

Missiological Reflection

Contextualization in Context

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Contextualization is the process of taking the Gospel to a new context and finding appropriate ways to communicate the Good News, so that it is understandable to the people in that situation. The goal is not only to make the Christian message theologically comprehensible in a local setting, but also the way of living the faith in church life and ministry needs to be Biblically and culturally appropriate. We should not narrowly understand the term as only the religious rituals of a particular culture. It also embraces the full-orbed experiences of human reality related to history, sociology, economics, politics, and ideologies. Thus, contextualization is applicable to the church in the West as much as to the church overseas.

In August 1971, a consultation of the Ecumenical Institute of the World Council of Churches in Bossey, Switzerland focused on the topic “Dogmatic or Contextual Theology.”¹ The expression “contextualization” then emerged the next year in the publication *Ministry in Context of the Theological Education Fund* (chaired by Shoki Coe of Taiwan)² as they established principles of financial distribution for graduate students of international churches. They described contextualization as “the capacity to respond meaningfully to the Gospel within the framework of one’s own situation.”³ The foundational concern of these institutions was that Western society dominated Christian theological reflection, and it had failed to address the incarnational nature of the Gospel in a particular cultural situation.⁴ Thus began a movement of mission theory and practice that separated itself from the colonial past.

Although the term contextualization and the resulting developments of regulating self-reflection may be recent, the notion of cross-cultural workers adjusting their message to local languages and cultures is evident throughout the Bible and mission history: from Abraham, David, and Daniel to Jesus, Paul, and the early church; from Stephen of Perm, Ramon Llull, and Matteo Ricci to Herman of Alaska, Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg, and to the present day. Furthermore, the ideas of contextualization in mission practice were embedded in the historic terms of accommodation, adaption, inculturation, and indigenization all used to label ways of expressing theology in non-Western contexts; and manifested in the visual cultural forms of dress, music, language, and communication all associated with what is known as the three-self missionary philosophy: to foster churches that were self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating.⁵

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The Early Church record witnesses promoting the contextualization of the Gospel. The Holy Spirit tailored each of the speeches in Acts for the particular audience. The design of Peter's sermons in chapters two and three was for a devout Jewish crowd. Paul's speech to the synagogue at Antioch of Pisidia is also appropriate for that religious congregation (Acts 13). Then Paul changes the content of his sermon for the people of Lystra in Acts 14, and the philosophers at the Athenian Areopagus in Acts 17. We need to recognize that authentic theologies for a specific cultural group are not a matter of science alone but need to be a Spirit-filled exercise. The missionaries of the first church preached the Gospel inspired with the Spirit's contextualized message for their receptors.

In Acts 4, for instance, the disciples prayed that they might witness with boldness and perform miracles of healing through their risen Lord. After they prayed, "They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God with boldness." A related aspect to this Spirit-speaking is the inter-religious conversation between the believers and people of other religions. The Holy Spirit empowered and equipped the Christian missionaries with boldness in this inter-religious encounter (Acts 13:2-4, 9-10).

During modern times, an understanding of how to contextualize the Gospel continues to be significant and crucial to the expansion of the church. Within Protestant evangelicalism of the 1970s and 1980s, there were emerging streams of contextualization such as the post-imperial missiology of missionary theologians such as Johan H. Bavinck, David J. Bosch, Michael Green, Melvin L. Hodges, Lesslie Newbigin, John R.W. Stott, Johannes Verkuyl, and Andrew F. Walls, all characterized by Western self-awareness rooted in ecclesiastical history.

Melvin Lyle Hodges was an Assemblies of God (AG) missionary to Nicaragua and El Salvador who in 1953 published *The Indigenous Church*, the first book of Pentecostal missiology⁶. This volume brought Pentecostal understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit in missionary activity, and highlighted that evangelistic churches were to contextualize their Pentecostal faith. In no small measure, Hodges' insights contributed to the significant growth of Pentecostals in Central America at the end of the twentieth century. Hodges defined the indigenous church as "a native church . . . which shares the life of the country in which it is planted, and finds itself ready to govern itself, support itself, and reproduce itself."⁷ He claimed that foreign currency creates reliance and affirms colonial models within mission agencies, which then leads to unhealthy and feeble churches. He encouraged flexibility of mission to suit the local church context.

Hodges' extensive influence upon the AG missions stems from his adapting Allen's missiology from a Pentecostal perspective (within an evangelical framework) by emphasizing the Early Church's Apostolic experience of the Book of Acts. In other words, he embraced the position that the Holy Spirit in evangelism and church growth is essential for contemporary mission work. The church is God's mission agency on earth, initiated via the outpouring of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit empowers the church in mission accompanied by the working of miracles and the healing of the sick. All persons should receive and experience the life of the Spirit to establish self-propagating, self-governing, and self-supporting local

congregations developed by national leadership, using their own language and culture, together with cross-cultural workers serving only as consultants.⁸

In the last three decades of the twentieth century, practitioner scholars such as Melvin Hodges made progress in expanding ways to accomplish contextualization. Combining with the voices of the post-imperial missiologists were the pronouncements of the mission-founded churches of the majority world, the Latino Liberation theologians, and the post-colonial missiological reflection of Latin America, Africa, and Asia. The critical stance of these peripheral missiologists towards a hermeneutic of distrust evolving from expansions of spontaneous growth embracing misery and poverty challenged the time-honored values of the evangelical heritage. From this hermeneutical ferment, the question bubbled forth: does truth come primarily from human cultural experience, or from God's divine revelation?

Through these turbulent debates, evangelicals began to take seriously the role of the believer's cultural context, in addition to the Biblical record, in shaping church planting and discipleship. Further, models of contextualization⁹ were entertained that dynamically moved along a continuum of variations in emphasis of human experience, Biblical and ecclesial truth, philosophy, and epistemological understandings.

¹ Fleming Bruce C. E., *Contextualization of Theology: An Evangelical Assessment*, Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1980.

² *Ministry in Context: The Third Mandate Programme of the Theological Education Fund (1970-1977)*, Bromley, England: Theological Education Fund, 1972.

³ *Ibid.*, 20-21.

⁴ Kraft, Charles H., ed., *Appropriate Christianity*, Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2005, 198.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁶ Hodges, Melvin, *The Indigenous Church*. Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1953.

⁷ Hodges, Melvin, *On the Mission Field: The Indigenous Church*, Chicago: Moody Press edition with changes from the Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1953, 7.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Moreau, A. Scott, *Contextualization in World Missions: Mapping and Assessing Evangelical Models*, Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2012. And Bevens, Stephen B., *Models of Contextual Theology*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1992.