The New Testament bears witness to the process of contextualization. The writings are themselves “models of doing context-oriented” ministry and theology, and they present “stories of contextualization” (Flemming 2005:15) in which the gospel is tailored for different people groups and cultures. Central to this account is the story of Christianity’s reaching the Gentile world, initiated by the “praxis of the Spirit” (Anderson 1997:117). In his threefold repetition of the conversion of Cornelius’ household, Luke identifies the frame and movements of Holy Spirit praxis, suggesting patterns for faith sharing across cultural and religious boundaries today.

Holy Spirit Praxis: A Frame for Contextualization

The face of Christianity is again changing. Some observe the center of gravity shifting to the south and east—even the “demise of Western Christianity” (Tennent 2007:8). For others, the West is simply presenting a complex new paradigm for mission (Bosch 1991:349). Certainly, the truths of the gospel are being revisited and retold through other concerns and worldviews. Andrew Walls demonstrates that such major transitions have
characterized the history of Christianity, that the spread of Christianity has been serial rather than progressive, and its resilience is “linked to the process of cross-cultural transmission” (Walls 1996:22), its translatability. He argues that this transmission often came just in time to save the faith for the world.

The first major transition of Christianity, from being solely Jewish to being Jewish and Gentile, was initiated by the “praxis of the Spirit” (Anderson 1997:117). The Holy Spirit’s activity is the foundation of the church’s missionary nature, and must be integral to bringing Christian faith into the majority populations and territories of not only primal but also the world religions, including Islam. The Spirit’s activity suggests a frame for participation, which could be called *Holy Spirit praxis*. To understand the implications for recipient cultures and people, as well as for established Christianity, this paper will first identify and define models of contextualization—giving particular attention to the presuppositions and structure of the praxis model; second, examine the story of Cornelius as a biblical case study for the frames and movements of *Holy Spirit praxis*, before finally assessing the model’s faithfulness to the mission and theological constants of the New Testament.

Models and Definitions

Attempts to understand and communicate the Christian faith must take into account Scripture, the interpretations that develop around it, as well as present human experiences—all products of cultural contexts. Contextualization is not something that is done with some theology, and not for others. The reality is that Scripture, which was written within a variety of contexts, is always interpreted within another, and delivered to another recipient context (Hesselgrave 1991:107-113). And, each context is complex.

Dean Gilliland compares seven models (Gilliland 1989:313-317) while Stephen Bevans proposes six, as a way to think about this “interaction of the gospel message and culture” (Bevans 2002:ix). Gilliland commends all those he compares (anthropological, translation, praxis, adaptation, synthetic, semiotic, and critical) for their “commitment to relevance and a focus on real situations in which people live,” but believes “the assumptions and methodology” of some “make them unacceptable” for evangelicals (Gilliland

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1Hesselgrave uses “a three-culture model of missionary communication:” the Bible culture, the missionary culture, and the respondent culture. For illustrations of this, see Nida 1952.
1989:313). Bevans suggests that his models (translation, anthropological, praxis, synthetic,\textsuperscript{2} transcendental, and\textsuperscript{3} countercultural) are inclusive, with no one working “to the exclusion of one or more of the others,” while some “function more adequately within certain sets of circumstances” (Bevans 2002:139). For a summary of these models, see figure 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Models</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Translation</td>
<td>The unchanging Scripture message\textsuperscript{1} is adapted using context as the vehicle for “a dynamic-equivalence translation” (Bevans 2002:37, 39; Kraft 1979:296).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthropological</td>
<td>God’s revelation and grace is found as “seeds of the word” in each context, with Scripture serving as a map and scrutinizer (Bevans 2002:54, 56, 57; Gilliland 1989:315).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Praxis</td>
<td>God’s presence and revelation is seen in activity—a process, a way of living (Bevans 2002:74, 75; Gilliland 1989:315) with human solutions, a danger.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adaptation</td>
<td>It is assumed that cultures share “one philosophical framework” and “the historical foci of systematic theology” can be adapted to fit each one (Gilliland 1989:315).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synthetic</td>
<td>A synthesis of models in dialogue with the four elements: message of Scripture, Christian tradition, culture, and social change (Bevans 2002:89, 90, 93, 102; Gilliland 1989:316).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semiotic</td>
<td>Truth is revealed through reading the “signs” of culture—best done by an outsider, thus a contradiction of contextualization (Gilliland 1989:316, 317).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transcendental</td>
<td>God is revealed in the authentic, converted, faithful, subjective experience of sought personal and communal understanding\textsuperscript{1} (Bevans 2002:103, 105, 108, 116).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical</td>
<td>Takes both culture and Scripture seriously, with exegesis of the former and fresh study of the latter, to determine a new response (Gilliland 1989:317).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Countercultural</td>
<td>While the context is taken very seriously, the gospel needs to challenge, encounter, engage, contrast with, and purify context (Bevans 2002:117-120; Cronshaw 2006:7, 8).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Contextualization models: summary of Gilliland’s and Bevans’ descriptions.

The praxis model is characterized by ‘reflective action’ (Bevans 2002:70) —typical of the prophets and consistent with the admonition to do and not merely hear the word of God’s desire (Jas 1:22). The central insight of

\textsuperscript{2}Gilliland raises concerns over the premise of “supracultural elements” (1989:314).

\textsuperscript{3}Bevans notes that an important presupposition of this model is that the human mind “operates in identical ways in all cultures and in all periods of history” (2002:105).
this model is that “theology finds its fulfillment not in mere ‘right thinking’ (orth-doxy), but in ‘right acting’ (ortho-praxy)” (Bevans 2002:70). Although Gilliland’s definition is essentially the same, his assessment of this model is not as positive, for he perceives its agenda to come “almost exclusively, from the socio-political context” (Gilliland 1989:315).

While the term praxis is not merely an alternative to practice but is a technical term, and while this model is sometimes referred to as the “liberation model” (Bevans 2002:72), because of the focus of liberation theologians, it does not necessarily suggest revolutionary liberation nor “justification for violence” (Gilliland 1989:315) although it always addresses underlying structures. Its key presuppositions are: (1) “the highest level of knowing is intelligent and responsible doing” (Bevans 2002:73); (2) God’s revelation includes his presence in history and in everyday life; (3) “theology must . . . produce change” (Gilliland 1989:315); and (4) “we best know God by acting in partnership with God” or, as the El Salvadorian theologian Jon Sobrino said: “to know the truth is to do the truth, to know Jesus is to follow Jesus” (Bevans 2002:75).

The Basic Movement of the Praxis Model

![Diagram of the Praxis Model]

Figure 2. Praxis model—a circular movement.
While the movement of the praxis model is circular, committed action is the first and foundational response in this model as portrayed in figure 2. The second step is theory development through reflection upon the actions taken and a re-reading of Scripture; and the third step is more action, but this time “refined, more rooted in the Bible, and . . . contextual reality” (Bevans 2002:76).

When the “praxis of the Spirit” (Anderson 1997:117) is identified as integral to this circular three-fold movement of praxis theology, deeply entrenched theological convictions are challenged and a revised frame for mission and ministry introduced. The conversion of Cornelius and his household illustrates Holy Spirit praxis, providing challenging insights perhaps integral to cultivating saving faith among major people groups.

A Comprehensive Case-Study

To demonstrate that mission makes the church and that “the impulse of the Spirit” was its heart (Bevans and Schroeder 2004:11), Luke selects and orders the story in his second book to show a movement in three societal spheres: Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, and the “ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The inclusion of the Gentiles grows from this mission statement of Jesus.

Following the martyrdom of Stephen the Hellenistic Jewish believers were scattered, resulting in the conversion of Samaritans—conversions that would have scandalized the Jerusalem Hebraic Jewish believers, for whom “Christianity was entirely Jewish” (Walls 1996:16). It is not surprising that the news of Samaritans accepting “the word of God” (Acts 8:14) got Peter out to the towns in Samaria and down to Lydda and Joppa to investigate what was happening. And there, he also received the call from Caesarea that would entirely redefine the messianic movement. While Samaritans could be described as half-Jews and the experience of the Ethiopian could be explained as “a rare exception” (Bevans and Schroeder 2004:24), the conversion of Cornelius and his whole Gentile household and their reception into the community of believers in Jesus, was a redefinition of the religion and identity of the early Jewish believers.

Told three times (in Acts 10, 11, and 15), this story of the conversion of Cornelius is clearly of great significance to Luke’s intent. There are five distinct parts to the story:

Unless indicated all Bible references are taken from the New International Version (NIV).
First, Cornelius a centurion in Caesarea, a “devout and God-fearing” Italian who “gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly” (10:2), had a vision in which he was told to send for Peter. After describing his experience, Cornelius sent two servants and a soldier to call for Peter. Meanwhile, in the second scene, Peter was being challenged to act in a manner entirely foreign to his concept of mission. As those sent by Cornelius approached Joppa, and while praying, Peter received a vision of “something like a large sheet” filled with “unclean” creatures (10:11, 14). When instructed to eat, Peter reacted for he had “never eaten anything impure or unclean” (10:14). He was told to “not call anything pure that God has made clean” (10:15). Hearing this repeated “three times” (10:16), when the call of the visitors was heard at the door, Peter heard the call of the Spirit to “not hesitate to go with them” (10:20). Going to the door, and learning their story, Peter did what was later to shock the Jerusalem community, he “invited the men into the house to be his guests” (10:23). The next day he set out with them, arriving at the home of Cornelius a day later (10:23, 24).

The third part is the narration of Cornelius’ conversion while, on another level, Peter and his whole community were also “being transformed” (Bevans and Schroeder 2004:24). After an awkward reception, Peter found Cornelius and his household of Gentiles waiting eagerly “to listen to everything the Lord” had “commanded” him to tell them (10:33). Acknowledging the Spirit’s activity in bringing them together, Peter began by telling them “the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all” (10:36). While still speaking of Jesus’ death and resurrection (10:39-43), to the astonishment of the Jewish believers present (10:45), the Holy Spirit descended upon all listeners (10:44). Responding to his own query (10:47), Peter “ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ” and then acceded to their request that he stay for some days (10:48).

The fourth scene in this dramatic story is played out in Jerusalem. Even though Cornelius was an upright God-fearer (indicated by his devotion, prayers, and alms giving), Peter clearly had some difficult questions to answer for he had stepped well outside the frames of acceptable Jewish behavior. Luke records that Peter “explained everything to them precisely as it had happened” (11:4), not failing to provide in full detail the vision he had received, the encouragement of the Spirit “to have no hesitation about going with” the Gentiles (11:12), and the instruction of the angel to Cornelius to send for him (11:13). Peter provided the additional information that this angel had told Cornelius that he would bring “a message through which” he and his household “will be saved” (11:14). Also, as the Holy Spirit came upon
this Gentile household in the same way as upon Jews on Pentecost (11:15), the apostle recalled that he remembered Jesus’ promise of being “baptized with the Holy Spirit” (11:16). Peter’s explanation persuaded the critics that “God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life” (11:18).

The surprising activity of the Spirit in this Gentile context was reshaping and redefining the mission, theology, and identity of the Jerusalem community. But the fifth and final part to this story is found in the theological “watershed” (Bevans and Schroeder 2004:28) of the Jerusalem council. Following Peter’s reiteration of his experience in the home of Cornelius, demonstrating that Gentiles as well as Jews are saved “through the grace of our Lord Jesus” (15:11), and reports by Barnabas and Paul of “the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them” (15:12), James spoke. Quoting the prophetic words of Amos (15:15-18; cf. Amos 9:11, 12), he found biblical anticipation for what was happening. God’s activity in mission was redefining their community for, as James noted, God has taken “from the Gentiles a people for himself” (15:14). His use of the term laos as well as purity language draws attention to the Gentiles, as well as Jews, as “God’s specially chosen people” (Bevans and Schroeder 2004:29), and the stage was set for the Spirit’s future activity, as well as tensions over identity in an inclusive messianic movement redefined by Holy Spirit praxis for God’s eschatological mission.

The implications for the Jewish Christians were huge. They could hardly have foreseen Christianity as a movement inclusive of the Gentile Roman-Hellenistic world. But through the Holy Spirit, God was present in their lives. His mission was theirs and he was known through cooperative and obedient action consistent with his activities, as well as affirmed by biblical and prophetic antecedents.

Holy Spirit Praxis

Jesus said that he would build his church (Matt 16:18) and commissioned his Jewish disciples to “make disciples of all nations,” including Gentiles (Matt 28:19); and this is what he was doing by his Spirit in the household of Cornelius. Luke presents this story as central to the Spirit’s initiative to redefine and translate the movement started by Jesus within the Jewish context to include the Roman-Hellenistic Gentile world. This story extends the three-step process of the praxis model, suggesting Holy Spirit praxis as a frame that is cognizant of the activities of the Spirit, biblical antecedents, and the obedient response of believers. Figure 3 provides a comparison
of the praxis model with *Holy Spirit praxis*, as well as a delineation of the movement described by Luke’s five-part drama. Again the movement is circular, with the activity of the Holy Spirit and the faithful obedient response of believers having major implications for the identity and mission of the whole movement of God.

The action of the Spirit is foundational to this transitional but inclusive frame:

1.1: The Spirit’s activities are not only local and particular, but are eschatological and defining for he brings God’s desired future. This was true of God’s visit to Cornelius.

Figure 3. Comparing the praxis model with Holy Spirit praxis.

2.1: The seemingly unpredictable initiatives of God challenge the worldviews and even theological frames of the believers, but their prayerful, obedient, and committed response achieves God’s purposes as seen in Peter’s response.
3.1: Peter’s response is one of action-reflection, inviting Gentiles into his home as guests, traveling with them, and entering the home of Cornelius; all the time processing what was happening in the light of God’s direct revelations, his recollection of the words of Jesus, and the presence of the Holy Spirit.

What happened next in this process was critical for the future of Christianity:

4.1: Believers in Jerusalem aggressively confronted Peter, but were persuaded by his careful analysis of the Spirit’s activities and his response in light of the words of Jesus. Although they could hardly have imagined it, their radical change of heart or conversion was critical for their ongoing identity as the people of God, and, although painful, their further obedient action as a mission movement also to Gentiles. Mission makes the church and they, perhaps unwittingly, had chosen a path of redefinition for themselves and cooperation with God’s future.

Luke’s narrative then moves to a case study of this redefined movement, a church of both Jews and Gentiles in Antioch where they were first called “Christians” (11:26). Antioch became the home church for the Gentile mission (13:1-4), resulting in further tensions with Jewish believers in Jerusalem, that resulted in the Jerusalem council.

5:1: Cornelius’ conversion story was again reiterated at the council in Jerusalem. It was now obvious that the future shape of this eschatological movement was at stake. In spite of Jesus’ statement of mission (Acts 1:4-8) the Jerusalem church and leaders had perhaps envisioned a national movement. But on the basis of the activity of the Spirit, the committed reflective action of those in the context of active mission, the response of the recipients of grace, the reflection of the church, and now the identification of biblical anticipation by the movement, the mission and faith community were redefined, providing the basis for the explosive transmission of faith into the Gentile Greco-Roman world.

While this model of Holy Spirit praxis is predicated upon the activity of the Spirit, “the work of God must be read and interpreted along with the Word of God” (Anderson 2006:119). Both authorities, the Scriptures and the Spirit, define the model. Ray Anderson writes, “As nearly as I can see, for every case in which eschatological preference was exercised by the Spirit in the New Testament church, there was a biblical antecedent for what appeared to be revolutionary and new” (Anderson 1997:124).
Evaluating Holy Spirit Praxis

The purpose of contextualization is to share the story of Jesus faithfully, to engage all people, cultures, and nations as disciples in community with God. Jon Paulien describes contextualization as “the healthy restatement of genuine Christian faith in a fresh cultural context” (Paulien 2005:218). By the Spirit’s activity in this process, he creates and recreates the church. Notice what is involved in Holy Spirit praxis:

It cultivates “contextualization in three dimensions” (Kraft 1999:1), our relationship with God and others, knowledge about God, and experience of God’s “power and authority” (Kraft 1999:9). This holistic focus is consistent with Jesus’ mission instructions to the seventy-two disciples (Luke 10:1-23): living and eating in the homes of the recipients (relationships), healing (power), and while healing, sharing God’s eschatological perspectives (knowledge). Charles Kraft believes these three dimensions protect from “dual allegiance Christianity” (Kraft 1999:10).

It provides for the process of “critical contextualization” (Hiebert 1987:109) which is dependent upon thorough dialogue between those sharing the gospel and the recipients through (1) the exegesis of the culture, (2) a serious examination of the biblical message to be contextualized, (3) a critical response to areas of convergence and dissonance, and then allowing (4) the community of believers involved to cultivate new contextualized practices and theology. Steps 3:1 to 5:1 (figure 3) of Holy Spirit praxis provide for this process, while protecting those doing the contextualizing from the blind spots of their cultures.

It acknowledges God, his will, and the gospel of Jesus’ death and resurrection as supracultural. While such reality can only be understood through culture and must “be contextualized anew each time it is applied to a different culture” with “new horizons for theological development” emerging (Gilliland 1989:225), the process of Holy Spirit praxis engages the recipients of the gospel, those sharing faith within that context, and the wider community of faith in understanding God, his will, and the gospel in the new cultural context. In this process the eschatological will and anticipation of God is understood in the light of prior understandings, biblical antecedents, and the historic provision of salvation through Jesus’ death and resurrection.

It safeguards from unhealthy syncretism. Syncretism is the “blending of one idea, practice, or attitude with another” (Moreau 2000:924). It is “the replacement or dilution of the essential truths of the gospel through the incorporation of non-Christian elements” (Moreau 2000:924). This can result from under-contextualization or over-contextualization (Hesselgrave
Under-contextualization may arise from a “rejection of contextualization” (Hiebert 1985:184, 185) or an “unhealthy reluctance to give up” one’s own syncretistic forms of faith and doctrine (Paulien 2005:224), while over-contextualization, which could be “uncritical contextualization” (Hiebert 1994:85), allows the recipient culture to overpower the claims of the gospel (Paulien 2005:224). While some syncretism is unavoidable, (Paulien 2005:4, 13; Bauer 2005:1:22) the frame of Holy Spirit praxis engages in “double exegesis” (Paulien 2005:229), which includes (1) the exegesis of Scripture through a group process, with a wide variety of people, at steps 3.1, 4.1, and 5.1, and (2) the exegesis of culture (Paulien 2005:233), again evident at steps 3.1, 4.1, and 5.1, but also through the Spirit’s analysis in Peter’s experience, at step 2.1. This process avoids the excesses of syncretism and cultivates what could be called “healthy contextualization” (Paulien 2005:225). See figure 4 for this new continuum.

![Figure 4. Continuum of contextualization and syncretism (Paulien 2005:225).](image)

It allows for God’s sovereignty and surprises. Reflecting on how God related to Abraham, Judah, Isaiah, and Esther, Paulien observes that “no matter how familiar we may be with Scripture, we cannot totally predict how God will act in any given circumstance” (Paulien 2005:243). Joshua Massey says, “His ways are not our orthodoxy” (2004:296). The Jewish believers in Jerusalem never thought that God would ask them to relate differently to Gentiles—it needed the activity of the Spirit, their committed and obedient response, and biblical antecedents to convince them.

It affirms the theological constants of Christian mission. It engages those sharing faith, their faith community, and the wider movement in asking the persistent and necessary questions about the relationships of Christology, salvation, eschatology, ecclesiology, anthropology, and culture in each context (Bevans and Schroeder 2004:37). Each of these was central to the five parts of the story of Cornelius.

However, this frame of Holy Spirit praxis also presents some challenges. It did for the leaders and church in Jerusalem and it does for us today. The five part drama of the conversion of Cornelius’ Gentile household, and the
ongoing repercussions and debates provide the backdrop to Luke’s narrative. These and the decisions of the Jerusalem council reshaped the identity of future Christianity, therefore suggesting that this frame of *Holy Spirit praxis* is more than an isolated case study. Although uncomfortable, due consideration should be given to the following suggestions:

1. It is “glocal” (Roberts 2007:14). The specific instructions of the Spirit in a local situation, for example in the home of a Gentile, had global implications for unreached people groups and for church.

2. It redefines the church. This was a painful process for the Hebraic Jewish believers and leaders in Jerusalem. While, as leaders in Jerusalem, Peter and James contributed significantly to the debates of the council and gave their assent to the decisions, it is evident they vacillated in the application. The “certain men” who continued to stir up dissention in Antioch over the grace of God being extended to Gentiles were clearly associates of James (Gal 2:12; Oosterwal 1989:21). The church is “created and recreated through the praxis of the Spirit,” liberating it from “its tendency to institutionalize the Word” (Anderson 1997:128).

3. It is prophetic. As well as communicating the gospel in ways that make “sense to people within their local cultural context,” Darrell Whiteman argues that “good contextualization offends.” This is not due to cultural offense, but when the gospel is shared and the church organized “along appropriate cultural patterns . . . people will more likely be confronted with the offense of the gospel, exposing their own sinfulness and the tendency toward evil, oppressive structures and behavior patterns within their culture” (Whiteman 1997:2-3). Such contextualized expressions are prophetic, expanding the ways in which the gospel is understood and the kingdom of God experienced (Whiteman 1997:4).

4. It confronts prejudice. Whether Cornelius and his Gentile household, Peter and the “circumcised believers” who accompanied him (Acts 10:45), the other “apostles . . . throughout Judea,” or the critical “circumcised believers” in Jerusalem (Acts 11:1, 2), their captivity to culture and unrecognized prejudices were exposed. All were confronted with the “offense of the Gospel” (Whiteman 1997:3) that the grace and salvation of God was for all, whether Jew or Gentile.

5. It suggests that mission shapes the message and movement. In that structures, status, and behavioral patterns reflect cultures, Paul was uncompromising in applying the revelations of the Spirit’s will to the life and community of the established believers and leaders. He openly confronted ambivalence or vacillation, for such represented “a different gospel” (Gal
1:6), or “no gospel at all” (Gal 1:7) when compared to that received “by revelation from Jesus Christ” (Gal 1:12). Not only was Holy Spirit praxis for the purpose of taking the gospel across the cultural divide to Gentiles, it also reshaped the message of the gospel for the Jewish believers and recreated their movement of faith. The Spirit’s activities across cultural, religious, and generational boundaries today are not only for the purpose of reaching the multitudes of world religions and secular cultures with the gospel, but also the Spirit’s activities are designed to reshape the message of God’s eschatological movement.

The Jerusalem church and apostolic leaders struggled over this aspect of Holy Spirit praxis. The implications for their church were enormous. History suggests that rarely have God’s people been prepared to accept his redefinitions. Statements of faith, prescribed structures, and cultural traditions are allowed to pre-empt the redefinitions God desires. But Anderson writes, “It is not precedent that permits the church to move with the freedom of the Spirit, but a biblical antecedent” (Anderson 1997:127).

Conclusion

Holy Spirit praxis is a radical model for it challenges those of the institutional church who “cling to historical precedent” (Anderson 1997:125). It forces them to acknowledge that the mission activity and power of the Spirit must always define God’s people, and redefine their eschatological identity. Being bound to historical precedent may in fact blind the church to God’s eschatological plans and preferences, producing stagnation in institutionalization.

Furthermore, in that the presence and activity of the Spirit is the pledge of the eschatological fulfillment of God’s promises in “anticipation of the return of Christ” (Anderson 1997:120), his actions suggest what God desires to be reality at the end, not just in the first century. We can therefore expect that “the Spirit will more and more prepare the church to be the church that Christ desires to see when he returns, not the one he left in the first century” (Anderson 1997:122).

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