleasing to God than cremation?

These and a host of other cultural practices, confront every believing community and the extent to which they are able to look at Scriptures, wrestle with the solutions, make their own choices and feel relatively justified in their choices that is the measure of their having contextualized godly living into their culture. All too often biblical standards with Western overtones have been imposed on

new believers in non-Western cultures, who have often accepted such harsh realities, and have sought to live by them, only to discover that they were being culturally alienated and the Gospel was being clothed (sometime almost literally) in foreign (unacceptable) garb.

Assembly, Leadership and Politics

The Church is a unique institution, the likes of which exists no where else in the history of human social organization. It has a distinctive membership, with shared goals and a unifying corpus of beliefs that bring direction and commonality to their activities, and yet it has taken on a myriad of structural forms that has allowed it to take root in virtually every possible cultural setting or historical period.

Believers have come together in homes, monasteries, wandering bands, funeral societies, religious orders,

churches and para-church societies. Leadership in these structures has ranged from little or none, to eldership, to authoritarian. Whatever it may be, what is important to our discussion is the manner in which believers organize themselves and establish appropriate leadership in order to facilitate their desire to function as a fellowship of believers.

From the perspective of wanting to measure the extent to which contextualization has taken place in respect to leadership we must evaluate what qualities are required for other leadership roles in the community and then compare these to leadership roles in the church. If there are radical differences, such as requiring a diploma from a recognized Christian (Western) institution, approval by a foreign/outside agency, or other denominational requirements, then, church leadership probably can not be considered to be contextualized. Furthermore, if church leaders have been vested with authority far in excess of traditional or non-church leaders then again we probably do not have a contextualized church.

Church leaders, in a contextualized church will be at home in the culture, will operate in accordance with leadership standards in the culture, and will find affirmation for their leadership from the members of the society they serve. Their churches or congregations will also be organized in such a way that members of the society will feel comfortable in supporting the church and of identifying with it. (An exception can be made, of course, for believers in cultures hostile to Christianity and the Church.) Given these broad parameters, then, suffice it to say that a contextualized church will look more like the host culture than a foreign culture and any deviation from the cultural norms of the society must be suspect other than for those practices that are unique to the work of the church, especially those associated with baptism, communion, and anointing.

Members of Society

Christianity has often been viewed as an enemy of the state, a destroyer of the culture, or at the very least a marginal contributor to the life of the people and their culture. Being insignificant in the total life of the culture does not mean that the church or the believing community is not contextualized. Nor does being persecuted by the state or members of the surrounding community mean that contextualization has not taken place. When these conditions exist, though, it does complicate the process for contextualization. Such activities reject and isolate believers so that no matter how adaptable they become they are never accepted as a part of the culture. Their only recourse is to seek to satisfy their own need for cultural compatibilities within bounds of the oppressive situation.

In less extreme situations, and in particular where the church has already taken root and is attracting a body of believers, it will become natural for the church and its members to gain in respectability, power and influence. It is at this stage that contextualization must be considered again. Does the church demonstrate a capacity to serve as a responsible institution in meeting the needs of the well-being of the society. Does it function as salt, light, oil, or in other ministrations that bind up the wounds or meet the needs for community harmony and development? Can it serve the spiritual well-being of the believing community while at the same time serving the well-being of societal structures? With all due respect to the prophetic nature of the Gospel message, if the church never moves beyond that of calling for revolution it can hardly be considered to be a contextualized church.

Discipleship

In this regard, if Christianity has been

embraced by a body of believers, if it is meeting their deepest spiritual needs and if they are comfortable with the manner in which it is a part of their lives, then an emotional bonding will arise commanding a sense of loyalty and a long standing commitment to both their church and the Lord Jesus Christ. Under such circumstances believers will find it difficult to even imagine life without their church and their faith. It will have become part of the very fabric of their lives.

Under such circumstances it is all too easy for complacency, sin, and backsliding to take place so that watchfulness must be maintained. Under such conditions what is called for is a revival of that which a people believe belongs in their culture—a vital living faith.

Conclusion:

Have we done the job that we have set out and have been given to do? That of:

1. Proclaiming the Gospel to every tribe and culture.
2. Planting the church where ever there are communities of believers.
3. Making the Gospel at home in all cultures.

Measuring our progress has never been easy, but as we look at each of these indices or indicators we get some idea of what we should be looking for and where we should target our efforts and our strategies to accomplish our task. After all, it is God's Church, the Body of Christ that we are commanded to serve and to plant among all the peoples of the earth.

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