



Contextualization in Evangelism and Missions

There is often much debate about contextualization in evangelism and missions. But what is contextualization? And, is it a biblically correct practice? Let's answer what it is first: Contextualization in evangelism and missions is the process of adapting (contextualizing) the expression and practice of the gospel from the Christian worker's original home culture to better accommodate the cultural context of the people being approached, whether locally or internationally, seeking to ensure that the message remains clear and true without compromising its essential truths.

The definition seems straightforward enough. However, it is the practice that can become muddied or, even at times, so distorted that it is no longer the gospel. Today, in our multi-cultural world, a great many people struggle with how to do evangelism and missions because they are unsure of how to appropriately share the gospel. Sadly, they too often give up. Even worse, when they do attempt it, it is not biblical. Let's look at that issue and attempt to answer the second of our two questions: Is gospel contextualization biblical? As a pastor and former missionary - I would say the answer is a hardy, Yes! And, at the same time, I have witnessed its abuse.

First, let's look at some examples. When we talk of "types of Christ" in the Old Testament (Adam as a type, Noah and the Ark, the Passover Lamb, Moses, etc.), these expressions of types are a form of contextual accommodation by our God. God was attempting to speak to mankind through these forms in a manner whereby man could see the type and then interpret the type to understand that it was pointing to something else. We know that something else to be - the Christ.

Secondly, in the incarnation, we see another kind of contextualization. In all eternity, the Triune God determined that the second person of the Trinity should "take on human flesh" and become "like man." The incarnation is a form of contextualization agreed to by the Holy Trinity that the Son of God and second person of the Trinity would become "like" us in every way "yet without sin."

Lastly, and perhaps a bit more earthy and more well known, when the Apostle Paul entered the Areopagus he saw a monument to an "unknown God" (Acts 17) and used a form familiar to the Athenians to make a case that the "unknown God" on display was, indeed, the Christian God we know at the Holy Trinity. In fact, in his argument, he quotes from Greek poet, all of this a form of contextualization, to convey the idea that we are the children of that God. Moreover, that the God is not unknown any longer. And even more, has revealed himself to us in Jesus Christ.

On the other hand, the biblical writers, including Paul, almost never attempted to obscure the truths of scripture (parables are one exception), for the normal purpose of scripture is to reveal the truth - Jesus Christ is Lord. Early in my time as a missionary there was a missional practice that was developed within evangelicalism in an effort to reach Muslims in closed countries. It was called the "insider movement." The insider movement was an honest attempt to overcome the almost certain harm that would happen to a missionary and/or their convert friends if it was discovered that a former Muslim had indeed converted to Christianity. In those closed Muslim communities, it is against the law. However, this practice permitted and even encouraged the "convert" to remain a Muslim. The convert had made a profession of faith to the missionary but remained in the disguise of a Muslim never having to publicly profess faith in Christ.

The problem with this contextualization is that it went too far. It over-accommodated Islam to the point where Christ was completely obscured. Paul reminds us in Romans 1 that even in the face of direct persecution by the Roman Empire, he was "not ashamed of the gospel." For that public testimony he lost his life.

But now let me give you a more recent and practical example. As a church planting missionary in Panama, I had to overcome my tendency to want to begin Sunday worship "on time." Americans are very time conscious. We believe this time consciousness is a reflection on our respect for the Godhead. But, honestly, it is a cultural practice, not a biblical one. Far too often, my American, business mindset, that is a reflection of my home culture, imposed itself on me, subconsciously forcing me to ignore Panamanian culture to the detriment of the ministry of the church. To Panamanians, and many Latinos, church time is considered social time. And the point of all social time is the development and maintenance of relationships. There is no clock! To interrupt those relationships by the demand to begin worship "on time" was, in fact, very insulting. I took off my watch and left it in my nightstand for seven years. I had to learn to ignore the hour (and my culture) and focus on my friendships with my Panamanian partners and friends. This is appropriate contextualization. As we often said at MTW; "It's not better or worse, it's just different." Believe me... it was different.

Do you have a neighbor who has recently moved in from out of state, or even from out of the country? Work to identify what their culture norms are and how you can rightly bridge them (contextualization) so that when a gospel opportunity arises, you can share the love and lordship of Christ in a meaningful and impactful way.

Blessing,
Michael Lee

this week

events

Men of the Covenant
4/6 at 6:30 pm

Men's Bible Study
4/8 at 6:00 am

Circle #1
4/7 at 10:30 am

Colleen Riddle Circle
4/8 at 11:00 am

volunteer schedule

Infant Nursery
Emily Donnelly
and Ann Marsh

Toddler Nursery
Amanda Brummett
and Ann Carol Love

Worship Training
Brittany Neely and
Kathy Donnelly

Sunday's sermon:

The Case for Jesus
Acts 18:24-28