

The Contextualization of the Gospel

The word “contextualization” sends shivers up some people’s spines—and not without reason. In the name of contextualization people have distorted the gospel message by squeezing it into the thought patterns of the culture.

But Biblical contextualization is just as important as being Christ-centered. Simply put, contextualization is the skillful application of God’s Word to a particular situation or context through the words we choose, the actions people see in us, and how we relate to them. In this way we incarnate the gospel before them in a way designed to reach them where they are.

The gospel message is unchanging and in some ways very simple: Christ died, overcame death, poured out the Holy Spirit, and is coming again. But that simple message is very rich. It takes the whole Bible to explain it. Christ is our prophet, priest and king. He is the lamb, the bread of life, the light of the world, the door, the way, the pilgrim heading home, the warrior who conquers his enemies. I could go on and on. The redemption provided by Christ has so many facets! And each one is particularly useful in specific situations. For example, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all told the story of Jesus, but each with different emphases to achieve different purposes.

So when it comes to applying the simple gospel message to a particular person in a specific situation, if all you say is “Jesus died for the sins of his people and conquered death,” in most cases it will be too general for the person to understand in a life-changing way. On the other hand, as you look at the vast richness of the message, you realize you can’t say everything at once. As you consider how you will apply the message to the specific situation of a particular person—and how you will incarnate it through your actions—you are engaging in contextualization. For example, Jesus’ approach to Nicodemus was very different from his approach to the Samaritan woman.

If we misjudge the situation, or if our motives are selfish, or if we just don’t know the Word of God very well, we might contextualize badly. But contextualization is something we all do simply because we can’t say or do everything at once. And it’s something we must do well if we are going to effectively apply God’s Word.

Contextualization across large cultural barriers reveals some of its complications. It isn’t as simple as just doing things *their* way, because *they* have an insider’s perspective on their cultural idols—which is often obscured by the fact that they grew up there, and everything seems so normal. It’s often hard for insiders to distinguish between their cultural giftedness and over-depending on that cultural giftedness—which is idolatry.

On the other hand, outsiders also have problems contextualizing in a culture that is not their own because they tend to understand and judge that culture through the lens of their own cultural idols—of which they tend to be unaware since they are insiders in their own culture.

For example, relationships and accomplishment are both aspects of the gospel, because Christ both loves his people and accomplished something for them. Also, the gospel restores loving relationships and gives us power to get things done for the kingdom. So, what if one culture thinks that the best way to get things done is by loving people, while the other culture thinks that the best way to love people is to get things done? And what if the Christians in each culture are affected by their respective cultural preferences in a way that makes them, for example, depend more on their ability to organize and use technology than on Christ. Or to depend more on their ability to persuade people by making them feel loved than on Christ? The way missionaries design and implement their ministries could easily communicate the cultural idolatry, with the result that people in the target culture get the feeling that being a Christian according to the foreigners means becoming more efficient.

The only solution, I think, for Biblical contextualization is for insiders and outsiders to work together—because actions help clarify the meaning of our words—and so learn from each other in the process as iron sharpens iron.