

# An Inside Look at Contextualization on the Field

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Contextualization of the gospel is a primary work for missionaries. It must be done to clearly communicate the gospel message in another culture, but it must be done with extreme caution so that God's Word is not compromised. International Mission Board writer, John Rimmer, states:

The work of contextualization involves the collision of two alien worlds in an effort to communicate clearly. The more alien, the harder the work necessary to make what is understood in one world understandable in the other. These barriers to clear communication are not merely linguistic but can also include cultural, historical, and moral chasms that must be bridged in order to allow the transport of the gospel from one side to the other.<sup>1</sup>

John Piper points out that we as ministers of the gospel are not merely witnessing linguistic or geographic cultures colliding, but spiritually-informed and worldly-informed thinking processes are colliding. Piper explains:

As we think seriously about contextualizing the message of the Bible, let's remember that we must also labor to bring about, in

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<sup>1</sup> John Rimmer, "Christ: The Perfect Model of Contextualization," *IMB.org*, 25 December 2018, <https://www.imb.org/2018/12/25/christ-perfect-model-contextualization/>

the minds of our listeners, conceptual categories that may be missing from their mental framework. If we only use the thought structures they already have, some crucial biblical truths will remain unintelligible, no matter how much contextualizing we do. We must pray and preach so that a new mental framework is created for seeing the world. Ultimately, this is not our doing. God must do it. The categories that make the biblical message look foolish are deeply rooted in sinful human nature. “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned” (1Corinthians 2:14).<sup>2</sup>

We thought it would be helpful to talk to some IMB colleagues about contextualization. How do they define the term? Who has helped them to contextualize the gospel with their people group? How have they seen contextualization done well? How have they seen it fail?

I interviewed 6 people, representing our IMB workers in 6 different affinities. They are:

Lily Traverston\*—South Asia

Burt Gavin\*--Europe

Andrew Bristol\*--Central Asia

Chris Schilt—Sub-Saharan Africa

Anne Henson\*—North Africa and Middle East

Harper McKay\*—Asia Pacific

Here are their perspectives on contextualization.

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<sup>2</sup> John Piper, “Preaching as Concept Creation, Not Just Contextualization,” *Desiring God*, 10 April 2008, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/preaching-as-concept-creation-not-just-contextualization> .

## How do you define contextualization?

Contextualization is the process of considering something in relation to the situation in which it happens or exists. The root word *context* is a combination of two Latin words “*con*” which means with and “*teks*” which is to weave. “Missiologically, it is determining how the reality of the gospel weaves into the lives of those who hear it,” explains Andrew Bristol (CAP).

Bristol grounds contextualization in the reality of the gospel. Scripture gives us a spiritual reality and a moral reality that must remain the bedrock of our message. Good contextualization must always keep everything said and done tethered to this reality or the gospel message will be swallowed up in falsities or half-truths that are more palatable to the host culture.

This weaving of the gospel into everyday life involves considering how the missionary speaks and acts by recognizing and omitting cultural and personal biases, but it is so much more. Contextualization also involves understanding how the audience is hearing, perceiving, and processing the message. The latter is influenced by worldview, language, biblical proficiency, and preferred mode of learning.

In his book *Center Church*, Timothy Keller says, “[It] is not giving people what they want. It is giving God's answers (which they probably do not want) to the questions they are asking and in forms they can comprehend.”<sup>3</sup> IMB worker Chris Schilt (SSAP) uses this definition while also adding the caveat that often for cross-cultural workers, there is another dynamic at play. “In the missionary role, we cannot be so passive toward a culture that we wait on them to ask the questions or to assume they are even asking the right questions,” he said. As missionaries, we have the responsibility to raise the questions the gospel asks and answers.

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<sup>3</sup> Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced Gospel-centered Ministry in your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 89.

## **What (or who) has been helpful for you in understanding contextualization?**

IMB missionaries are well prepared when they leave Field Personnel Orientation (FPO) to go to the nations. Many of those interviewed mentioned this orientation as foundational for their understanding of contextualization. The teaching at FPO is effective because it is taught by experienced field personnel. These fellow laborers as well as the ones on the field in-country are good sources of wisdom—what to do, what not to do, what has been tried before and failed, and what opens up good communication.

Anne Henson found the most help with a faithful national partner. In her Muslim setting, the partner can effectively bridge the gospel to share in a way that doesn't water down the gospel and speak to issues that are hindrances to acceptance. Her national partner's prior Islamic faith and knowledge of the Koran allow her a unique understanding of the bridges and barriers to the gospel in her culture.

Chris Schilt learns a lot from the cultural practices he observes with his tribal people group. Although it is tempting to just shut down any practices that seem pagan or even demonic, he encourages missionaries to first seek to understand the motives behind the practice and what needs are being met by those practices. In this way, Scripture can be applied specifically to those needs. He uses a tribal dance as an example. Former missionaries prohibited the dance. This prohibition for tribal Christians resulted in new believers giving up the one thing that fulfilled a real need of the community. The community desired a relationship with the past and a way to deal with fear and evil. Christian teaching is rich in answering these needs, but the teaching being provided did not go deep enough into these felt needs. The result was new believers covertly participating in the dance and animosity with the missionaries.

Lastly, Andrew Bristol reminds us that understanding Scripture is pivotal in good contextualization. He differentiates between biblical wisdom and

biblical law. Biblical laws are those absolutes that operate beyond culture, like the sexual ethic in marriage that leaves no room for adultery. Biblical wisdom speaks to areas that are more open to contextualized negotiation, like the practical outworking of gender roles within a household. These categories can be helpful when parsing through cultural behaviors.

Lily Traverston also prioritizes the importance of Scripture in guiding her in confronting cultural behaviors. When sharing the gospel and making disciples she is careful not to base her guidance on her own opinion or her home church's traditions, knowing that the next missionary who comes along can do the same thing and lead people astray. "We may notice a sin pattern or unbiblical pattern in the life of locals, but if it is not Scripture that we use to address these matters we are simply creating more confusion," she said.

### **When has contextualization gone awry and why did that happen? What did you learn from it?**

Though our efforts are sincere when trying to reach a different culture and make the gospel understandable, we make mistakes. One of the most well-known examples of this is the *insider movement*.<sup>4</sup> An insider movement strategy encourages new believers to stay deeply embedded in their culture to bring others to faith in Christ. However, this requires the new believer to continue following cultural and religious practices, often replacing original meanings with his new understanding of Scripture, but doing so secretly, so as not to be outed by the community and lose any chance of influence. This syncretized form of evangelism and discipleship is not found in Scripture

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<sup>4</sup> One of the better-known proponents of insider movements defines the term in this way: "any movement to faith in Christ where a) the gospel flows through pre-existing communities and social networks, and where b) believing families, as valid expressions of the Body of Christ, remain inside their socio-religious communities, retaining their identity as members of that community while living under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the authority of the Bible." Rebecca Lewis, "Promoting Movements to Christ within Natural Communities," *IJFM* 24 (2007): 75.

and leads to a compromised gospel message and a compromised Christian life.<sup>5</sup>

Another *faux pas* in contextualization happens if we too quickly adopt practices we don't understand in order to fit in. Harper McKay adopted the local greetings based off what she had read about Muslim evangelism without realizing using the greeting identified her as Muslim. She was trying to reach them with the gospel, but they walked away thinking she had received enlightenment from Allah. McKay lived in a culturally diverse city in which different groups of Muslims had unique differences.

With time McKay and her husband found that some Muslims in general respond positively when they use familiar language, others are confused and some plainly do not like it. "I've backed off of a one-size-fits-all approach to sharing the gospel and have learned to listen to people first and adjust my approach based on how they approach me," she said.

Even nationals struggle with good contextualization when trying to present the gospel to the secular world. In Bristol's context, a local national church of believers from an Orthodox tradition carried some of their strict teachings about communion into their new evangelical church. These traditions erected a huge barrier for Muslim background believers who wanted to worship with them. "The lesson—even nationals struggle with the issue of contextualization—not just the missionary worker," he said.

## **How does language help with contextualization?**

Language learning is the backbone of contextualization. "Language provides a lens into the way people think about and approach their world. It gives insight into the complexities and priorities of a people. It often helps to

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<sup>5</sup> Dave Garner, guest post for Kevin DeYoung, "Insider movements: Why should I care?", *The Gospel Coalition*, 22 July 2014 <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/insider-movements-why-should-i-care/>.

uncover the underlying meaning of common cultural practices as we dig deeper into the linguistic intricacies,” said McKay.

Chris Schilt agrees. “Language learning itself gives a glimpse into the worldview of a particular culture. For example, some cultures love the passive voice because of their perspective on causation and shame avoidance. Others prefer very direct and simple sentences, which express their culture’s characteristics. Without some depth of language learning it would be nearly impossible to understand culture much less to attempt to communicate in ways a particular people can grasp and feel,” he said.

Bristol added the insight that language learning is about 3 cultures—yours, theirs, and the Bible’s. “Some people think about contextualization in respect to two cultures: the worker and the national. But there is also a biblical culture encompassing Hebrew and Greek elements through its history and language,” he said. “The Southern Baptist missionary must contextualize the Bible in its cultural environment before we contextualize the Bible for our national readers. But it is more than just language and history. It is also theology.”

## **How has contextualization been helpful in your context?**

Contextualization helps our workers clearly and effectively share the gospel with their people. Adopting positive characteristics of the host culture, learning ways of dress and speech that communicate respect to nationals, and mastering their language opens doors and earns respect. Understanding contextualization is also one of the best gifts we can give to our national brothers and sisters.

Schilt is training leaders in Africa. Part of that training is teaching them to contextualize the gospel for their own people. “We strive to help our students evaluate a cultural phenomenon, consider Scripture’s teaching about the topic, weigh a practice in light of Scripture, and then either leave a practice, embrace it, or change it. Critical contextualization is key so that authority

rests in Scripture and not on the foreign missionary, home missionary, or even local pastor,” he said.

Traverston in South Asia adapted to a culture of oral learners. She does not use linear logical argumentation and focuses on the Bible as a complete story. In every setting, it is important to remember that though the people do not have a biblical worldview they are not blank slates. “They have a belief system and motivations that go along with those beliefs, which influences their decision making at every level. If we simply place our stories in the belief system they already possess it leads to syncretism. We have to begin with God and creation and build a framework of Scriptural truth while making it known that we are sharing the good news of Jesus Christ,” she said.

Contextualization enables us to dig deep into a culture so that we can understand what people are searching for that they can only find in Jesus.

### **What are some best practices of effective contextualization?**

Our workers had a plethora of best practices to share.

1. Be a student of the Word of God so you can faithfully handle Scripture. The way the teacher handles Scripture in the classroom will be the way the students handle it and pass it on. How those leaders teach or preach the Bible influences the way the congregation will interpret the Bible. “Homiletics shapes hermeneutics.” (Bristol)
2. Trust the Holy Spirit to do the ultimate work of contextualization to make truth understandable at the heart level.
3. Listen and learn from nationals—both believers and unbelievers.
4. Have believers retell Bible stories or presentations in their own words so that you can learn how they think.
5. Listen, observe, ask questions, and listen some more—to the other person, and to the Holy Spirit.



6. Go deep in language and culture, learning barriers and bridges to the gospel.
7. Observe who is bearing good fruit around you and learn from them.
8. Continually point to Scripture as the authority, not yourself or your home culture.
9. Remember that the Bible isn't just for literary learners. It is a single narrative that invites me to participate in what God has predetermined to do in my world." (Bristol)
10. Form a close community of local people who are theologically grounded and culturally in tune.

As ambassadors of the gospel, we are called to do the hard work of taking truth (Matthew 28:19-20) to every nation, tribe, people, and language (Revelation 7:9). This task involves being students of the Word and students of the world in which we are going. In Acts 17, Paul contextualizes the gospel when he addresses the Greeks. He had perceived much about them and spoke directly to what he had observed in their culture to share the hope they could have in Jesus Christ. This work is our calling. Through the power of the Holy Spirit God will work through our efforts to solve the world's greatest problem—lostness.