

Contextualization Informed by Scripture and Baptist Tradition

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Introduction

Those from the outside who visit a local Baptist church service observe people and their actions. They hear words sung, prayed, and preached. They may be greeted with a bow, a hug, or a handshake. They might see bread and wine¹ (or juice) consumed, or someone immersed in water.

¹ The *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* helpfully describes the use of wine in the first century setting of the New Testament. “Wine was an important drink in the ancient world and features significantly in the teaching of Jesus. In the ancient world, including first-century Palestine, three kinds of wine made from grapes were in use: (1) fermented wine (*oinos* [e.g., Eph 5:18], which usually was mixed in the proportion of two or three parts of water to one part of wine [*b. Pesah.* 108b]); (2) new wine (*oinos neos* [e.g., Mt 9:17; Mk 2:22; Lk 5:37–38; cf. Hos 9:2; Hag 1:11; Zech 9:17], the normal drink of the Qumran community [1QS VI, 4–6; 1Q28a II, 17–18, 20; 1QHa X, 24]), which was wine from the most recent harvest, made of unfermented grape juice (see also the reference to *gleukos*, [“sweet wine”] in Acts 2:13; however, note that both wine and new wine were fermented grape juice with alcoholic content and thus able to cause intoxication); and (3) wine in which the process of fermentation had been stopped by boiling the unfermented grape juice (“must” or unfermented grape juice). (A. J. Köstenberger, “Wine,” <https://ref.ly/logosres/dctjssgsscnddtn?ref=Page.p+993&off=184&ctx=three+kinds+of+wine+made+from+grapes+wered>. Joel B. Green, Jeannine K. Brown, and Nicholas Perrin, *Dictionary of Jesus and the*

These elements of a church service are observable, that is to say: local. However, as Paul teaches in 1 Cor 14:16-19; 23-26, visitors only partially understand what they observe through their experience. We have a responsibility to provide them with an intelligible explanation to *build them up*.

We should intend for first-time observers to understand better. We can do this through providing them a fuller context, beyond their experience alone. This context includes Scripture and theology (which centers our practice in the context of church history). First-time experiences *can* result in a clearer communication of the Christian faith, if we intentionally add information from the Bible and from doctrinal statements (like creeds and confessional documents, especially Baptist ones.)

The missional implications of this practice are plain: If we are unconcerned about first-time experiences as a part of our contextualization process, we are likely missing opportunities. We might not get a second chance to clearly communicate our message.

Each element of a local church service has a more complete definition that begins with the Bible and only then includes personal experiences. Understanding the perspectives of visitors from the outside is foundational for church leaders tasked with contextualizing the gospel in an understandable way. Contextualization, according to A. Scott Moreau, is “the process

Gospels, Second Edition (Downers Grove, IL; Nottingham, England: IVP Academic; IVP, 2013), 993.)

Jesus’ teaching to contrast the Old and New Covenants references wine skins and the process of fermentation in Matthew 9:16-17. In contrast to John the Baptist, who did not drink wine (Luke 1:15), Jesus did drink wine and was accused of being a drunkard (Mat 11:19), (Köstenberger, 994). Readers will remember the consistent biblical prohibition against drunkenness (Gal 5:21) and choose judiciously.

Depending on the setting, contextualization of the Lord’s Supper may look different. In countries with prohibitions against alcohol, wine substitutes are permitted. In other contexts, for some, this may mean the freedom to use wine substitutes to avoid quarrelling over opinions and “to follow after things which make for peace, and things by which we may build one another up” (Romans 14:1-15:7). For instance, one might abstain from alcohol in their daily life, but feel freedom to use wine in the Lord’s Supper. With this freedom, context and conscience will determine best practice.

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.”²

In addition to its usefulness for outreach, this kind of local church contextualization transcends reaching the lost. Our goals include discipling church members and equipping church leaders by connecting our practice to the Bible. This brief article guides the reader on an exploration of local church contextualization to:

- increase our understanding of outsiders’ perspectives and needs;
- encourage intentionality as members are discipled in their local church context;
- invite leaders to connect local church practice more closely and explicitly to the Bible and Baptist theology.

This article focuses on the following three elements: local church, pastor, and baptism. Each of these elements is local, that is, observable from our own limited perspective. When observed, each element communicates partial information. Observers may improve their perspective with more information from the Bible.

John Frame calls this approach *perspectivalism*. He identifies a problem: “We are finite, and our knowledge is finite. I can only know the world from the limited perspective of my own body and mind.”³ Frame also supplies a solution, “One way to increase our knowledge and our level of certainty is by supplementing our own perspectives with those of others. When our

² A. Scott Moreau, *Contextualization in World Missions: Mapping and Assessing Evangelical Models* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2012), 36.

³ John M. Frame, *The Collected Shorter Theological Writings* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2008), “A primer on perspectivalism.”

own resources fail us, we can consult friends, authorities, books, etc.”⁴ He continues “To maximize my own knowledge, I need the knowledge of everyone else, especially that of God.”⁵ The Bible does something for us that we can’t do on our own. It makes the unseen visible. Our interactions with the Scriptures, joined with our experience, make us aware of God’s presence, reveal God’s perspective, and clarify his intentions for the local church.

Improving Our Contextualization

Church leaders communicate the Bible in a way that enables those in their modern context to understand. We aim to say the same message we’ve received, but we do so with a local accent. Church leaders must be careful, however, to avoid jumping over 2,000 years of church history to privilege only the biblical and modern contexts.

As Baptists, we have a rich cultural heritage that we celebrate and continue to cultivate. We have ordinances, not sacraments; congregational polity, not state churches; and exegetical, not allegorical interpretations of Scripture. Missions is likewise a key part of our identity.

A proper view of contextualization privileges not only a biblical and a modern context. It also must incorporate perspectives from church history, especially Baptist perspectives, to truly bring forth a contextualized expression of a local Baptist church. We theologize (see contextualize) within a Baptist heritage.

This article aims to correct a possible misunderstanding about contextualization among Baptists: We theologize within a Baptist heritage—a theology that always submits to the Scriptures.⁶ However, any approach to contextualization that fails to consider real perspectives from church history, including

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Contrast this to the competing authorities of the Catholic church tradition: the Bible, church tradition, and the magisterium.

creedal statements as well as those of our Baptist brothers and sisters, fails to consider an essential part of our context: our place in time, specifically in church history.

The Biblical text also determines our context, because therein we see God's perspective on our lived experience. For instance, the Bible includes uses of the term *ekklesia* that refer to the church in a way that transcends only a local setting. (Eph 3:21, Heb 12:23) This knowledge is not gained from our first-person observation alone.

This article examines three elements of a local church to help readers understand how to better contextualize them in their contexts. Proper contextualization is found at the intersection point of the biblical author's intent, theological interpretations we've received, and the context in which we live.

Baptists unite our experience with a theology gained from studying the Scriptures in an intentionally systematic way. These systems begin with the Bible and include confessional statements like the *Baptist Faith and Message 2000* or the Particular Baptists' *London Confession*; systematic theologies; and sermons or resources written by faithful believers.⁷

Methodology for Proper Contextualization

Robert Banks' fictional account, *Going to Church in the First Century*, explores the first-century Roman church through the eyes of a first-time visitor.⁸ In his narrative, we see Publius wondering at his experiences in a first-century Christian home.⁹ Not all of Publius's assumptions are correct, such as his

⁷ For helpful examples, see: W. J. McGlothlin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Philadelphia; Boston; Chicago; St. Louis; Toronto: American Baptist Publication Society), 1911.

⁸ I disagree with Banks' exclusion of certain Pauline letters, based on his doubts about Paul's authorship. His definition of *pastor* fails to include info from the pastoral epistles. Despite this problem, *Going to Church* provides a helpful emic perspective. Robert J. Banks *Paul's Idea of Community: Spirit and Culture in Early House Churches*. Third Edition. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic: A Division of Baker Publishing Group,) 2020.

⁹ Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community*, 174.

observations of the Lord's supper from a ritualistic Roman worldview, but they are valuable windows into how local church practice communicates theology. Publius's misunderstandings are instructive.¹⁰ These misunderstandings provide additional warrant to Paul's admonitions about improving the accuracy of observers' interpretations of their local church experience.¹¹ For Baptists, this accuracy depends on their awareness of Scripture and Baptist theology.¹²

Missiologists divide observations about people into two broad categories: *emic* and *etic*. Emic approaches seek "to understand the meaning of people's lives, as they themselves define them."¹³ On the other hand, "Etic interpretations make the results meaningful to—or translatable for—outsiders."¹⁴ Improving our contextualization *also* improves the quality of emic perspectives (those of local church members) and not only the etic perspectives of visitors. When we intentionally provide rich description from biblical and confessional sources, accuracy of observers' and participants' interpretations increases.

Local Church

If you've been part of local church for a long time, it's easy to forget your first experience. When an outsider first attends a church service, can their perspective on the experience match up with God's perspective? Is the *church* a building? Is it the hour in which worshipers gather? Is it the people? Or is

¹⁰ Ibid., 181.

¹¹ Again, Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 14 is pertinent.

¹² We must also judiciously include those creedal statements that define orthodoxy as a part of our Christian heritage. These are not technically Baptist but are adopted as essential for our understanding of our real place in Church history.

¹³ Margaret D. LeCompte and Jean J. Schensul, *Ethics in Ethnography: A Mixed Methods Approach* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira, 2015), 23.

¹⁴ Margaret D. LeCompte and Jean J. Schensul, *Analysis and Interpretation of Ethnographic Data: A Mixed Methods Approach* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira, 2012), chap.1.

it the actions of the people gathered? What parts of this event constitute the *church*?

Misunderstandings abound for outside observers. They lack the deeper context for their experience. However, for many long-time attendees, if their understanding of the local church has more to do with their experience than the Bible, they, too, may be missing deeper truths.

The word church first appears in the gospels, in Jesus' teaching to his disciples:

[Jesus] said to [the disciples], "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. (Matt 16:15-18)

Jesus, in addition to making a pun on Peter's name (Πέτρος sounds a lot like πέτρα, the Greek word for "rock."), makes his identity as the Christ and the Son of the living God *the defining characteristic* of the church.¹⁵

¹⁵ The Catholic church interprets Jesus' statement as providing the rationale for the concept of apostolic succession. Peter is the rock on which Jesus builds his church. The Catholic Catechism teaches, "**881** The Lord made Simon alone, whom he named Peter, the "rock" of his Church. He gave him the keys of his Church and instituted him shepherd of the whole flock. "The office of binding and loosing which was given to Peter was also assigned to the college of apostles united to its head." This pastoral office of Peter and the other apostles belongs to the Church's very foundation and is continued by the bishops under the primacy of the Pope. (553; 642)" Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd Ed. (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), 233.

There are only two possibilities in the text that "this rock" might symbolize, Peter *or* his confession that Jesus is the Christ. A wider biblical context demands the correct interpretation. If Baptists were to choose Peter, following the sense of Catholic Church tradition, we'd by necessity also need to accept the authority of the Pope and the bishops as sacramental channels of God's grace. Baptist churches are obviously centered around Jesus as Christ and Lord, as directed by numerous examples throughout the New Testament.

In Israel's history, *Christ* meant anointed one, a definition that informed the first-century use. Jesus' identity is tied to the historic Jewish hope that God would send someone specifically to redeem his people.¹⁶ The church is made up of people who claim Jesus is the Christ as the central part of their identity. Around this central identity we build every other thing the local church is and does.

Visitors from the outside often have little Bible knowledge and lack familiarity with church history. Confessional documents are tools Baptists use (after the Bible) to transmit our defining theology. All Baptist theology should submit to the Bible, and Baptist history is populated by those whose identity included this kind of active, if occasionally imperfect, submission.¹⁷ In the *BFM 2000*, we read, "A New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ is an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel."¹⁸ This is a statement we ought to repeat often in our local church gatherings. Local churches should consider revisiting statements like these with regularity, and also defining each term in ways relevant for their setting. For example, what does *autonomous* mean? What is a *covenant*? Examples of Baptist theology, like the one above, are composed entirely of Baptist distinctives which find their source in the Scriptures. This practice includes necessary elements in our contextualization process: connecting our present-day experience to faithful models from Baptist history and to the source of our doctrinal beliefs, the Bible. In this way, our Bible-affirming theology can guide us and fill in knowledge gaps left by first-person experience alone.

¹⁶ Marinus de Jonge, "Christ," *ABD on CD-ROM, Version 2.0c. 1995, 1996*.

¹⁷ R. Stanton Norman, *The Baptist Way: Distinctives of a Baptist Church* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2005), 184.

¹⁸ Douglas K. Blount, Joseph D. Wooddell, eds., *The Baptist Faith and Message 2000: Critical Issues in America's Largest Protestant Denomination* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), Appendix 1.

Pastor

Visit a local church, and you'll most likely see someone who calls everyone to attention, reads or recites a passage from the Bible, and then explains the meaning. They invite their hearers to live in agreement with the Bible. This is the role of a *pastor*.

Most of us, even without having read the Bible, are used to the idea of a teacher. Pastors teach, but is *teacher* all that a pastor is? How does a pastor understand what he is there to do?

The role of a pastor is deeply rooted in Israel's history. The Israelites were nomadic people who raised sheep and other herd animals. Jacob, a key figure in Hebrew history, described God as a shepherd/pastor in relation to his people (Gen 48.15). Through the prophets, God promised to shepherd his people; and, in the local church, He provides shepherds to teach them (Jer. 3:15; 31:8-12; Zec. 10:2,8; Eze. 37:24-25). In 1 Peter, the author instructs local church leaders to willingly pastor the church in anticipation of Jesus' return.¹⁹

So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. (1 Pet 5:1-4)

The *BFM 2000* communicates the following about pastors: “[The local church’s] scriptural officers are pastors and deacons. While both men and

¹⁹ Timothy S. Laniak, *Shepherds after My Own Heart: Pastoral Traditions and Leadership in the Bible*, ed. D. A. Carson, vol. 20, New Studies in Biblical Theology (England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; Apollos, 2006), 232.

women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture.”²⁰ This doctrinal confession submits to Paul’s statement, here:

I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. (1 Tim 2:12-14)²¹

Baptist theology submits to the Bible’s instruction. Because the role of pastor includes oversight and authority over a local congregation, Paul’s instruction in 1 Timothy determines who may serve in this role. Our Baptist theology never supersedes the authority of the Scriptures. We begin with the Bible, and then look to Baptist theology. In this case, the *BFM 2000* does not include direct instruction on a pastor’s function. It instead focuses on biblical limitations for who may serve in this office, an issue relevant for its time and setting. Local church leaders should take care to present their congregations with doctrinal statements that explain how their pastoral role *and* function are defined by the Scriptures.²² To do otherwise risks sowing misunderstanding because of a lack of clarity.

Baptism

Visitors from the outside may wonder when they see someone immersed in water and hear a description connecting this action to the death of Jesus. It would seem like *baptism* provides no immediate benefit when assessed for efficiency. The same person who goes into the water comes back out, albeit

²⁰ Blount et al., *The Baptist Faith and Message 2000*, Appendix 1.

²¹ See also 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:6.

²² And this is why we benefit from incorporating Baptist confessional documents and theology written in a variety of settings and historical time periods. Baptists are a global people and the needs of our context might possibly be met by the faithful theologizing of others.

a little wetter. What is going on under the surface, deeper than water and words?

Baptism is a window into a relational commitment which is invisible from the outside, but significant, nonetheless. The BFM 2000 provides the following theology:

Christian baptism is the immersion of a believer in water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is an act of obedience symbolizing the believer's faith in a crucified, buried, and risen Saviour, the believer's death to sin, the burial of the old life, and the resurrection to walk in newness of life in Christ Jesus. It is a testimony to his faith in the final resurrection of the dead. Being a church ordinance, it is prerequisite to the privileges of church membership and to the Lord's Supper.²³

With our choices, we define our relationships. However, these same relationships also define us. Our identity is largely formed in relation to others. Since baptism symbolizes the adherent's faith in Jesus, it points to a radical reordering of the self and of deepest loyalties. Baptism is a public ritual that communicates a believer's new identity.

Conclusion

In summary, attempting to define the terms local church, pastor, and baptism based solely on first-person observation often leads to misinterpretations among insiders and outsiders alike. Our identity and practice as Baptists flows from the Bible and are summarized through confessional statements and historical Baptist theology. This article highlights the need for local church contextualization that intentionally makes this source material foundational to the life of the local church (incorporated into the liturgy, during

²³ Blount et al., *The Baptist Faith And Message 2000*, Appendix 1.

sermons, and emphasized in new member trainings) and intentional as an aid to promoting understanding among visitors and members alike. Proper contextualization begins with the Bible, centers our modern practice in the stream of historical Baptist theology, and pays attention to the needs of our modern context. We theologize now within the echo of Baptist thought. Our current efforts at the local church level will, likewise, inform the practice of future generations of Baptists.

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