

Great Commission Contextualization

Contextualization must be done in light of the overall purposes of God and His redemptive plan for the world. Failure to contextualize without the “big picture” fragments the understanding of Scripture and significantly hinders the Church from fulfilling its mission.

by David J. Hesselgrave

The “rule-makers” say that one should never begin an address... or a letter with an apology. However, I have not heard of a rule that dictates that one should not begin with a confession. To the contrary, an old adage has it that confession is good for the soul and it says nothing about whether one begins or ends with it. So at the very outset, I confess that for all my missiological life and most of my missiological tenure I erred rather grievously. My sin was more one of omission than commission but nevertheless it was a costly mistake.

I was nurtured and subsequently ministered on a “simple gospel” basis: the idea that we are to encapsulate the Gospel into two or three (or four or six things) that “God wants people to know,” and that if a person assents to those and accepts Christ, subsequently he/she will be saved; and that leaders are free to nurture converts in any way that suits personal preferences and preunderstandings.

Now I still believe that there is something to be said for that approach. In one sense the Gospel is “simple.” Aided by the Spirit of God, anyone can understand it. One need not be a theological expert in order to be truly saved. But the larger truth is that the Gospel is inclusive of the whole of biblical revelation from Genesis to Revelation. Even the bad news is part of it in the sense that the Good News is hardly recognizable as good apart from it. Moreover, we are called upon to disciple the nations by teaching them to observe all that Christ has commanded. There is an inclusivity—a wholeness—in the Great Commission whether one interprets the object of “teach” to be “observing/obeying” or “all things Christ commanded.” If we take our Lord seriously our task is indeed

an encompassing and exacting one—much more than many of us have thought it to be. At various times both missionaries and national leaders employed a variety of “discipling approaches” but few seemed satisfied with any of them. One approach after another was discarded until most fell into some more or less comfortable pattern and settled for that.

Over the years I have come to believe that an omniscient God has already provided the key to both world evangelization and effective contextualization. In effect, and with your indulgence, I therefore propose to outline the progress of my thinking over a generation and illustrate the contextualization process as I now understand it

Definitions and Preunderstandings

It will not be necessary for me to elaborate my commitment to propositions having to do with the verbal plenary inspiration and the perspicuity of Holy Scripture, the necessity of Gospel proclamation, the convicting and illuminating ministries of the Holy Spirit and the priesthood of all believers. However, there are certain terms and assumptions that require special attention.

First, I use “biblical theology” in the more technical sense to refer, not just to theology that is biblical, but to theology that is the “...confessional recital of the acts of God in history; together with what must be inferred from those acts” (Wright 1991:101). Both the biblical record of those acts and, therefore, biblical theology are characterized by unity of plan and purpose, chronological development, a largely, but not exclusively narrative form, objectiv-

ity, and normativity. With B. B. Warfield, I believe biblical theology to be basic to the entire range of theologizing as classically conceived, whether exegetical, expositional, systematic or practical (Davis 1978:144-45).

Second, as intimated above, many and often elaborate definitions have been conferred on the neologism “contextualization.” I define it here in terms of “cultural meaningfulness.” Since my interest is in contextualization with a view to fulfilling the Great Commission, I will use the term to refer to the process of communicating the biblical Gospel in such a way as to make it meaningful to the people of any given cultural context. This stipulated definition is simple but important. Contextualization has been defined so as to include socio-political involvement, incarnational lifestyle, application as over against exposition of the biblical text, and so on.

Third, Scripture itself as the Word of God written constitutes the most authentic and effective instrument of contextualization. This is so because its divine Author has so ordered history and so inspired certain human authors that the cultural settings, languages, literary genres, events and actors of the Bible—as well as the meaning of the text itself—bear the stamp of what I will call “transculturality.”

Contributors: “Way-Show-ers”

From my earliest days at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, I enjoyed the good company of the Old Testament scholar, Walter C. Kaiser. Only later on did I begin to understand the relationship that existed between approach to biblical theology and his mis-

sionary spirit. You will understand something of this by ruminating on the following quotation from his *Toward an Old Testament Theology*:

Our proposal is to distinguish sharply biblical theology's method from that of systematics or the history of religion. There is an inner center or plan to which each [Bible] writer consciously contributed. A principle of selectivity is already evident and divinely determined by the rudimentary disclosure of the divine blessing-promise theme to all men everywhere as the canon opens in Genesis 1-11 and continues in Genesis 12-50. Rather than selecting that theological data which strikes our fancy or meets some current need, the text will already have set up priorities and preferences of its own. These nodal points can be identified, not on the basis of ecclesiastical or theological camps, but by such criteria as: (1) the critical placement of interpretive statements in the textual sequence; (2) the frequency of the repetition of ideas; (3) the recurrence of phrases or terms that begin to take on a technical status; (4) the resumption of themes where a fore-runner had stopped often with a more extensive area of reference, (5) the use of categories of assertions previously used that easily lend themselves to a description of a new stage in the program of history; and (6) the organizing standard by which people, places, and ideas were marked for approval, contrast, inclusion, and future and present significance (Kaiser 1978: 11-12).

In effect, Kaiser is saying that certain basic hermeneutical principles are implicit in the biblical text itself if we pay attention to them. This becomes tremendously important in circumstances where (1) sound principles of biblical interpretation are widely disregarded in sending churches; and, (2) such principles, when introduced to members of the receiving churches, seem to be imposed upon the text by foreign "experts" rather than growing out of Scripture itself.

Timothy M. Warner first crossed my pathway when some years ago I became exercised over the direction that so much of Christian counseling was taking, following as it was upon the heels of humanistic psychology. One of

my colleagues at TEDS, Warner became more and more involved in spiritual warfare and a deliverance ministry. It is a long story, but I will just say that one day before his departure for another ministry I went to his office. During the ensuing discussion Warner made a statement that was to be confirmation of the direction my own thinking and writing was taking at the time. He said, "Dave, I have become convinced that truth encounter must precede power encounter." He went on to explain that a great number of Christian people themselves—many of them already in Christian service (!)—have not really grasped a biblical worldview and as a consequence live frustrated, defeated lives. He was in process, therefore, of building his counseling ministry upon the foundation of a reexamination of the relationship between the Triune God, men and women, the spirit world, and the self as it unfolds in Scripture beginning with Genesis and working straight through the Old and New Testaments.

Very late in my teaching ministry at TEDS, the Lord brought the anthropologist Paul Hiebert to be a faculty colleague. His arrival occasioned a re-study of his "critical contextualization" writings and that has provided what may prove to be one of the final pieces in completing the contextualization puzzle. Hiebert takes a very common sense view of the nature of language—the view of "critical realism" (Hiebert 1989). That is, meaning is to be found in the correspondence between the mental image of the word-user and the outer reality to which the word refers. "Critical realism" avoids two extreme—it opposes the view that says that meaning is to be found only in persons and that one must somehow get "into the head" of the message source in order to discover his/her meaning. It also opposes the opposite view—namely, that meaning is inherent in the signs and forms themselves. The former view leads to over-contextualization by making even the signs and forms of the Gospel,

such as doctrinal formulae and water baptism, almost totally subjective and cultural. The latter view leads to under-contextualization by making certain forms of the receiving culture inherently evil and by insisting on certain (Christian) linguistic and behavioral forms without bothering to inquire into the meanings assigned to them in the receiving culture.

"Critical realism" insists that meaning is to be found in the relationship between signs/forms and reality; that it is discoverable by a careful examination of context; and that, insofar as possible, the people of the receiving culture context must contribute to that process.

Process Principles

Perhaps we are now prepared to begin to put the pieces together in such a way as to view the larger dimensions of contextualization as herein conceived. Three principles apply throughout that process.

First, Great Commission contextualization strategy begins with a practical application of Scripture as seen through the lens of biblical theology. Scripture must become not only the substance but also the strategy—not only the message, but also the method—of authentic and effective Gospel contextualization. If God has revealed His will and plan, then almost by definition the strategy He employed in doing so takes priority over human strategies. If God has chosen certain methods of communication in Scripture, then insofar as those methods are reproducible, they take precedence over our own methods.

For example, one of the most effective means of communication is story-telling. It may then be advantageous for me to begin my Christian witness by telling the story of how God has dealt with me personally—with how he has changed my life and given me hope for

the future. But Great Commission contextualization as proposed here requires me to move early on to the story of God's dealings with mankind, not just to inferences gleaned from that story. This may well be part of the "all things that I have commanded" of the Great Commission!

Second, if God's revelation to mankind is to become meaningful—really "meaning-full"—to the people of any given culture, those who introduce it and those who carry it forward (the "planters" and the "waterers") must allow the Gospel message as unfolded in Scripture to inform every aspect of the discipling ministry. Missionizing, evangelizing, catechizing, counseling, preaching, worshiping—these and other discipling-related activities are not to be separate and unrelated ministries developed by the "experts" in each of these ministries. All must work in line with one divine "blueprint" and complement each other.

Thirdly, if the Gospel is to be understood by people of various languages and cultural contexts, the divine Word must, of course, be transmitted in the thought forms and symbol systems of those peoples. The Old and New Testaments do not constitute a replica of some heavenly document. Unlike the Koran, the Bible is translatable. Moreover, the Bible writers were inspired by the Holy Spirit to write their respective portions of the one story in ways that were meaningful to their particular audiences and at a critical juncture when it was imperative that people representing a variety of languages and cultures simultaneously hear and understand the Gospel on that first Pentecost. It is that same Holy Spirit who gave the "gift of tongues" enabling Parthians, Medes, Elamites and others to do just that (Acts 2:10).

In our own case, however, the situation is quite different. We must labor

diligently to understand both the original language/culture of the Bible writers and the language/culture of contemporary respondents with a view to proper translation and interpretation. When we do that we soon discover that there is no one-to-one correlation between the linguistic and non-linguistic forms of Scripture, our own culture, and respondent cultures. For example, *hamartia* in the New Testament may translate as "sin" in the United States and *tsumi* in

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Japan, but not only are the word symbols different, their meanings are quite different as well. Again the ritual of bowing in the Old Testament, bowing to an audience in America and bowing before the portrait of the deceased at a Japanese funeral, while appearing to be the same act, nevertheless have radically different meanings.

These examples are simply indicative of the fact that at the earliest stage of missionizing in Japan, qualified informants were greatly needed. At later stages the Japanese church as a priesthood of believers became (or should have become) a "hermeneutical community" deciding how the Scripture is best understood and applied in the Japanese cultural context. While often overlooked, this is what is involved in the discipling of the *panta ta ethne* of the Great Commission.

The Process Analyzed

Now perhaps, we are somewhat better prepared to analyze some specific proposals that will serve us when evalu-

ating, comparing and contrasting what I have called "Great Commission Contextualization" with two other approaches—one quite traditional and the other very contemporary. The setting is a village in the Central African Republic. (For most of us that will assure enough cultural distance to make more objective analysis possible.) The particular issue involved is that age-old problem of polygamy and the contextualization focus will be upon one of

the qualifications for local church *episcopoi* (overseers) as we have it in Paul's first letter to Timothy, Chapter 3 verse 2: "the husband of one wife."

First, consider the "under-contextualization" approach of C. Caverno and some missionaries to Africa. The attitude and action of many missionaries and

not a few of their national counterparts vis-a-vis polygamy and I Timothy 3:2 has been informed by people like C. Caverno who have analyzed the practice of polygamy in one dimension only—the moral dimension. In an article that appears in the 1939 edition of *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* he wrote:

Polygamy has been and is the open blazon by the human race of sex vice. . . There is hypocrisy beneath the word polygamy. It is an attempt to cover up by the term "plural marriage" what is not marriage and cannot be marriage. There is no particular need of defining what the condition is, so long as we can look upon it as a violation and negation of the marriage relation. The very use of the term from any language covering a like condition is an attempt—"to steal the livery of the court of heaven to serve the devil in" (Caverno 1939: 2416).

Caverno goes on to explain that polygamy is primarily the outcome of tribal wars when victors took women captive as concubines and slaves. In polygamy, he says, "Woman is reduced to

the position of ministrant to man's unmodified sensuality" (Ibid.).

Please pay special attention to the phrase "in any language;" to his explanation of polygamy in terms of tribal wars; and to his insistence that unbridled sensuality is the root cause of polygamy. That he could easily be challenged on all three counts does not seem to occur to him. His judgment is strictly moral and, to a lesser extent, theological.

It is important to understand that a previous generation of missionaries largely would have concurred. I remember discussing the subject of polygamy in tribal Africa with the late Walter Trobisch, author of the best selling books *I Loved a Girl* and *I Loved a Boy*. He spoke of the growing desperation he experienced when his Africa mission colleagues almost unilaterally decided to refuse communion to polygamists until such time as they had divested themselves of all but one wife. Those missionaries were not without compassion. However, given their understanding of the biblical text, the roots or "polygamy," and the immoral nature of the practice as described by such scholars as Caverno, they felt that they had no choice. To accept polygamists as members of the congregations in good standing would be to compromise Christian truth. To refuse to accept them helped to assure missionaries that church leadership would not fall into unworthy hands. Polygamy had to be rejected out of hand.

Nevertheless, as Trobisch himself probed the issue from an African perspective, he concluded that iconoclastic denunciation of polygamy in this fashion was tantamount to exorcising the house only to let more devils in. The natives did indeed have some most bizarre notions regarding sex and marriage, but Trobisch found that those notions functioned quite well as practical safeguards against physical and social dangers. Though polygamy did indeed

entail some negative consequences, in the African context the moral code did not militate against it; it protected wives from serial pregnancies; it made provision for women who might otherwise be left helpless; it provided the husband with ready and willing labor for his gardens; and it enhanced the husband's prestige and status in the village. To force the polygamist to divest himself of all but one wife, on the other hand, had cruel consequences for those wives who suddenly found themselves without solace or support.

Little Improvement

Now we might be tempted to think that this is a scenario of the past when missionaries were not anthropologically informed and were less sensitive to cultural concerns, and when national leaders were more willing to conform to foreign domination. Not entirely so, as time has passed, the problem of polygamy is not as great as it once was due to a variety of factors. But it is still there. Perhaps more importantly, our approach to a variety of issues in church and mission shows little or no improvement whatsoever. As often as not we fail to study the text carefully we oversimplify the nature of language and culture; we do not consider the difference between form and function; and (perhaps most importantly) we do not take time to explore emic (insider perspective) understandings and interpretations. Under-contextualization is very much with us today.

Far removed from the approach informed by the likes of scholars such as Caverno is the approach informed by scholars such as Charles Kraft. Kraft believes that meaning is to be found in persons, not in words or rituals themselves. In his understanding, the Bible is a cultural sea with supracultural truths floating around on it. The Bible is not revelation as such, but nevertheless all of it is potentially revelatory. As for cultures, they are divinely ordained and give

evidence of their divine origin in the ways that they order life and values and allow societies to maintain themselves (C. Kraft 1978).

Given these assumptions, one approaches the list of qualifications for church leadership in I Timothy 3:3-9 very differently (Kraft 1978). The qualifications were not normative and meant not to be applied "as is" to every cultural situation. Rather, they mirrored the expectations and values of Ephesus and the larger Greco-Roman world in which Paul and his colleagues labored. In that cultural context, adherence to the list of qualifications as they appear in Paul's letter resulted in the kind of church leadership that merited the respect and admiration of the community. *In the eyes of the public of that time and place* adherence resulted in church leadership that was, in Paul's words, "above reproach" (I Tim. 3:2).

By way of contrast, the current North American context is very different. Our culture acknowledges such things as the equality of women, the capability of young people, the legitimacy of divorce in many situations, and so on. According to Kraft, this should result in a culturally-nuanced interpretation and application of the biblical text. To begin with, insofar as order reflects priorities, the order of leadership qualifications might be changed so as to reflect, for example, the value that we in North America place upon youthful vigor as over against senior status and maturity.

Secondly certain items should be changed somewhat: as concerns marital status, it seems that in the first century Greco-Roman context irreproachability ("without reproach") demanded that a man not take a second wife after the death or divorce of his first wife. American congregations experience no problem at all with remarriage after the death of a spouse. Most (but not all) would have a problem with the remarriage of a pastor (at least) after divorce,

not so much with lay remarriage, and more and more churches are putting women in top leadership roles in accord with societal changes. “The husband of one wife,” therefore, contextualizes into “faithful to one spouse (at a time).” Thirdly, we may choose to add such things as administrative ability and personableness to the list. Kraft calls this “dynamic-equivalent transculturation.”

Returning to our African village mission/church scenario, the specific problem is polygamy and the focus is on I Timothy 3:1-9, especially verse 2. Since Kraft’s missionary experience was among the Higi of Nigeria, those who would employ his approach in our village situation would have no difficulty knowing how to proceed. In the beginning, they would translate (not just interpret) the passage differently. First, the village culture valuing membership in the “royal class,” maturity, and hospitality very highly, these would be placed at the top of the list of leadership qualifications.

Second, “the husband of one wife” qualification would be omitted and “one who manages his own household well” would be modified. As we have seen in the African context, plural wives often elevate a man’s social status and prestige. Moreover, “managing a household well” is deemed to be demonstrated best in a polygamous household for any man should be able to manage a household with only one wife in it! (The Kru of Liberia have a saying, “You cannot trust a man with only one wife.”) So the solution would be to delete “the husband of one wife” and change “one who manages his own household well” (verse 4) to “one who manages his own (polygamous) household well.”

Dynamic-equivalent transculturation in our Central African Republic will involve a process. Those who pioneer the work will need to be armed with an understanding (misunderstanding?) of language and biblical revelation that allows for this kind of (over?) contextualization. They will then be free to translate I Timothy 3:1-9 (and the rest of Scripture) in the manner indicated, and they will teach the Scripture accordingly. Polygamy, therefore, will present no

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real problem initially. At the same time they will be aware of the fact that monogamy is both the ideal of Scripture and the direction in which world cultures are moving. Polygamy should be, and will be, replaced by monogamy. That being the case, over time and as national leadership emerges and is trained, both the original translation and attendant interpretation and instruction will be modified to reflect the biblical ideal and macro-cultural realities.

It goes without saying that this approach entails significant difficulties for those who would employ it, even though polygamy itself may not appear as an immediate problem. Not only will the emerging church have to cope with problems that accrue to social change, but eventually the contextualizers will be forced to explain how it is that the Bible could seemingly say one thing at one time and something else at another time. But, of course, the explanation for that state of affairs reveals why, for the conservative contextualizer, Kraft’s approach entails not only significant difficulties, but insuperable ones

The Biblical Narrative

Third, we will turn to a “Great Commission contextualization” scenario as advocated here. It begins with quite different understandings and assumptions of the nature of symbols and rituals, revelation and contextualization, and the Great Commission and world evangelization as such.

Whether our Central African Republic village represents virgin territory or has already had a Church

planted for a generation or more, the contextualization approach advocated here will likely be much the same. However *church planters* may make their initial contacts, identify with the people and gain

a hearing, they will quickly introduce the Bible narrative—first communicating chronologically the great events and themes and then over time filling in the gaps. In whatever state “*church waters*” may find an existing church, very possibly they will find it necessary to begin at the beginning and proceed in much the same fashion.

As indicated above, the Great Commission contextualization process will then be carried forward by learning the significance of local culture language and customs from the villagers; by rehearsing and applying lessons learned from the events and themes of biblical revelation; and by employing and reinforcing the methods of biblical theology in all ministries of the mission and church. In this way, whether in evangelism, catechizing, counseling or preparing leadership, Christian believers will become well informed on such matters as Adam and Eve’s relationship to God and each other; the marriages of Abraham, Jacob, David and Solomon; the selection of O.T. judges, kings and prophets as well as New Testament apostles, elders and deacons;

the Church, and so on.

Insofar as polygamy is not a moral issue in the village, it may not emerge as a significant problem early on. However, it is obvious that at some juncture it will surface as a primary concern. When it does, Great Commission contextualization will build upon the foundation already laid and exhibit four critical characteristics. First, the matter will be considered in the church—the “body of Christ,” the “company of the committed,” the “hermeneutical community.” Second, those who lead this process will be prepared to encourage open discussion concerning local understandings related to polygamous marriages. Third, leaders will both teach and model basic principles of Bible interpretation.

Fourth, the problem will be discussed in relation to the various contexts of Scripture: monogamy and polygamy in the Old Testament; the teachings of Jesus including his teaching on divorce; the New Testament epistles with special attention to the Pastoral Epistles; the context of First Timothy including the doctrinal section immediately preceding the list of qualifications in chapter 3; and, finally, the events and imagery of the Book of Revelation. Bathed in prayer and concern for God’s greater glory, this kind of discussion can be expected to lead to mutually acceptable decisions.

Our immediate reaction may be that this seems like an extremely arid and laborious task. But, if it seems so, I suggest that you recall the multiplied hours you have likely spent in Bible studies that were little more than a recital of proof texts and personal opinions. I suggest that you also remember the seemingly endless hours spent on questions of far less importance in church business meetings. Also I ask that you consider how many church divisions and world compromises might have been avoided if local congregations would have met in prayer and around the Word of God in this fashion.

The Prognosis

Perhaps all of this is another case of “old men dreaming dreams.” The very idea of any large grouping of missionaries, evangelists, counselors, and pastor/teachers subordinating their carefully studied—or at least, habitual—approaches to the framework of biblical theology seems idealistic in the extreme. The notion that it would make any significant difference if they did may seem to be hopeful but quite impractical. Not so! After going through “Walk Through the Bible,” “Divine Drama,” “Bible Panorama” and similar studies, even Christians who have been in the church for many years often exclaim, “I’ve never seen it this way before.”

In my estimation, Great Commission contextualization is our most hopeful strategy if we are serious about world evangelization. Not only does it best meet the requirements of Scripture itself, it also qualifies on the basis of sound principles of communication, anthropology, psychology and other social science disciplines.

To be sure habits are not easily changed. Though storytelling is one of the earliest and most important arts known to man, telling and retelling redemptive history and prophecy does not seem sophisticated enough for moderns and post-moderns who are beholden to human sciences. We have become so addicted to the idea that some strategy of man’s devising (once baptized with the holy water of Bible proof texting) is key to world evangelization that we cling to that idea even though recent history shows that one key after another fails to turn in the lock. Could it be that, despite all our emphasis on understanding receptor cultures, we have failed to understand how captive we are to our own culture and its worldview?

Were someone to ask me what I believe to be the greatest missiological strategy ever devised I would now answer, “Tell them the story of Jesus.

Write on their hearts every word.” I would remind us all of that which we may already know—namely, that He is the Seed of the woman in Genesis 3, the Bright Morning Star of Revelation 22, and that indeed, the whole Bible relates the “story of Jesus.”

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