Paul G. Hiebert and Critical Contextualization

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Christian missionaries are sometimes leery of the social sciences — specifically cultural anthropology. Having watched some liberal theologians who promote the use of social sciences deny one orthodox belief after another, some Evangelical missionaries refuse to even investigate the use of anthropological insights. Evangelical missionaries and other Evangelical Christians often fear that the incorporation of anthropological insights into missiology might lead to a wholesale acceptance of the philosophically relativistic worldview often associated with cultural anthropology, comparative religions, and other social sciences. Some other Christian theologians object to the use of social sciences because of the church growth movement in the late 20th century. This movement often made explicit and extensive use of the social sciences. As they applied these findings to missions, some missiologists and practitioners adopted a mechanical approach to missions as if conversions, church plants, and leadership development could be produced through reverse engineering. The outcome was not necessarily philosophical relativism but rather an approach to missions that tended to depend more on marketing techniques and business principles than on the power of the Word and the Spirit.

These reservations and fears should be heard and understood. However, the heart of missions is the gospel, and the gospel is a message that must

be communicated (Romans 10:14-15). Therefore, Evangelical missiologists and missionaries should seek to ensure that they communicate as clearly as possible. In the providence and kindness of God the Father, the application of methods informed by good cultural anthropology can help missionaries communicate the gospel message more clearly, so that lostness, the world's greatest problem, may be addressed.

Paul Hiebert was a missionary anthropologist par excellence. Throughout his career as a classically trained anthropologist and Evangelical missiologist, Hiebert demonstrated both academic rigor and evangelistic fervor that made his work vital for anyone seeking to integrate missiology and cultural anthropology. Hiebert wrote that the history of the relationship between cultural anthropology and missions has been "long and checkered."[1] He concluded his discussion of this topic by writing that "anthropology and missions are like half-siblings who share – at least in part – a common parentage, are raised in the same settings, quarrel over the same space, and argue the same issues."[2] Hiebert supported cultural adaptations being made in order to make the gospel understandable to new cultures. He wrote, "We must distinguish between the Gospel and culture. One of the primary hindrances to communication is the foreignness of the message, and to a great extent the foreignness of Christianity has been the cultural load we have placed on it."[3] The central contribution that Hiebert made to the field of missiology was that anthropological insights must be brought to bear on missiological issues.

It was Hiebert's contention that cultural anthropology can greatly aid missionaries in their work of evangelism and church planting by helping missionaries better understand the cultures within which they are seeking to

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[1] Paul G. Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts: Anthropological Explorations for Contemporary Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 79.

[2] Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts*, 126.

[3] Paul G. Hiebert, "An Introduction to Mission Anthropology," in *Crucial Dimensions in World Evangelization*, ed. Arthur Glasser et al. (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1976), 57.

communicate the gospel. As such, missionaries should actively seek to "learn how to ask the right questions in the right way."[4] With cultural anthropology informing the way we ask questions, we will come to a deeper and clearer understanding of the culture in which we hope to enter, share the gospel, disciple new believers, plant churches, develop new leaders, and continue in partnership. Specifically, anthropologically informed thinking will allow missionaries to be more effective when planting indigenous churches. By the grace of God and in the power of the Spirit, these churches will be more likely to stand the test of time and continue to remain true to the "faith that was delivered to the saints once for all."[5]

Critical Contextualization

Hiebert contributed several key ideas to missiology and the practice of missions, but his idea that has had the broadest and longest influence is critical contextualization. Hiebert's explanation and promotion of the epistemological position known as critical realism precedes critical contextualization in terms of logical sequencing.[6] However, critical contextualization was

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[4] Eugene A. Nida, "Missionaries and Anthropologists," *Practical Anthropology* 13 (November-December 1966): 273-77, 275-76. For an example of what it means to ask of the "right questions in the right way," see Jacob A. Loewen, "Missionaries and Anthropologists Cooperate in Research," *Practical Anthropology* 12, no. 4 (July-August 1965): 158-90.

[5] Jude 3 HCSB.

[6] A full explanation of critical realism is beyond the scope of this article. In brief, critical realism is the approach to epistemology that contends that while objective reality actually exists, our understanding of that reality is always limited and, consequently, should be open to adjustment. Critical realism developed within the philosophical discipline of epistemology. The concept can be traced to Wilfrid Sellers and his father Roy Wood Sellers. These two philosophers developed the concept of critical realism in order to explain the relationship between phenomenological perceptions of physical objects and the objects themselves. Paul Coates, "Sense-Data," in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* [on-line]; accessed 13 October 2010; available from http://www.iep.utm.edu/sense-da/#H7; Internet

Furthermore, Durant Drake explained that critical realism was developed in order to propose a way forward in the area of epistemology which avoided some of the pitfalls of other types of realism while also avoiding the idea that it is impossible to speak in any meaningful way about physical objects which exist outside of one's own person. Durant

actually Hiebert's initial and primary concern. Hiebert's desire to see the gospel critically contextualized was the spark that lit his interest in the topic of epistemology and his embrace of critical realism as the epistemological foundation upon which he would build his other missiological ideas. The purpose of this article is to help readers understand how Hiebert's thinking and writing about contextualization has impacted the way that contemporary Evangelical missionaries carry out the missionary task.

Critical Contextualization in Hiebert's Early Writing

The seeds of critical contextualization. Hiebert understood that communicating a message from one culture demanded more than a bilingual dictionary. Verbal language is one aspect of culture, but clear communication of any message involves more than the verbal aspect of language. Communication involves the whole culture. His concern for communication in missions undergirded the concept of critical contextualization (a term that he would not develop until later), which was evident as early as his 1967 essay "Missions and the Understanding of Culture."[7] In that essay, Hiebert wrote, "Missions is the communication of the Gospel. This means that the Word of God must be translated into a new language. Translation *involves more than replacing words and sentences of one language with those of another.*" Hiebert went on to write that the purpose of the article was "to show how an understanding of the fundamental postulates of another culture can help us to translate the Gospel and the church into a new language and culture."[8] Hiebert recognized that critical contextualization is not the easy way to do

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Drake, "The Approach to Critical Realism," in *Essays in Critical Realism*, ed. Durant Drake (New York: Gordian Press, Inc., 1968), 4.

[7] Paul G. Hiebert, "Missions and the Understanding of Culture," in *The Church in Mission: A Sixtieth Anniversary Tribute to J.B. Toews*, ed. A. J. Klassen (Fresno, CA: Board of Christian Literature Mennonite Brethren Church, 1967), 251, emphasis mine. This essay is Hiebert's earliest published work. It was published in the same year that he received his PhD from the University of Minnesota and was written for a Mennonite Brethren audience.

[8] Hiebert, "Missions and the Understanding of Culture," 252.

missions. This understanding led him to write that "it is easier to bring a potted plant than to plant and raise a seed."[9] The easy way, however, is not always the best way. Hiebert recognized this principle. As such, he promoted critical contextualization as the best way – but not the easiest way – to impact cultures for Christ.

Hiebert continued to write about the issue of critical contextualization before he applied either the label "critical" or "contextualization." For instance, in an article published in 1979, he wrote that "cultural translation is an ongoing process of communication, feedback, recommunication [*sic*], and more feedback."[10] The process that Hiebert hinted at here can be thought of as the basis on which he would later build the four-step process of critical contextualization. In an indication of his development of the process of critical contextualization, Hiebert recognized that this process of translation is not limited to an issue of language, but also applies to "thought forms, symbols and customs of a new culture."[11]

The first appearance of the term "critical contextualization." After having written about some of the principal beliefs behind the idea, Hiebert introduced the term "critical contextualization" in his article by that name in the July 1984 issue of *Missiology*.[12] In that article, Hiebert asked, "What should people do with their past customs when they become Christians?"[13] Hiebert went on to outline how this question has been answered in the history of missions. Many have completely rejected any and all old customs. Some have rejected customs from a position of ethnocentrism while others have

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[9] Hiebert, "Missions and the Understanding of Culture," 252.

[10] Paul G. Hiebert, "The Gospel and Culture," in *The Gospel and Islam: A 1978 Compendium*, ed. Don M. McCurry (Monrovia, CA: MARC, 1979), 61-62.

[11] Hiebert, "The Gospel and Culture," 60. Hiebert went on to write, "Just as the gospel calls people to repentance and new life, so it calls for new lifestyles, and the forsaking of cultural practices and institutions that foster sin." Ibid., 63.

[12] Paul G. Hiebert, "Critical Contextualization," *Missiology: An International Review* 12, no. 3 (July 1984): 287-96.

[13] Hiebert, "Critical Contextualization," 287.

recognized "that in most traditional cultures no sharp lines can be drawn between religious and mundane practices," and have therefore rejected them outright as well.[14] The opposite response was to accept any and all old customs into the church. This approach invited the development of syncretism. Hiebert offered a third way, which he labeled critical contextualization, as a way forward.[15]

Hiebert's Fully Developed Presentation

of Critical Contextualization

Hiebert's most complete presentation of critical contextualization is presented in his July 1987 article by the same name in the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*.[16] In this article, Hiebert traced the different approaches to contextualization as he did in the previous article. However, in this article he showed where the various approaches have fit into their historical setting by framing the conversation around a discussion of different eras.

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[14] Hiebert, "Critical Contextualization," 288.

[15] Hiebert presented his step by step process in this article, but I will deal with it in the next section when I discuss his 1987 article, since it is more complete (and more widely referenced).

[16] Paul G. Hiebert, "Critical Contextualization," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 11 (July 1987): 104-12. As mentioned earlier, though this is not his first article on the subject, it has proved to be the most influential. It is the fourth chapter in *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* and is also part of J. I. Packer's *Best in Theology* collection. Paul G. Hiebert, "Critical Contextualization," in *The Best in Theology* vol. 2, ed. J. I. Packer (Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today, Inc., 1987), 387-400. It should also be noted that Hiebert indicated that the data from which he drew to develop this model was taken exclusively from India. He believed, however, that the model would still apply to various cultural settings around the world.

The chapter entitled "Critical Contextualization" in *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* is very similar to the 1984 article, but it also contains an explanation of various aspects of culture from material to expressive to ritual culture. The focus of the process of critical contextualization remains on the question of what to do with old pre-Christian ways of life. Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1985), 183.

The first era was the era of noncontextualization that took place during the time of colonialism (1800-1950). This time period promoted the idea of cultural evolution and the "triumph" of science."[17] This era was marked by a refusal to change anything in one's approach to gospel ministry and missions. Hiebert went further than calling this era a time of noncontextualization; he called it an era of anti-contextualization that "was essentially monocultural and monoreligious," since "truth was seen as supracultural."[18] Hiebert admitted that there are some good things about taking a monocultural point of view to Christian missions. Namely, it preserves the exclusivity of Christ, takes history seriously, and supports the "oneness of humanity."[19] As will be demonstrated, however, the negatives outweighed the positives in this approach to missions.

Regarding the central question of whether old customs could and should be preserved, the non-contextual approach supported the complete and total rejection of local pre-Christian customs. For instance, missionaries who entered a culture in which drums were used in pagan religious rituals might have forbidden converts from playing drums during Christian worship services. Two negative consequences resulted from the non-contextual approach. The first seems rather obvious while the second is somewhat counter-intuitive. The first negative result of the non-contextual approach was that Christianity became equated with Western culture and was therefore seen as foreign. This foreignness became a barrier to gospel advance.

The second negative result was that the old customs, instead of dying out or going away as the missionaries suspected that they would, "went underground."[20] This hiding of old customs led to exactly what the missionaries who had rejected these customs were trying to avoid: syncretism.

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[17] Hiebert, "Critical Contextualization" (1987), 104-05.

[18] Hiebert, "Critical Contextualization" (1987), 106.

[19] Hiebert, "Critical Contextualization" (1987), 106.

[20] Hiebert, "Critical Contextualization" (1987), 106.

The resultant syncretism was not the conspicuous type of syncretism existing on the surface of a culture which is lived out in the public square. Instead, this syncretism existed in the private and family lives of individuals – away from the eyes of the missionaries. Hiebert's conclusion was that the non-contextualized approach to missions simply does not work. When non-contextualized approaches are used, the result is false churches planted and a distorted and false gospel presented which is no gospel at all. This failure became evident, and, as a result, the next era of contextualization surfaced.

As with the first era, the second era was impacted by forces outside of the world of Christian missions.[21] The end of colonialism (which was, in turn, influenced by a number of historical and political events), the rise of the postmodern approach to science, and new approaches to anthropology known as structural functionalism and ethnoscience contributed to the rise of the second era which embraced "uncritical contextualization."[22] As with the first era, this era had some positive aspects. First, this era steered clear of the danger of the gospel being equated exclusively with Western cultural forms. It was decidedly non-ethnocentric and sought to affirm the good that could be found in various cultures around the world. Second, this era also affirmed the doctrine of the priesthood of believers. This doctrine gave Christians in each country, culture, and people group the privilege to make their own decisions regarding the adaptation of the gospel into their particular cultural context and social setting.[23]

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[21] Hiebert does not give exact dates for this era, but it most closely approximates with the mid to late twentieth century. These eras should not be thought of as completely airtight, however, as many of the impulses from the colonial era survived colonialism – and still survive today. For a more complete investigation of different eras and their impact on missiology, see David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991).

[22] Hiebert, "Critical Contextualization" (1987), 108.

[23] Hiebert, "Critical Contextualization" (1987), 108.

As with the era of noncontextualization, however, the era of uncritical contextualization proved to have more negatives than positives. Hiebert listed several of these negatives in his article. A review of each point is not necessary, since his seventh point serves as a good summary of the previous six points. Hiebert wrote,

> There is an offense in the foreignness of the culture we bring along with the gospel, which must be eliminated. But there is the offense of the gospel itself, which we dare not weaken. The gospel must be contextualized, but it also must remain prophetic -- standing in judgment on what is evil in all cultures as well as in persons.[24]

Christ alone must be the cornerstone over which people stumble – not the sin-stained cultures of the missionary or the mission field and removing the stumbling block of a crucified Christ is not an option for Evangelicals.[25]

Critical contextualization was Hiebert's proposed solution to the problems found in both the era of noncontextualization and the era of uncritical contextualization. Critical contextualization is a four-step process that presupposes that there is an indigenous church with which the missionary can dialogue.[26] The first step in the process is "exegesis of culture."[27] In this step,

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[24] Hiebert, "Critical Contextualization" (1987), 108.

[25] Rom 9:33; Isa 8:14; Isa 28:16

[26] It should be noted that while the essay being discussed is Hiebert's mature treatment of the *subject* of critical contextualization, the most mature *application* of critical contextualization is *Understanding Folk Religion*. The entire book is organized around the application of critical contextualization among folk religions. Paul G. Hiebert, R. Daniel Shaw, and Tité Tienou, *Understanding Folk Religion: A Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 29.

[27] Hiebert, "Critical Contextualization" (1987), 109. In his initial article on the subject, Hiebert broke this step down into two sub-steps: first, recognizing the *need* to deal with this or that subject, and second, gathering information about that subject. It seems that in the 1987 article this first sub-step is assumed and/or incorporated into the thorough exegesis of culture. Hiebert, "Critical Contextualization," (1984), 290.

the missionary and the local Christians study a particular aspect or custom within the local culture for the purpose of understanding it. At this point in the process, they do not judge the custom being investigated but instead only seek to understand it from the perspective of the culture under investigation.[28] Putting it into anthropological language, an emic, or an insider's, perspective of the given custom is sought.

The second step in critical contextualization is an exegesis of Scripture and what Hiebert labeled the *Hermeneutical Bridge*. Once again, both the missionary and the local Christians work together. In this step, instead of studying culture, they study the relevant biblical passages to understand how the Bible speaks to the custom being examined. It should be noted that Hiebert stressed the role that the missionary and/or pastor plays in this step of the process. During this step, the missionary and/or pastor plays an active role in pointing the community toward a right understanding of the relevant biblical passages.[29] History has shown that most often, having access to the Bible and trusting in the Holy Spirit are necessary and essential but not sufficient to prevent syncretism and false teaching. The process of critical contextualization had to be guided by a mature Christian teacher who helped them to discover and apply the truths of Scripture to their precise situation and cultural context. After all, the Spirit has given the church teachers (Eph 4:11).

The third step of critical contextualization called the *critical response* involves the people evaluating their own practices based on the understanding they received from Scripture. This evaluation might lead to an acceptance of the old practice as it has always been practiced, an outright rejection of the old practice as irredeemably non-Christian, or, finally, an adaptation of

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[28] Hiebert, "Critical Contextualization" (1987), 109. Hiebert warns against any condemnation taking place at this stage saying that condemnation will simply result in customs and practices being driven out of the sight of the missionary.

[29] Hiebert, "Critical Contextualization" (1987), 109-110.

the old practice.[30] When the final option is chosen, the final step in the process of critical contextualization is put into practice. A new contextualized practice is developed by the people.[31]

This new practice is sometimes referred to as a functional substitute, and this practice develops in response to a crisis of belief within a given culture. For instance, many cultures around the world practice ancestor worship, and when a person or group of people comes to Christ, a crisis of belief occurs. They ask, "Should we continue to worship our ancestors when we know that God alone is worthy of worship? Isn't honoring our ancestors what God commanded in the fifth commandment?"

It is precisely these types of questions which critical contextualization seeks to address. However, contemporary readers might be frustrated, because Hiebert did not provide clear and precise answers to these types of questions. Instead, he provided the critical contextualization framework from which missionaries can work. One of the key concepts behind the process of critical contextualization is that the answers to these questions can only be found in real-life situations and not in an abstract discussion.

Conclusion

Paul Hiebert's impact on Evangelical approaches to contextualization has been broad and long-lasting. Countless missionaries have been influenced by his thinking and writing even if they have never heard his name. However, Hiebert's legacy cannot be summarized through a mere explanation of Critical Contextualization and its impact on missiology and the practice of missions. Hiebert's legacy runs much deeper than words on a page, ideas in people's heads, or even strategies developed. His legacy is in the lives he influenced and helped to change by the power of the Spirit and for the glory of God.

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[30] Hiebert, "Critical Contextualization" (1987), 110.

[31] Hiebert, "Critical Contextualization" (1987), 110.

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