

**The Gospel
in Human Contexts:
Changing Perceptions
of Contextualization**

THE GOSPEL IN HUMAN CONTEXTS:
Changing - Perceptions of Contextualization
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As humans we live in particular contexts: our family, our neighborhood, our town, our country. We seldom give specific thought to them. They simply '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. One must put post stamps on letters before dropping them in the mail box. Only when things go wrong, or change rapidly, or when we go outside our everyday world, do we become aware that we live in contexts and start thinking about them—their structure and givens. Many of us, particularly in our childhood, are 'monocultural'.

Others of us have grown up or live in multi-cultural contexts—missionary kids, immigrants, missionaries, business people and diplomats living abroad, and African American slaves in the homes 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 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 multicontext world, to build bridges of understanding and relationship between different contexts, and to judge between them. This is true for social, cultural, linguistic, and religious contexts. How do, and how should we, relate to Others and to o\Otherness?

The more we examine human contexts, the more we become aware of how different they

can be, and how difficult the issues are in dealing with these differences. What starts as a study of other peoples ends with us studying ourselves and our own assumptions. The process often leads to culture shock, social shock, theological shock, religious shock and epistemological shock. Our tendency is to pull back from the analysis and to dogmatically reaffirm the rightness of our own world.

Missionaries cannot afford to withdraw from the study of other cultures and of their own, because their ministry is in cross-cultural settings. They, of all people, must learn to study and relate to people in other contexts, because the effectiveness of their ministries will be determined in large measure on how well they do so.

Humans live in many contexts: geographic, biological, social, cultural and historical. Here we will focus only on cultural contexts. Missionaries seek to plant churches in local social contexts,¹ and to communicate the Gospel in local cultural contexts.² 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 and other contexts into account, and examine the relationships between the different contexts in which the people we serve live.

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

¹ “Society” here is defined as the systems of relationships that enable people to form communities.,

² “Culture” here is defined as the more or less integrated systems of learned ideas, feelings and values encoded in learned patterns of behavior, signs, products, rituals, beliefs and worldview shared by a community of people.

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 themselves. The 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.

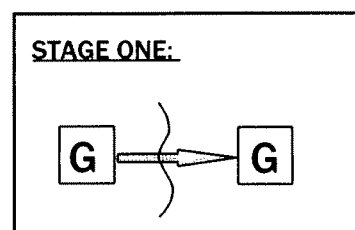
PHASE ONE **Proclaiming the Gospel: Non-contextualization**

“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. His is a widespread attitude commonly found in the church.

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 cultures and cultural 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. 0.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.

In this phase we equate the Gospel with our Christianity. New converts should learn from us and our ways, because we are Christians. To do Christianity differently raises difficult questions. How different can Christians in other cultures do it, and 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 simply assume that new converts will imitate us.

In this perspective we see other cultures as *tabula rasa*, as blank slates on which we can write Christianity. There is nothing in the old culture worth preserving. From the point of the view of the people, to become Christian one must become western. As the Chinese used to say, “One more Christian, one less Chinese.”



The epistemological foundation for this phase is positivism.³ We believe that our Christianity is biblical, and our theology corresponds directly, one-to-one, with Scripture. Other religions, and other theological positions,¹ are false and must be attacked. We are concerned with communicating the truth and defining it in rational terms. We divorce it from feelings and values, because these are subjective and 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 seek to 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 context of the listeners nor the messengers need be taken into account.

³ For a discussion of epistemological positions see Hiebert 19XX.

Most missionaries, when they enter another culture, move quickly to phase two, but some remain in with this perception all their lives. They work through translators, and control the converts and churches. They make certain the Christians conform to the cultural context introduced by the missionary.

PHASE TWO: Contextualizing the Gospel Abroad

True, we must speak in their language and translate the Bible, but their thought categories, logic, ways of ordering realities and worldview are essentially like our own.

In this stage we assume that cultures are essentially the same, and that our culture is better and normative. We are civilized and they are backwards or primitive. Therefore, there we do not need to take the time to study other cultures deeply.

In this phase we translate the Bible literally, because we believe words point directly to objective realities. Contextualization is to find the right answers, and these are generally the answers we give to the questions in our own culture.

There are few, if any, redemptive analogies.

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.

1. Growing Awareness of the Need to Contextualize:

1.1 **The Messenger**

When we enter a new culture, we often experience culture shock—the feeling of

disorientation that arises when all our familiar cultural ways no longer hold. We experience language shock. We know in our heads that the people speak a different language, but we do not experience how deeply we are affected when we cannot communicate even the simplest messages. To ask for oranges in the market we point to them and then to our mouths. When the vendor gives us a few, we don't know how much to pay. All we can do is hold out our hand with some money, and let the vendor take what she wants. We experience culture shock. The people use time and space, and greet one another differently. Their beliefs are strange. We are forced to deal with all these 'others', and ultimately with the question of 'otherness.'

We often experience theological shock. In our home country we meet with our kind of Christians. Abroad we find few of these, and are glad to see anyone that calls her or himself a Christian. But what about the theological differences that separate us? Can we worship with people who call themselves Christians but are from different denominations, or Christian traditions, such, as Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, or Nestorian?

We also experience religious shock. We meet Muslims and Hindus, who are good people, often better than some of the Christians we know. They can articulate their beliefs clearly and 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.

A second area in which the messenger must struggle to identify with the people is in matters of life-style. What kind of food should missionaries eat at home? What kind of clothes should we wear? What kind of house should we live in? Should we become like the people we work with? Or should we try to preserve some of their home culture for the sake of

psychological survival and for the sake of our children, who, we assume, will eventually return to our 'home culture' when they are adults?

What about our attitudes towards the people. At first the people seem to be so different—so 'other'. Our first tendency is to see them as 'primitive' or 'backward.' As we learn to know them personally, they become more human for us, friends and neighbors. Even so, we generally keep a psychological barriers between us. We do not think seriously of migrating and becoming citizens of the country, nor do we think that our children might marry locally and settle down as 'natives.' We think of 'returning home' when we retire.

We also face issues of work. Can the 'natives' become pastors without seminary training in Greek and Hebrew? If we ordain them, can they be leaders over missionaries? Can they full partners with missionaries in the work? Can they be entrusted with the funds of the mission, and with making final decisions? Working together raises a whole new set of questions having to do with cultural contexts and cultural differences.

1.2 The Message

Our growing awareness of the importance of cultural contexts also emerges as we seek to communicate the Gospel. Can missionaries use translators, or should they take the time and energy to learn the language well? Can the Bible be translated into other languages? Every translation loses original meanings and introduces unintended new meanings to the text. Can the worship forms in church be contextualized. Can we use traditional drums, even though these are normally used to communicate with the spirits. Can the pastor sit cross-legged on a platform and chant the message using non-linear logic? Should we translate hymns or should the people write

new hymns using the melodies, harmonies and rhythms of their own culture?

A whole new set of issues arises as people become Christians. What should they do with their old cultural ways? In an Indian village, should Christians be buried in a Hindu graveyard, or a Muslim graveyard or should we start a Christian graveyard. Can Christians bow at a funeral to venerate their parent? Can Christians visit a mosque or attend a Hindu religious festival to keep relationships with nonChristian friends?

Culture - evangelistic styles

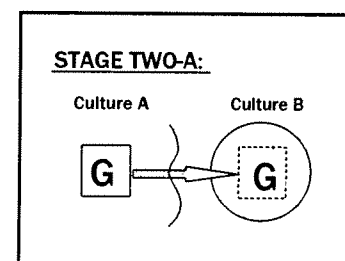
- local ecclesiologies and church organization
- doing local theologies
- engaging worldviews
- concern with transmission of truth of the gospel
- formal signs, literal Bible translation
- contextualization is the right answers given by the west
- copy the west and bring Civilization and western ways. We are Christians so they should do things as we do.
- turning over the work and the 3 selves- including funding and power;
- dealing with old customs and beliefs: spirits, rituals, festivals, ancestors, polygamy
- issues: contextualization – gospel and culture, syncretism vis contextualized

= religious pluralism,

=

2. Phases in Contextualizing the Gospel Abroad:

2,1 **Minimal contextualization:** Colonial era. literal civilize, one

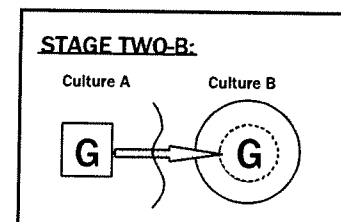


way

- Come as OUTSIDERS
- used our grids to study their culture. We assume their diseases are small pox, cholera, malaria and the like. - tendency to see other cultures as evil or neutral, so bring Western Christianity and Civilization.
- we do not try to understand their culture in its own terms.
- a tabula rasa approach to other cultures
- tendency to see other people as 'others' vs. us
- formal bible translation
- remake others into our image
- a very Modern approach to others and otherness
- perception of others as primitive, uncivilized, Need to civilize them
- postivism

2.2 Uncritical contextualization: The Anti-colonial Era.

- aware of deep culture, and deep cultural differences
- see other cultures as neutral or good
- try to become INSIDERS - emic analysis, see the world as they do. Their diseases are 'hot' diseases and 'cold' diseases



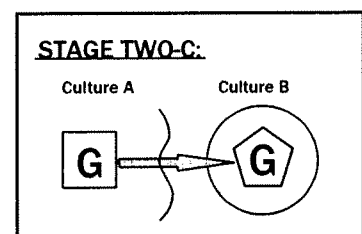
- signs increasingly seen as Saussurian—sign—mental image. Dynamic equivalence Bible translation, receptor oriented.

- uncritical contextualization
- locals read the Scriptures directly, formulate own theology Post Colonial Era
- dynamic equivalence Bible translation
- self theologizing = ATA
- worldview evangelism
- instrumentalism, and idealism relativism.
- subjectivism: stress experience, feelings personal truth
- theology done by native experts small t.
- dialogue for consensus: Hegelian dialogue
- contextualization is determined from within, not without
- question: does the most contextualized gospel lead to the most vital, biblical church?
- others are inscrutable, natives, romanticize them, run our own down
- dialogue, learn from them There are few, if any, redemptive analogies.
- epistemology is instrumentalism – what works?
- subjectivism, relativism
- basis of post-modernity

2.3 Critical Contextualization:

- realize we can seek to understand other cultures from the inside, but that we will never become total Insiders.

We will remain OUTSIDERS-insiders. Moreover we are still deeply shaped by our first culture. We can't simply drop it.



- We develop a 'meta-cultural grid that enables us to live between two worlds, to translate between them and to negotiate between them.

-we become 'bi-cultural' people that try to broker between both:

- reactions: deny one or the other, or live in schizophrenic worlds, or seek to somehow integrate them.

- epistemology is critical realism

- see cultures are good and evil

- critical contextualization

- double translation

- go as sisters and brothers: others are us in deep relationships

- Bible as objective revelation

- theology is our understanding of the Bible in our context.

- Peircian semiotics, signs link realities and perceptions

- Critical realist epistemology

- community hermeneutics, specialists input, but corporate decision

- metatheology, missional theology

- dialogue to determine the truth. Non Hegelian dialogue

- objective truth subjectively perceived

- Truth in cultures as truths perceived

- cognitive tied to affective and evaluative

- contextualization is an ongoing process

- complementarity of Systematic Theology, Biblical Theology, Missional Theology

**PHASE THREE:
The Gospel in Our Cultural Context**

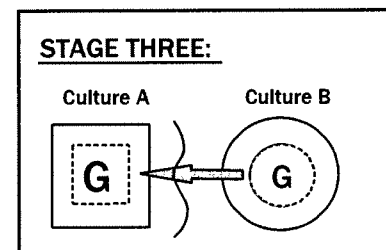
- realize that when we return 'home' it is no longer 'home'. We are OUTSIDERS-insiders in our own culture. Reverse culture shock.
- return home, growing awareness of one's own cultural context. Missionaries return and see their gospel is influenced by western context.
- see our own culture as a mission field. See its flaws, and the over-contextualization of Christianity in the west.
- identity crisis. Who are we? Become anthropologists, missionaries, foreign diplomats, foreign scholars.
- cultures are relative, no right for one to judge another
- local gospel, local theologies,
- strengthen the development of a meta-cultural grid to translate between and compare different cultures.

- challenge to the assumptions of the western mission movement and its colonial identification

- challenge to positivism
- question of who does theology—western experts, but

contextualize their theology

- gospel in our culture movement.
- partnership in mission between equals
- development of a metacultural grid—become an outsider-insider.
- become inbetweeners. Inbetweenness

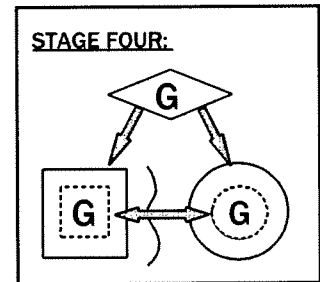


PHASE FOUR:

The Gospel to All Cultures

Global Era

- Bible as revelation—objective truth
- theology is derived and always done in context
- critical contextualization a process
- we are all relativized by the Gospel. No culture is absolute or privileged. Comparisons can be made and some shown to be better in answering certain questions than others, but none is perfect or the ideal. All can learn from the others.
- Gospel is cognitive, affective and evaluative
- critical realist epistemology
- Peircian semiotics.
- local and global theologies
- partnership,
- nonHegelian dialogue to understand the truth
- Peircian semiotics: triadic nature: tie external realities to inner understandings -maps.



1 The Gospel to all contexts.

Kingdom Era

- need to read scripture and dialogue between u
- global theology and critical realist dialogue
- hermeneutics belongs to the church, not specialists. Each local has right to interpret for itself, but must do so in the larger church community—and church before

2 Global dialogue in theology:

PHASE FIVE;

The Gospel Itself given in Cultural Contexts

- Gospel in particularity of history and locality
- move from local up to global and back down, not from top down.
- trust God to work in the local. Contextualization is first God's work, then ours.
- global dialogue and partnership in church
- scandal of particularity.

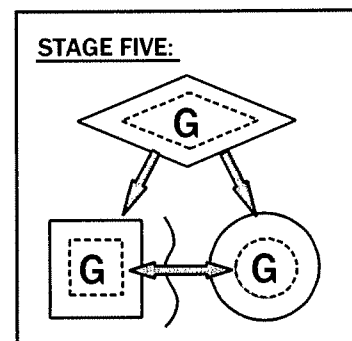
1. The Gospel revealed in human contexts.

- realize Bible is in contexts. Issues of particular --

universal,

Newbigin:

Newbigin most often speaks of the relations of church to culture in terms of a "missionary encounter with culture." 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 culture, calling for radical conversion, and issuing an invitation to understand and live in the world in the light of the gospel. Mike Goheen, IBMR 2002, "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you": Lesslie Newbigin's Missionary Ecclesiology." 355-369. quote p. 361.

GOSPEL AND HUMAN CONTEXTS

Reject Niebuhr's 5 categories; See Hauerwas and Willamon

Organizing Principles:

1. Gospel vs. culture: The Gospel is not tied to any specific culture (given in particularity of O.T. and N.T. but the Gospel not equated to them or confined to them.

- Culture: – SARX, ARCHAEON, EON, good and bad

- human creation: in image of God we create

- human fall: we sin and the cultures and social systems we build are sinful.

Corporate sin. Corporate dimension to salvation in the church.

2. Gospel in Culture: The Gospel must be put in cultural forms for people to understand it.

3. Gospel to culture: The Gospel is transformative. It is not information to be believed, but a call to be obeyed. It calls us to follow Christ, to radical discipleship

REFERENCES CITED

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SO THAT PEOPLE MAY BELIEVE: PRINCIPLES OF CONTEXTUALIZATION

Introduction:

Acts 10: Peter's transformation in his mission to the Gentiles

- he thought God is the God of the Jews – he learned God is the God of all people
- he thought Christianity is the way he did it – he learned Christianity can be done in different ways in different contexts
- he came as an outsider – he learned he must come as an insider

In missions we must deal with the question of how the Gospel relates to human cultural and social contexts. This raises very difficult questions, and challenges our own ways of looking at things.

1. Our Growing Awareness of the Need to Contextualize the Gospel

1.1 Stage One: Simply bring the Gospel. Noncontextualization

1.11 The Messenger:

- come as an outsider, expert and teacher
- bring our lifestyle with us
- we see others as 'primitive,' 'backward'

1.12 The Message:

- we believe the Gospel is the same for all people
- we believe our culture is Christian
- we assume the culture of the people we serve is pagan and must be changed
- we try replace the old culture with our Christian culture

1.2 Stage Two: Communicate the Gospel in the people's language. Minimal contextualization

1.21 The Messenger:

- we learn the language but keep our cultural ways
- we see the other as 'native' – stress differences and inscrutibility

1.22 The Message:

- we translate the Bible and communicate in the local language
- we believe that people see the world as we do
- we make literal translations of the message, and believe that the people understand it as we do

1.3 Stage Three: Contextualize the Gospel fully in the people's culture. Uncritical contextualization

1.31 The Messenger:

- we become a cultural insider and live like the people
- we learn to see the world as the people do – an 'emic' perspective
- we see others as "fellow humans"

1.32 The Message:

- we see the culture as good, and contextualize the Gospel fully to it so that it is not

- seen as foreign
- we stress 'receptor oriented' communication
- we call for a minimum of change in beliefs and practices of the Christians

1.4 Stage Four: Communicate the Gospel in culturally appropriate ways, and call for transformation. Critical contextualization

1.41 Messenger:

- we see others as "us"-- as Christians in the church, and as humans in our common humanity
- identify as much possible with the people but retain a clear Christian identity
- join with believers in forming a new Christian community

1.42 Message:

- see all cultures as having both good and evil elements
- phenomenology: we study the local culture to understand it
- ontology: we study Scripture and judge local cultural elements in the light of the Gospel: keeping what is good, rejecting or substituting for what is evil, reinterpreting what can be redeemed, introducing the universal practices of Christianity, and creating new rituals
- ontology: we patiently help people to move from old evil beliefs and practices to Christian beliefs and practices

1.5 Stage Five: Examining Our Own Contextualization. Reflexive contextualization

1.51 Messenger:

- we realize our Christian ways are shaped not only by the Gospel but also by our own culture, and learn to distinguish what is Gospel and what is our culture
- we go as learners, and as sharers of the Gospel
- we join the people as one church seeking to understand God's message to us in our cultural context

1.52 Message:

- do not equate the Gospel with our culture and our Christian ways
- study Scripture together with the people to understand and obey God

2. Principles of Contextualization:

2.1 **Do not equate the Gospel with any culture:** the Gospel is the record of God's revelation to us.

2.2 **Communicate the Gospel in the local cultural forms as much as possible:** to be understood the Gospel must be expressed through culture.

2.3 **Call the local culture to transformation: the Gospel is not simply information to be believed, it is a call to be transformed—to follow Jesus in every area of our lives.**