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Faithful contextualization: *Crossing boundaries of culture with the eternal gospel*

The church is now called to carry the everlasting gospel to more people in more diverse cultures than ever before. When the early Christian church launched its evangelism in obedience to Christ's great commission, the world population is estimated to have been about 285 million.¹ By A.D. 1000, the world population rose to about 300 million; by 1800 about 970 million; by 1900 about 1.65 billion; and by 2000 more than 6 billion. Today, the world's population exceeds 7 billion and is growing rapidly. Since 1900, about one-third of humankind has been Christian.

The great numerical challenge of mission is augmented by major cultural and religious challenges. Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, Animists, and Agnostics have some things in common: they shop for high-fashion clothes, use iPhones, and post messages on Facebook; but the differences that divide them have become starker. To reach them, the church must cross the ever-widening chasms of faith and culture. Two-thirds of humanity are non-Christian, yet the great majority of converts to the Adventist Church are from the one-third who are already Christian.

In spite of major cultural and religious boundaries needing to be

crossed, we often use one-size-fits-all, habituated strategies. The same methods developed for Methodists or Baptists are used to reach Muslims and Buddhists. Sometimes we identify the Adventist message with a particular method of sharing the message. The same sermons may be preached in the same sequence with the addition of ethnically appropriate pictures and local sermon illustrations. These adaptations could be appropriate, but many times they do not go far enough. As a result, many spiritually receptive people do not hear the universal gospel in a way that is credible and understandable. When people do accept Christ, they sometimes retain cultural elements that are unbiblical and discard others that are biblically acceptable or neutral. Hence, the need to understand the important topic of contextualization.

Understanding contextualization

"Although the term *contextualization* was quite recently minted, the *activity* of expressing and embodying the gospel in context-sensitive ways has characterized the Christian mission from the very beginning."²

The word *contextualization*, coined in 1972 by Shoki Coe of Taiwan, can raise questions and fears. Some fear that

contextualization necessarily means abandoning the primacy of the Bible for the sake of being culturally relevant. This discussion seeks to demonstrate that faithful contextualization can actually deepen a person's conversion and discipleship. Contextualization is necessary, not only for peoples far away but for multigenerational Christians in predominantly Christian countries whose culture evolves constantly, often in unbiblical ways.

The starting point in understanding faithful contextualization is to affirm that the Word of God is the absolute, universal, unchanging rule of faith and practice for humans in every time, place, and culture. The scriptural design for human life, summarized in the Decalogue and encapsulated in Christ's command to "love the LORD your God" and "love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:37-39, NKJV), applies to all.

The next point is to understand the scriptural perspective of culture. At Creation, God made Adam and Eve to be both individual and corporate creatures. Their individual nature sometimes receives more attention than their corporate selves. Their corporate, or communal, nature was based on their relationship with the Triune God, who regularly communed and had fellowship with them. Their

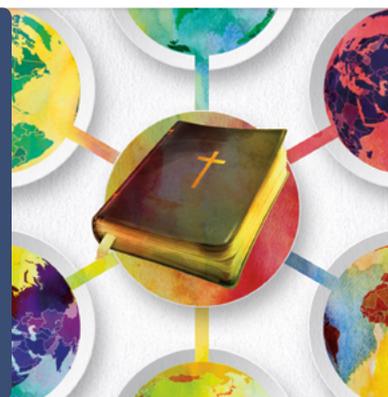
corporate nature was also expressed in their marital and family relationships. As they had children, the first family grew to eventually become clusters of families with multiple generations. Adam and Eve were given dominion (Gen. 1:28, 29), and that gave them both freedom and responsibility to decide how to use the resources of nature. In their exercise of dominion, they developed communal lifestyle patterns and behaviors that make up culture. Were we privileged to view the first family in Eden, we would have observed a perfectly sinless culture in operation.

The most profound instance of God's identification with human culture is the Incarnation. The Creator became Jesus of Nazareth, who was not a generic human being but a member of a particular cultural group, living in a particular village, in a specific time period. As the apostles inaugurated the earliest church, the pattern of Christ's incarnation was followed. The eternal, unchanging gospel of Jesus reached beyond the cultural characteristics of Jerusalem and Galilee to those of Corinth, Philippi, and Rome. A Roman believer did not need to adopt the cultural styles of believers in Jerusalem,

of ideas, feelings, and values and their associated patterns of behaviors and products shared by a group of people who organize and regulate what they think, feel and do.³ Underlying culture is a set of deep assumptions about the nature of reality called *worldview*. To be effective, cross-cultural mission must reach well beyond the surface level elements of culture.

To summarize our discussion thus far on contextualization: various words, such as *accommodation*, *adaptation*, *inculturation*, *indigenization*, and *nativization*, have been used to name the process of carrying the gospel into the

Today, as in biblical times, everyone who reads or hears the Bible uses cultural lenses or filters to understand and apply it to themselves.



The Fall perverted both the individual and corporate cultural dimensions of humanity. After God scattered humanity at Babel (Gen. 11), people groups developed widely different cultures as they spread around the globe. The growing cultural diversity was neither good nor bad, in and of itself. To the extent that individuals and groups responded to God's gracious plan of salvation, they reflected His character individually and culturally.

God's love and respect for both the individual and cultural dimensions of humanity continue to be clear in the Bible after Babel. Biblical authors wrote from within their own cultures, using local languages and thought patterns. Between Genesis and Revelation a vast range of cultural variation is exhibited in the biblical narrative of true believers serving God faithfully in different cultural ways.

which included circumcision (Acts 15).

Today, as in biblical times, everyone who reads or hears the Bible uses cultural lenses or filters to understand and apply it to themselves. Almost everyone who shares the gospel instinctively tries to make it credible and relevant within the local cultural context. The issue really is not *whether* we should do contextualization but *how* to do it effectively. The greater the religious, cultural, or linguistic chasms being crossed, the more difficult and challenging is the task. However accurate and Spirit-empowered the "sent message" may be, the communicator must not assume that the "received message" is accurate. "Receiver-oriented" communication, which asks how the hearer needs to receive the gospel message, is essential.

Culture goes much deeper than such externals as food, clothing, and music. Paul Hiebert defines *culture* as "systems

deeper levels of a culture. Evangelical Protestants prefer *contextualization*.

There are some variations of the word *contextualization*. Charles Kraft uses the term *appropriate contextualization*.⁴ This term can imply that culture is privileged over the Bible. Paul Hiebert favors *critical contextualization*.⁵ By *critical* he means the careful, intentional, selective, disciplined, thoughtful incarnation of the normative gospel into particular cultures. The term *faithful contextualization* builds on Hiebert's intention that the Bible be primary and adapting to culture secondary, although essential.

Thus "contextualization is at the 'mixing point' of gospel and culture."⁶ Just as Jesus, in His humanity, was a person of culture, so His religion is always embedded in believers of specific cultures. No "culturally generic" or "noncultural" Christianity exists, just as

no Christian exists who lacks individuality. When the mix of gospel and culture occurs, the resulting church community is to be “defined by Scripture but shaped by culture.”⁷

The process of faithful contextualization

Faithful contextualization is both a process and an outcome. As a process, it starts with critiquing my own cultural practice of Christianity so that it remains biblically faithful and culturally appropriate in my ever-evolving culture. Confronting the way I live within my own culture becomes absolutely essential before I engage in cross-cultural mission. A look into my own so-called “Christian culture” in the United States quickly reveals that there are pitfalls to avoid at the “mixing point” of the Bible and culture. The principles of the Bible are very imperfectly embodied in my own mother culture, even with its Christian heritage of centuries. If that is the case, the task of leading peoples who have no Christian heritage to mature Christian discipleship can be seen as a long and demanding process.

Cross-cultural contextualization is “the process whereby Christians adapt the forms, content, and praxis of the Christian faith so as to communicate it to the minds and hearts of people with other cultural backgrounds. The goal is to make the Christian faith as a whole—not only the message but also the means of living out of our faith in the local setting—understandable.”⁸ The greater the cultural-linguistic-religious distance between the missionary and the recipient, the greater and more patient the effort will need to be. Merely transplanting the missionary’s way of being a Christian is both impossible and unacceptable. Doing mission among peoples of varying persuasions—Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, etc.—requires long-term service that includes knowing the language and culture in order to embed successfully Christianity within their cultures.

The process of cross-cultural contextualization includes several steps, of which five may be noted:

1. Study the culture carefully to perceive deep underlying worldview questions and assumptions. At this stage, judgment of apparently unbiblical parts of the culture is withheld in the search for deeper knowledge.
2. Study afresh the Bible with the local culture in mind, asking “What does the Word say to this particular people group?”
3. Engage the local community of believers in a thoughtful, unhurried discussion about the local culture and the Bible. As specific issues are discussed, explore three questions: What is approved by the Bible? What is biblically neutral? What is forbidden by the Bible? The goal is to reach decisions by consensus because the local people understand their own culture best and will have to live with the decisions.
4. Identify functional substitutes to replace practices that are changed or abandoned. When people stop doing something, a disturbing vacuum exists that must be filled with something better.
5. Develop a transformational discipling ministry for supporting change that may include redemptive church discipline.

Consider an example. The missionary observes aspects of local funeral rites that seem unbiblical because they relate to ancestor worship. He or she does not rush in with prescriptive changes but starts observing and discussing each element of the ritual to understand the meanings behind the ritual. With the group, he or she identifies each element as biblically acceptable, neutral, or unacceptable. When the unacceptable elements and those needing modification are identified, the group chooses functional substitutes and designs a revised funeral ritual. They formally introduce the revised funeral service to the congregation and explain why certain elements of the old service were changed. When the next death occurs, they implement the new funeral service and afterwards evaluate the modified

funeral rite, making additional changes as needed.

The outcome of faithful contextualization

As an outcome or condition, faithful contextualization means practicing a culturally appropriate Christianity patterned after the Word of God in every dimension. Practicing contextualized Christianity includes experiencing growth in sanctification in personal behavior and lifestyle, family relationships, and personal spirituality in a culturally appropriate style. The believer lives as a cultural insider insofar as the Word permits and as a cultural outsider as the Word requires. The believer has a culturally appropriate Christian presence and witness in the surrounding community.

Faithful contextualization holds two principles in tension—the “pilgrim principle” and the “indigenous principle.”⁹ On the one hand, the “pilgrim principle” means that the Bible judges every culture and makes all believers foreigners in their home cultures. Peter referred to his audience as cultural “sojourners” and “pilgrims” (1 Pet. 1:1; 2:11, NKJV). Believers were to live “by different priorities, values, and allegiances than their . . . neighbors.”¹⁰ This means that when Indians step into an Adventist church in India, they should not feel that they are in a Hindu ritual, because something important and essential is different. The degree to which a believer must be a cultural alien varies a great deal in the contemporary world, depending on the degree of religious freedom. Christ’s “salt and light” principle (Matt. 5:13–16) teaches that believers should not take a more culturally alienated position than that imposed by their society or required by Scripture. For example, Christians in restrictive parts of the world may need to be secret believers, while those living in the United Kingdom, where there is religious freedom, should not live as hermits.

On the other hand, the “indigenous principle” means that the gospel can be incarnated into every culture. Believers need not adopt a foreign cultural lifestyle

to be authentic Christians. Churches should be places where people can feel culturally at home, with culturally familiar architecture, music, dress, liturgy, and communication styles that are in harmony with Bible principles. When Cambodians step into an Adventist church in Cambodia, they should not feel that they have gone to America. Except where Christianity is totally banned, the principles of the Bible can be practiced within every culture. Even in restrictive contexts, believers can and do live as hidden or partly hidden followers of the Bible within their cultural styles.

Peter advocated a “differentiated acceptance and rejection of first-century culture.”¹¹ A Christian should “live by the good values of society that are consistent with Christian values and reject those that are not, thereby maintaining one’s distinctive Christian identity.”¹² Thus, the Indians find something different from Hindu rituals, the

Cambodians find something culturally familiar and feel like they have gone to neither Brazil or Norway when they go to church. Clearly, the “mixing point” or “meeting place” of Scripture and culture, a complex junction, and faithful contextualization persist as a demanding task that has few shortcuts.

Conclusion

The goal of faithful contextualization is that the absolute, universal, unchanging Word of God will dwell in individuals within today’s particular cultural groups as authentically as Jesus dwelt among His own Jewish kinfolk in Nazareth. When this happens, believers will be authentically Christian and also authentically members of their birth cultures, immigrant cultures, or chosen cultures. They will be Christian and Japanese, Christian and Arabic, Christian and Chinese, Christian and American, or European, or African,

or Latin American—all around God’s earth. 

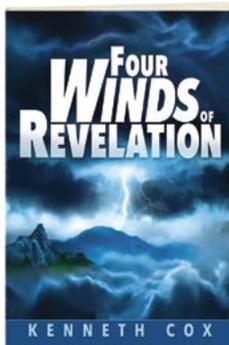
- 1 Population numbers are at the median point between low and high estimates for ancient times per the United States Census Bureau Web site, https://www.census.gov/population/international/data/worldpop/table_history.php.
- 2 Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2005), 15.
- 3 Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1985), 30.
- 4 Charles H. Kraft, ed., *Appropriate Christianity* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2005).
- 5 Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights*, 171.
- 6 A. Scott Moreau, *Contextualization in World Missions: Mapping and Assessing Evangelical Models* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2012), 19.
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- 9 Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 7–9.
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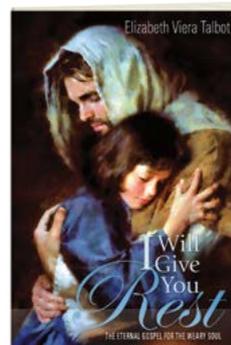
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