

# **The Gospel in Human Contexts**

David Hesselgrave  
and Ed Stetzer, eds.

Broadman and Holman  
2007

# **Contextualization: debate, challenges, future.**

[Estetzer@namb.net](mailto:Estetzer@namb.net)

**Due: Fall 2006**

**Publisher: Stetzer and Hesselgrave, Broadman  
Press**

>>> "Stetzer, Ed" <estetzer@namb.net> 6/21/2006 12:25 PM >>>

Please forward to Paul Hiebert

Thanks,

Ed Stetzer

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**From:** Stetzer, Ed  
**Sent:** Wednesday, June 21, 2006 10:00 AM  
**To:** 'phiebert@tiu.edu'  
**Subject:** Book project

*Paul Hiebert  
 Aug 3, 06*

Paul,

Good afternoon! My name is Ed Stetzer and, although we have never met, we do have some mutual friends. One of them is Dave Hesselgrave.

Dave and I are working on a book together and would like you would participate.

The book would be an "issues" book, focused on some of the key issues in mission today. Broadman and Holman would publish the book and have an indicated an enthusiasm for the project. The title is not yet determined.

Here is the outline we are using:

1. Mission Defined and Described- what is mission, the debate over definition, and why it matters

Grand Essay (3000-4000 words) -Van Engen  
 Several Sub-essays (TBD)  
 Summation- Hesselgrave and Stetzer

2. Contextualization- the debate, challenges, and future of contextualization

Grand Essay (3000-4000 words) -Hiebert  
 Several Sub-essays (North American contextualization, exported models, ecclesiology, etc.)  
 Summation- Hesselgrave and Stetzer

3. Christian Mission and the Future- what is the situation now and how will it project in to the future... and why that matters

Grand Essay (3000-4000 words) -Winter (confirmed)  
 Several Sub-essays (missional nature of the church, globalization, etc.)  
 Summation- Hesselgrave and Stetzer

If you choose to participate, your deadline would be the end of the year (or earlier). Your essays would be sent to the authors of the sub essays at that time. The whole book would go to the publisher in Spring of '07.

The audience would be folks who are thinking on mission issues-- students, yes, but also mission leaders and

lay people studying mission, etc. This would also have connection to the current North American conversation about missiology, etc.

As I mentioned, Dave Hesselgrave and I will be co-editors. Ralph Winter has already committed. Chuck VanEngen is to give final word this week, but was enthusiastic on the phone, so we hope he is "in."

Please pray and consider being a part. If possible, I'd like to connect via phone and talk more,

Thanks,

Ed

-Ed Stetzer, Ph.D.

Missiologist and Director of the *Center for Missional Research*

"Helping Christian leaders make strategic missional decisions by researching culture, analyzing churches, and evaluating ministry effectiveness."

North American Mission Board

<http://www.namb.net/research>; [estetzer@namb.net](mailto:estetzer@namb.net)

"In times of change, the learners will inherit the Earth, while the knowers will find themselves beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists." -Eric Hoffer

*Answer His Call, Tell His Story, Change Your World*

Juno e-mail printed Sat, 16 Sep 2006 22:57:21 , page 1

From: "Ed Stetzer" <ed@newchurches.com>  
To: <ed@newchurches.com>, <phiebert@juno.com>  
Date: Wed, 13 Sep 2006 19:00:01 -0400  
Subject: RE: FW: Hiebert Article

That second address would be for David Hesselgrave

-----Original Message-----

From: ed@newchurches.com [mailto:ed@newchurches.com]  
Sent: Wednesday, September 13, 2006 11:04 AM  
To: phiebert@juno.com  
Subject: Re: FW: Hiebert Article

Paul,  
Good to hear from you. I would love a hard copy. You can send it to me  
at:  
1520 Ivey Trace  
Cumming, GA 30041

Also, please send a copy to  
4345 Terrace View Lane  
Rockford, IL 61114-4707

I will also be sending out an email to all the authors soon. Be  
expecting  
that early next week but know that all of it will not apply to you.

God Bless,  
Ed

Paul,

Here are some thoughts from our editor. Our B&H editor is John Landers. He is a former missionary with two Ph.D.s (theology/missions and another one in history) so we should receive some good feedback.

Perhaps his comments below will be of help.

Thanks,

Ed

Somehow this has to be brought down to his word limit.

The first task is to define headings. The second task is to shape it up around the organization. This seems to me to be the skeleton:

### Three Views of Contextualization

Minimal Contextualization: Enlightenment rationalism and positivism, Western colonial superiority presumed

Uncritical Contextualization: Saussurian semiotics, complete cultural relativism

Critical Contextualization: Critical realism, Peircian semiotics.

### Divine Revelation Given in Human Contexts [or The Gospel and Human Contexts]

The ontological principle: The gospel *versus* human context

The phenomenological principle: The gospel *in* human contexts

Studying humans

Studying Scripture

The missiological principle: The gospel *to* human contexts

The first half follows a Hegelian pattern. I don't find a second view in the headings, but I think I have it properly identified. Another heading identifies "Divine Revelation Given in Human Contexts" as View 4. It seems to me that he is reviewing the history of contextualization and comes down in favor of the third. Then he moves on to define the our theological-missiological task. We might say that the first part is about what contextualization is and then goes on to lay down some principles to guide the missiological task of contextualization.

In my own opinion, I think the block quotes on pages 4 and 5 could best be rewritten in our writer's own words with some shorter quotations incorporated. This should shorten the manuscript and enhance comprehension.

On page 3 we have two headings: minimal contextualization, then noncontextualization, and then come back to Minimal contextualization on page 5. This section should be the easiest part to trim.

I might point out that on page 17, he brings up sarx, eon, and archaeon. But he doesn't expand on this, so it could easily be trimmed off.

You and David Hesselgrave are going to need to define your reading audience and then decide what this is comprehensible for that audience. Reorganizing, trimming, and rewriting should also increase lucidity and reader comprehension.

Let me point out that on page 9 he mentions Jones and Newbigin in relation to radical contextualization. But then in the same paragraph says they affirmed the truth of the gospel, etc. So are they cultural relativists or critical contextualizers? Perhaps we need to view them as forerunners of critical contextualization. That's just a question.

**THE GOSPEL IN HUMAN CONTEXTS:  
Changing Perceptions of Contextualization**  
Paul G. Hiebert

As humans we live in particular contexts: our family, our neighborhood, our town, our country. We seldom give specific thought to them, but these contexts affect what we see, feel and value, and what we believe without question is true, right, and proper. These beliefs are so obvious to us that they seem to be universal. They simply 'are' the way things truly are. We assume that others see things the way we do. Houses have bathrooms, bedrooms, kitchens and living rooms. Cars drive on the right side of the road, and stop at stop signs. We must put post stamps on letters before dropping them in the mail box. We fail to recognize that many of the assumptions and values that underlie our culture are not Biblical

Many of us, particularly in our childhood, are 'monocultural.' Only when things go wrong, or change rapidly, or when our views of reality come in conflict with the assumptions from another culture, do we question them. Such experiences make us aware that we live in contexts and force us to start thinking about them—their structure and givens.

Others of us have grown up or live in multi-cultural contexts—missionaries, missionary kids, immigrants, business people, diplomats, and African American slaves in the houses of white masters. These are aware of cultural differences, and have learned to negotiate between two worlds in daily living, but even they often do not stop to consciously examine these contexts and how they shape their thinking, or the deep differences between them. These people are, to some extent, 'bicultural,' but would find it hard to explain to others what this means.

In a rapidly globalizing world, it is important that all of us give thought to human contexts, and how these shape others and ourselves. We need to learn how to live in a multi-

context world, to build bridges of understanding and relationship between different contexts, and to judge between them. This is true for social, cultural, linguistic, religious and historical contexts. How do, and how should we, relate to Others and to Otherness?

As Christians, we are often unaware of the fact that we are shaped more by our contexts than the Gospel. We take our Christianity as biblically based and normative for everyone. We do not stop to ask what of it comes from our sociocultural and historical contexts, and what from Scripture. Missionaries are forced to deal with sociocultural differences, and, therefore, with social and cultural contexts. But even they often take little time to systematically study the contexts in which they serve in any depth, even though the effectiveness of their ministries is determined in large measure on how well they do so.

Humans live in many contexts: geographic, social, cultural, political and historical. Here we will focus only on cultural contexts and the importance of understanding them for the sake of missions. Missionaries seek to plant churches in local social contexts and to communicate the Gospel in local cultural contexts.<sup>1</sup> The church without the Gospel ceases to be the Church. The Gospel without humans and social institutions, such as families and congregations, dies. A full analysis of missions must take social, historical, personal and other contexts into account, and examine the relationships between the different contexts in which the people we serve live

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<sup>1</sup> “Society” here is defined as the systems of relationships that enable people to form communities. “Culture” here is defined as the more or less integrated systems of ideas, feelings and values encoded in learned patterns of behavior, signs, products, rituals, beliefs and worldview shared by a community of people. Society and culture are subsystems that are part of human realities. Others include physical, biological, psychological and spiritual subsystems



### THREE VIEWS OF CONTEXTUALIZATION

Our conscious awareness of cultural contexts, including our own, often goes through changing perceptions as we encounter Others and Otherness. It is important to keep in mind that everyone does not go through them in a linear fashion, and that those who grow up in multi-cultural settings develop at least some awareness of social and cultural differences, and therefore of cultures and societies themselves. The changing perceptions outlined below are a model— a way of looking at our growing awareness of others and otherness -- in cross-cultural ministries. It is not a descriptor of the phases all persons go through in their encounters with other cultures. Rather, it is a tool to help us understand ourselves, and the history of the modern mission movement in which missionaries from Europe and North America went to the ends of the earth, and to learn from past experiences.

Both personal and corporate views of contextualize change as we encounter other cultures and face the questions raised by ‘otherness.’ These changes are not necessarily linear, and may overlap.

#### Minimal Contextualization

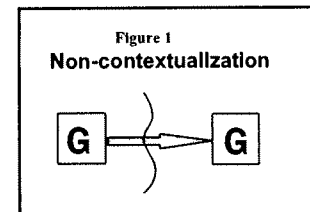
“Just go and preach the Gospel. Why waste time going to college and seminary?” my boss said when he learned I wanted to be a missionary, and wanted first to complete college, seminary and graduate studies. His is a widespread attitude commonly found in the church.

#### **First Phase**

When people go as missionaries, we know they need to understand the Gospel, but we are sure they know enough from church and Sunday School to reach the lost abroad. Even if we recognize their need for more Bible training, most of us are unaware of the profound issues

raised by cultural, social and historical differences. We know that missionaries might benefit from a class or two on the culture in which they plan to serve. We are confident that in a few years they will naturally learn the local language and customs, and be able to minister as they have in our church. All they need to do is proclaim the Gospel to the people, and the people will understand and believe. They need to persuade the people to leave their old gods and receive Jesus as their Savior, and move on to new areas where the Gospel has not been proclaimed. The Gospel is seen as acultural and ahistorical in its very nature.

In this phase we equate the Gospel with our Christianity (figure 1). New converts should learn from us and our ways and join us, because we are Christians and this is the way we practice it. To do Christianity differently raises difficult questions. How differently can Christians in other cultures do it? Is our Christianity normative for all? To what extent has our ways of doing Christianity been shaped by the Gospel and to what extent by our culture? We come as outsiders and assume that new converts will join and imitate us.



An example of this view, one that can be found around the world, is the Methodist Church in Sri Lanka. W. T. J. Small wrote,

. . . there was no attempt to adapt the form of worship to a national or truly Sinhala form. . . . Sinhala renderings of the great Methodist hymns were produced and sung to Western tunes, to the accompaniment of an organ or harmonium; the few lyrics included in the hymn book were hardly used in the services inside the church, and were reserved for open air services. . . . In short, a visitor from the West entering one of our churches during this period would find nothing to suggest to him in the ritual music or appointments that was in an eastern church (Small 1971: 367).

This view was not restricted to Methodists, nor to missionaries in Sri Lanka. It was characteristic of most Protestant missions around the world.

The epistemological foundation for this phase was positivism,<sup>2</sup> which holds that our scientific knowledge is an accurate, true photograph of the world, and corresponds one-to-one with reality. Its theories are not models but facts. Scientists seek objective truth, and must eliminate feelings and morals from the rational/empirical processes used to ascertain truth because they introduce subjectivity.

The semiotic basis is formal linguistics, which argues that signs, such as the word “tree,” point directly to empirical realities. Therefore we can speak of objective truth. This view assumes that all people live in essentially the same world, but simply attach different labels to realities. Their thought categories, logic, ways of ordering realities and worldview are essentially like our own. In communication and Bible translation, missionaries needed simply to find the corresponding words in another language, adjust the grammar, and the people would understand the message accurately.

One characteristic of this view of signs is its strong affirmation of **truth**. Feelings and morals are eliminated from the rational process, because they introduce subjectivity. In mission this stresses communicating the Gospel as truth, with little focus on its affective and moral dimensions. In evangelism and teaching, an emphasis is placed on accurate, rationally developed arguments, and an apologetic confrontation with other religions.

A second characteristic is that communication is measured by what is said or transmitted. It is sender oriented communication. Communication is measured by what was transmitted: by number of sermons preached, hours of radio broadcast, and quantity of tracts and Bibles distributed.

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<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of epistemological positions see Hiebert 1999..

In contextualization, formal semiotics assumes that signs in other cultures, such as drama, drums, bowing and music, are inherently tied to their pagan meanings, and therefore can not be used by Christians. This leads to a widespread rejection of local signs, and the importation of western Christian ones. We sing western hymns translated into the local language, build churches in European styles, and import our liturgies. If we are Anglicans, we have priests, if Presbyterians, we have presbyters, if Baptists, we introduce voting. The result was a minimal contextualized approach to missions.

Theological positivism holds that our central concern is truth, and that our theology corresponds one-to-one to Scripture. Other theologies and religions are false and must be attacked. We are concerned with truth and define it in rational terms. We divorce it from feelings and values, because these undermine the objectivity of the truth. Our concern is that people believe the Gospel truth, because that determines whether or not they are saved. We defined the truth in propositional terms, and seek to transmit it unchanged. We see ourselves as God's lawyers, and put our trust in experts who have studied Scripture deeply.

Finally, we see the Gospel as acultural and ahistorical. It is unchanging and universal, can be codified in abstract rational terms, and communicated in all languages without loss of meaning. Neither the sociocultural contexts of the listeners nor the messengers need be taken into account.

In this phase we link Christianity to Civilization. We see ourselves as 'modern' and others as 'primitive' and 'backward'-- in need of development. Therefore, we do not need to study other cultures deeply, except to find the distortions they bring to the people's understanding of the Gospel. We bring schools and hospitals to teach people the truths of science and civilize them. We see other cultures as primitive or evil, with little to contribute to our understanding of

reality. There is little in the old culture worth preserving. The minds of the 'natives' are a *tabula rasa* on which we can write Christianity and science. To become Christian and civilized the people must become like us. As the Chinese used to say, "One more Christian, one less Chinese."

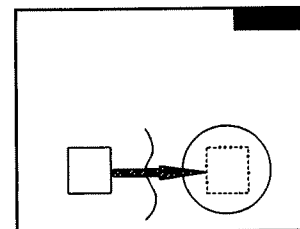
### **Second Phase**

When we enter another culture, we soon encounter deep differences. We experience culture shock: the feeling of disorientation that arises when all our familiar cultural ways no longer hold. We experience language shock: the inability to communicate even the simplest messages, and the growing realization that languages shape the very way we experience and see reality. We also experience religious shock: the fact that other religions make sense to their followers, even though to us these are strange and obviously wrong. We meet Muslims and Hindus who are good people, often better than some of the Christians we know. They can articulate their beliefs clearly persuasively. How can we say that they are lost? Why are we Christians? Was it a matter of conviction or of birth and upbringing? We are forced to examine our own beliefs more deeply, and the bases for our convictions. Such encounters with cultural differences force us to deal with 'others' and, ultimately, with the question of 'otherness.'

This encounter with 'otherness' requires missionaries to decide on matters of life-style in a new land. What kind of food should we eat at home? What kind of clothes should we wear? What kind of homes should we live in? In this view we try to preserve our culture abroad for the psychological survival and for our children, who, we assume, will eventually return to our 'home culture.'

Otherness also raises the question of the messengers attitudes towards the local people. They are so different—so other! In the modern view, we are ‘civilized,’ and they are ‘primitive,’ ‘backward,’ and in need of help to become like us. When we learn to know them personally, they become more human to us—friends and neighbors, but we keep a psychological barrier between us and them. They are ‘others,’ not ‘us.’ We do not think seriously of migrating and becoming citizens of the country, nor that our children might marry locally and settle down as ‘natives.’ We think of ‘returning home’ when we retire.

The more we live with and study the people we serve, the more we become aware of the depth and power of the people’s culture, and the need to contextualize both the messenger and the message for them to understand and live the Gospel, but we are afraid that this can distort the Gospel, and so it must be done minimally (figure 2). We realize that we must speak and translate the Bible in the people’s language, and organize their services and churches in ways the people understand, but we equate Christianity with our beliefs and practices.



### Uncritical Contextualization

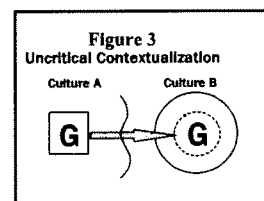
The more deeply we are involved in cross-cultural ministries, the more we realize the reality of social, cultural and historical contexts, the depth of the differences between them, and the difficulties in dealing with these differences. Early anthropologists and missionaries studied other cultures using western theoretical frameworks. After the 1930s anthropologists began to realize the importance of understanding the world as the people they studied see it (*emic* perspectives).<sup>3</sup> This led to a profound shift in the nature of anthropological and missiological

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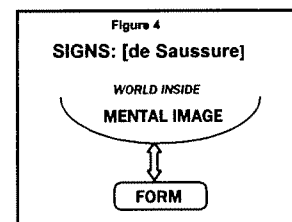
<sup>3</sup>Bronislaw Malinowski and British Structural Anthropology pioneered ethnographic fieldwork that stressed living with the people and learning to see the world the way they see it.

theories, and to an ongoing exploration of the differences between cultures and their mutual intelligibility. Can we truly understand Others? Can we compare their cultures with our own, and, if so, on what basis? We start by studying the people we serve, but what starts as a study of other people ends with us studying ourselves and our own assumptions. Our tendency is to pull back from the analysis and to dogmatically reaffirm the rightness of our own world.

The growing awareness of anthropological insights into human contexts leads in missions to a growing awareness of the importance of radically contextualizing the Gospel in other contexts so that the people can understand the Gospel and become followers of Jesus Christ (figure 3).



This awareness was influenced by two paradigm shifts. The first was the emergence of Saussurian semiotics. Ferdinand de Saussure raised the question of the relationship between forms and meanings in signs, and came to the conclusion that it was 'arbitrary'. He argued that signs do not refer to external realities, as formerly thought.<sup>4</sup> Rather, they are mental constructs that create meaning systems in the mind (figure 4). Signs have forms and meanings, and there are no links between signs and realities other than the conventionalities of human cultures.



Meanings are wholly subjective.

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This raised the question of whose perspectives are 'right', and, eventually, to the belief in cultural relativism.

<sup>4</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist, took a diadic view of signs. They have outer experientable "forms" and inner "meanings." He raised the question of the relationship between forms and meanings, and came to the conclusion that this is 'arbitrary'. In other words, there are no links between them other than the conventionality of human culture. If this is true, than an accurate literal translation from one culture to another does not guarantee the preservation of the meaning. Consequently, we must measure communication not by what is sent by the speaker, but what is understood by the listener. In other words, we must stress 'receptor oriented' communication.

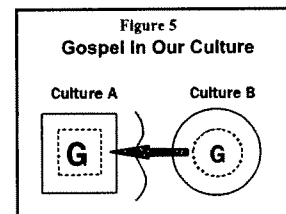
If this is true, than an accurate literal translation from one culture to another does not guarantee the preservation of the meaning. Rather, we must measure communication not by what is sent by the speaker, but what is understood by the listener. We need translations in which mental meanings are preserved in cross-cultural communication rather than literal references. The result is dynamic equivalence, receptor oriented Bible translations. The problem remained, if signs do not have external, objective reference points, then there is no way to test whether the meanings understood in one culture are the same as those found in another culture. There are no objective tests for truth.

The second paradigm shift is in epistemology. Positivism, which was the foundation for the enlightenment, is increasingly challenged as false, arrogant, oppressive and colonial. In its place emerged post-modern instrumentalism (also known as pragmatism) which sees knowledge systems as the creation of human minds. They are cultural rorshacks, not photographs, of reality. There is no way to test whether they are true, so we adopt those that are most useful to us (see Laudin 1997, Hiebert 1999), The result is cultural relativism. All cultures are seen as equally good and true. None can judge another. Moreover, the preservation of cultures becomes an unquestioned good.

The introduction of Saussurian semiotics and instrumental epistemology profoundly challenged the fundamental assumptions of the western mission movement and its colonial attitudes. If there is good in all religions, why should missionaries seek to convert others? If missionaries did go, they should come as insiders, and identify fully with the people they serve. Local people were encouraged to read the Scriptures for themselves, and to formulate their own theologies.

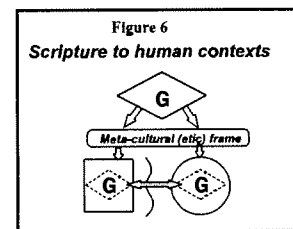


Another phase in the debate over contextualization occurred when missionaries, such as E. S. Jones and Leslie Newbigin, returned to their home countries. They began to look at these as mission fields, and were shocked at the uncritical contextualization of the gospel in western context (figure 5) It has become part of the culture, not an outside counterculture community. It has largely lost its prophetic voice. Both Jones and Newbigin were forerunners of critical contextualization, and out of their prophetic calls emerged the ‘Gospel in Our Culture’ movement.<sup>5</sup>



### Critical Contextualization

In recent years there has been a reaction to radical contextualization. The question arises, is the Gospel still the gospel when it is radically contextualized, or has it become captive to the cultural context? Does the most contextualized gospel lead to the most vital, biblical churches? Out of this has emerged a critical approach to contextualization (figure 6).



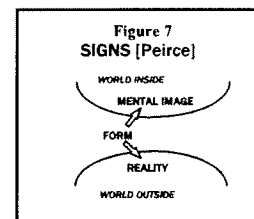
Central to this view is the fact that the Gospel cannot be equated with any contextual expression of it. As Andrew Walls notes,

No one ever meets universal Christianity in itself: we only ever meet Christianity in a local form and that means a historically, culturally conditioned form. We need not fear this; when God became man he became historically, cultural conditioned man in a particular time and place. What he become, we need not fear to be. There is nothing wrong in having local forms of Christianity—provided that we remember that they are local (1996, 235).

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<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that both Jones and Newbigin, in their encounters with Hinduism, moved well beyond an instrumentalist view and religious relativism, to affirming the truth of the Gospel and the need to bear bold witness to it—in this typology to stage five. In North America the Gospel in Our Culture Movement is led by George Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder (1996), inspired by the writings of Lesslie Newbigin (1986, 1989).

Underlying this new paradigm is a rejection of Saussurian semiotics and emergence of Peircian semiotics (figure 7). Charles Peirce, an American mathematician and linguist, proposed a third way of looking at signs. He rejected the dualism of form and meaning introduced by Humboldt and Saussure, and introduced a triadic view of signs. Each sign, he said, had 1) the sign (the signifier; e.g. the spoken or written word, the sound of a bell, an arrow); 2) the mental concept or image it evokes in the mind (the signified), and 3) the reality to which it refers (the significatum). For example, the word 'tree' invokes a mental image of a tree, and refers to real trees in the forest. In other words, a sign is the linking of mental images to realities by means of words, gestures, sounds and images. They have a subjective dimension and an objective dimension. This means that they are not simply human constructs, but that they reflect the order in reality itself. If there was not a a great deal of correspondence between peoples' views of reality and reality itself, life would be impossible. Driving down the road we need not only to watch out for mentally constructed traffic, but traffic that is indeed real and deadly.



There is also a growing reaction to postmodern instrumentalism and the emergence of a post-postmodern critical realist epistemology (Laudin 1977, Hiebert 1999).<sup>6</sup> In this view, humans can know reality in part, but their knowledge is not a photograph of reality with a one-

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<sup>6</sup> Charles Peirce, a philosopher and mathematician, wrote in the late nineteenth century. He named his epistemological theory 'pragmatism'. William James and John Dewey drew on his insights but transformed the theory so fundamentally that in the end Peirce rejected it, and renamed his theory 'pragmaticism'. This term never caught on, and many believe that Peirce is the father of what currently is known as pragmatism or instrumentalism and of epistemological relativism. Peirce's epistemology was not relativistic, but the basis for what is now known as 'critical realism' (see Hiebert 1999).

to-one correspondence between theory and facts, but a map of reality. Maps must correspond to reality in what they claim to affirm, but they are mental images that are schematic, approximate, and, of necessity, limited and selective. A road map does not make truth claims about property boundaries or economic variables. Moreover, to be useful, it must be simple, not showing every bend in the road, or every pot hole or bridge. But it must get drivers to their intended destinations.

Given Peircian semiotics and a critical realist epistemology, it is possible to compare human belief systems and to test them against external realities that all humans experience. To do so, we need to develop ‘meta-cultural grids’ that enables us to compare and evaluate between two worlds, to translate between them, and to negotiate between them.<sup>7</sup>

In Bible translation, Peircian semiotics leads beyond dynamic equivalence to double translations in which the translators seek to communicate ideas accurately while preserving the forms in Scripture as much as possible, often by using footnotes or parenthetical clarifications.

In contextualization, the new paradigm calls for critical contextualization, or doing missional theology (Tiéno and Hiebert 2006). The Bible is seen as divine revelation, not simply as humanly constructed beliefs. In contextualization the heart of the Gospel must be kept as it is encoded in forms that are understood by the people, without making the Gospel captive to the

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<sup>7</sup> There is no one true metacultural grid. Rather, metacultural frames are created by people from different cultures gathering together and comparing the ways they translate between and compare cultures, something all transcultural people learn to do, even if they give little thought to it. Developing suitable metacultural and metatheological frames is the first step in building mutual understanding between people from different contexts, and for comparing and evaluating these contexts in the light of divine revelation.

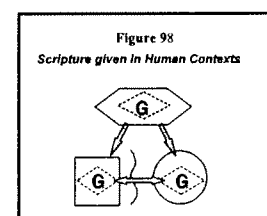
contexts. This is an ongoing process of embodying the Gospel in an ever changing world. Here cultures are seen as both good and evil, not simply as neutral vehicles for understanding the world. No culture is absolute or privileged. We are all relativized by the Gospel.

A critical realist epistemology differentiates between revelation and theology. The former is God given revelation, the latter is human understandings of that revelation and can not be equated fully with it. Human knowledge is always partial and schematic, and does not correspond one-to-one with reality. Our theology is our understanding of Scripture in our contexts. It may be true, but it is always partial and perspectival. It seeks to answer the questions we raise. This calls for a community based hermeneutics in which dialogue serves to correct the biases of individuals. On the global scale, this calls for both local and global theologies. Local churches have the right to interpret and apply the Gospel in their contexts, but also a responsibility to join the larger church community around the world to seek to overcome the limited perspectives each brings, and the biases each has that might distort the Gospel.

In this view of contextualization, missionaries are transcultural people--outsider-insiders--people who come to serve the local churches, not as inside rivals for power and positions.

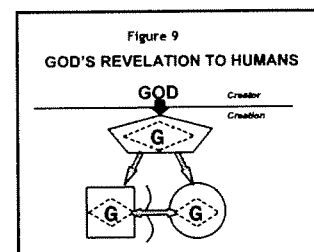
### **DIVINE REVELATION IN HUMAN CONTEXTS**

While affirming that Scripture is divine revelation, it is important to keep in mind that Scripture itself was given to humans in their particular historical and sociocultural contexts (figure 8). This is obvious to Old and New Testament scholars, but often is overlooked by ordinary Christians. But differentiating between eternal truth and the particular contexts in which



it was revealed is not an easy task, but is essential if we are to understand the heart of the Gospel which is for everyone.

A full view of the Gospel in human contexts must emphasize the fact that the Gospel is indeed divine revelation to humans, not human searches for the truth (figure 9 ). This revelation is given in the particularities of history and locality, but it is given by God and reveals



God's universal message to all humankind. It is easy, particularly in the academy, to ask what humans think about God. We must always remember, as Malik reminds us (1987) that the real question is what does God think about us. It is difficult in a pluralist world to affirm with deep love that the Gospel is unique because it is, in fact, God speaking to us, not human theological reflections about ultimate realities. But, as E. Stanley Jones points out, we are called, not to be God's lawyers, but to bear bold witness to what we know—that Jesus Christ is the only way to God and his Kingdom. If we truly believe this is true, then to affirm other ways is to withhold from people knowledge of the way to eternal salvation.

What then is the relationship between Gospel and human contexts, and how can we communicate the Gospel to humans in their contexts? Three principles can help us here.

The Ontological Principle:  
Gospel **VERSUS** human contexts

The first principle is that the Gospel must not be equated with any particular human context. Not only is this true with regard to western Christianity, but also with the Scriptures. The Gospel was revealed in the historical and sociocultural contexts of the Old and New Testaments, but those contexts are not normative for Christianity around the world.

It is important to remember that the Gospel is distinct from human cultures, but this does not to set the two in opposition to one another. Rather it is to recognize that they are two separate, interrelated realities. It is to recognize that divine revelation was given to humans in particular social and cultural contexts, but that the Gospel is not equated to any one of these contexts.

The Phenomenological Principle:  
The Gospel **IN** human contexts

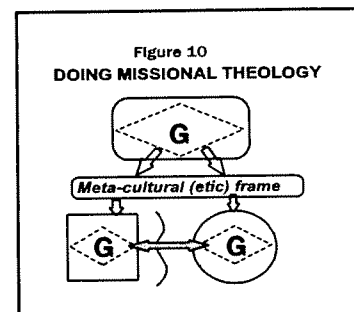
The second principle we need to keep in mind is that the Gospel must be put in specific sociocultural contexts for people to understand it. To do so we must study Scripture and humans and build a bridge between them. This process is doing missional theology (Ti nou and Hiebert 1996).

The first step in doing missional theology is *phenomenology*: to study humans in their contexts, particularly the issues that concern them and us. Church leaders and missionaries should study and lead the church to study the contexts of the people they serve. To study humans they need theoretical frameworks. Here they can draw on human studies, such as anthropology, sociology, psychology, history and the humanities. These must be tested against biblical teachings, because these are human methods, just as the philosophical and historical methods we use in doing systematic and biblical theology are human methods.

In this step, leaders and missionaries should avoid criticism of the customary beliefs and practices because the people will not talk to them freely for fear of being condemned, and because we are in danger of making premature judgments based on an incomplete understanding of the situation. In either case, we will only drive the old ways underground. The result is split-level Christianity.

We must also study our own contexts to see how these have shaped our understandings of humans and of Scripture. This reflexivity is difficult to do, but essential to the process. Often Christian leaders from other contexts can see our biases better than we do, so we need to listen to them carefully.

Having studied our own contexts and those of the people we serve, we must develop a transcultural framework that enables us to translate between and compare different contexts (figure 10). The formation of this mental framework is critical in building bridges of understanding between cultures, and all parties to the conversation



must be heard in its formation. In it each must agree that their views have been truly understood by outsiders as best as can be done in outside terms. It is here that anthropology can help, because it has sought to develop transcultural frames for translating and comparing social and cultural systems around the world. Its frameworks are imperfect, and an ongoing dialogue between spokespersons for different cultures must continue in the construction of a transcultural frame of reference in which all their voices are accurately heard.

Having studied humans in their contexts phenomenological, the next step is to study Scripture to discern its ontological criteria for evaluating humans in particular contexts. How should we respond to the specific situation at hand? We need to study Scripture carefully to understand the Gospel in its three dimensions. There is a cognitive dimension to it—it is about truth. There is an affective dimension to it—it is about beauty and love. There is a moral dimension to it—it is about holiness and justice. Contextualization seeks to formulate and communicate universal truth (cognitive dimension), love (affective dimension) and holiness (moral dimension) revealed in Scripture in particular human contexts which are very diverse and

ever changing.<sup>8</sup> To assume that general rules, once properly determined, remained unchanged, and needed simply to be applied in later cases overlooks the changing nature of human life and the dynamic quality of theology that must be extended to new situations.

The study of Scripture is the responsibility of the church as a hermeneutical community. We need experts to help us, but as the Church we are entrusted with the Gospel. If we all do not study it together, we will not be active participants in knowing and living it, and we may be led astray by lone individuals. We must keep in mind that our own interpretations are shaped by our social, cultural, psychological and historical contexts, and that these need to be checked by others from other cultures, who can help us see these biases. This is not to say that our interpretations are wrong, but, like glasses we wear, our contexts color how we see things. By studying our perspectives carefully, we can grow in our knowledge of and obedience to the Gospel. Moreover, in the process of contextualizing the Gospel people may not always agree. The effort to find complete agreement before acting is meaningless. It is to forget the very purpose for which theological reflections must be done, namely, to make know the Gospel to humans in their contexts so that it can transform them.

What checks help us in this process to guard against syncretism? It is important to remember that all our Christian understandings and life are in human contexts, and therefore partial. This does not mean they are necessarily wrong, but we need to be humble in our stance

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<sup>8</sup> Anthropologists are increasingly aware that there are three dimensions to culture: cognitive, affective and moral. During the Enlightenment stress was placed on the cognitive dimension—on truth. Affective and moral dimensions were thought to compromise the objectivity of the Truth, and so eliminated as essential parts of the academy. Postmodernity has shown us that the cognitive cannot be separated from the other two, even in the sciences, and that all three must be taken together.



and to seek unity in the church “so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might be made known . . .”(Eph. 3:10, 4:1-3). But there is always the danger when we put the Gospel in human contexts that the essence of the Gospel be so distorted that it loses its message. We must also keep in mind that God starts with us where we are, and reveals himself to us more fully as we grow in the knowledge of our Lord. In one sense syncretism is a message that has lost the heart of the Gospel. In another sense, it is moving in the wrong direction, away from a fuller knowledge of the Gospel.

The checks against both types of syncretisms lie in a meta-theology–theological reflections on the way we do our theologies. First, we need to take the Bible seriously as the rule of faith and life. This may seem obvious, but we must constantly remind ourselves that biblical revelation is the standard against which our beliefs and practices must be measured. Second, we need to recognize the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of all believers open to God’s leading. Reason in its many forms is important, but it is the Holy Spirit who reveals to us through Scripture mysteries that transcend human knowledge. Third, we need the church to be a hermeneutical community that seeks to understand God’s word to it in its particular contexts. In this community we need Christians from other cultures, for they often see how our cultural biases have distorted our interpretations of the “Scriptures. This corporate nature of the church as a community of interpretation extends not only to the church in every culture, but also to the church in all ages. Through this community hermeneutics we seek a growing understanding, if not agreement, on key theological issues that can help us test our theologies and our practices. This will be an ongoing process in which the church constantly engages itself seeking to understand what the lordship of Christ and the Kingdom of God on earth are about (figure 10)

The Missiological Principle  
The Gospel **TO** Human Contexts

The third principle to guide us in understanding the relationship of the Gospel to human social and cultural contexts is that the Gospel is transformative. It is not simply a message to be affirmed as true, but a call to follow Christ throughout life in radical discipleship. Newbigin speaks of the relation of church to culture in terms of a “missionary encounter with culture.” This principle leads us to the third step in doing missional theology, namely *missiology*. Here we evaluate human situations in the light of Scripture, and decide on a course of action, both immediate and long term.

Early anthropologists and missionaries often saw other cultures as primitive and uncivilized. Later they began to see that there is good in all cultures, good that can be preserved so that people have a sense of their identity. Now we realize that there is also evil in all cultures, such as oppression of the poor, women and immigrants, corruption and sin. All need to be transformed into the likeness of the Kingdom of God. A missionary encounter occurs when the church embodies the comprehensive demands of the gospel as an alternative way of life to the culture in which it is set, and thereby challenges the culture’s fundamental assumptions. In this way, the church offers the gospel as a credible alternative way of life to its fallen culture, calling for radical conversion, and issuing an invitation to understand and live in the world in the light of the gospel.

The day of moral neutrality is over. It is important to remember that human contexts are both good and evil. The biblical terms for human contexts are *sarx, eon, archaeon*. Humans are created in the image of God and are the object of his great love. But they are also fallen, and the societies and cultures they build are affected by that fall. There is both personal and corporate sin, and personal and corporate dimensions to God’s redemption.

Knowledge is not simply information. It is a power used by the participants in the social, economic, political and cultural arenas of life. Knowledge of the Gospel makes us responsible to share its message of salvation and transformation with all people, to care for the poor, oppressed, sick, and bring the good news to the lost (Hauerwas and Willimon 1989).

In transformation we must start where the people are and help them to grow, just as God starts with us where we are but leads us into maturity and faithfulness. Conversion is to turn to follow Christ, as individuals and as churches. It is the first step in spiritual growth and obedience. This transformation must be both personal and corporate. As individuals we need to be 'born again' into a new life. As a church we need to model not the way of this world, but manifest the ways of the Kingdom, and challenge the evils in our societies and cultures.

In transformation we need to involve people in evaluating their own culture in the light of new truth draws on their strength. They know their old culture better than does the outsider, and are in a better position to critique it and live transformed lives, once they have biblical instruction. We can bring outside views that help them see their own cultural biases, but they are involved in making the decision, they grow spiritually through learning discernment and applying scriptural teachings to their own lives. The gospel is not simply information to be communicated. It is a message to which the people must respond. Moreover, it is not enough that leaders be convinced that changes are needed. They may share their convictions and point out the consequences of various decisions, but they and their people must together make and enforce decisions arrived at corporately. Only then will old beliefs and practices not be pushed underground, subverting the Gospel.

In transformation we must deal with the deeper issues involved. Too often we act on immediate cases at hand, and do not use them to stimulate long range reflections on the underlying issues. Specific cases should stimulate further reflections in systematic and biblical theologies and human studies that facilitate long term, well grounded responses to the personal, social and cultural contexts at hand.

Transformational theology focuses on mission. It takes humans seriously, in the particularity of their persons, societies and cultures, and their ever changing histories. It integrates cognition, affectivity, and evaluation in its response to biblical truth, and defines faith not simply as mental affirmations of truth, nor as positive experiences of God, but as beliefs, feelings and morals that lead to response and obedience to the word of God. It rejects the division between pure and applied theology, and sees ministry both as a way of doing theology and as a form of worship.

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