

A Brief Statement on Contextualization

The way we view culture affects our view of the task of missions. In the early days of the western missionary movement, western culture was assumed to be the most developed expression of mankind. Other cultures were developing and might someday reach the heights of the West. Some even understood the task of missions to be "civilizing the natives." Although this "developmentalist" mentality is still with us in many ways, most missionary agencies today have in principle rejected it as ethnocentric, paternalistic and stifling of growth and maturity.

During the second half of the nineteenth century the benchmark of a mature church became independence as measured by the "three self formula." Although there was disagreement on how soon independence should occur, most all agreed that churches should become self-propagating, self-supporting and self-governing. While this was a healthy corrective to paternalism, many soon realized that a church could measure up to the formula and still not communicate effectively to the heart of its culture. For example, a church could propagate itself, support itself and govern itself using western methods and thought patterns. While this might attract people who idealize western culture, it would not produce a movement able to reach the heart of the people. On the other hand, churches could become so independent that they failed to reflect the biblical interdependence of the body of Christ.

The need to plant "indigenous" churches and to "contextualize" the gospel became increasingly clear. The church must be like a banana plant growing in Central America-- so indigenous to the area that it prospers without any unusual care. Furthermore, the gospel must be applied in many different cultural contexts. These varied applications highlight different aspects of the multi-faceted, unchanging message and bring out its richness. With this shift, non-western cultures were no longer viewed so much as primitive stages along the way toward western culture, but increasingly as unique reflections of God's glory, each providing a God-given paradigm -- a singular opportunity to apply and understand God's Word. Western culture, then, as one perspective among many, must dovetail with and be enriched by those of other cultures. When we add to this the effects of sin on culture, especially the tendency of each to idolize its own perspective (ethnocentrism), it becomes clear that missions benefits not only the "receiving" culture but also the "sending" one.

1. The application of Scripture to different contexts throws light on the meaning of Scripture. For example, when you are facing a new and different challenge or difficulty, you often see nuances in a passage that you hadn't seen before. So different cultures, with their different sets of priorities and starting points, will tend to perceive certain aspects of Scripture first as they seek to apply it to their different contexts.

2. Some people talk about contextualization producing different "theologies," like "African theology" or "Ugandan theology" or "Chilean theology." What is meant here (or should be meant!) is not different systems of truth or relativism, but different ways of organizing theology that arise from the application of Scripture to cultures with different sets of priorities and starting points. These different "theologies" should all dovetail with one another to enrich our understanding of Scripture.

3. On the other hand, there is an ever-present tendency to "absolutize" or make an idol out of our particular set of priorities or starting points and to "squeeze" and distort Scripture so that it fits our preconceived notions. For example, Marxist ideology absolutizes certain legitimate concerns about social class and oppression. The so-called "Liberation Theology" used Marxist ideology to interpret and explain what is happening in much of the Third World. Then it "squeezed" Scripture until it supported their Marxist interpretation of what was happening. This is not the contextualization of the gospel. It is the distortion of Scripture to support preconceived ideas. To some extent there is a greater commitment to the preconceived ideas than to Scripture.

4. I believe the church in every culture is affected (usually in ways that it doesn't realize) by the modes in which its culture has absolutized its particular set of priorities and starting points. It is difficult even to become aware of this unless one is able to get out of his or her culture and see himself or herself from another point of view. One of the unsung values of the missionary endeavor is that it facilitates this process. On the other hand, it also happens that missionaries sometimes bring a certain "cultural baggage" to the mission field.

5. To minimize the "cultural baggage" effect, and to promote the contextualization and mutual enrichment that the missionary enterprise can bring, it is advisable to form what some missiologists call a "bi-cultural bridge." This is an intentional attempt on the part of missionaries and leadership (and / or new believers) from another culture to examine the two cultures and sets of priorities together from a biblical point of view. This is an ongoing process that should yield increasingly more effective ways to reach a given culture for Christ.

6. It is my belief that, to the extent supporting churches want to get involved in missions effectively, they should take some steps onto the bi-cultural bridge, bringing their spiritual gifts to be a blessing, along with a willingness to be challenged in ways they might not have expected.

7. A brief example: One of the differences between Latin cultures and our North American culture has to do with the different emphases that are placed on "knowledge" and "relationships." North American culture (traditionally at least -- this is changing with the coming of Post Modernism) has emphasized the important role of truth and knowledge, while Latin culture has prioritized the important role of love and relationships. Latins often accuse North Americans of being "cold" and "distant," while North Americans often accuse Latins of not saying what they really think.

This has affected the church in both places. For example, most US models for leadership training in the church operate with the assumption that if you transmit the correct information, everything else will fall into place. They "lead out" with knowledge. In Latin American, however, people "hear" better when the relationship is first firmly in place. Viewed in the best light, this difference is just a matter of starting point and priority. Sometimes, however, the different emphases are made too important, with very dangerous results.