New Testament Precedents to the Practice of Contextualization in Contemporary Mission

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NEW TESTAMENT PRECEDENTS TO THE PRACTICE OF CONTEXTUALIZATION IN CONTEMPORARY MISSION

By Boubakar Sanou

Introduction
The biblical revelations were intended to reform or transform the beliefs, values and practices of the peoples to whom they were first addressed, as well as subsequent generations who would choose to follow them (Brown, 2006:127). In real-life situations, missionaries face many problems when it comes to issues dealing with the correlation between the gospel and human cultures (Hiebert, 1985:29). Throughout the history of Christian missions, one of the challenges has been how to be sensitive to different cultures and remain faithful to biblical principles at the same time. Unfortunately, sensitivity to local cultures has sometimes overshadowed faithfulness to biblical principles. Nevertheless, there is still a need to find ways of being both biblically faithful and culturally relevant in transmitting the principles of the Word of God. If we put emphasis only on biblical coherence, “we are in danger of being ineffective messengers at best, and at worst of communicating a gospel that is misunderstood and distorted” (Hiebert, 1985:141). In mission, we need to present the gospel in such a way that if people reject it, it should not be because it is a misunderstood gospel. Terry Muck and Frances Adeney emphasize that the contextual complexity of many ministry and mission settings requires the use of different approaches instead of a one-size-fits-all approach. To them the biblical record shows that “every time the gospel engages a cultural setting it does so in a unique way” (Much and Adeney, 2009:34).

Understanding Contextualization
Contextualization has been defined in several ways over the decades. I find the following two definitions to be the most comprehensive. Michael Pocock, Gailyn Van Rheenen and Douglas McConnell define contextualization as:

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 the faith out in the local setting—understandable (Pocock et al., 2005:323, emphasis in the original).
For David Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, contextualization is the “attempt to communicate the message of the person, works, Word, and will of God in a way that is faithful to God’s revelation, especially as it is put forth in the teachings of Holy Scripture, and that is meaningful to respondents in their respective cultural and existential contexts” (Hesselgrave and Rommen, 1989:200).

Contextualization is therefore a missional strategy concerned with finding appropriate means and methods of presenting the principles of the never-changing Word of God in the context of an ever-changing world in such a way that these principles are correctly understood by each context. As such, contextualization is not a one-time event but an ongoing process.

A number of reasons are given by scholars in favor of the practice of contextualization in mission and ministry. There are also arguments given to discredit the practice because of the risk of syncretism that might be associated with it. However, as stated by Dean Flemming and Paul Hiebert, contextualization is not an option in view of the fact that no single cultural expression of the gospel is ultimate (Flemming, 2005:138), because “all cultures can adequately serve as vehicles for the communication of the gospel” (Hiebert, 1987:55). It has been also argued that contextualization is part of God’s missiology from the time of the fall (Engle, 1983:86) and that “properly understood, the Bible is a record of contextualized revelations; a record of the way God interacted with humans in space-time history in the totality of their contexts” (Musasiwa, 2007:67).

What is argued here is that although the message of Scripture is timeless, its interpretation and application is not. In other words, to interpret and apply the message of the Bible properly, we must not only seek to understand the context of the original hearers but also that of its contemporary audiences. Emphasizing the missiological and theological reality of contextualization, Stephen Bevans emphatically states that among fallen, limited human beings, “there is no such thing as ‘pure’ theology; there is only contextual theology” (Bevans, 2002:3).

### Contextualization in the New Testament

The early church was also faced with the dilemma of relating the gospel to local contexts. Under the leadership of the Holy Spirit they were able to transcend cultural boundaries in fulfilling the mandate to take the gospel to the ends of the world. Scholars see several examples in the New Testament as precedents to the practice of contextualization in contemporary mission. The following four are explored here: the incarnation of Christ as a foundation of contextualization, Logos in reference to Christ, four gospels instead of one, and the decisions of the Jerusalem Council.

### The Incarnation as a Foundation of Contextualization

Richard Engel sees Christ’s incarnation in the first century Jewish cultural setting as a perfect model of contextualization. He observes that Christ’s incarnation as a human being serves as a foundation of “contextualization of God’s message without compromise. By means of the incarnation God perfectly contextualized his communication (cf. Hebrews 1-2). He met his target culture where it was and as it was” (Engle, 1983:93, emphasis added). Alluding to Jesus’ incarnation as a foundation of missiological contextualization, Gorden Doss argues that Christ’s “lifestyle would have been somewhat different had he been incarnated into another culture” (Doss, 2007:192). Finally, for Allan Neely, the prologue of John’s Gospel, especially verses 1 and 14, is foundational for understanding the meaning and implications of contextualization. He asserts that the fuller context of John 1:1-14 “suggests that in Jesus, God identified thoroughly with human-kind, and that God came in Jesus for the express purpose of disclosing not only God’s love but also God’s salvific intent for the world (3:16-17)” (Neely, 2000:474). Just as Jesus was incarnated into human culture, so the Apostles applied the incarnational model to the teaching of his Gospel.

### Christ as the Logos in John 1:1, 14

John begins his gospel by introducing Jesus as “the Word” (Logos). At the time of John, the word logos was loaded with different meanings. To the Jews, the logos “conveys the notion of divine self-expression or speech (cf. Ps. 19:1-4)” (Köstenerberger, 2004:25) or an agent of creation (Psalm 33:6). To Greek philosophers, the logos was the principle of reason that ruled the world (Campbell, 1995:395). With these different understandings, it was unthinkable for Greeks to say that “the Logos became flesh,” (John 1:14) because for them “the separation of the divine spirit and the mundane world (flesh, sarx) was an axiom of belief” (Burge, 2000:59). For that reason, to say that Jesus took on flesh was to suggest an image of lowliness (Parsenios, 2013:400). For Jews it was blasphemous to state that “the Logos was God,” (John 1:1) i.e., inferring “some personal identity between the Logos and God” (Burge, 2000:54). It was also shocking for Jews to hear that the Logos became flesh and made his dwelling among human beings because “the verb for dwelling is employed in the Greek Old Testament for the tabernacle of God. In other words, Christ is the locus of God’s dwelling with Israel as he had dwelt with them in the tabernacle in the desert (Exodus 25:8–9; Zechariah 2:10). Hence the glory of God, once restricted to the tabernacle (Exodus 40:34), is now visible in Christ (John 1:14b)” (Burge, 2000:59).

In this religiously pluralistic context it was a risky creativity for John to introduce Jesus as Logos to his audience (both Jews and Gentiles) since each group would be inclined to understand it from their cultural perspective. For John however, “the different understandings proved to be the key to begin a creative dialogue with his context and explain the Jesus tradition through this dialogue” (Sadananda, 2007:367). In this dialogue, John leads his audience to understand the Logos not only as a divine creative attribute or as a simple principle of order in the universe, but as a full divine being alongside God. John’s strategy demonstrates the necessity of using cultural concepts, for example, names for God, but infusing them with biblical meaning over time in order to make the proclamation of the gospel contextual, effective and meaningful. For Andreas Köstenberger, in John 1:1–18, John does contextualization by employing universal terms such as “word” and “light” to engage adherents of religions and worldviews in his religiously pluralistic context (Köstenerberger, 2004:31). A missional principle derived from this precedent is that the presentation of the timeless message of Scripture must be done “by using the cultural forms, words, and symbols of a people in order to better present that timeless message” (Bauer, 2007:246).
The Gospels

Why did four biblical authors take it upon themselves to tell the story of Jesus? Flemming answers this question by pointing out that:

If modern Gospel studies have taught us anything, it is that the four Evangelists have narrated the story of Jesus according to their own theological and literary concerns and in light of how they perceived the needs of their readers. We might even say that the four Gospels are 'four contextualizations' of the one story. The Gospels, then, form an important piece of the total picture of how the Christian message is reexpressed for new audiences in the New Testament. (Flemming, 2005:234, emphasis added)

The same story was packaged by each author in a different way for the consumption of a specific audience.

The Jerusalem Council—Acts 15

By the time of Acts 15, many Gentiles had come to faith in Christ. Their conversion to Christianity raised some fundamental theological questions. According to the account of Acts 15, one of the issues the early church struggled with was how to admit Gentile believers into full church membership. Was circumcision to be part of the terms on which Gentile converts were to be admitted? After a lengthy discussion they agreed that the Jewish "cultural specificities need not cross over the cultural bridge to the Gentiles" (Doss, 2007:195). Later Paul wrote that "circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, keeping God's commands is what counts" (1 Corinthians 7:19). Although the council refrained from asking Gentile believers to be circumcised and adopt a Jewish way of life as a prerequisite to full church membership, they were however required "to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality" (Acts 15:29). Gentiles were allowed to live by their own cultural norms as long as those norms were not in conflict with core biblical teachings.

The early church thus chose cultural diversity over cultural uniformity in faith expression. As a result of this agreement, "church life for Greek disciples was different from church life for Jewish disciples," and "the cultural differences that exist[ed] between Jewish believers and other believers no longer formed a barrier preventing fellowship between them" (Brown, 2006:128). A fundamental principle of the Jerusalem Council’s proceedings is that in our cross-cultural missionary endeavors, we always need to distinguish between our cultural baggage and biblical principles.

Conclusion

Although every culture needs to be transformed by the Spirit and the Word of God (Pierson, 2009:257), it is still essential that the communication of the gospel, in whatever setting, seeks to make the gospel concepts and ideas relevant to people within their own cultures (Hiebert, 1985:55). However, the need to be culturally appropriate always should be closely coupled with an in-depth analysis of the Scriptures. Because "people can only understand that which is part of their cultural frame of reference" (Rogers, 2004:65), the presentation of the gospel must be both biblically sound and culturally relevant in order to be meaningful to the receiving peoples.

Works Cited


