

Contextualization of the Gospel

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Jeff Vanderstelt

CONTEXTUALIZATION DEFINED

Contextualization is adapting the declaration and demonstration of the gospel in culturally adaptable forms, holding to the essence of the gospel at the same time.

"I see contextualization is adapting my communication of the gospel without changing its essential character."¹

Tim Keller

CONTEXTUALIZATION DEMONSTRATED

Consider Jesus...*The Word became flesh and dwelt among us...*

- o The true God and the essence of the gospel took on bodily form
- o He came into a particular culture in a particular time in a particular form
- o He was a male, a Jew, a part of the working class
- o He spent 30 years living in and learning the culture before he started his public ministry

Then before he turned the mission over to his disciples he said, *"As the Father has sent me, I am sending you."²*

Examples of Contextualization from Paul in Acts

- o Acts 13:13-52 - In a synagogue in Pisidian Antioch to those who believed in the God of the Bible
- o Acts 14:8-20 - In Lystra with a pagan, blue-collar crowd

Authority

- » Synagogue - Scripture and John the Baptist
- » Pagans - General Revelation - Creation

Content

- » Synagogue - He ignores doctrine of God and goes straight to Christ
- » Pagans - He works with the very concept of God (In Acts 17 as well)

Appeal

- » Synagogue - You need Christ to justify you (you're not good enough)
- » Pagans - Turn from worthless idols that don't really provide for you or give you joy

In Common

- » God is good and powerful (13:16-22; 14:17)
- » They are trying to save themselves and it won't work (13:39; 14:15)

¹http://www.redeemer2.com/themovement/issues/2004/feb/advancingthegospel_3.html

² John 20:21

- » God has broken into history to accomplish our salvation - they don't need to earn it
- o Acts 16:1-5 - Paul's circumcision of Timothy so as not to offend those he was trying to reach (This is good example in light of the fact that Paul so vehemently opposed mandatory circumcision previously)

Mission implies Contextualization

There is no such thing as a non-contextualized Christianity. The minute you decide to minister the gospel you begin to 'incarnate', like Jesus did. And we, like he did, come bringing the gospel cloaked in our specific make-up, experiences, backgrounds, values and view points...basically we bring our SPECIFIC gospel informed culture into a culture. Therefore, the very forms that we ministry with and the practices that we engage in will have a Biblical form or shape AND a cultural form or shape.

*"Mission is the mother of theology"*³
Martin Kahler

Each time we give form or shape to the gospel, we are demonstrating our theology in a particular way in a particular context. This means we are always doing contextualization - intentionally or unintentionally - because we are always demonstrating what we believe about God (theology).

*"True theology is the attempt on the part of the church to explain and interpret the meaning of the gospel for its own life and to answer questions raised by the Christian faith, using the thought, values, and categories of truth which are authentic to that place and time."*⁴

Dean S. Gilliland

CONTEXTUALIZATION DIAGNOSED

To effectively contextualized the gospel in a particular culture then requires:

AWARENESS

1. Personal
 - » You are bringing your own culture
 - » You must become aware of who you are and how your unique make-up shapes the declaration and demonstration of the gospel
 - » Pay close attention to your personal preferences as you make decisions about how to engage the culture
 - » You also come with a gospel distortion (Truth or Grace emphasis) - this means you will need to continue to be transform by the gospel (see Newbigin Gauntlet)

³ Martin Kahler as quoted in McKaughan, O'Brien, and O'Brien, *Choosing a Future for U.S. Missions*, 21.

⁴ Dean S. Gilliland, "Contextual Theology as Incarnation Mission," in the *The World Among Us*, 10-11

- » Let others speak into your life regarding how you are perceived by those you are seeking to engage - this requires Listening!

2. Church Culture

- » The people who have formed the local expression of the Church you lead or participate in also have a culture
- » Are you aware of its uniqueness and how it differs or is similar to your culture?
- » What practices or forms have you adopted that were once timely and culturally appropriate, but are now ineffective?
- » Do you know the difference between the essentials and un-essentials?
- » What is the perception in the community of your Church culture?
- » Again listen well in regards to how you are being perceived

3. Community Culture

- » The larger community/city you live in has a culture that permeates
- » There are also a large diversity of cultures within it
- » Part of the job of the missionary is to discern what unique cultures you are being sent to first - this may be determined by who God has granted you favor with or like (i.e. the women praying by the river in Acts 16)
- » NOTE: This does not mean we are to limit our reach to only one particular culture - the kingdom of God is not displayed through homogeneity, but through the diversity of cultures being redeemed
- » Get to know the people within your city - neighbors, city officials, leaders in business, education, arts...find out who the influencers are and why
- » Get to know the story/stories of your city - What has shaped it over the years? What are its wounds? What are it's strengths?

EXEGESIS

We need to exegete...culture in the same way that missionaries have been so good at doing with diverse tribal culture of previously unreached people. We need to exegete...the themes of Rolling Stones..., Dennis Rodman, Madonna, (and) David Letterman...We need to comprehend that the Spirit of the Living God is at work in these cultural expressions, preparing the hearts of men and women to receive the gospel of Jesus Christ. We have to find, in good missionary fashion, those motifs and themes that connect with the truths of the gospel. We need to learn how to proclaim, "That which you worship as unknown, I now proclaim to you." This is the missionary vision at its best.⁵

Craig Van Gelder

Your goal is to understand the meanings of cultural patterns, rhythms and systems. You want to learn the story and how the gospel completes the narrative of the culture.

⁵ Craig Van Gelder, ed., *Confident Witness – Changing World* (Grand Rapids: Erdmans, 1999), 14-15

Questions to ask in this process:

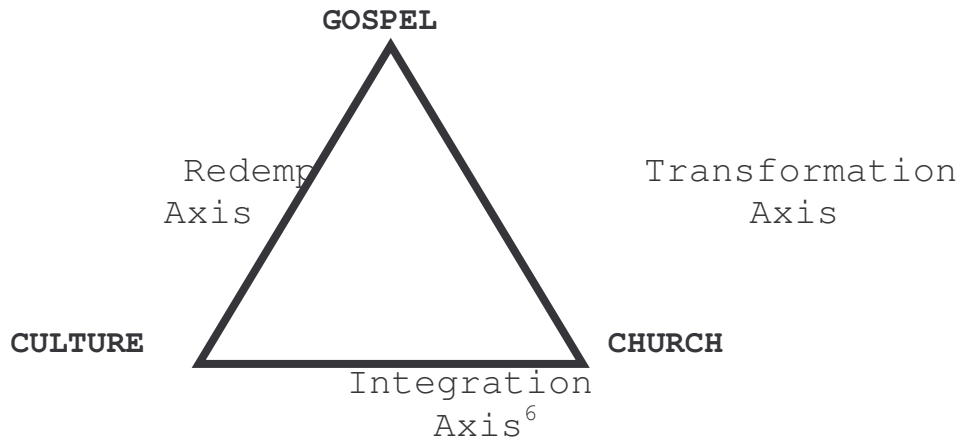
- o What are the emotional needs of the elderly, families, teens, singles, men, women, children?
- o What are the social, economic or educational needs of the same?
- o What are the flaws and difficulties with the systems of the community?
- o What is their worldview?
- o What redemptive analogies best fit this culture?
- o What does this culture understand about the basic components of the gospel story?
- o What questions are being asked in the culture that point to their need for the gospel?

NOTE: You will have to do more than just demographic studies. You have to dig deeper into your community and become a part of it yourself - this means stepping into the rhythms of your culture on a regular basis

CONTEXTUALIZATION APPLIED

As you are transformed by the gospel and sent into your culture, your job is to bring the embodiment of the gospel to you culture in forms that are adapted to address the gospel "holes" in their stories so as to show them that their story can only be completed through the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Adapting a theology of mission from missiologist Leslie Newbigin, George Hunsberber, develops 3 relationships that must occur between the church, gospel and culture:



Contextualization includes Proclamation and Demonstration

1. Proclamation

Content: God's Story - connect the text or topic within the overarching story.

Ed Clowney points out that if we ever tell a particular Bible story without putting it into the overall main Bible story (about Christ), we actually change the meaning of the particular event for us. It becomes a moralistic exhortation to 'try harder' rather than a call

⁶ George R. Hunsberger, "The Newbigin Gauntlet," in *The Church between Gospel and Culture*, 5. Adapted by Jeff Vanderstelt

to live by faith in the work of Christ. There is, in the end, only two ways to read the Bible: is it basically about me or basically about Jesus? In other words, is it basically about what I must do, or basically about what he has done?

Method: Link God's Story to the People's Story - How do the gospel themes address your culture's hopes, fears, tensions? (1) Begin with familiar and show how the gospel confirms what is strong and good in the culture. Know the people's story extremely well. Show your sympathy with it. (2) But use the gospel to challenge and destabilize common cultural assumptions at points that they are weak or inadequate. (3) Finally, comfort and galvanize with the promises of the gospel. Show them that they can't finish their own story without God in Christ.

(Taken from Tim Keller's article on being context sensitive⁷)

2. Demonstration

It's interesting to note that in the Acts 16 passage only one of the three representative conversions took place through preaching. The other two are through a power encounter and the quality of godly character observed in community.

Maybe this is why Peter encourages the believers to *"Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have."*⁸

Before and after this Peter is encouraging the believers to live lives that are full of good deeds and effectively display Christ through actions.

Good Deeds: The Active Medium of the Gospel - The good news that Jesus came to preach had physically observable results (healings, miracles, loving the outcasts, etc...)

What would good news look like to your community? What are the 'signs of the kingdom' in your culture?

A New Humanity: The Visible Presence - The outcome of the gospel is a people who live together in new ways (eating together, praying together, bearing each other's burdens, sharing all they have with one another etc...)

What forms of visible expression does the church need to embody together to display the new humanity God is creating in this community?

Contextualization must continue to be informed by the Gospel and Mission of God so that we don't over adapt to our culture around us, buying into it's idols, and we don't under adapt to the culture, buying into the idols of our own Christian culture.

Contextualization [is] a delicate enterprise if ever there was one...the evangelist and mission strategist stand on a razor's edge, aware that to fall off on either side has terrible consequences...Fall to the right and you end in

⁷ http://www.redeemer2.com/themovement/issues/2004/feb/advancingthegospel_3.html

⁸ 1 Peter 3:15

*obscurantism, so attached to your conventional ways of practicing and teaching the faith that you veil its truth and power from those who are trying to see it through very different eyes. Slip to the left and you tumble into syncretism, so vulnerable to the impact of paganism in its multiplicity of forms that you compromise the uniqueness of Christ and concoct "another gospel which is not a gospel."*⁹

Dean S. Gilliland

1. What are the barriers to the gospel in your culture?
2. What forms might the Church take in your culture to better embody the Gospel?
3. What do we have in common and how might our particular uniqueness lead us to adopt different forms?
4. What have you learned about contextualizing the gospel that you could share with others?

Additional Resources for Demographic/Cultural Research:

www.newchurches.com

www.ethnicarvest.com

www.churchplantingvillage.net

www.peoplegroups.info

<http://link2lead.com/L2L/start.asp>

⁹ Dean S. Gilliland, "Contextual Theology as Incarnation Mission," in the *The World Among Us* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1989), vii.