

Editor's Note

Zane Pratt

Few subjects in missiology arouse more emotion than contextualization. For some, the very word raises fears of compromise and syncretism. For others, concerns over colonialism and cultural imperialism push in the opposite direction. For some time, missionary scholars have utilized a scale distinguishing levels of contextualization from no adaptation at all to insider methods that seek to pursue Christian discipleship within other religious traditions. What is the right way to go?

As Evangelical Christians committed to the inerrancy, authority, and sufficiency of Scripture, it is essential to realize that our starting point is not our own experience of the gospel or the church, but rather Scripture itself. One drawback to the usual contextualization scale is that it measures the distance from the culture of the missionary, not from the theology and practice of the Bible. Every Christian today practices a contextualized faith in a contextualized church. No one lives in the culture of the New Testament, and no one worships in a church that is just like the churches in the New Testament. North American churches worship in a language that did not even exist in the first century. Our cultural assumptions are different. Our musical styles, seating arrangements, architecture, and technology would all seem foreign to a first century Christian. Contextualization is not an option. Every Christian does it. The question before every believer is whether we will do it well or not. Failure to realize we are doing it increases the possibility

that we do it poorly. Syncretism happens just as readily in North America as it does anywhere on the mission field.

As Evangelical Christians, there are two two issues to address, and they must be addressed in this specific order. First, are we being faithful to Scripture? This means more than whether we can proof-text a practice from the Bible. It means faithfulness to Scripture in its entirety, considered both in its grand narrative and in its great theological themes. It means keeping what is central to the Bible central in our theology and in our practice. Scripture sets boundaries to all contextualization efforts, and those boundaries are inviolable. The second issue, under the authority of Scripture, is sensitivity to the local cultural context. Under this heading, the most important matter is clear communication. The goal of contextualization is clarity, not comfort. Is the truth of the gospel, in all of its sharpness, understandable to the receptor audience? Here is where understanding the local language and culture is essential, as the same words may have different connotations in different contexts, and references that work well in one culture may not work at all in another. Then, within the boundaries of Biblical freedom, it is appropriate to adjust things that are spiritually indifferent to conform to local practices.

This issue of the journal addresses contextualization from a variety of angles. Our hope and prayer is that it will stimulate thoughtful discussion among mission practitioners and lead to more faithful contextualization, to the glory of God and the salvation of many.

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