

When it comes to communicating the gospel message, discuss the meaning of contextualization and the extent to which it is found in the New Testament? Demonstrate how your conclusions might be applied to a church situation known to you.

Introduction

The decline of Christianity in the West is an undeniable and tragic fact, one that has led many to seek new methods for reaching the lost. One of the main methods which has presented itself for this task is contextualization. In this essay I will consider what contextualization is, whether it helps or hinders Gospel proclamation, and accomplishes its stated goals. I will back up my claim with New Testament citations, and then use real-life examples to further demonstrate my conclusion.

Understanding Contextualization

Contextualization is a neologism.¹ Before the 1970s, it was a rare word. Yet, when the word was used, it meant “to study something in its own context.”² In the late 1980s and 1990s, it was picked up and used, “with a remarkable diversity of meaning,” by the scholarship of the secular world.³ The term was framed in its popular use, however, in the 1970s by a group of progressive, universalist, ecumenical theologians of the World Council of Churches (WCC), making contextualization’s first “public debut in the publication *Ministry in Context: The Third Mandate Programme of the Theological Education Fund (1970-77)*.”⁴

Contextualization is notoriously difficult to define. Since its framing in the 1970s, contextualization has taken on a vast array of definitions. A prominent explanation for the plurality of definitions is that both conservatives and liberals contend for the term.⁵ Julius Muchee and others have observed that the meaning of contextualization has been determined differently by both “radical” theologians and “conservative” theologians. Muchee, however, goes further and identifies that these are merely

¹ David J. Hesselgrave, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Modals* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House Company, 1989), 32.

² Phil Johnson, “Context and Contextualization,” *Pyromaniacs*, 24 March 2008, <https://teampyro.blogspot.com/2008/03/context-and-contextualization.html?m=1>

³ Ralph Allan Smith, “The Trinity and Contextualization,” *Covenant Worldview Institute*, n.d., https://www.berith.org/essays/trin_ctxt/01.html

⁴ Hesselgrave, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Modals*, 28.

⁵ Phil Johnson, “Context and Contextualization,” *Pyromaniacs*, 24 March 2008, <https://teampyro.blogspot.com/2008/03/context-and-contextualization.html?m=1>

“reactions” to the original idea of contextualization.⁶ The original idea of contextualization, according to one of the leaders of the WCC, was for it to be a “dialectic between contextuality and contextualization.”⁷

The original idea of contextualization transcends definitions because it is a dialectical formula. The WCC intended for contextualization to be a formula to be put into praxis, not a definition to be put into a dictionary. It is “a dynamic not a static process.”⁸ This dialectical process “is really the heart and core of the contextualizing activity.”⁹ Though other meanings can be attributed to it by both liberals and conservatives, the WCC intended it as “the coming together, in a dialectical process, of the *Missio Dei* and history resulting in a liberated culture.”¹⁰ The WCC and their allies called this a “theology of change,”¹¹ and also acknowledged contextualization’s interplay with Marxist ideas.¹²

Contextualization as a dialectic is the “involvement in the struggle for justice within the existential situation in which men and women find themselves today.”¹³ It is not primarily about proclaiming the Gospel, but seeing a “liberated culture.” Contextualization “is prophetic in that it is the Christian speaking to the unjust and therefore unholy structures of the present culture, and then seeking to transform it by changing these structures.”¹⁴

The basic formula of this dialectic is: *culture plus Christianity equals contextualization* (a synthesis of culture and Christianity). The hermeneutic employed in this dialectical process is a dialogical one: an everchanging conversation between Christianity and culture.¹⁵ Any culture that is seen to have stifled this process is condemned. Because of colonialism, the West is condemned, and African cultures are commended as being more hermeneutically capable of understanding Scripture.¹⁶ When a missionary

⁶ Julius M. Muchee, “Did the New Testament Contextualize the Old?” *Journal of Asia Adventist Seminary* 6 (2003): 54.

⁷ Hesselgrave, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Modals*, 150.

⁸ Hesselgrave, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Modals*, 31.

⁹ Marion Luther McFarland, “Culture, Contextualization, and the Kingdom of God,” *Christianity and Civilization* 4 (1985): 329.

¹⁰ McFarland, “Culture,” 326.

¹¹ Hesselgrave, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Modals*, 32.

¹² Hesselgrave, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Modals*, 88.

¹³ Hesselgrave, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Modals*, 32.

¹⁴ McFarland, “Culture,” 329.

¹⁵ Hesselgrave, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Modals*, 152.

¹⁶ Elizabeth Mburu, “Southeastern Symposium - Elizabeth Mburu,” Southeastern Seminary, 16 June 2020, <https://youtu.be/7VrKFWnjRPs?si=dpSzzqi81vXv-Nwc>

from the West goes to the third world, he must “purge the gospel of all Western embellishments... The gospel and only the gospel is to be communicated from one culture to another.”¹⁷

This hermeneutic of contextualization (a dialogue between current cultures, and between those cultures and Scripture)¹⁸ is at variance with the traditional evangelical hermeneutic, which Abner Chou describes as the faithful hermeneutic:

We ultimately should go back to the Bible to learn how to study it. Such an approach is not novel. In fact, evangelicals have traditionally used the doctrines of inspiration, inerrancy, and illumination to ground their understanding of hermeneutics... “the Scriptures doctrine of Scripture, espousing its own revelatory and inspired character, binds us to the grammatical/historical method of exegesis.”¹⁹

In his book, *Biblical Critical Theory*, Christopher Watkin lists contextualization alongside many other terms and ideas he considers dialectical²⁰ in nature.²¹ In the forward to this book, the late Timothy Keller (who is perhaps the most influential proponent of contextualization within evangelicalism), writes that Watkins’ dialectical Critical Theory is “exactly” what he has been calling for.²² For Keller, contextualization is the dialectical synthesis of Christianity and the culture. Christianity transforms culture by critiquing it in order to point to Christianity “as the source of numerous fulfilling counternarratives”²³ to the “baseline ‘cultural narratives’” of society.²⁴ The result of this, in many cases, is adapting Christianity to culture, not transforming cultures by the message of the Gospel.²⁵

Non-Dialectical Contextualization

Contextualization, through theologians like Keller, promises what the church today seems to be failing to do: fruitfully reach the lost.²⁶ Indeed, its framers promised that adopting contextualization would

¹⁷ McFarland, “Culture,” 333.

¹⁸ Bruce Ashford, “Principles of Theological Contextualization - Bruce Ashford,” Exploring Hope, 26 January 2015, <https://youtu.be/c3tk8d26Euc?si=NstUspTt-koWx26n>

¹⁹ Abner Chou, *The Hermeneutics of the Biblical Writers* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 2019), Perlego edition, “The Quest for Authorial Logic.”

²⁰ In his book, Watkin uses his own word to refer to his dialectical thought-system: “Diagonalization.”

²¹ Christopher Watkin, *Biblical Critical Theory* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Academic, 2022), 17-19.

²² Watkin, *Biblical Critical Theory*, xvi.

²³ Watkin, *Biblical Critical Theory*, xvi.

²⁴ Timothy Keller, *Center Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2012), 90.

²⁵ Sandra Van Opstal, “Sandra Van Opstal: The Western Church Doesn't Decide What's Christian, It's Only 10% Of Christianity,” Woke Preacher Clips, 18 May 2021, https://youtu.be/HiuiNXIyOwI?si=jkaKUvrnrGGz_6id

²⁶ Keller, *Center Church*, 13.

help Christians navigate “secularity” and “technology.”²⁷ Many conservatives, not wanting to abandon the attractive promise of this new method for reaching the lost, sought to adopt it within conservative missiology. Sadly, many of those attempting this often veered off into participating in the dialectical process. One such example is Paul Hiebert, as influential thinker and proponent of contextualization, who began by rejecting many of the liberal ideas of contextualization. To do this, however, he set “non-contextualization” against “uncritical contextualization,” from which he synthesized his “critical contextualization.”

Others, unlike Hiebert, hold to a non-dialectical concept of mission which many of them called contextualization. These Christians sought to define the term solely as a means of better communicating the Gospel amongst a group of people who are foreign to the messenger.²⁸ To them, contextualization was about rightly proclaiming the Bible, understood by the faithful hermeneutic, and helpfully applying the meaning of Scripture to individuals. They defined contextualization as “the cross-cultural communication of a text’s significance for today.”²⁹ These Christians saw the practical barriers of communicating the Gospel and sought to overcome them: language, overly religious and unnecessary terminology, a propensity to sin by living in an uncaring and uncompassionate way, etc. They did not shy away from changing culture, and indeed advocated for change – not through “the fusion of Christian and Marxist utopianism,”³⁰ but through proclamation of the Gospel and the transformation of human hearts.

Contextualization and the New Testament

Is the dialectical process of contextualization, founded on the dialogical hermeneutic between Christianity and culture, Biblical? Is a form of contextualization advocated for by the New Testament? Many theologians claim that this is the case, and that contextualization is prevalent throughout the entirety of the New Testament.³¹ Is this claim true?

²⁷ Hesselgrave, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Modals*, 31.

²⁸ McFarland, “Culture,” 327.

²⁹ Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2010), Perlego edition, “Introduction.”

³⁰ Marvin Olasky, *The Tragedy of American Compassion* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1992), 195.

³¹ “Putting Contextualization in its Place,” 9Marks, 26 February 2010, <https://www.9marks.org/article/putting-contextualization-its-place/>

Some theologians say that Jesus is the primary example of contextualization.³² Just as Jesus incarnated Himself into the world, we must incarnate ourselves into the cultures in which we proclaim the Gospel:

For the missionary... to communicate clearly the gospel, he must enter into the thought-forms of the pagan culture into which he seeks to introduce the message of reconciliation, much in the same way as Jesus was incarnated into the Hebrew culture.³³

Daniel Hames and Michael Reeves urge Christians to be cautious about this idea:

The incarnation we must hold out to the world is Christ's and not our own . . . As much as Paul describes his ministry in relational language as motherly (1 Thess. 2:7), fatherly (1 Thess. 2:11), and a personal example of holiness (1 Thess. 2:10), these are descriptions of the quality of his main activity: proclaiming the gospel of God (1 Thess. 2:9). Paul sees this proclamation as the key to his ministry because the gospel, not Paul himself, has divine power...³⁴

When Paul describes his ministry in 2 Corinthians 4:1-6, it is clear that his hermeneutic comes from Scripture alone, and that his intent is to see souls saved and see their lives changed. Paul's ministry method was clearly not dialectical, and his hermeneutic was definitely not dialogical:

We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God . . . For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

For Paul, everything was about proclaiming the Person and work of Jesus Christ. He did this by relying on the proclamation of the never-changing ever-relevant Word of God, not by relying on a unique and culturally relevant method.

Paul exercised tremendous freedom in his proclamation of the Gospel, but the content of his message was always coming from Scripture, and was always the Gospel. He would quote from non-Christian poets (Acts 17:28), but the content of his message was from Scripture.³⁵ He would sometimes begin his messages with God as Creator in order to proclaim the Gospel to Gentiles (Acts 14:15-17, 17:24-31), and he would sometimes begin with Abraham and the Old Testament in order to proclaim the Gospel to

³² Terry L. Wilder, "A Biblical Theology of Missions and Contextualization," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 55.1 (2012): 16.

³³ McFarland, "Culture," 327.

³⁴ Daniel Hames and Michael Reeves, *God Shines Forth: How the Nature of God Shapes and Drives the Mission of the Church* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2022), 120.

³⁵ Peter Mead, *Foundations: Four Big Questions We Should Be Asking But Typically Don't* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2015), 23.

Jews (Acts 17:2-3; just like Barnabas in Acts 7). In every case, his theology was based wholly on God's self-revelation.

Paul did not offer counter-narratives to the cultures' desires, contra Keller. His proclamation of Gospels led to radical cultural transformation (Acts 19:17-20), as did the ministry of the other Apostles (Acts 2:37-47). Paul revealed people's real problem (separation from God in sin; spiritual death) and their true need (reconciliation with God through Christ's atoning work; spiritual life):

For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:22-24).

To the Corinthian congregation, who looked far worse than the culture (1 Corinthians 5:1), and who were too focused on boasts of their spiritual superiority to care about the lost (1 Corinthians 4:6-7), Paul wrote that He sacrificed everything he had and was – “his rights, privileges, and ultimately his own life”³⁶ – to see souls saved and the church built up (1 Corinthians 9). As far as he could press his freedom in Christ for the sake of the proclamation of the Gospel, he did. If that meant being reviled, persecuted, slandered, becoming the scum of the earth for the sake of the Gospel (1 Corinthians 4:8-13), and becoming the slave of all (1 Corinthians 9:19), he did. As far as he could, he sought to remove any barrier to Gospel proclamation and individual transformation through that Gospel. If adapting to the culture helped his message gain a hearing, he did so (Acts 16:3). If adapting to the culture compromised the Gospel or Christian obedience, he strongly opposed such “contextualization” (Galatians 2:11-14).

Contextualization and Practice

I am involved with two churches within which we do missions, evangelism, and outreach. One is my home church in America, and the other is my local church in England. In both churches we seek to remove barriers that might prevent people from hearing the proclamation of the Gospel. We have translators who speak Mandarin and Spanish in both churches, seeking to overcome language barriers. In the English church, because the church is made up of people from many cultures, the whole church shares in meals and unique cultural traditions together. Through a partnership with the charity

³⁶ Tommy Clayton, “The Final Word on Contextualization,” *Grace To You*, 29 September 2011, <https://www.gty.org/library/blog/B110929/the-final-word-on-contextualization>

Christians Against Poverty,³⁷ the church relationally reaches out to those whom contextualization promised to reach, investing in their spiritual and material lives.

In the American church, we recently announced a new building plan to better facilitate evangelism and fellowship. This church has its own private school attached to their building. Because of cultural decay, the school is flourishing and facilitating many people joining the church who otherwise might not have. In both churches we host events that are fun and inviting for people inside and outside of the church. The focus is not on artificially diversifying our congregations, but on Christ, both by faithfully proclaiming the Gospel, and living in an intentional and compassionate way in our context.

Conclusion

Today, the church faces the threat of dialectical dialogical contextualization. This dialectic, while opposed to the faithful hermeneutic, is attractive in the many contexts Christians find themselves. Scripture calls us to look to God in His Word to know how we are to live, and what we are to proclaim. Contextualization, as it was intended to do, calls us to live and proclaim what we understand through the human synthesis of Christianity and culture. Instead, like Paul, we must proclaim the Gospel in any context and culture into which God sends us, by finding faithfully unique ways to do so, and letting God's Word alone shape our mission and method. The entire field of Missiology stands upon the edge of a knife. "Stray but a little, and it will fail, to the ruin of all. Yet hope remains while Company is true" to God and His Word.³⁸

Word count: 2,176

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³⁷ Christians Against Poverty UK, <https://capuk.org/>

³⁸ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring: Being the first part of The Lord of the Rings*, (Dublin, Ireland: Harper Collins Publishers, 2022), 357.

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