



FIRST-PERSON: Reclaiming contextualization

By David Sills

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LOUISVILLE, Ky. (BP)--Preachers and missionaries must continually strive to communicate the Gospel so their hearers may understand the message and embrace Christ as their only hope of salvation. Effective Gospel communicators take into consideration their cultural context, especially when preaching to the unreached or unchurched.

Today, a controversial debate, pitting brother against brother, is brewing, and threatens to boil over. John MacArthur, Phil Johnson and others speak of contextualization negatively and believe that it obscures the Gospel. Mark Driscoll and others advocate what they call contextualization as the only way to make the Gospel relative to people today. Unfortunately, the rhetoric swirls around the use of foul language and sexual references in the pulpit. The result is an inaccurate use of the term contextualization that threatens this essential tool of Christian communicators.



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Some mistakenly believe that contextualization means making Christianity look just like the culture. However, contextualization is simply the process of making the Gospel understood. The only reason to utilize filthy language or to reference explicit sexual behavior would be if the local culture communicated using filthy language in every conversation so much that no message would make sense without it. Of course, this is not the case. In fact, much of what many call contextualization is simply an effort to be trendy and edgy. It may be effective, it may attract a hearing, it may not be offensive to the hearers, but that is not contextualization; that is marketing.

Others argue Paul never contextualized the Gospel and so they do not either. They have labeled the other extreme's use of foul language or sexual themes in sermons as contextualization, and have thrown the baby out with the bath water. The reality is that these very detractors contextualize every Sunday. They preach in English, not Greek or Hebrew; they wear suits and ties, not robes or togas; and they illustrate their sermons with modern life, not from daily life of ancient biblical times.

When detractors of contextualization travel, even then they "contextualize" by eating available local foods, using the national currency, or driving on the left hand side of the road. When they preach or teach those with lower levels of academic attainment, they simplify the same sermon that they preached to a more advanced congregation back home. The problem is not the practice of contextualization; it is a misunderstanding of what the word means.

Paul wrote in Romans 10:13-15 that all who call on the Lord may be saved and then went on to ask a series of questions pointing out the importance of hearing the Gospel for salvation. Ultimately, he asked, "How shall they hear?" It would be pointless to preach the Gospel in English to monolingual Mandarin speakers. Instead, we must preach the Gospel in culturally appropriate ways that are faithful to God's Word.

When missionaries and preachers seek to contextualize the Gospel, they may wonder how far is far enough and how far is too far. Paul gives us those guidelines. He wrote in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 that he made adjustments in every lawful way so as to relate the Gospel to his hearers in ways they could understand. He also gave the parameters in verse 23 where he wrote, "I do it all for the sake of the Gospel." The glory of God and reverence for His revelation should guide us in the limits of contextualization so that we never say or do anything that would bring reproach on Him or alter the Gospel message. The goal of contextualization is to be culturally relevant and faithful to God's Word.

Cultural relativism is another misunderstood term that helps us understand the process of contextualization. When secular anthropologists study cultures, they often see them as silos, distinct from others and as a universe in themselves. With such a mindset, they say that the culture that kills the second twin is not committing murder if the culture does not see it as such. This perspective is often called cultural relativism since these secular anthropologists believe that no culture can be fairly compared to another. Obviously, Christians do not embrace such nonsense; there is a God who has clearly communicated what is sin and what is not in every culture -- no matter what the local culture may think.

However, in the extrabiblical matters, those aspects of life that God does not address with moral import, we have freedom. All things being equal, it is not more or less sinful to live in a house made of wood, bricks, bamboo or mud. Nor does it matter to God whether we wear leather shoes, tennis shoes, wooden shoes or no shoes. We can enter other cultures and communicate the Gospel in ways that they can readily understand, making the adjustments that are necessary for them to "hear it" -- especially regarding extrabiblical matters. Aspects that missionaries should contextualize include language, music style, musical instruments and clothing style. Contextualization adjusts extrabiblical aspects in response to the culture; the Gospel message never changes.

Critical contextualization provides the needed balance. On one hand, failure to contextualize at all adds extrabiblical requirements to salvation. On the other hand, allowing the culture to contextualize with no theological or biblical limits results in syncretism and aberrant expressions of Christianity. Preaching the Gospel to people with a pagan worldview results in confusion. Preaching John 3:16 to a people who worship a tree or stars or ancestors with no biblical understanding of sin may result in a show of hands at the invitation, but they will not have understood the Gospel and their need for Christ.

Too many missionaries in the past have gone to both extremes, allowing sinful behaviors or forbidding neutral practices in cultures they did not understand. The disciplined nationals can see sin that the missionary is unaware of and may never see, and they bring this cultural knowledge to the table. The theologically educated missionary can bring the parameters that 2,000 years of theological and biblical

reflection provide -- the fence around the process. Together the missionaries and the disciplined nationals will find God-honoring, biblically faithful and culturally appropriate expressions of Christianity for the culture. When studying a passage of Scripture, and how it comes to bear on a cultural practice, the hermeneutical community will see areas needing change and find functional substitutes to address the needs.

The current debate between dear brothers in Christ -- each of whom is defending what he believes to be the responsible approach to preaching the Gospel -- could be left for them to sort out since it need not involve us. However, the debate has grown beyond their two camps and is not happening in a corner; increasing numbers are listening, choosing sides and shaping their own ministries to mimic their chosen champion. Undoubtedly, the edgy language proponents push the limits of preaching and influence demographic segments of the USA population that desperately need the Gospel while the other side wants to preserve the sanctity of the Gospel and pulpit ministry.

An East African proverb states, "When two elephants fight, the grass gets hurt." Similarly, there are potential victims in this current struggle that are at risk, and we dare not overlook the danger. One is the pure Gospel message. I am not arguing for the merits of presenting the gospel by using what my Bible-belt upbringing would call foul and filthy language. Neither am I jumping on a bandwagon going to the other extreme and pretending that the way I preach the Gospel and what I wear when I do so ought to be fine for the entire world. My concern is presenting the Gospel in culturally sensitive ways that are faithful to God's Word. When the Gospel is offensive for the wrong reasons, many people will reject it without ever hearing and understanding it. Another potential victim is the unity that Christ called us to maintain. Jesus said that this testimony of unity would proclaim to the world that the Father sent Him and loves us. (John 17:23) A final potential victim is the missiological method of critical contextualization. Preachers and missionaries must present the Gospel in culturally appropriate ways or people will never understand the Gospel message Christ sent us to proclaim.

As I taught on the exclusivity of the Gospel in the Andean community of San Agustín, the elderly brother who invited me asked about his parents and grandparents. He explained that they believed in traditional religions and the syncretism of animism with Catholicism. Although their small village did not have a priest, one would come once a year or so to perform a mass. He told me that everything was in Latin and that his parents did not even speak Spanish, much less Latin. Then he asked me what happened to his parents when they died. "Where did they go?" I humbly explained that as I understand God's Word, they did not go to heaven if they had not heard the gospel and been born again. He thought for a moment and responded, "I believe that those priests will have a lot to answer for one day." I felt so superior and vindicated until God brought to my mind on my drive back home how many times I had preached the Gospel in ways that made sense to me with little thought as to how well the people were understanding my message.

Of course, we must contextualize the Gospel message so that our hearers can properly understand it. Shame on us if we ever debate that. The current debate may be over marketing techniques, but let us never sacrifice the necessity of critical contextualization.

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