

Levels of Contextualization

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We read a great deal today about 'contextualization'. During the last decade it has replaced 'indigenization' as the 'in word' in mission. Both words speak of planting autonomous churches that understand the Gospel in their own particular settings. But contextualization seeks to go beyond the old word which carries the ideas of missions going from the west to the rest of the world, and ending in independent churches. Contextualization implies that the Gospel belongs to no one culture but speaks to all of them, including the west, calling them to be like Christ and His Kingdom, and that the goal of missions is partnership between young and old churches in evangelizing the world.

The idea that Christianity must, in some sense, adapt to the culture in which it finds itself is not new. Luther insisted on the Germanization of Christianity during the Reformation, and Protestants led the way in translating the Bible into local languages. Early Protestant missionaries such as Ziegenbalg, Plütschau and Carey emphasized the need for establishing independent churches.

In the early nineteenth century, however, there was a move away from contextualization. The emergence of colonialism and a western sense of cultural superiority led many missionaries to reject the cultures around them and to import wholesale their own western ways. The Gospel and western culture were equated. The churches they planted were copies of the west, and the Gospel seen as a foreign gospel by the people around them.

Disturbed by the alien nature of the churches in young countries, mission leaders began to call for missionaries to plant churches that fit into their cultural contexts. Appealing to Christ's as their model, and to

Paul's identification with those around him (I Cor. 9:19:20), they said that the church should not be like a potted plant dependent upon outside nurture, but like a seed planted in the local soil and growing naturally. But this demands that the farmer know both the seed and the soil if there is to be a good harvest.

There are two contexts within which people live: history and culture. We must take both of them seriously. There is a danger, particularly among us evangelicals, that we become ahistorical and acultural in our thinking of the Gospel. We fail to see that God works in and through people, and people are always influenced by their historical and cultural settings.

Here we will look at the second of these contexts. Certainly historical movements influence missions greatly. The rise of nationalism, the spread of modernity and secularism, the rapid growth of the cities, the growing cry for human rights, the rebirth of Islamic, Hindu and Buddhist fundamentalism — we cannot understand missions today without understanding these. Here, however we will limit ourselves to sociocultural contextualization.

CONTEXTUALIZATION, THE MISSIONARY AND THE CHURCH

Contextualization has many dimensions. For sake of analysis, we will divide them into two broad categories: 1) **the contextualization of the the missionary and the church** (having to do with interpersonal and inter-group relationships), and 2) **the contextualization of the Gospel** (having to do with the Biblical message).

The first of these has to do primarily relationships between missionaries and nationals, and between missionary agencies and the churches they plant. Key issues here include polity (how are things organized), power and authority (who is in charge), resources (who pays, is paid and how

much), and status and roles (who gets credit and respect). Although today most young churches are no longer dependence and subordination as they were during the colonial era, these issues are still very important ones in most mission settings.

Identification A crucial question all of us as missionaries face early in our ministry is what kind of life-style should we adopt. Should we cook western foods, wear western dress, drive cars and live in large bungalows, or should we eat local foods, wear native dress, walk and live like the people? Some argue for the former in the name of health and efficiency, others for the latter for the sake of effective ministry.

There is no simple answer. We can recreate small Americas on mission compounds, but then we are cut off from the people to whom we have come to minister. Or we can try to 'go native' and be accused of hypocrisy. The people know who we are. Moreover, we cannot kill our past without killing ourselves. In the end, we need to identify with the people as closely as we can in life style, but realize that true identification must be rooted in attitudes of a deep love for and oneness with the people.

Church-mission relationships A second dimension of contextualization has to do with relationships between mission agencies and the churches they plant. The first Protestant missionaries made no distinction between the two. When Ziegenbalg and Plütschau landed in India, they organized a local church - they were that church. Converts were added and leaders trained to take the place of the missionaries. There was no separate mission agency, only the church.

By the nineteenth century the two structure model had emerged - mission agencies were seen as distinct from the churches they planted. This raised many crucial questions: who was ultimately in charge? who owned and

financed various ministries such as pastoral support, schools, hospitals and outreach? and who was responsible for evangelism? Distressed by the extreme dependence of young churches on mission agencies, Anderson and Venn called for the planting of 'three-selves' churches: churches that are self-supporting, self-governing and self-propagating. From the very beginning, they said, missionaries should begin turning responsibilities over to young churches, and as soon as possible the mission should disband or move on. Only then, they argued, would local churches have real life. Despite this plea, progress has been slow and the questions of responsibility, authority and resources have remained critical in modern missions

Church organization Another aspect of the contextualization of the church has to do with its internal social organization. In a society structured by caste, should the church permit caste divisions to remain in the church? In a society practicing polygamy, should the church permit its members to do so as well?

Central to the question of organization is that of church polity. Should Baptist missionaries introduce democratic elections in a society where these are totally foreign to the people's way of choosing leaders? Or should the missionaries use local forms of social organization in the church such as elders, or powerful chiefs? Should church leaders be paid? And must they set goals and manage as western leaders do? Interestingly enough, today many missions are more willing to contextualize the Gospel than they are church polity and leadership styles.

Contextualized evangelism In recent years more attention has been given to the contextualization of evangelistic methods. There is greater interest in using oral methods of evangelism in nonliterate societies,

encouraging 'mass movements' in societies where group loyalties are high, and supporting modern media and network evangelism in the rapidly growing cities of the world. There is also a growing sensitivity to the ways in which social organization such as caste, class, and ethnicity influences the people's response to the Gospel.

CONTEXTUALIZATION AND THE GOSPEL

In recent years there has been more discussion regarding the contextualization of the Gospel. What is God's message for the church in India, Africa, Latin America, or, for that matter, in North America?

Bible translation Given their belief in the priesthood of all believers, Protestants have emphasized the translation of the Bible into local languages. But any translation raises difficult questions. No two languages are alike, and all translations add to and subtract from the original meanings. Early translators were less aware of this and translated the Bible literally. For example, the Greek words 'shepherds' and 'snow' were translated into the local words for these objects. Little attention was given to the connotations these words had in the local cultures. In some shepherds were seen as drunkards, in others in tropical regions there was no word for snow. It became clear that much of the meaning of the Gospel was lost in these literal translations.

In an attempt to contextualize the Gospel message, later translators turned to 'dynamic equivalent' translations - translations in which an attempt is made to preserve the meanings of a passage, even if this involves changing the literal meaning of some of the words. For example, "whiter than milk" might be used in cultures where there is no word for snow.

Today, however, there is a growing awareness of the dangers in changing the biblical text. A shift is taking place towards more

interpret the scriptures in their contexts. They face questions western Christians have not faced. And the theologies brought them from the west are colored by western world views. On the other hand, we must affirm the oneness of the Gospel, and hold to theological absolutes. How do we bring these two together?

Increasingly Christians from around the world, who are committed to the authority of the Bible and sensitive to the guidance of the Spirit, are examining Biblical absolutes and their meaning in different cultural contexts. Because they come from different cultures, they are aware of one another's cultural biases and can check them. The result is a growing understanding of the biblical message not colored by the biases of any one culture.

Ever since the Church began to evangelize the Gentile world it has faced the questions of contextualization. The first great church conference (Acts 15) was called to deal with some of them. Missions have always been revolutionary - challenging the complacency of the church and shattering its categories. But missions have also be revitalizing - bringing new vision and life to the church. The same is true today. The emergence of the church world-wide is both a challenge and a promise of things to come.