Contextualization: Faithful to the Gospel, Clear to the Hearers

INTERNATIONAL
MISSION BOARD

GCBJM Vol. 2 No. 2 (FALL 2023)

Contextualization: Faithful to the Gospel, Clear to the Hearers

CONTENTS

RESOURCE REVIEWS

Editor's Note

Zane Pratt, IMB Vice President for Training

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 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 prooftext 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.

FEATURE ARTICLE

Culture and the City: Rethinking Contextualization for Urban Peoples

Paul Salem

At a seminary in Southeast Asia where I teach, a group of us were discussing worship in the church. A trained ethnomusicologist was among those in the discussion. She lamented that the local churches in our diverse, global city had "lost their song." Her statement caused me to think about worship in a diverse city. Whose song should the urban church be singing? The ethnomusicologist had in mind traditional tribal music developed during a different era. Yet, I can scan local radio all day long and not find the traditional tribal music playing. Can that really be "their song"?

Urban churches are not struggling with only the choice of music. There was a time when church planting was primarily conceived of as targeting homogeneous communities, with one primary culture. But cities are a mix of cultural influences, practices, and worldviews behind those practices. Furthermore, urban churches, if they are reaching their cities, will have to contend with many cultural influences at work. Contextualization that befits an urban church must be able to engage the confluence of cultures in the city simultaneously.

In this article, I will explore the vital topic of contextualization through the lens of urban diversity. The principles of contextualization have not changed. But, current understandings of culture, indigeneity, and ethnicity have changed considerably. This reality is partly because the forces of glo-

balization, technology, and urbanization prohibit conceptions of culture in flat and static categories. In fact, culture and ethnicity have never been static. This article will work towards some initial solutions and, as such, serve as a conversation starter. I hope that others will take the conversation further by adding their experiences and insights. Our goal should be to see urban churches that are able to engage within the cultural plurality of their cities.

Cultural Plurality and Urban Life

The neighborhood in Southeast Asia where I have lived with my family for more than a decade is an average, predominately local neighborhood. It is not an expatriate enclave, nor is it culturally trendy. My kids have grown up with kids from different linguistic and religious backgrounds. They learn how to navigate different cultures without even thinking about it. The other kids in the neighborhood are shaped by similar cross-cultural interactions. This exchange is one aspect of urban life.

It is very difficult to remain culturally insulated in a city. Culture is not passed on through a formalized curriculum. People pick up culture constantly, with every human interaction and even by using human-made things (material culture and built environment). The density and diversity of the city guarantee that people will absorb culture from countless influences.

The marketplace demonstrates the difficulty of living in a city and remaining free of an immeasurable swirl of cultures. If you travel to just about any global city, you are likely to find chain stores from Japan, Korea, America, Italy, South Africa, and Sweden. There are IKEA stores in the major cities of more than 60 nations.[1] This means families are walking through the IKEA showroom maze in China and India, drawing home decorating ideas from the Swedes. One trip to a mall might involve indirect interactions with dozens of cultures and likely many hybridized ones. For example, someone might have a Churro from a Korean chain or a Turkish-styled quesadilla in a mall in Jakarta. It would be very hard for someone to live in a city and not be influenced by an immeasurable swirl of cultures.

In missiology, culture has most often been tied to ethnicity. This tendency was heavily influenced by early anthropology that studied remote soci-

---

1   "List of Countries with IKEA Stores," Wikiwand, accessed August 7, 2023, https://wikiwand.com/en/List_of_countries_with_IKEA_stores.

eties, where cultural influences were primarily from within the society.[2] Anthropologists largely avoided doing their field work in cities because it would have been far too messy. Even as "urban anthropology" came about, it predominately studied small village communities adjusting to urban life.[3] Several influential missiologists since 1974 were trained anthropologists[4] and imported this view of culture heavily tied to ethnicity into missions practice.[5] An updated understanding of culture and ethnicity is vital to the consideration of contextualization in urban contexts.

Contextualization for Homogeneous Contexts

There is a sense in which contextualization has always been practiced. As the earliest church spread from Jerusalem, there was a process of contextualization. The translatability of the gospel has been an enduring characteristic of Christianity.[6] However, as Protestants developed their global missions efforts, the primary focus was on language translation with little attention paid to culture and worldview. For many missionaries, culture was seen as

---

2   Brian M. Howell and Jenell Williams Paris, *Introducing Cultural Anthropology: A Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 30.

3   Robert V. Kemper and Jack R. Rollwagen, "Urban Anthropology," in *Encyclopedia of Cultural Anthropology*, ed. David Levinson and Melvin Ember (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1996), 1337.

4   *Among those who were trained anthropologists and wrote publications in missiology are Sherwood Lingenfelter, Charles Kraft, Alan Tippett, Paul Hiebert, William Smalley, and Darrell Whiteman.* Sherwood G. Lingenfelter, *Transforming Culture: A Challenge for Christian Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1992); Sherwood G. Lingenfelter, *Agents of Transformation: A Guide for Effective Cross-Cultural Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1996); Charles Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979); Charles H. Kraft, *Anthropology for Christian Witness* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997); Alan Tippet, *People Movements in Southern Polynesia: Studies in the Dynamics of Church-Planting and Growth in Tahiti, New Zealand, Tonga, and Samoa,* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1971); Paul Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994); Paul Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1985); Darrell L. Whiteman, *Melanesians and Missionaries* (Wipf and Stock, 2002); Darrell L. Whiteman, *An Introduction to Melanesian Cultures* (Melanesian Institute, 1984); William A. Smalley, ed., *Readings in Missionary Anthropology* (South Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1974).

5   Robert J. Priest, "The Value of Anthropology for Missiological Engagements with Context: The Case of Witch Accusations," *Missiology* 43, no. 1 (December 2014): 27–42.

6   Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989).

an impediment to the gospel. Missionaries from Western nations presumed their own culture was the model of Christian culture.[7]

Western cultural pride took a major hit with the eruption of two World Wars in the same century. Then, along with the rise of anthropology, missiologists became more aware of cultures and the need to contextualize the gospel and Christian practice in different cultural contexts. In evangelical circles, the conversation around contextualization is only fifty years old.[8]

Much of the writing and thinking about contextualization happened as evangelicals began to direct their focus to unreached people groups. As a result, contextualization was applied to ethnolinguistic people groups. Missionaries were taught to study the people group as a singular culture. They were labeled the *receptor culture.*[9] The missionary was to be mindful of three cultures: the missionary's culture (A), biblical culture (B), and the receptor culture (C).[10] Thus, the missionary translates culture B into their own culture (A) and then translates from culture A to culture C. The ideal would be to go directly from culture B to culture C, but that is difficult. The difficulty comes when the receptor community is a mix of cultures and influences.

The three-culture process functioned on a simplified understanding of culture. However, if the missionary assumes everyone in the community is

---

7   This trend is sometimes described as a pursuit of the three C's: Christianity, commerce, and civilization. Andrew Porter, "Missions and Empire, c. 1873-1914," in *The Cambridge History of Christianity: World Christianities, c. 1815-c. 1914*, ed. Sheridan Gilley and Brian Stanley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 560.

8   The first use of "contextualization" appeared in 1971. Although contextualization was not emphasized in evangelical circles, it has a long, complex history. The practice of orienting the message to the context of the receptor goes back to Jesus and Paul (cf. John 4; Acts 17). A number of terms have been used and defined variously: indigenization, nativization, accommodation, adaption. Jesuit missionaries debated many issues related to contextualization as they entered India, Japan, and China. Protestant missions was slower to move beyond more visible forms of cultural adjustment (i.e., language, musical style, dress). Gilliland sees this previous era as indigenization and the shift to focus on deep culture and worldview as contextualization. Dean S. Gilliland, "Contextualization," in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, ed. A. Scott Moreau (Grand Rapid, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 225–26; Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004).

9   David Hesselgrave, "Contextualization That Is Authentic and Relevant," *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 12, no. 3 (July 1995): 200.

10 This pattern can be seen even in the chapter titles of Daniel Shaw's work on contextualization. R. Daniel Shaw, *Transculturation: The Cultural Factor in Translation and Other Communication Tasks* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1988).

like culture C, then efforts at contextualization will connect with some and marginalize others. Early examples of contextualization tended to simplify cultural diversity. In *Down to Earth: Studies in Christianity and Culture*, Alan Tippett used Fiji as an example.[11] Such a society, isolated by the ocean all around, simplified the process.

The forces of *glurbalization*[12] (globalization and urbanization) have meant that very few cultures remain in isolation. In the modern world, the introduction of air travel, satellite dishes, and the internet, mean that even an island is no longer isolated. True cultural homogeneity is rarer and rarer. Craig Ott calls for contextualization that accounts for this new cultural reality.[13]

A Superficial Understanding of Culture

Missiologists, armed with early anthropology, tied culture heavily to ethnicity. Furthermore, culture is often understood by missionaries as fixed.[14] In a previous era, many anthropologists were *essentialists* and *perennialists*. An *essentialist* viewed ethnicity as the primary identity with which someone navigated social contexts. A *perennialist* viewed ethnicity as the primary way to bring structure and stability to a society.[15]

Today, anthropologists have a different understanding of culture and ethnicity. Sociologist Andreas Wimmer notes: "Few authors today dare argue for the givenness, transsituational stability, and deep-rooted character of ethnic cultures and identities."[16] Rather, culture is dynamic, flexible, and may or may not be tied to traditional cultures. The more urban, the more likely culture is going to change and morph according to the mix of influences in the

---

11 Alan R. Tippet, "Contextualization of the Gospel in Fiji - A Case Study from Oceania," in *Down to Earth: Studies in Christianity and Culture*, ed. John R. W. Stott and Robert T. Coote (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1980), 287–307.

12 Jonathan Ro, "Glurbanization: The Social Intersect between Globalization and Urbanization" (Urban Mission and Transformation Consultation, 2019, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: pre-published, 2019).

13 Craig Ott, "Globalization and Contextualization: Reframing the Task of Contextualization in the Twenty-First Century," *Missiology: An International Review* 43, no. 1 (2015): 44.

14 *Daniel Shaw describes the Maxikali of Brazil set in their culture with no likelihood of changing.* Shaw, *Transculturation*, 150.

15 Andreas Wimmer, *Ethnic Boundary Making: Institutions, Power, Networks* (Oxford: New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 1.

16 Wimmer, 2.

city. Culture can no longer be considered boundaried or isolated from other cultures.[17]

The way ethnicity is understood is also undergoing change. Ethnicity is often constructed for political advantage[18] or exaggerated for tourism. And, people are more likely to develop multiple identities and move in and out of them depending on their context.[19]

Missionaries must adapt to these new insights. In order to think about contextualization well, we must be able to understand culture well. If culture is defined inaccurately, it will impact missions practice adversely. Missionaries will be unable to pivot practices and methods to meet the needs of the moment if they remain unaware of the ever-changing tides of cultural change.

My great grandmother illustrates the malleability of culture. She landed on Ellis Island from Germany. Having landed in the melting pot of New York City, my great grandmother culturally adapted to her environment. My grandfather (her son) did not exhibit any characteristics from having a German grandmother. By no means was my grandfather cultureless, however. Instead, it testifies to the power of an urban, hybridized culture.

Cities as Cultural Blenders

Roberta King is an ethnomusicologist who has studied musical forms in Africa. Her work has contributed to authentic expressions of worship that connect to the hearts of African worshippers. However, when she got to the urban context and saw the influences of modern and non-African music, her default was to go back out to the village to study traditional contexts to find the "hidden cultural forms" for contextualization.[20] This bias towards traditional ethnic heritage misses the potential for other equally important cultural impacts amalgamated within the city.

---

17 Howell and Paris, *Introducing Cultural Anthropology*, 29.

18 Ott, "Globalization and Contextualization: Reframing the Task of Contextualization in the Twenty-First Century," 50.

19 Ott, 49.

20 Roberta R. King, "Variations on a Theme of Appropriate Contextualization: Music Lessons from Africa," in *Appropriate Christianity*, ed. Charles H. Kraft (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2005), 321.

Global youth culture, social media, and other media have a deeper impact on urban peoples than we might realize. Nels Anderson, in his landmark essay "Urbanism and Urbanization," noted that rural culture has a defensive posture, but cities have a more dynamic and aggressive influence on the individual.[21] In other words, urban cultural influences have a more dominant role in the urban dweller's cultural framework.

Cities bring together diverse cultural influences as well as urban life influences. Some aspects of life in cities are unique to cities like interacting with strangers, using public transportation, or navigating crowds, traffic, and population density. These cities are becoming what Leonie Sandercock dubbed "mongrel cities."[22] Mongrel cities are where the confluence of cultures requires new patterns for negotiating life in the city. Paul Hiebert and Eloise Meneses tell us that urban life "with its emphasis on individualism, freedom, and mobility, is a strong counterforce to the bonds of ethnicity. People are forced to work together in government and business, marriages between people of different ethnic communities take place, and mixed neighborhoods spring up."[23] Nothing is static in cities. The confluence of ideas, cultures, and subcultures not merely wields influence but vies for dominance. Everything becomes de-territorialized. Kuhn describes this process:

> This cultural de-territorialisation has resulted in formation of new kinds of identities 'beyond culture', identities that are as a consequence no longer fixed but indeterminant, fluid, and hybrid. Moreover, as identity formation shifts from essential-

---

21 Nels Anderson, "Urbanism and Urbanization," *American Journal of Sociology* 65, no. 1 (1959): 72.

22 Leonie Sandercock, *Cosmopolis II: Mongrel Cities of the 21st Century* (London; New York: Continuum, 2003).*of the struggle for equality and diversity and the struggle against fundamentalism. Cosmopolis II presents a truly global tour of contemporary cities - from Birmingham to Rotterdam, Frankfurt to Berlin, Sydney to Vancouver, and Chicago to East St. Louis. Passionately written and superbly illustrated with a range of specially commissioned images, Cosmopolis II is a visionary book of our urban future.","event-place":"London; New York","ISBN":"978-0-8264-7045-4","language":"English","publisher":"Continuum","publisher-place":"London; New York","source":"Amazon","title":"Cosmopolis II: Mongrel Cities of the 21st Century","title-short":"Cosmopolis II","author":[{"family":"Sandercock","given":"Leonie"}],"issued":{"date-parts":[["2003"]]}}}],"schema":"https://github.com/citation-style-language/schema/raw/master/csl-citation.json"}*

23 Paul Hiebert and Eloise Meneses, *Incarnational Ministry: Planting Churches in Band, Tribal, Peasant, and Urban Societies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995), 284.

izing to fluid and hybridizing new, more inclusive and cosmo-
politan practices begin to emerge.[24]

City dwellers exposed to blended cultures and identities develop options
for their own identity and cultural expression. One does not live in a city
without being changed by the city. A few years back I had the opportunity
to visit Yangon, Myanmar. Myanmar has an estimated 135 distinct ethnic
groups (Chin, Karen, Chinese, Indian, Rohingya, Burman, etc.).[25] All of those
ethnic groups can be found in the city of Yangon. Yangon has become a hub
of languages, cultures, histories, and religions. It is not merely the mixing of
cultures. Some of these that come to Yangon are from very rural locations.
One can observe them as they struggle to step onto an escalator or get told
by a stranger not to spit their betel leaf in the mall. Life in the city changes
them irreversibly. However, it is not merely a rural-to-urban shift that chang-
es people.

One's ethnic background intensifies in a homogeneous village but gets dilut-
ed and altered in a city where many cultures come together. And in Yangon
it is not just the different ethnic groups of Myanmar that come together.
After Myanmar nationals go abroad to work or study, they bring back oth-
er cultural influences. It is not uncommon to find shops serving Malaysian
specialties. Less obviously, those who work overseas might bring back work
habits and culture that differ from the norm in Myanmar. Over time Yangon
has developed a hybridized culture that is blended and morphed beyond dis-
tinguishable cultural influences.

Given that cities contain both a distinctly urban culture as well as a blended
mix of the cultures at play in urban contexts, it is important for the church to
take notice. A church overly contextualized to one culture limits the impact
of the church to reach anyone who does not fit a precise cultural stereotype.
If one assumes that the congregation is monocultural, then worship, preach-
ing, and discipleship across the board will miss the mark. This does not mean
that a church can cater to every culture present in the city. The point, rather,
is that even a *monocultural* church in a city, is not as *monocultural* as one might

---

24 Joel S. Kahn, *Other Malays: Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism in the Modern Malay World*
    (Singapore: NUS Press, 2006), 162.

25 "Myanmar - World Directory of Minorities & Indigenous Peoples," Minority Rights
    Group International, June 19, 2015, https://minorityrights.org/country/myanmarbur-
    ma/.

suppose. For example, I once preached in an Indonesian church in Queens, New York. At first glance, everyone (almost) speaks Indonesian and shares Indonesian culture. But the church is made up of Indonesians from a variety of cultural backgrounds (Buddhist, Muslim, and Christian backgrounds, young, old, formational years in Indonesia, formational years in New York, etc.). In other words, that church in Queens was not nearly as homogeneous as one might initially think.

A Word about Enclaves and Homogeneous Churches

As some read about cities as cultural blenders, the question of enclaves or other ethnically homogeneous population pockets may come to the fore. Cities certainly are hosts to enclaves, including ethnic enclaves. Mark Abrahamson describes urban enclaves as concentrations of residents who share an identity (ethnic, socioeconomic, lifestyle, etc.). Traditionally, enclaves have been thought of as inner city-based and segregated according to ethnicity. Abrahamson illustrates through a number of examples that urban enclaves can be suburban or oriented around other affinities.[26] Besides ethnicity, he compares characteristics of enclaves with subcultures with one notable difference, "place tie."[27] Subcultures are not necessarily tied to a geographical location, whereas enclaves are tied to a place. The formation of an enclave does not necessitate a hundred percent of a neighborhood. If there is no other dominant identity, as little as twenty-five percent of a population with a singular commonality will make it noticeable as an enclave.[28]

It is good to recognize those who are culturally cut off from others in the city. Certainly, language is a significant barrier. And there should definitely be churches in a city worshipping with all of the languages spoken in the city. A language-specific church, however, is not quite the same thing as a homogenous church. Language-based churches still have a posture of welcome to all who speak the language. A homogeneous church starts with an assumption of boundaries.[29] Only those who fit the category are welcome.

---

26 Mark Abrahamson, *Urban Enclaves: Identity and Place in America* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 2.

27 Abrahamson, 3.

28 Abrahamson, 8.

29 *The notion of the homogeneous unit as the focus of church planting goes back to Donald McGavran. He defines a homogeneous unit here: "A homogeneous unit of society may be said to have people*

In the height of the people group missiology paradigm, much of international church planting was thought of in terms of planting churches for each ethnolinguistic people group. Donald McGavran, who is generally credited with developing the *homogeneous unit principle* (HUP), thought of a fulfilled Great Commission as looking like a *mosaic* of homogeneous units. Over time, practitioners applied this primarily to people groups. McGavran, however, never defined homogeneous units only by ethnicity.[30] In urban settings, McGavran saw very different homogeneous units based on class, geography, and subculture.[31]

There is not space for a full discussion on the missiological viability of HUP. Cities will inevitably have enclaves and pockets of people who see themselves as part of a group. This leads some to conclude that urban missionaries should plant homogeneous churches. While there is certainly a need to plant churches for all kinds of people in the city, it may be more helpful to consider how churches can be planted to include more people rather than trying to plant a church for each *culture* found in the city.

There are a number of reasons why the homogeneous approach to church planting is not the best choice for urban church planting. First, homogeneous church planting encourages a static and stereotyped view of culture. As we have established, culture is dynamic and any particular cultural group in a city will have a wide range of cultural influences. Targeting a fixed cultural caricature will inevitably exclude many who might otherwise be open to the gospel.[32] Second, homogeneous church planting encourages cultural

---

consciousness when its members think of themselves as a separate tribe, caste, or class." Even this definition implies a clear delineation of who is inside and who is outside the group. Donald Anderson McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 155.

30 Jeffrey Kirk Walters Sr., "'Effective Evangelism' in the City: Donald McGavran's Missiology and Urban Contexts" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Louisville, KY, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2011), 54.

31 *McGavran was a complex thinker who is sometimes characterized unfairly. Troy Bush offers a more nuanced treatment of McGavran in light of many critics of his due to HUP.* Troy L. Bush, "The Homogeneous Unit Principle and the American Mosaic," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Missions and Evangelism* 2 (Fall 2016): 25–46.

32 *Erik Hyatt gives the example of a predominately white church who had a vibrant international student ministry. They struggled to integrate international students into their homogenous church. Hyatt argues for an intentional diversity in order to welcome everyone.* Erik Hyatt, "From Homogeneous to a Heterogeneous Unit Principle," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 50, no. 2 (April 2014): 226–32.

boundaries rather than theological boundaries for church membership.[33] Francis DuBose saw the danger of this approach as perpetuating the culture.[34] Third, and most important, homogeneous church planting is not the New Testament approach to church planting.[35] It is noteworthy that Paul and others worked hard to bring those of different ethnic identities together in the newly started churches. It seems that it would have been more natural to plant homogeneous churches in a city like Antioch, which was segregated in ethnic enclaves. Antioch was estimated to have had 18 ethnic enclaves or quarters within it and was noted for continual ethnic tensions.[36] Instead of homogeneous churches in Antioch, we see ethnic diversity in the church's leadership (Acts 13:1).

A better way to think about church planting in diverse cities is to consider planting language-specific, culturally dynamic churches. Every church should seek to welcome any who might come. A church planter can never successfully plant enough homogeneous churches for all of the different cultures and subcultures of a city. Rather, planting culturally diverse churches in all of the languages of the city can at least provide access to everyone in the city. Therefore, it is important to plant churches, in many languages, that are contextualized to reach diverse urban populations.

---

33 *There is a subtle but important distinction here. When people are part of church that is for "people like them", then it becomes easy to assume it is only for people who fit into the particular cultural mold. For example, a Japanese friend was trying to reach out to unchurched Japanese international students in San Francisco. He was reprimanded by the pastor of the Japanese church for inviting these Japanese students. The church had grown comfortable with their congregation of first-generation Japanese Americans and were not interested in reaching other Japanese.*

34 Francis M. DuBose, *How Churches Grow in an Urban World* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1978), 69.

35 *Eloise Hiebert Meneses views this as a gospel issue: "New Testament churches were assemblies associated with place, not ethnicity, bringing together diverse peoples and requiring them to submit to Christ, as to the head of a household. There is evidence that contemporary attempts to form multi-cultural churches out of a liberal political agenda ironically become enmeshed in power struggles. But those that recognize the centrality of the gospel succeed due to the adoption of a central authority, Christ himself, who relativizes all ethnic and national identities in favor of a common purpose, the spread of the gospel to others who have not heard it."* Eloise Hiebert Meneses, "Transnational Identities and the Church: Examining Contemporary Ethnicity and Place," *Mission Studies* 29, no. 1 (2012): 62–78; David E. Stevens, *God's New Humanity: A Biblical Theology of Multiethnicity for the Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2012); Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary: Realities, Strategies and Methods* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 409–10.\\uc0\\u8221{} {\\i{}Mission Studies} 29, no. 1 (2012

36 Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal, Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force ....* (HarperOne, 1997), 160.

Urban Churches as Contextually Urban

There are features of living in a city that shape those living in cities. These features even affect animals. Research has shown that birds change when they are in an urban context for long.[37] If cities change birds, think how much cities change people. The church cannot ignore these changes. It has too often been the case that churches in the city operate like rural enclaves, trying to maintain tradition and guard established convention.[38] To maintain way of life is a hallmark of village life. This mindset impacts churches in the city planted with those who have recently arrived in the city. These churches are needed in the city, but they have a tendency to guard against any changes. Unfortunately, these churches struggle to resonate with urban dwellers accustomed to a layered and undulating cultural matrix.

In the rest of the article, I suggest a few ways in which the city shapes people and point to opportunities to plant the church in urban soil. In an article of this length, I can only highlight a few key thoughts. These brief examples serve to demonstrate that a thorough reflection on the nature of urban culture and the shape of the church is greatly needed.

Urban Rhythms

Time is one of the most coveted commodities for city dwellers. In many global cities in Asia, it is normal to be at the office for twelve hours. When we lived in the Greater Los Angeles area, many of our neighbors had two-hour commutes to work each direction. The lack of available time for city dwellers has implications for the urban church.

In the previous issue of this journal, Anthony Witten described a church he had a part in planting. It was not his goal to describe the choices the core team made to contextualize the church, but he hinted at a contextual reality that surfaces in nearly every serious discussion about urban church life. Their church is composed of urban professionals who have very little time that is not gobbled up by work or family obligations. Therefore, the church

---

37 P. D. Smith, *City: A Guidebook for the Urban Age* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2012), 78.

38 Alex G. Smith, "Some Historical Views on Asian Urban Extension: Complexities of Urban and Rural Relationships," in *Communicating Christ in Asian Cities: Urban Issues in Buddhist Contexts*, ed. Paul H. De Neui (Pasadena, CA: W. Carey Library, 2009), 32; Hiebert and Meneses, *Incarnational Ministry*, 325.

leadership decided to do as much as they can on Sundays.[39] Some city center churches use lunch times as a spiritual touchpoint. Those working in service sector jobs may only be able to worship at night.[40]

Urban Choice

One of the most significant changes that has accompanied globally connected urbanization is the elevated role of choice in daily life. For most of human history, people navigated life with few choices. Their work, spouse, clothing, food, education were all *pro forma*. Today, the urban dweller chooses nearly everything. Clothing, music, food, career, friends, education, and even identity are chosen and curated by the individual. People are hardwired to anticipate choices, including choices about matters of faith. Conflict surfaces when church leaders presume members are obligated to do what they say. Urbanites, especially younger ones, will find a faith community that allows for them to make choices.[41] This poses a challenge for an urban church. Certainly, a church built on consumerism is not compatible with the gospel. Nevertheless, an urban church needs to acknowledge that people are accustomed to making choices. Churches should adjust accordingly. We need churches that are simultaneously biblically faithful and contextualized for our urban audiences.[42]

Urban Space

Another aspect of urban living is the lack of space. Urban space is contested space. There is not enough road space for all the vehicles, and urban land is the most expensive because it is the most sought after. This means an urban church needs to maximize space as much as possible. This also means location is more important than the cost or rental of a space. Urban churches need

---

39 Anthony Witten, "Making the Most of the Gathered Church: How A Church's Liturgy Shapes Spiritual Formation and Growth," *Great Commission Baptist Journal of Missions* 2, no. 1 (May 2023): 1.

40 *In one Southeast Asian city migrant workers gather to worship at 10:30pm because many work until 10pm.*

41 *This assumption stems from an era where a pastor had a presumed respectability and authority in the community.*

42 Michael Crane, *Urbanizing the Church in an Urbanizing Asia, Urbanization: Impacts on the Church, Mission and Society Today*, 2018, 116.

to establish spaces that are findable, accessible, and welcoming.[43] Storefronts are set on the sidewalk with large windows and clear advertising about what one might find if they enter. This is to put the potential shopper as well as the passerby at ease. When a dedicated church space is visually closed off to the passerby and closed six days of the week, it sends unintended messages that the church is creepy or irrelevant.

Urban Worldview(s)

Cities change people irrevocably. If someone is raised in a rural community and all they know are people who are similar culturally and believe the same things, their worldview is more predictable and set. If that same person is raised in a city with frequent interactions with people of different cultures, speaking different languages, and committed to various beliefs, their worldview is likely to be complex and layered. Even an urban congregation full of people raised in Christian families is influenced by many outside ideas, some of which are contradictory to a Christian worldview. Preaching, teaching and discipleship will need to be persistent and incisive, in order to counteract the "defeater beliefs"[44] that sneak in through other influences. Rather than being reactive to cultural and social issues, the urban church needs to find ways to be proactive in shaping people in Christlikeness using the language and culture of the city.

Urban Churches as Transcultural Hubs

Not only does the urban church need to contextualize to current realities of urban people, but it also has an opportunity to display a transcultural community centered around the One who demolished the barriers that perpetuate ethnic enmity. The choice of *transcultural* is intentional. To be cross-cultural or intercultural is merely to navigate between cultures. To be transcultural is to transcend the boundaries of cultures, acknowledging a richness that comes from diversity as well as an innate humanity common to all people.[45]

---

43 Linda Bergquist and Michael D. Crane, *City Shaped Churches: Planting Churches in a Global Era* (Pasadena, CA: Urban Loft Publishers, 2018), 132.

44 *Defeater beliefs are described by Tim Keller as: "beliefs of the culture that lead listeners to find some Christian doctrines implausible or overtly offensive. "B" beliefs contradict Christian truth directly at points we may call "B" doctrines."* Timothy J. Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 123.

45 Will Baker, "From Intercultural to Transcultural Communication," *Language and Intercultural Communication* 22, no. 3 (2022): 180.

The New Testament indicates the church displays the gospel when diverse peoples converge as "one new humanity" (Eph. 2:15). Historian Andrew Walls sees the transcultural nature of the church as paradigmatic:

> It is to be repeated as people separated by language, history and culture recognize each other in Christ. And the recognition is not based on one adopting the ways of thought and behaviour and expression, however sanctified, of the other; that is Judaizing, and another Gospel. Christ must rule in the minds of his people; which means extending his dominion over those corporate structures of thought that constitute a culture. The very act of doing so must sharpen the identity of those who share a culture. The faith of Christ is infinitely translatable, it creates 'a place to feel at home.' But it must not make a place where we are so much at home that no one else can live there.[46]

Cities draw all kinds of people. While people attempt to use cities for their own achievements, the city uses them at the same time. Urban life can be draining and even dehumanizing. The urban church has an opportunity to engage people in their respective cultural locations. But, this is not intended to be in isolated homogeneous efforts.[47] As we have already seen earlier in the article, cities are far too culturally complex to be meaningfully reached by a smattering of culturally homogenous churches.[48] Rather, we need churches that prioritize dynamic cultural engagement.

Christian leaders are beginning to identify the increasing need to engage people with culturally complex identities. One mission organization has begun running cultural intelligence seminars, recognizing our churches are struggling to engage with people outside of their own cultural enclave.

46　Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission and Appropriation of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 25.

47　*This does not mean there are no culturally isolated enclaves. For some, the battle to find their identity means turning back to a strong ethnic identity. But even in doing this, the identity is chosen and shaped. This means even the robustly monocultural identity went through a process of selection from the many cultural choices.*

48　*There will be homogenous churches, particularly when it comes to languages. But no church should be content with reaching one particular culture or people group (Matt 28:18-20).*

Stephan Tan, who pastors Regeneration Church in the hyper-diverse city of Melbourne, Australia, notes the many cultures colliding and rubbing against one another. He says:

> Transculturalism seems more realistic, someone moves from another country, they lose some aspects of their home culture and hold onto other aspects. Everyone brings something of their culture and loses something of their culture. Every culture is beautiful and broken. What standard do we use to examine culture? Scripture. In the church, have a goal of cultural intelligence. Conflict resolution can be challenging, particularly saving face. Everyone needs to understand multiple cultures that have influence in the broader culture. A key category is alienation (not discarding oppression or injustice), the reversal of Babel. Try to bring diverse leaders together to work together on ministry/theological issues. Goal is to get them to work together on this, which gets them into deeper understanding of each other's culture.[49]

Tan moves beyond a superficial reduction of culture as language, food, and music preferences. He deploys theological categories in order for those in his congregation to develop an identity in Christ that makes space cultural expression. Moreover, thinking in terms of alienation helps draw people together around the gospel, rather than pitting cultures against each other. Tan recognized that the language of oppression or injustice might encourage division, whereas alienation is able to address social as well as spiritual brokenness simultaneously.[50]

More work needs to be done in this area. When urban churches are contextualizing rightly, we will see a new generation of well-discipled urban Chris-

---

49 Stephen Tan, Interview with author, Zoom, April 25, 2023.

50 *Tan offers further explanation in a sermon on race and the gospel. The Tower of Babel account shows a separation of peoples resulting from disordered priorities. Alienation occurs even when specific acts of racism do not. Christ's death on the cross brought reconciliation that would address the alienation between people and God as well as between different groups of people.* Stephen Tan, "Race- The Image of God- Nov 17, 2020," Inner West Sermons, accessed August 19, 2023, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/inner-west-sermons/id1641221641?i=1000577055898.

tians who will then disciple the next generation. With more than four billion urban dwellers, this issue deserves our attention.

Paul Salem (PhD) serves in urban Southeast Asia with his family. He teaches in a local seminary, serves as an elder in his church, and trains church planters. Paul has written a number of books and articles.

Bibliography

Abrahamson, Mark. *Urban Enclaves: Identity and Place in America.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996.

Anderson, Nels. "Urbanism and Urbanization." *American Journal of Sociology* 65, no. 1 (1959): 68–73.

Baker, Will. "From Intercultural to Transcultural Communication." *Language and Intercultural Communication* 22, no. 3 (2022): 280–93.

Bergquist, Linda, and Michael D. Crane. *City Shaped Churches: Planting Churches in a Global Era.* Pasadena, CA: Urban Loft Publishers, 2018.

Bevans, Stephen B., and Roger P. Schroeder. *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today.* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004.

Bush, Troy L. "The Homogeneous Unit Principle and the American Mosaic." *The Southern Baptist Journal of Missions and Evangelism* 2 (Fall 2016): 25–46.

Crane, Michael. *Urbanizing the Church in an Urbanizing Asia. Urbanization: Impacts on the Church, Mission and Society Today*, 2018.

DuBose, Francis M. *How Churches Grow in an Urban World.* Nashville: Broadman Press, 1978.

Gilliland, Dean S. "Contextualization." In *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, edited by A. Scott Moreau, 225–27. Grand Rapid, MI: Baker Books, 2000.

Hesselgrave, David. "Contextualization That Is Authentic and Relevant." *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 12, no. 3 (July 1995): 115–20.

Hiebert, Paul. *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1985.

———. *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994.

Hiebert, Paul, and Eloise Meneses. *Incarnational Ministry: Planting Churches in Band, Tribal, Peasant, and Urban Societies*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995.

Howell, Brian M., and Jenell Williams Paris. *Introducing Cultural Anthropology: A Christian Perspective*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011.

Hyatt, Erik. "From Homogeneous to a Heterogeneous Unit Principle." *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 50, no. 2 (April 2014): 226–32.

Kahn, Joel S. *Other Malays: Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism in the Modern Malay World*. Singapore: NUS Press, 2006.

Keller, Timothy J. *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012.

Kemper, Robert V., and Jack R. Rollwagen. "Urban Anthropology." In *Encyclopedia of Cultural Anthropology*, edited by David Levinson and Melvin Ember, Vol. 4:1337–44. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1996.

King, Roberta R. "Variations on a Theme of Appropriate Contextualization: Music Lessons from Africa." In *Appropriate Christianity*, edited by Charles H. Kraft, 309–24. Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2005.

Kraft, Charles. *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979.

Kraft, Charles H. *Anthropology for Christian Witness*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997.

Lingenfelter, Sherwood G. *Agents of Transformation: A Guide for Effective Cross-Cultural Ministry*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1996.

———. *Transforming Culture: A Challenge for Christian Mission*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1992.

McGavran, Donald Anderson. *Understanding Church Growth*. 3rd ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990.

Meneses, Eloise Hiebert. "Transnational Identities and the Church: Examining Contemporary Ethnicity and Place." *Mission Studies* 29, no. 1 (2012): 62–78.

Minority Rights Group International. "Myanmar - World Directory of Minorities & Indigenous Peoples," June 19, 2015. https://minorityrights.org/country/myanmarburma/.

Ott, Craig. "Globalization and Contextualization: Reframing the Task of Contextualization in the Twenty-First Century." *Missiology: An International Review* 43, no. 1 (2015): 43–58.

Porter, Andrew. "Missions and Empire, c. 1873-1914." In *The Cambridge History of Christianity: World Christianities, c. 1815-c. 1914*, edited by Sheridan Gilley and Brian Stanley, 560–75. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Priest, Robert J. "The Value of Anthropology for Missiological Engagements with Context: The Case of Witch Accusations." *Missiology* 43, no. 1 (December 2014): 27–42.

Ro, Jonathan. "Glurbanization: The Social Intersect between Globalization and Urbanization." Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: pre-published, 2019.

Sandercock, Leonie. *Cosmopolis II: Mongrel Cities of the 21st Century*. London; New York: Continuum, 2003.

Sanneh, Lamin. *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989.

Schnabel, Eckhard J. *Paul the Missionary: Realities, Strategies and Methods*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008.

Shaw, R. Daniel. *Transculturation: The Cultural Factor in Translation and Other Communication Tasks*. Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1988.

Smalley, William A., ed. *Readings in Missionary Anthropology*. South Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1974.

Smith, Alex G. "Some Historical Views on Asian Urban Extension: Complexities of Urban and Rural Relationships." In *Communicating Christ in Asian Cities: Urban Issues in Buddhist Contexts*, edited by Paul H. De Neui, 1–40. Pasadena, CA: W. Carey Library, 2009.

Smith, P. D. *City: A Guidebook for the Urban Age*. New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2012.

Stark, Rodney. *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal, Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force ....* HarperOne, 1997.

Stevens, David E. *God's New Humanity: A Biblical Theology of Multiethnicity for the Church.* Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2012.

Tan, Stephen. Interview with author. Zoom, April 25, 2023.

———. "Race- The Image of God- Nov 17, 2020." Inner West Sermons. Accessed August 19, 2023. https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/inner-west-sermons/id1641221641?i=1000577055898.

Tippet, Alan. *People Movements in Southern Polynesia: Studies in the Dynamics of Church-Planting and Growth in Tahiti, New Zealand, Tonga, and Samoa,.* Chicago: Moody Press, 1971.

Tippet, Alan R. "Contextualization of the Gospel in Fiji - A Case Study from Oceania." In *Down to Earth: Studies in Christianity and Culture*, edited by John R. W. Stott and Robert T. Coote, 287–307. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1980.

Walls, Andrew F. *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission and Appropriation of Faith.* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002.

Walters, Jeffrey Kirk, Sr. "'Effective Evangelism' in the City: Donald McGavran's Missiology and Urban Contexts." Ph.D. Dissertation, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2011.

Whiteman, Darrell L. *An Introduction to Melanesian Cultures.* Melanesian Institute, 1984.

———. *Melanesians and Missionaries.* Wipf and Stock, 2002.

Wikiwand. "List of Countries with IKEA Stores." Accessed August 7, 2023. https://wikiwand.com/en/List_of_countries_with_IKEA_stores.

Wimmer, Andreas. *Ethnic Boundary Making: Institutions, Power, Networks.* Oxford: New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Witten, Anthony. "Making the Most of the Gathered Church: How A Church's Liturgy Shapes Spiritual Formation and Growth." *Great Commission Baptist Journal of Missions* 2, no. 1 (May 2023): 1–13.

PEER REVIEWED ARTICLE

Key Questions for the Contextualization of Ministry among Ukrainian Refugees

Dan Upchurch

The United Nations Refugee Agency defines refugees as "people who have been forced to flee their homes and have crossed an international border to find safety in another country."[1] From the beginning of January 2011 to the end of January 2022, my wife and I were privileged to serve in Ukraine. For us, it became a second home. Then, at the end of January 2022, we were required to leave Ukraine due to the threat of war. At that point we emotionally became refugees.

On February 24, 2022, the war broke out in Ukraine and thousands of Ukrainians fled to Poland where they became physical refugees.[2] In early March 2022, my wife and I moved to *Żory,* Poland to work with Ukrainian refugees. As we wrestled with how to do this, I realized we needed to focus on: What is the situation like? What are the people like? What do they need to hear? How do they need to hear it? These questions were not developed through abstract reflection, scientific investigation, or group discussion. They arose out of our efforts to minister to the Ukrainian refugees. The first question grew

---

1   *UNHCR, "What is a Refugee," UNHCR. Accessed August 27, 2023. https://www.unhcr.org/ what-refugee.*

2   *In early March 2022 100,000 Ukrainians per day were arriving in Poland. See: "Ukrainian refugees arrive in Poland 'in a state of distress and anxiety,'" UN News. May 27, 2022. https:// news.un.org/en/story/ 2022/05/1119172.*

out of the fact that we like the refugees had been thrust into a new context. They were trying to figure out how to live in that context and we were trying to understand how to minister to them in it. The second question arose out of the first. We were convinced that ministry is done best when it is based on the characteristics of the people one is trying to reach. Our task was to try to figure out how much this new context for Ukrainian refugees was changing them as people. How were they like the Ukrainians we had been ministering to and with for years and how were they beginning to differ from them? The third question developed as we tried to share God's Word with the refugees. We noticed that many people and agencies both secular and religious were focusing on trauma healing as they worked with the Ukrainian refugees. We were sceptical that psychology alone could give them what they needed. We also were firmly convinced God's inspired Word contained the anchor these refugees needed to navigate the chaos in which they found themselves. However, we had to determine which aspects of biblical truth were most needed at this moment. The fourth question emerged due to three key factors. One, in Ukraine the government was pushing Ukrainian as the only acceptable language for Ukrainians. Two, many of the Ukrainian refugees were from eastern Ukraine where Russian had been the dominant language until the beginning of this phase of Russian aggression. Three, the refugees were having to learn Polish to deal with life tasks in their new setting.

The Situation: What is it like?

At the heart of ministry contextualization is the conviction one should adapt ministry methods to fit the context. As J.D. Payne and John Mark Terry note in their book Developing a Strategy for Missions, "Unlike principles, they do not always translate effectively from context to context. Methods that worked well in one context may be disastrous in a different context."[3] So, to do contextualization properly among Ukrainian refugees in Poland, we needed to consider some key aspects of this new context. One, thousands of Ukrainians per day were arriving in Poland. Two, most of the refugees were women and children. Men 18 to 60 were forbidden to leave the country.[4]

---

3   *J.D. Payne and John Mark Terry, Developing a Strategy for Missions (Grand Rapids: Baker), 239.*

4   Afshan Khan, "Inside the Journey of Ukrainian Refugee Children and Families," Unicef. March 23, 2022. https://www.unicef.org/eca/stories/inside-journey-ukrainian-refugee-children-and-families.

Three, few of the refugees intended to stay long-term in Poland.[5] Even the ones staying in Poland were just looking for a place to land temporarily until things settled down back home.

Four, the refugees in the beginning were largely from eastern or central Ukraine (especially from Kyiv). In time, as the war has shifted, more and more refugees from southern Ukraine have arrived.[6] Five, no one knew how long the war would continue. Six, for most of the refugees, this was the first time to live cross-culturally surrounded by a new language and culture. Seven, all the refugees were emotionally traumatized, and, in the beginning, most were in panic and survival mode. Over time, they began to establish a sense of temporary stability.

The People: What are they like?

At first, I was tempted to view the refugees as Ukrainians as a new type due to their new location and level of trauma. However, I quickly realized the tendencies that had served as a baseline for contextualization in Ukraine were applicable in Poland. As Ukrainians, they needed at least three things for life to be worth living.

One, they needed community. Although impacted by Western individualism, Ukrainians are still a collective-minded people. They draw a sense of self-identity, worth, and security from being a part of a group.[7] These refugees had lost their community when they fled Ukraine. Now they were alone in strange land. So, to minister to them it was important to provide events where they could gather and fellowship with other Ukrainians. Trauma healing trainings, worship services, picnics, and camps have provided this community for them.

---

5   "How many Ukrainian refugees are there and where have they gone?" BBC. July 4, 2022. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-60555472

6   *For information, relating to the intentions of Ukrainian refugees and their geographical origin see:* "Regional Intension Survey Result (3rd Round)." UNHCR. June 9, 2023. https://data2.unhcr.org/en/dataviz/304?sv=54&geo=0.

7   "Country Comparison Tool." *www.hofstede-Insights.com.* https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison-tool?countries=ukraine.

Two, Ukrainians needed music. Music helps them deal with the highs and lows of life.[8] As soon as the first worship song began at the first worship service in *Żory*, tears rolled down the faces of all present but by the end of the last song smiles had appeared. Worship services and concerts have provided the means for meeting this need.

Three, Ukrainians need celebration. Holidays are a big part of Ukrainian culture, both secular and religious. When Easter 2022 rolled around, Ukrainians in Poland found themselves in country where this holiday was not celebrated the way in which they were accustomed. Where could they buy the paska cake that is so much a part of Ukrainian Easter celebrations? Where could they take their baskets to be blessed? What day should they celebrate Easter? The Poles (Roman Catholics) celebrated it on April 17, but Ukrainian tradition (Orthodox) demanded they celebrate it on April 24. We had to adapt to meet this need by holding a large Easter celebration with Ukrainian food and music on the central square. Christmas, Easter, and other holiday celebrations have become a large part of our contextualization strategy.

Camps and kids' events have also helped meet this need. After one kids' event, a preteen girl came up to my wife, hugged her, and said, "Thank you for doing this. Every day I must take care of my little sisters and brothers. Today I just got to be a kid for a few hours. This was the first time since I left Ukraine."

The Message: What do they need to hear?

Going into ministry to the Ukrainian refugees, I knew our task was to not to tell the refugees what they wanted to hear, but what they needed to hear. We needed to give "people the Bible's answers, which they may not at all want to hear, to questions about life that people in their particular time and place are asking, in language and forms they can comprehend, and through appeals and arguments with force they can feel, even if they reject them."[9] The refugees wanted to hear the war would be over soon. They longed to hear that Ukraine would win and would become a member of the EU and NATO. Some hoped we would say that God hates all Russians.

---

8   *For a discussion of the role of music in Ukrainian resistance see:* Nichole Faina, "*Learn about Ukraine's Resilience and Its History with Russia through These 4 Songs,*" *University of Pittsburgh. March 1, 2022. https://www.pitt.edu/pittwire/features-articles/ukraine-russia-history-through-music.*

9   *Timothy Keller, Center Church (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 89.*

What they needed were words of hope. The government and NGOs were meeting their physical needs. They were assisting with food, housing, and medical expenses. At first the Polish government was even providing free intercity rail transportation for Ukrainian refugees. However, they could not offer the hope that would help them establish some temporary normal and move toward recovery.[10] The Psalms of lament became key tools in this process (e.g., Ps. 10). Above all, they needed to know there was a Savior, who invites them to come to him for hope, healing, and salvation (Mat. 11.28-30).

The Form: How do they need to hear the message?

As J.D. Payne and John Mark Terry have noted, "Contextualized communication involves the right person communicating the right message in the right language in the right form in the right place to the right people."[11] That was how we needed to communicate with the refugees. They needed to hear what we had to share in a language they did not have to work at understanding.

Many refugees have been learning Polish, but Russian and Ukrainian were still their heart languages. Speaking Russian is not politically correct in Ukraine today.[12] However, many of the refugees grew up in regions where pre-war Russian was the dominant language, or Ukrainian and Russian were spoken without a significant differentiation. Upon hearing a language that they could easily understand, their hearts relaxed and their ears opened.

The refugees preferred to hear this message from someone who had lived in Ukraine. Many well-meaning American volunteers have come and tried to help. However, the refugees responded better to fellow Ukrainians and to our team of missionaries that lived in Ukraine before the war. Regardless of who shared this message, the refugees wanted to be sure that person really cared about them.

---

10 *For discussion of the unique role of churches and religious organization in refugee recovery see: "The Unique Role of IAFR on the Refugee Highway," IAFR. Accessed August 27, 2023. https:// global-uploads.webflow.com/5e753e90e64659ba51ecd6ad/60551956c600b70f2558a9fd_ IAFR%27s%20Unique%20Role%20on%20the%20Refugee%20Highway.pdf.*

11 *Developing a Strategy for Mission, 138.*

12 Martin Fornusek, *"Poll: Less than 10% of Ukrainians Speak Primarily Russian at Home,"Yahoo News. August 23, 2023. https://news.yahoo.com/poll-less-ten-percent-ukrainians-214057497.html.*

Conclusion

Many things are changing regarding the Ukrainian refugees in Poland. Their numbers have decreased.[13] The places new refugees are from have changed as fighting has engulfed southern Ukraine. The level of Polish proficiency among many refugees has radically increased as they have stayed in Poland. The financial support from the Polish government has decreased, and the laws regulating it have become more stringent.[14] No one knows what will change in the future. However, I believe the four questions that have guided the contextualization of the ministry of our missionary team and our Ukrainian partners over the past eighteen months are fundamental enough to continue to provide guidance regardless of whatever may come.

Dan Upchurch has a PhD from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. He and his wife, Lori, have served in Eastern Europe since 2000. They have 3 sons and 7 grandchildren. Dan's greatest passion in ministry is equipping national believers to make disciples, train leaders, and plant and grow healthy, reproducing churches. Dan currently serves as Instructor of General and Practical Theology Courses and Director of the Church Growth and Development Master's Program at Ukrainian Baptist Theological Seminary, L'viv Ukraine.

---

13 *Adriana Sas, "Ukrainian Refugees in Poland 2022." Statista. https://www.statista.com/statistics/1293564/ukrainian-refugees-in-poland/.*

14 *"Poland: Amendments to Ukrainian Refugee Hosting Laws Showcase the Need for Continued Humanitarian Support," IRC. January 27, 2023. https://www.rescue.org/press-release/poland-amendments-ukrainian-refugee-hosting-laws-showcase-need-continued-humanitarian.*

Whose Story? Or, Can Narrative Theology Ever Be Evangelical?

Cameron D. Armstrong

"Tell people a fact and you touch their minds. Tell them a story and you touch their souls." -Hasidic Proverb

"And you shall remember the whole way the LORD your God has led you."-Deuteronomy 8:2

Introduction

My entry into the world of orality and narrative was not a smooth one. I was raised in an evangelical home filled with books, and my college-educated parents taught me never to question the predominant theological pedagogies we learned in church every Sunday. There was, however, a strong emphasis on the performing arts in our home, particularly music from my dad and drama from my mom. Christians all from a young age, my siblings and I imbibed this dual emphasis on both evangelicalism[1] and an appeal to

---

1   David W. Bebbington defines the term "evangelical" based on four characteristics: biblicism (the authority of Scripture), crucicentrism (the death of Christ on the cross as central to the gospel message), conversionism (the need for sinners separated from God to repent from their sins and believe the gospel), and activism (the belief that all Christians ought to engage in the Great Commission task of making disciples of

the imaginative. As I grew in my understanding of God and learned to communicate his word through preaching, I assumed the three-point expository sermon was the homiletic apex.[2] Such sermonizing was precisely what my wonderful professors taught me in seminary. Then came what was, for me, a paradigm shift.

When I was newly married and one course away from graduating with my MDiv, my advisor suggested that I take a course over Fall Break in Bible Storying. The instructor, a long-time missionary with the International Mission Board, required students to read two books prior to day one: *Making Disciples of Oral Learners* and *Truth that Sticks*.[3] I immediately began applying orality and storying in my local ministry, seeing the men I counseled open up to spiritual conversation in ways they never had before. The next year, I studied for a Th.M. on how orality interacts with the evangelical doctrine of biblical inerrancy.[4] By this point, my wife and I were on the mission field and using storying in our ministries in Romania. I then completed a Ph.D. in Intercultural Education at Biola University on the use of orality in a formal seminary context.[5] I now lead a ThM/PhD program in orality missiology in the Philippines.[6]

---

all nations). David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1930s to the 1980s* (London, UK: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 2. I disagree with the common contention that the term "evangelical" be dropped or redefined in light of contemporary political realities. Insofar as Christian groups uphold Bebbington's fourfold formula, the term remains a helpful qualifier to distinguish from other Christian communities like the Catholic or Orthodox Churches.

2   By "three-point expository sermon," I mean sermons that elucidate, or exposite, a text or passage of Scripture giving a single "main truth" and supporting that truth statement with specific points rooted in the text. Expository preachers often use three points in their sermons. See Ramesh Richards, *Preparing Expository Sermons: A Seven-Step Method for Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001).

3   International Orality Network, *Making Disciples of Oral Learners* (Elim, NY: Lausanne, 2007); Avery T. Willis and Mark Snowden, *Truth That Sticks: How to Communicate Velcro Truth in a Teflon World* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2010).

4   I later adapted my unpublished ThM thesis for publication in Cameron D. Armstrong, "Contextualization, Biblical Inerrancy, and the Orality Movement," *Journal of the International Society of Christian Apologetics* vol. 7, no. 1 (2014): 244-304.

5   Cameron D. Armstrong, "Finding Yourself in Stories: Romanian Theology Students' Experience of Oral-Based Teaching Methods," PhD diss, Biola University, 2020.

6   See https://www.agstphil.org/orality-studies/. The story of the formation of our program is detailed in Cameron D. Armstrong, "A Graduate Program for Orality Missiology," *Journal of Asian Mission,* forthcoming Fall 2022.

Needless to say, I believe in the power of theologizing through narrative. I also believe in the inerrancy and infallibility of Scripture. What I do not believe is that the two cannot be reconciled. The task before us is to show that such reconciliation is possible. As my parents taught me, it is possible to remain evangelical while allowing for adjustment and growth based on imaginative communication forms that touch the heart. In what follows, I argue that an evangelical narrative theology takes from and builds upon the best from both worlds—the world of traditional evangelicalism and the world of the oral-narrative nature of Scripture. After defining *narrative theology*, I address evangelical concerns and recent developments. I conclude by offering five ways scholars might construct an evangelical narrative theology.

What is Narrative Theology?

Growing out of a reaction to the unfulfilled promises of modern philosophical theology, namely that single, objective answers exist to solve theological dilemmas, theologians grew skeptical and began exploring new paths to divine understanding. Theologies *after modernity*, or *post-modernity*, emphasize instead the contextual nature of theological perspectives. Narrative theology became one of these perspectives.[7]

According to German theologian Gabriel Fackre,

> Narrative theology is discourse about God in the setting of story. Narrative (in its narrow sense) becomes the decisive image for understanding and interpreting faith. Depiction of reality, ultimate and penultimate, in terms of plot, coherence, movement, and climax is at the center of all forms of this kind of talk about God.[8]

Narrative theology is primarily concerned with the use of story mediums to communicate who God is. Using the various pieces of story structure, nar-

---

7   Some scholars label these theological perspectives in the negative, such as "critical," "liberal," or "post-liberal." I prefer the term "narrative theology" since it is more positive in the sense that it describes what it is instead of what it is not.

8   Gabriel Fackre, "Narrative Theology: An Overview," *Interpretation* vol. 37, no. 4 (1983): 343, cited in Charles Van Engen, *Mission on the Way: Issues in Mission Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), 49.

rative theology believes it is possible to know and understand God through God's word revealed to God's people.

The rub comes as narrative theologians declare that the knowledge of God cannot be fully analyzed, explained, and exhausted.[9] To use the terms of Grant Osborne, there is a desire to drill deeper into knowing God as our hermeneutics "spiral" further into understanding the narratives of God as expressed through the communities of God.[10] According to narrative theologian Roger Olson, narrative theology lies somewhere between both conservative theology's search for a single truth and liberal theology's denial of any truth at all.[11] Could narrative theology be a kind of middle ground? To answer this question, we must examine evangelical concerns and see if they hold up to scrutiny. To the extent that evangelical authors press for narrative theologians to come clean on their belief in the veracity and historicity of biblical narratives, conservative warnings are entirely warranted. Yet if, in fact, these concerns are merely generalizations that fail to appeal to sources or worse, the source of Scripture itself, perhaps it is time for evangelicals to reevaluate narrative theology.

Evangelical Concerns

Evangelical theologian Millard Erickson, in his magnum opus, which is taught in theological education institutions the world over, holds that there are five components of theology for it to be Christian. These are:

1. Theology is biblical.

2. Theology is systematic.

3. Theology also relates to the issues of general culture and learning.

4. Theology must also be contemporary.

---

9   See, for example, Roger E. Olson, "Narrative Theology Explained," Patheos, January 15, 2016, accessed July 10, 2023, https://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2016/01/narrative-theology-explained/

10 Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1991).

11 Roger E. Olson, "Back to the Bible (Almost): Why Yale's Postliberal Theologians Deserve an Evangelical Hearing," *Christianity Today,* May 20, 1996: 31-34.

5.   Theology is to be practical.[12]

Narrative theology, by definition, draws away from abstract systematizing. Indeed, narrative theology cannot be systematic.[13] While narrative theologians may consider cultural and practical issues, skeptics note the tendency to shun systematic theology and tend to infer that a denial of Erickson's second component necessarily entails a denial of the first. Why?

According to missiologist Charles Van Engen, evangelical theologians charge narrative theologians on multiple counts of mishandling the Scriptures.[14] In this section, I address two of the most widespread charges and cite from the premier "fathers" of narrative theology.

First, narrative theology, critics charge, denies authorial intent. Often scholars trace the narrative theology discussion to an article by H. Richard Niebuhr titled "The Story of our Life."[15] Niebuhr defends the premise that Christian preaching through the centuries chiefly concerns the proclamation of biblical events in story form:

> The preaching of the early Christian church was not an argument for the existence of God nor an admonition to follow the dictates of some common human conscience, unhistorical and super-social in character. It was primarily a recital of the great events connected with the historical appearance of Jesus Christ and a confession of what had happened to the community of disciples.[16]

---

12 Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology,* unabridged and one-volume edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983), 21-22.

13 South African theologian John Klaasen notes that narrative theology is an attempt to make sense of the world issues that systematic theology fails to address. John Klaasen, "Practical Theology and Narrative: Contours and Markers," *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* vol. 3, no. 1 (2017): 457-475. This does not mean, of course, narrative theology is unorganized. On the contrary, narrative theology strives for coherence in developing and "expositing" a biblical narrative.

14 Charles Van Engen, *Mission on the Way: Issues in Mission Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), 44-68.

15 Gary L. Comstock, "Two Types of Narrative Theology," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* vol. 55, no. 4 (1987): 687. Niebuhr's article is reproduced in full in Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones, eds., *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 21-44.

16 Ibid, 21.

Niebuhr does not discount the historical nature of biblical events. On the contrary, it is the confession that Jesus Christ appeared to real people in human history that makes a genuine confession of belief possible. However, Niebuhr hinted in this article that differences exist between Christianity's *external history*, meaning the historical course of events, and the *internal history* of the story of the ecclesial community.[17] Although the two innately interact, making this distinction smacks of a Barthian divide between revelation and the natural world. Theology thus became, for many narrative theologians in the line of Neibuhr, a process of *performance* of Christian norms to formulate a Christian identity that may or may not originate in the biblical text.[18]

These thoughts were developed most prominently through the work of theologians of the Yale School, particularly Hans Frei and George Lindbeck.[19] While the two differ widely in theological method, both agreed that theology arising out of narrative and narrative criticism leads to a Christian character formation rooted in the narrative character of the Christian gospel. Their point is not proving the Bible's historicity. Their point is ensuring the believer's transformation.

All well and good, evangelicals respond, yet what is the genesis of theology? If the jumping off point is merely connecting the transformation story of a community, albeit a Christian community, to a biblical narrative, that is insufficient exegesis. Authorial intent is not given the seat of honor it deserves. Thus, if this significant rule of conservative hermeneutics is denied, narrative theology fails to take the Bible seriously.[20]

---

17 "External history is the medium in which internal history exists and comes to life." Ibid., 44.

18 See, for example, David F. Ford, "System, Story, Performance: A Proposal about the Role of Narrative in Christian Systematic Theology," in Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones, eds., *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 191-215. More recently, Kevin J. Vanhoozer expanded this idea of theology as doctrinal performance via speech-act theory in his influential *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Doctrine* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005).

19 Especially influential are Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven, CO: Yale Univ., 1980) and George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1984).

20 See John Frame's review of George Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine* in John M. Frame, "Review of Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine*," *The Presbyterian Journal* vol. 43 (1985): 11-12. Frame applauds Lindbeck's upholding of the importance of doctrine yet decries as

Second, evangelicals accuse narrative theologians of downplaying the transcendent God, focusing instead on the stories of immanent Christian communities. Theology, it is said, becomes the story of a religious group (or groups) more than the story of God.[21]   Like all forms of theology, narrative theology moves from the experiences of biblical characters and principles to the practical outworking in the life of the Church. Grenz and Olson argue that this must be so for theology to be called such. They write, "The genius of narrative theology lies in its assertion that faith entails the joining of our personal stories with the transcendent/immanent story of a religious community and ultimately with the grand narrative of the divine action in the world."[22]

Narrative theology, then, links our personal stories as part of God's community with the metanarrative of the Scriptures. This ongoing task is by no means heretical until it begins labeling such links revelation. While few narrative theologians are willing to go this far, evangelicals often suspect such equivocation. One example that flirts with this idea is David Ford's explanation of Christian worship as neither attention to doctrinal truths nor a soul's inner communication with God. Instead, Ford says, Christian worship is a "social meal- and word-centered communication informed by the key events of the Christian story."[23] Thus, narrative theologians are said to favor progressive experience over and above revealed truth by relying more on the conclusions of literary criticism about the Bible than on the fact that God says the Bible is his Word.[24]These two evangelical charges, denial of authorial intent in interpretation and focusing more on progressive communal experience than the

---

"liberal" Lindbeck's emphasis on doctrinal language as symbols for Christian communities.

21 See, for example, John Frame, "Narrative Theology," The Gospel Coalition, accessed July 10, 2023, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/narrative-theology/

22 Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *20th Century Theology: God & the World in a Transitional Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992), 272.

23 David F. Ford, "System, Story, Performance," 201.

24 "Theology is our best human attempt to understand the biblical drama-story and that includes developing canonical-linguistic models (complex metaphors, doctrines) that express its meaning for the church's belief and life. But a theologian cannot do that properly unless he or she is 'living the story' together with a community of faith shaped by the story." Roger E. Olson, "Narrative Theology Explained," Patheos, January 15, 2016, accessed July 10, 2023, https://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2016/01/narrative-theology-explained/

revealed, transcendent God, cause many bristling debates. Yet they are and should be well-noted. Distinguishing between a mystical biblical-spiritual history and external-natural history will not do, since Christianity's central claim is that the supernatural truly entered the natural. To quote the evangelical titan Carl F. H. Henry,

> Representations of biblical history by many narrative theologians leave one with the uneasy sense that their commendable reservations about the historical method are correlated with a view that important aspects of biblical history belong to a different historical category than the history that contemporary historians investigate . . . Evangelical theism insists that God reveals himself in external history and nature, and supremely in redemptive history.[25]

Evangelical calls are poignant, then, for narrative theologians to choose whether they believe biblical narratives are genuinely historical. Waffling has no place in Christian preaching and discipleship. Sooner or later, we must choose sides.[26]

Redeeming Narrative Theology

While narrative theology presents real dangers, it also presents opportunities. In this section, I present five opportunities for evangelical theology to learn from narrative theology. In this way, theology may take both the Bible and narrative seriously so that narrative theology can be redeemed.

First, narrative appeals to modern readers. The sharing of stories, especially spiritual stories, ignites emotion. Stories inspire, challenge, embolden, model, sadden, encourage, discourage, clarify, humanize, and question. In short, stories generate empathy.

---

25 Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, 11-12; cited in Van Engen, *Mission on the Way*, 63.

26 Keven Vanhoozer portrays the discussion a different way. Using the Catholic concept of the "seven deadly sins," Vanhoozer says that the sin of modernism was Pride in the absolute ability of human reason and ingenuity. The sin of postmodernism that embodies much of narrative theology proposals, however, is Sloth, due to their refusal to commit to anything. Vanhoozer, "Theology and the Condition of Postmodernity: A Report on Knowledge (of God)," in Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ., 2003), 23-24.

Narrative theologians are quick to point to the ethical nature of stories.[27] Stories instill a community's values into their members. Commenting on the formative essence of narrative for the Church, Grenz and Olson note, "[Narrative theology] rightly calls theology and ethics to consider the role of the Christian community in the formation of believers as people of character."[28]

Second, narrative is often misunderstood in theological discourse. This is especially true in Christian preaching. Even though preachers know the vast majority of Scripture is narrative,[29] most preachers are trained in analytic exegesis that dissects a biblical passage and pulls out a single "big idea."[30] Yet, as theologian Albert Mohler notes, such exegesis works well for a passage from Romans but less so for the book of Jonah.[31]

The result is that either the biblical narratives are not preached at all, which is less likely, or that they could be preached in ways uncharacteristic of the narrative genre, which is more likely. What if a biblical story has more than one main point? Should preachers struggle to condense them into one? The problem then becomes that the preacher may be more faithful to his hermeneutic presuppositions than to the biblical narrative he is preaching.[32]

Third, narrative makes biblical characters more real. Little value comes from understanding the heart of a biblical story if it turns out that the characters in that story are merely prototypes propping up a narrative's (or a sermon's)

---

27 See, for example, Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, revised and updated ed. (New York, NY: Basic, 2011). Alter's work is an excellent example of how studying the Old Testament using literary theory can bring out helpful insights that enhance interpretation, without detracting from historical-grammatical hermeneutics, leading to new ethical insights.

28 Grenz and Olson, *20th Century Theology*, 360.

29 Tom Steffen, "Pedagogical Conversions: From Propositions to Story and Symbol," *Missiology* vol. 38 (2010): 150.

30 This was certainly the case in the Bible Exposition class I took, which leaned heavily on Ramesh Richard's *Preparing Expository Sermons: A Seven-Step Method for Biblical Preaching*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001).

31 R. Albert Mohler, "The Gospel in Biblical Narrative," Truth for Life, May 24, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=21n6Qww8ZA8.

32 Perhaps even deeper, preachers do not consider narrative to be theology, considering it instead jumbled and messy. Writes Charles Van Engen, "The narrative of Scripture intends to be theology – it intends to point to and signify the reality of God." Van Engen, *Mission on the Way*, 54. I would caveat it further with the claim that the narrative of Scripture *is* theology – it *does* point to and signify the reality of God.

main theological principle. Failing to regard biblical characters as real people with real lives and perspectives quite literally drains the lifeblood from them. For example, in a rush to systematize our understanding of the divine-human nature of Christ, Christians may skip over the wonder Jesus' Jewish friends felt by having a front-row seat to his healing and creating power. Taking seriously the thoughts, words, and actions of all the characters in a biblical story will lead to diverse theological paths we would do well to follow. Such character theology assists Christian teachers and preachers in connecting with audiences who may not prefer more linear, abstract approaches.[33]

Fourth, narrative fits the overall biblical story. One stream in which narrative theology has greatly aided the Church is the recovery of thinking of the Bible as a Grand Narrative. This approach is called biblical theology, and it has led to helpful discoveries. Christians are taught that, even though the Bible was written by over 40 authors in a span of 1,500 years on several continents, the Bible is one story of a good God who redeems his fallen people. Various parts, or movements, are proposed for this metanarrative. I learned to retell the Grand Story in terms of Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration. Yet beyond the terms we use, the reality that the Bible is intended to be understood as a unified story in which we may all find our place is helpful on multiple fronts, including missionaries doing the hard work of contextualization.[34]

Fifth, narrative provides a less abrasive apologetic. Narrative is essential in soteriology, the study of salvation, because salvation stories "presume the sufficient conditions of a narrative: two states and an event that transforms the first into the second."[35] In other words, Christians use narrative in explaining not only their own salvation stories, but also the overarching story

---

33 "Character theology" is developed in Tom Steffen and William Bjoraker, *The Return of Oral Hermeneutics* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2020), 164-195. Using this model, I wrote an advent devotional a few years ago to bring out honor-shame realities. See Cameron D. Armstrong, "Advent Devotional: Honor, Shame, and the First Christmas," Honorshame. com, https://honorshame.com/advent-devotional-honor-shame-and-the-first-christmas/

34 Consider, for example, the use of biblical theology among Filipino tribal Christians to counter heretical evangelists. "Tribals Reaching Tribals: A Conversation with Steve and Jen Hagen," Orality and the Mission of God podcast, September 12, 2022, https://anchor.fm/oralityandthemissionofgod/episodes/Tribals-Reaching-Tribals-A-Conversation-with-Steve-and-Jen-Hagen-e1nn0n4?fbclid=IwAR1ie1llswGpbD4fVA58FRMsrZC-Qg5R5pB96cZBHuTqMJgtVV-fw4TCyojY

35 Michael Root, "The Narrative Structure of Soteriology," in Hauerwas and Jones, eds., *Why Narrative?*, 263-264.

of the gospel. As Christians tell the story of their lives before Christ, how they met Christ, and the redeemed life since that time, others imagine what it might mean to live such a story. This is especially helpful in interreligious encounters.[36]

Sharing how our stories dovetail into the biblical story is nothing new, as the Apostle Paul frequently used such an approach in the Book of Acts. Yet an overemphasis on systematically proving abstract statements in our evangelism strategies (God is holy, you are a sinner, etc.), can lead to fear whenever the topic of evangelism arises. Christians fear they are not fully trained in apologetics and doctrine to counter the lies of the enemy. Explanation through stories, however, may deflate those fears.[37]

The Best of Both Worlds?

This article has introduced basic concepts and definitions of narrative theology. Arising out of a postmodern reaction to propositional thought that reduced rich narratives to abstract statements, theologians began to trace and intersect the narratival schemes of biblical stories and their own stories. Evangelical suspicion of a de-emphasis on the historicity of biblical narratives in favor of some sort of ahistorical, spiritual horizon is rightly warranted. That is a dangerous path that is often circular and leads nowhere except apostasy.

Yet a focus on the narrative structure of Scripture, both the individual narratives and the Grand Narrative of the whole, can also lead to a robust biblical theology. Understanding the unfolding plan of God (biblical theol-

---

36 Drawing from Hans Frei's identification of five types of Christian dialogue with world religions, Malaysian theologian Kang-San Tan advances that dialoguing with religious narratives helps non-Western Christians synthesize their worldview among non-Christian majority cultures in a way that traditional Western systematic theologies often do not. Tan writes, "Evangelicals rooted in a Western epistemology seem good at analyzing but not very good at synthesis; good at splitting fine doctrinal hairs, but not very good at allowing new shoots to grow into indigenous Christianity within the parameters of orthodoxy." Kang-San Tan, "Hans Frei's Typology of Theology for Religious Encounters in Asian Contexts," 279-295, in *Asian Christian Theology: Evangelical Perspectives*, ed. Timoteo D. Gener and Stephen T. Pardue (Carlisle, UK: Langham, 2019), 290.

37 "Storytelling evangelism" within community is the thrust of Sam Chan's *Effective Evangelism in a Skeptical World: How to Make the Unbelievable News About Jesus More Believable* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018). For the use of story in apologetics, see Josh Chatraw, *Telling A Better Story: How to Talk About God in a Skeptical Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2020).

ogy) becomes richer through an informed evangelical narrative theology. As a result, Christians not only begin to locate how biblical narratives fit in the overall canon, but they also begin viewing their own stories as part of God's Story. On an even more personal level, Christians empathize with biblical characters, reliving their perspectives in ways that fortify their faith and spur them forward in the Christian journey. And if that kind of genuine Christian living becomes the result of our teaching, we may rest assured that the God who walked alongside the characters of the Bible will walk alongside our disciples also.

Cameron D. Armstrong (PhD, Biola University) has served with the International Mission Board for eleven years. Cameron served in Bucharest, Romania for ten years prior to moving to the Philippines in 2022. He now serves as Program Director for the ThM/PhD in Orality Studies at Asia Graduate School of Theology – Philippines *(hosted by Asian Theological Seminary) and also works in various capacities with the Philippine Baptist Theological Seminary. Cameron and his wife, Jessica, and their two children, Sara and Noah, live in Manila, Philippines.*

Local Mentoring for the Missionary

Charis Salem

Introduction

When Tyrel[1], a newly arrived missionary to the Philippines, was asked to provide marriage counseling to a struggling local Christian couple, he was willing to try. However, shortly into the conversation involving the entire family rather than just the husband and wife, things started to escalate. Strong feelings came to the fore, multiple languages were flung about, and Tyrel was floundering, unable to help the couple, much less the whole family. Suddenly an older local pastor arrived from a church down the road. "I watched him confidently and calmly and relationally bring truth and reason and peace to the situation," Tyrel recalled.[2]

How does one prepare for the myriad of confusing and, at times, overwhelming, cultural situations missionaries will find themselves facing in their new country? Mission organizations go to great lengths to ensure that missionaries have an infrastructure in place to thrive on the field. They arrange consultants for counseling, provide health care resources, and give support for children's education; they set up language directors, team leaders, and organizational mentors. These sources of support have their place and often contribute to missionary longevity. It is common for

---

1   *Name changed for security purposes.*

2   Tyrel Kilkenny, personal communication with author, January 1, 2023.

mission organizations to recommend that new workers seek out seasoned missionaries as mentors (and this is a good thing).[3] However, mission leaders sometimes fail to emphasize one of the greatest potential sources of cultural and spiritual mentoring – the local believer.

Zeke[4] recalled being encouraged by his leadership to seek out locals as friends as he and his family prepared to serve in South Asia, but no mention was ever made of looking for a local mentor. "It's a little sad; I think the underlying message maybe was that a local couldn't be a mentor for me," he said. When he began training local believers as a 24-year-old new missionary, he was teaching local Christians older than himself with more years in the faith and more cultural understanding. It wasn't until he had been on the field for about a year and a half and after unintentionally burning some relational bridges through a lack of cultural understanding that he finally met a local who he could go to with hard questions, someone who would push back on the way he had been operating.[5] He felt that, with more encouragement to seek out the advice of a wise local believer earlier on, he may have avoided inadvertently hurting several local believers.

In this article, I will build a case for why local Christian mentors can play a critical role in developing the missionary's understanding of local culture as well as in deepening their faith within the new context. This should lead to mission organizations encouraging those being sent out to keep their eyes open for local mentors that the Lord may provide.

Biblical basis for mentoring

While there are many ideas concerning what it means for someone to mentor another person, Edmund Chan has some excellent thoughts on how we should see this role as believers: "Mentoring is not just an impartation of knowledge. It's about living a life! Mentoring is an impartation of life and convictions. It is about living a life and sharing the journey."[6]

---

3   Jennifer Waldrep, "Missionaries Need Mentors Too," *IMB* (blog), June 11, 2019, https://www.imb.org/2019/06/11/missionaries-need-mentors/.

4   *Name changed for security purposes.*

5   *Zeke Dillon, personal communication with author, August 20, 2023.*

6   Edmund Chan, *Mentoring Paradigms: Reflections on Mentoring, Leadership, and Discipleship* (Singapore: Lifestyle Impact Publishing, 2008), 57.

This concept of mentoring as a life-on-life relationship occurs multiple times in Scripture. The Old Testament provides a number of examples, including Moses mentoring Joshua (Exod 24:13, Deut 34:9) and Elijah mentoring Elisha (2 Kgs 2). In the New Testament Priscilla and Aquilla mentored Apollos (Acts 18:26), helping him gain a clearer understanding of the Gospel. Apollos, though Jewish, had been born in Alexandria, meaning that this particular mentoring relationship was likely cross-cultural to some extent. Barnabas mentored Paul through extensive time spent ministering together (Acts 11:26), and Paul went on to mentor many others, among them Timothy (Acts 16) and Titus (Titus 1:4).

Though Scripture contains many examples of mentoring, Jesus himself sets the highest bar. During his brief three years with his disciples, he taught them both directly (Mark 2:23-28; Luke 8:9-18) and indirectly (Matt 9:9-13) They witnessed his actions towards others (Matt 8) as they lived side by side with him. They were challenged by him (Luke 9:57-62) and they experienced his love personally (John 13). The outstanding feature of the disciples was not their education or intelligence (Acts 4:13), but it was their teachability.[7] God used these twelve men to help change the world through their time spent with Jesus. Though every human mentor will be flawed, Scripture makes clear the impact that a good mentor can have in the life of a Christian in spurring them on towards deeper understanding of their faith and greater obedience. Mentoring is no less necessary now than it was then, and it is vital in situations where we have entered a new culture.

Differences between a local partner and a local mentor

Isn't a mentor just a ministry partner with a different name, one might ask? Most missionaries do come to the field and seek out local partners to varying degrees. They desire to learn from those partners and gain cultural insight. They often form deep friendships. Missionaries may find a local partner and then proceed to train that partner in the strategies and methods that the missionary has predetermined are going to be effective.[8] However, it seems to be rarer that we are willing to consider the local believer as

---

7 　Robert E. Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism: 30th Anniversary Edition* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1993), 29.

8 　This type of partnership is likely not an equal one, however, given that most of the ministry direction proceeds from the missionary.

someone who could speak authoritatively into our own lives. Three key aspects differentiate a mentor from a partner: First, mentors have experience, knowledge, and skills in a particular area that their mentees do not yet possess. Second, mentors bring their mentees into a new world that was previously outside the mentee's experience.[9] Third, the assumption of authority is reversed from that of the traditional missionary and local believer relationship. Though missionaries may prefer to avoid the conversation about power dynamics between themselves and local believers, those dynamics are real, and they often skew towards the missionary (particularly in developing world locations), intended or not. Granting permission to the trusted local mentor to speak authoritatively and opening oneself up to receiving that instruction marks a clear distinction between a local ministry partner and a local mentor.

The authority granted does not necessarily apply to every aspect of the missionary's life. A mentee grants the mentor the right to speak authoritatively into their life within a particular area of expertise. Kelly Seeley, IMB missionary in Europe, states,

> (L)ocal leaders need to be given the real ability to shape the ministry of the missionary. Of course, the local person is not to shape all of it, but the missionary's leaders need to seek the voice of local partners. Their voice does not just need to be heard, but it ought also to be influential concerning the ministry development decisions for the missionary and what they need to work on in the language, culture, and ministry approaches.[10]

One missionary shared his family's experience of having to decide where to live after moving to serve among a people in Micronesia. One option was isolated with a beautiful view of the ocean. The other was crushed in the midst of a village, surrounded by people, noise and litter. When the missionary expressed his intention to live on the isolated beach with the view,

---

9   Vigen Guroian, "Literature and the Real Meaning of Mentorship," Baylor University Institute for Faith and Learning, 2008, https://ifl.web.baylor.edu/sites/g/files/ecbvkj771/files/2022-12/friendshiparticleguroian.pdf.

10 Kelly Seely and Stephan Pues, *Servant Partnership: A Practical Guide for Gospel-Motivated Collaboration in Your City* (Frankfurt: Gemeindegründungszentrum e.V., 2019), 29.

his cultural helper gently said, "If you want to learn to speak our language, the other place is better for you."[11] Missionaries should keep themselves open to the real possibility that the Lord could provide a local believer of such substance, depth, and competence that the missionary and the work could greatly benefit from submitting some of one's decisions to his or her wise advice.

Challenges in seeking out local mentors

Many missionaries live and serve in zero-to-one situations, where there may not be even one Christian among the group they are seeking to reach. These circumstances generally do not lend themselves to finding a local mentor. However, one possibility remains within this scenario that may still allow for a rich mentoring experience. There may be a local believer from a near culture who could serve as an effective spiritual mentor. This person might even understand the target culture well enough to offer sound explanations and advice regarding cultural dynamics. The potential richness of this kind of mentoring relationship should not be overlooked, since learning this new culture is vital to seeing ministry success down the road. "While the externals of clothing, food, music, transportation, and the Internet are changing and making the world more homogeneous, deep cultural values seem to be ever more stable and enduring" states one mission leader.[12] Time is never wasted with someone who can help unravel the deep ministries of the new culture in which a missionary is embedded.

Many missionaries serve in situations in which the church is very young and there are no mature believers yet. In these cases, I have only this to add – perhaps our version of a mature believer is not exactly how the Lord sees it. There may be more potential than we initially observe in some of those believers to mentor the new missionary. At the least, they can serve as great cultural mentors. Keeping an open mind in these situations could pay later dividends in terms of ministry effectiveness.

Finally, most missionaries go out with a commitment to bring the most important Truth, the Gospel, to a place and people that lack it. There is a

---

11 Sherwood G. Lingenfelter and Marvin K. Mayers, *Ministering Cross-Culturally: A Model for Effective Personal Relationships*, 3rd Edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 15.

12 James E. Plueddemann, *Leading Across Cultures: Effective Ministry and Mission in the Global Church* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 2009), 73.

potential that, in our zeal to bring the Truth, we may close ourselves off from considering the ways in which local believers can teach us and even speak with authority into our lives.

Different types of mentoring relationships

As previously mentioned, there are various areas in which a local believer may serve as a mentor. One person may be an amazing cultural mentor and assist in understanding how to contextualize communal faith practices in the new country, but not have as much to offer on personal spiritual disciplines. Others may be amazing as a personal spiritual mentor but not be as far along in their own understanding of evangelism. Looking for one person to fulfill all the potential roles a mentor could play is probably not the optimal route to take. The search for a mentor is likely more fruitful if the missionary focuses on finding someone to learn from in a few particular areas.

I have personally benefitted from having two different women as mentors during my 18 years serving in Southeast Asia, and they each played quite different roles. With the first one, we were close to the same age, but this local friend had a deep faith combined with excellent cultural understanding of her own people. I fed off her wisdom in those early years when I was often floundering in my attempts to understand locals. Her spiritual maturity meant that I could ask very direct questions about the ways local Christians understood and practiced their faith without the risk of offending her. She knew my heart by that point and gave me wide latitude to confer with her about situations that were confusing to me or scenarios where I had no idea how to react to local Christian's strange or even, to my perception, sinful behavior. As a strong believer, she also was able to view her own culture from a biblical perspective, and she granted me insight into the process when I was afraid that my understandings might be more cultural than biblical.

I met my second mentor at a service for a new church plant. She seemed to bridge my two worlds, coming from the Southeast Asian nation where we serve, but having also lived internationally. I noticed how she interacted with others, and I was drawn into her sharp-witted, faith-drenched orbit. We have met monthly for most of the last six years. Often, we have read books on faith together, but the most valuable insights from her have come from hearing how she has navigated situations with other nationals, both

believers and non-believers. We share openly about challenges we each are facing in ministry, and I have gleaned much from hearing how she has handled situations in her church. She has the kind of faith that is willing to challenge local norms. As a non-local, I am not always confident as to whether my take on a situation is more informed by my culture or the gospel. For those times when I have been unsure, this friend has been an excellent guide.

Regarding mentoring of missionaries by locals, Rachel, a long-time missionary from the UK, states:

> I think it's happening more now... We can look to other westerners and there are certainly things other westerners can give but there are the deep insights that local believers have ... it can really change their perception [the missionary's] about the country, about their worldview, about the way they look at things when they first arrive, if they have a wise and trusted mentor who is a local believer.[13]

And a mentor does not need to be someone who is similar to the missionary in order for this to work. The mentors that both Tyrel and Jack worked with were from different backgrounds, culturally, socio-economically and educationally. It was because of those differences, in addition to the spiritual maturity of those men, that Jack and Tyrel both learned from them.

Benefits to having a local mentor

Seeking out a local mentor may provide multiple benefits to the missionary, ranging from cultural expertise to contextualized spiritual insights. Developing this kind of deep relationship with a trustworthy local believer would likely bring benefits beyond those mentioned here, but they are reason enough to ask the Lord to provide a local mentor.

1. Cultural Insight

Western culture these days, and American culture in particular, leans heavily toward the idea that being ourselves is sufficient for connecting with the rest of the world. "This is a formula for cross-cultural disaster,"

---

13 Rachel, personal communication with author, February 2, 2023.

writes Plueddemann.[14] Given that we are all, to some degree, a product of our environments, missionaries from the West moving into new cultures will need to perform the hard work of finding a new way of being and interacting in their new home, rather than assuming that good intentions and a sunny disposition will be sufficient to cover the cultural gap with locals. "I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some," states the Apostle Paul.[15] Though most missionaries seem to arrive on the field with a commitment to learn the new culture, this commitment can fall by the wayside when the cultural rub becomes too uncomfortable.

Most cross-cultural workers can learn about the new culture through every-day interactions with locals. However, spending significant amounts of time with a local mentor creates potential for levels of understanding that are harder to come by in more casual connections. Having a local mentor who will take the time to explain the "why" of cultural differences offers the opportunity to do a deep dive into cultural learning that is connected to a meaningful relationship, adding impetus to the effort required in the learning process. This process deepens the missionary's trust in the mentor and opens him or her up to receiving criticism or observations from the mentor about ways in which the missionary can improve their interactions with locals.

2. Deepened understanding of suffering

Most Western missionaries who head to the developing world are fairly inexperienced when it comes to suffering for their faith or from the maladies that affect many developing world nations. Local believers may suffer from persecution, poverty or the effects of a dysfunctional government. "While the Bible does not dwell on the why of suffering, it often talks about how we should face suffering. It teaches many things that give us strength to face suffering," observes Ajith Fernando, one of the Youth for Christ directors.[16]

---

14 Plueddemann, *Leading Across Cultures*, 21.

15 *1 Corinthians 9:22, ESV.*

16 Ajith Fernando, *Discipling in a Multicultural World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 97.*Ajith Fernando offers biblical principles for discipling and presents examples showing how they apply to daily life and ministry. He addresses key cultural challenges, such as the value of honor and shame, honoring family commitments, and dealing with persecution, and helps us think realistically about the cost and commitment required for productive cross-cultural ministry. This practical guide to discipleship will help us help others grow into mature and godly followers of Christ.*

Finding a trusted local believer who has already walked that walk and applied the teachings of Scripture to their own suffering offers the wide-eyed new missionary a front row seat to how one can remain faithful in the midst of significant suffering. Though the chances are low that the missionary will suffer in the same manner as a local believer, learning directly from someone who has walked through suffering deepens the missionary's understanding and ability to meaningfully support others experiencing similar circumstances.

The evidence of suffering in the life of Grajang, a Thai pastor, was visible in his leprosy-ravaged fingers. He was a poor man who had experienced the physical isolation of living with a disease that terrorized the population. As a rare Christian in an overwhelmingly Buddhist country, he also experienced social isolation. He offered up the gifts of this suffering and the resulting spiritual maturity to Jack, a fresh-to-the-field IMB missionary in the 70s. For a number of years, Jack spent several days a week with Grajang, eating and sleeping in the same quarters, sharing the gospel house to house in the villages together. He watched Grajang wake up at 4:30 am every day to pray, saw his compassion in how he engaged with Thai villagers, and had his own understanding of the Thai people shaped by these experiences. "I saw a godly man communing with the Father, the source of his ability to minister to others. I learned how to share the gospel with the Thai. I continued to learn from Grajang as long as I worked with him," Jack shared.[17]

3. Contextualized Faith Practices

Local mentors can provide insight into cultural or spiritual aspects of life; in many cases, they will provide both. Most missionaries are quite open to the idea of looking to local friends to provide cultural insights (and those who do not meet at least this low bar of cultural adaptation are unlikely to survive many years on the field). But seeking a grasp on the mingling of culture and faith and the myriad ways in which one can influence the other is also a critical piece of the missionary learning arc.

What does church look like in a culture where men and women generally operate in separate spheres? How do church authority structures differ, but remain biblical, between cultures with low versus high power distance? How should biblical accountability work in a culture with strong face-sav-

---

17 Jack Kinnison, personal communication with author, August 18, 2022.

ing values? Falling back on cultural practices from home, which we may presume to be the biblical way, leaves the missionary vulnerable to bringing in practices that do not serve the new context well and may in fact have much more outside culture attached to it than the missionary realizes.

The Old Testament contains examples of God transforming Near Eastern covenant forms and practices for his own purposes. For example, circumcision already existed outside of Jewish culture when God established it as an early covenant practice.[18] God did not simply dismiss all cultural forms as he established his relationship with the Israelite people. As the church is established in new contexts, missionaries should anticipate that part of their task is to sift through what stays, what goes, and what can be transformed. The line between syncretism and contextualization can be thin, and yet we cannot ignore the importance of removing as many barriers as possible to understanding the Gospel. Contextualization is one of the keys. If at all possible, a critical piece to this sifting should be the trusted guidance of a local mentor in understanding these cultural forms.

4. Bridge for Communication

When Tyrel first arrived in the Philippines, he often thought he understood conversations and cultural signals that happened during meetings, only to discover that he had missed important pieces. The local partners with whom Tyrel ministered were mostly younger than he and thus did not seem like classic mentors. However, Tyrel observed, "when we finished meeting with people in a community or talking with church leaders, I couldn't wait to debrief it with them to learn all the cultural and linguistic cues I had missed in the conversation." Tyrel continues, "This carried over in all areas of ministry as I learned the value of asking questions and not assuming I understood situations."

These young ministry partners who served as mentors for Tyrel were safe people for him to ask cultural questions. They interpreted local situations for him and could stand in to speak for Tyrel, too, if others misunderstood his intentions. As a person of good repute in the community, the mentor is a human bridge who can ease communication miscues that can so easily happen between those of differing cultural backgrounds. As a trusted friend with the authority to speak into the life of the missionary, he can guide

---

18 Jackson Wu, "The Doctrine of Scripture and Biblical Contextualization: Inspiration, Authority, Inerrancy, and the Canon," *Themelios* 44, no. 2 (2019): 312–26.

the missionary into better ways of communicating that sidestep previous mistakes.

5. Humble Posture

Seeking a local mentor puts missionaries in the uncomfortable position of feeling incompetent (at least in some situations). Becoming a baby again, linguistically and culturally, is humbling on its own, but confessing our ignorance to someone else who recognizes it and who is simultaneously more knowledgeable takes a high degree of humility. Lance Borden shares the positive potential of having a local partner speak into the missionary's ministry:

> Whether interacting with the culture as a whole or with our partners, we need to be able to understand how we tend to be viewed, and act and speak in ways that demonstrate humility coupled with passion and really powerful faith. We do indeed bring many valuable aspects, and our partners recognize and appreciate them. Our partners can guide us on when and how to contribute them most powerfully.[19]

When missionaries are willing to be open with trusted local partners and allow them to speak into how we function in our new culture, the friendship can begin to shift towards a mentoring relationship. This results in the missionary taking a posture of humility, which not only benefits ministry effectiveness as it opens up space for local believers to feel heard and play a larger role in ministry, but it also benefits the missionary personally as she more deeply reflects the image of Christ who "humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death..."[20] Opening herself up to correction by a local mentor requires that kind of death to self that can move the missionary into deeper levels of Christlikeness.

Conclusion

I can't give the reader a reductionistic list of five ways to find a local mentor. The truth is that this is a rather ambiguous enterprise. There aren't nearly

---

19 Seely and Pues, *Servant Partnership: A Practical Guide for Gospel-Motivated Collaboration in Your City*, 26.

20 *Philippians 2:8a.*

enough local mentors to go around for all the missionaries who could use one. And finding them isn't a straightforward process even when there is potential. This effort falls into the same category as so many other things within the life of a missionary – trusting in the Lord to provide what and who He thinks we need. "Great leaders do not control people, nor do they attempt to control their own lives. They are able to live with the ambiguity of not knowing what comes next. They choose to become radically open to the twists and turns, the ups and downs, the obstacles and opportunities, that comprise the elements of an extraordinary life," writes Alvin Ung.[21] This is one way in which we can open ourselves up to the provision of our great God and be amazed by what He does in and around us – but let's begin by asking him to provide.

Bibliography

Chan, Edmund. *Mentoring Paradigms: Reflections on Mentoring, Leadership, and Discipleship.* Singapore: Lifestyle Impact Publishing, 2008.

Coleman, Robert E. *The Master Plan of Evangelism: 30th Anniversary Edition.* Grand Rapids, MI: Revell, 1993.

Fernando, Ajith. *Discipling in a Multicultural World.* Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019.

Guroian, Vigen. "Literature and the Real Meaning of Mentorship." Baylor University Institute for Faith and Learning, 2008. https://ifl.web.baylor.edu/sites/g/files/ecbvkj771/files/2022-12/friendshiparticleguroian.pdf.

Lingenfelter, Sherwood G., and Marvin K. Mayers. *Ministering Cross-Culturally: A Model for Effective Personal Relationships.* 3rd Edition. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016.

Plueddemann, James E. *Leading Across Cultures: Effective Ministry and Mission in the Global Church.* Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 2009.

Rachel. "E-Mail Message to Author," February 2, 2023.

---

21 Alvin Ung, *Barefoot Leadership: The Art Heart of Going That Extra Mile* (Kuala Lumpur: Khazanah Nasional, 2012), 19.

Seely, Kelly, and Stephan Pues. *Servant Partnership: A Practical Guide for Gospel-Motivated Collaboration in Your City*. Frankfurt: Gemeindegründungszentrum e.V., 2019.

Ung, Alvin. *Barefoot Leadership: The Art Heart of Going That Extra Mile*. Kuala Lumpur: Khazanah Nasional, 2012.

Waldrep, Jennifer. "Missionaries Need Mentors Too." *IMB* (blog), June 11, 2019. https://www.imb.org/2019/06/11/missionaries-need-mentors/.

Wu, Jackson. "The Doctrine of Scripture and Biblical Contextualization: Inspiration, Authority, Inerrancy, and the Canon." *Themelios* 44, no. 2 (2019): 312–26.

Language Acquisition and Effective Gospel Contextualization

Jonthan Sharp

For the cross-cultural Christian worker, language learning is a fundamental part of communicating and contextualizing the gospel message. After all, Paul writes that people cannot call on Christ if they have not believed in him, and they cannot believe in him unless they have heard about him (Rom. 10:14). Missionary-sending agencies normally value language acquisition. But in practice, language learning at times can be fraught with difficulties for missionaries.

First, language acquisition is simply not an easy task. Research shows that attaining basic fluency in a new language normally takes an investment of at least 480 to 720 hours.[1] Prioritizing such a time-intensive task can be challenging while dealing with pressures of life and family and facing so many other tasks that need to be done. There are no shortcuts to effective language learning. Because of this difficulty, a temptation for missionaries is to default to English or another trade language.

In fact, English is the common language in much of the world today like Greek was in New Testament times. In other regions of the world, Spanish,

---

1   Peter Rubenstein and Bryan Lufkin, "How to learn a language in an hour a day," *BBC:* https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20190219-how-to-learn-a-language-in-an-hour-a-day, accessed 20 September 2023.

Hindi, Mandarin, Arabic or another language may be the common trade language. Missionaries sometimes assume that their use of the heart language is not as strong as the English of the people they are reaching. This easier route to ministry in English or a trade language can be tempting. Years ago, I observed the consternation of missionaries in the Andes Mountains of Peru when told that they were required to learn the language of the indigenous peoples. They did not understand why they needed to go to so much trouble when they thought that everyone spoke enough Spanish. Their ministry context was typical of many parts of the world. The trade language--Spanish in this case--was necessary to live and communicate in the country. However, a country may have many people groups who speak different mother tongues. Often there are fewer resources for learning these languages, making this task even more difficult. But I have observed that subsequent missionaries in the Peruvian Andes have worked more effectively evangelizing and planting churches among indigenous groups as they have emphasized learning the heart language of the people. They have seen that through the heart language of people, faith can take root and be expressed and understood more deeply.

Koine Greek was the common language of the Eastern Mediterranean world during New Testament times.[2] Yet with the coming of the Holy Spirit at the birth of the church, we see the heart language of the people used, not the common trade language. Observers that had come from many nations for the Festival of Weeks were bewildered by the miracle of hearing followers of Jesus declare the wonders of God in their own mother tongues (Acts 2:6-12). These travelers would have been proficient enough in Greek to get by. Perhaps they even knew Aramaic or even some Latin. But this day God chose to speak to people in their own heart languages. The Spirit clearly showed God's plan to extend the kingdom outside of just Israel and to the nations. Use of the heart language shows that the message is not just for one group of people; the message is for all. Using their heart languages cut through barriers quickly, allowing them to get to the heart of the gospel and preparing people to be open to hear it.

A motivation for learning the heart language is recognizing that language is an essential part of people's culture; culture and language are inseparable.

---

2   Edwin Arthur, "Koine Greek and the *Misso Dei*": https://www.sil.org/system/files/reap-data/13/71/10/ 13711019208662770132037847917630268 0043/Arthur_Koine_Greek_ and_the_Missio_Dei.pdf, accessed 20 September 2023.

We can never understand a culture well without learning the language well.[3] Missionaries unprepared to learn heart language and culture effectively can easily end up establishing *transplanted churches* that reflect the missionaries' home culture more than the local context.[4] Kraft notes that, while sometimes necessary to introduce some foreign concepts, the application of too many foreign concepts and customs to the practice of a new faith results in a religion that feels foreign to nationals: "It's as if they were learning to follow a foreign Christ and to speak their language with a foreign accent."[5] Fluency in the heart language, not just a trade language, is necessary to think culturally and express the gospel in culturally relevant ways, allowing the gospel to genuinely take root in the culture.

This principle of communicating in the heart language is relevant, but challenging, in an increasingly multicultural, global environment. The use trade language in ministry is often necessary, especially as we seek to see multicultural expressions of the Gospel. The Apostle Paul is an example of using trade languages out of necessity.[6] Wisdom is needed to know when a general trade language needs to be used in a multicultural environment, and when and how the heart languages of people should to be used. For example, we have seen many internationals attend our church plant in Lisbon. Any given night we have groups meeting in Portuguese as well as English and can have people from up to 10 different countries represented. In these cases we are relying on the two main languages spoken among the group, yet we have seen a disconnect from some of the internationals until we find someone who can speak to them in their heart language and get them a copy of the Bible in their heart language. While we can partner together and do ministry through the trade languages, we have seen the most response and the most fruit when we find someone who can bridge the gap between their heart language and our trade language.

---

3   Clyde Davidson, "Language Learning for Missions is Worth It," *Radical*: https://radical.net/article/language-learning-for-missions/, accessed 29 July 2023.

4   Gailyn Van Rheenen, "Transplanted and Contextualized Churches," http://www.missiology.org/blog/GVR-MR-17-Transplanted-and-Contextualized-Churches, accessed 28 July 2023.

5   Charles H. Kraft, *Issues in Contextualization* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2016), 19.

6   Paul's pioneering calling and gifts did not allow the time for learning local languages. His calling was to get the gospel to anywhere people had not heard. He had to use common trade language for this task. However, this does not mean that the leadership that he helped disciple and raise up did not function in local heart languages.

The practice of world religions around the world, unfortunately even Christianity at times, often includes elements of syncretism, such as the incorporation of elements of folk religion.[7] To avoid syncretism, deep discipleship and healthy leadership development are necessary. Proficient use of the heart language is necessary for healthy discipleship. Missionaries who are not able to communicate well in a people's heart language will likely find it difficult to have deep spiritual conversations and explain many essential concepts.

My wife has a good friend she was discipling who loved using English and was very proficient in it. Yet when she talked about personal matters—about her relationship with family or her boyfriend, about stresses, about hurts or even about her biggest dreams—she always switched mid-sentence, probably without realizing it, from English to her native language. All the Bible study and application and prayer time was always in her language, not in English. She defaulted to her heart language.

Language study is also important for Christian workers to personally adapt to life in another culture and to have deep friendships. One study found that missionaries who do not experience continuous culture and language learning reported having a shorter, less fulfilling term of service.[8] Language proficiency opens the doors for meaningful interactions and friendships within the host culture, helping produce a fulfilling life and more fruitful ministry. I have observed workers in my context from organizations that do not emphasize language learning. The worker's lives seem to mainly function in a foreign bubble of English-speaking expatriates. Language and culture learning help to break this bubble, allowing workers to engage meaningfully within the host culture.

Learning a people's heart language is also a powerful way of showing God's love. Many minority people groups have had their language and culture rejected by their society and government. We show people that we love and

---

7 Brooks Buser, "Three Reasons the Church Needs Fluent Missionaries," *Radical*: https://radical.net/article/church-fluent-missionaries/, accessed 27 July 2023.

8   Detlef Bloecher, "Continuous Language and Culture Studies are Indispensable," https://www.theimtn.org/main/documents/articles/Continuous%20Language%20Studies%2011714.pdf, accessed 27 July 2023.

value them as we learn their language and culture.[9] Jesus is the ultimate example of this in his act of incarnation. He took on human language and culture as his own. He even endorsed the disrespected Galilean culture and language, considering them fit vehicles for God's message.[10] Jesus's incarnation is our example of perfect love in which he identifies with people, serves them, and gives himself sacrificially for them.

Pitfalls to avoid

While intentional language acquisition is a foundational part of the missionary task, I believe there are ways that workers can lose a healthy balance between language learning and practical ministry. Garrison warns of a mentality of sequentialism that can lead a worker to put off essential elements of the missionary task until after becoming proficient in language. He writes that a characteristic of Christian movements is that missionaries model gospel proclamation from the beginning, even before language proficiency.[11] Some Christian workers tend to avoid the work of the ministry, evangelism, and disciple-making until becoming proficient in language. However, much language can be learned through practical ministry. God uses our gospel witness, even despite weakness in our language proficiency.

We do not need to wait until we are perfectly proficient to start ministering. I first started language and culture study when I was a teenager and Latin-Americans moved into my town and accepted invitations to our church. Since I was the one willing to learn Spanish to communicate, I soon was the one teaching the adult Spanish-language Sunday School class and translating sermons into Spanish. I learned Spanish and culture much more quickly because I was "in over my head," immersed in meaningful ministry. We must seek to follow God's wisdom and direction to avoid the extremes: (1) overly disengaging from ministry until mastering language and (2) failing to prioritize learning language and culture. In many cases, it may be necessary to refrain from overinvolvement in ministry for a time in order

---

9   Catherine Graul, "Why Learning a New Language Is Hard But Still Worth It," https://www.wycliffe.org/blog/posts/why-learning-a-new-language-is-hard-but-still-worth-it, accessed 28 July 2023.

10 Kraft, *Issues in Contextualization*, 31.

11 David Garrison, *Church Planting Movements: How God Is Redeeming a Lost World* (Bangalore, India: WIGTake Resources, 2007), 308.

to receive classes or tutoring in the local language. Wisdom is necessary for the appropriate balance.

Another pitfall to avoid is overly focusing on our own language proficiency and cross-cultural communication to the neglect of the development of local ministry partners. While this task is important, we should not assume that effective language learning will necessarily guarantee fruitful ministry. The reality is that the most effective contextualization and communication of the gospel will likely come from cultural insiders. The apostle Paul, during his missionary journeys, left us an example of developing and entrusting the work to local leaders and ministry partners.[12] We should have the humility to recognize thatas local leaders are developed, they will be able to communicate the gospel, make disciples and establish churches more effectively than we outsiders can. Our task is to equip and release these leaders.

In our context, we have valued working toward higher language and culture proficiency among the people we serve. But at the same time, my wife and I seek to invest in and equip Hindi-speaking and Arabic-speaking national partners to make disciples and plant churches among these im-migrant segments, despite not knowing their languages. In this case, the national partners have made much of the effort to bridge the language and cultural gap. Paul himself had to use the trade language in some circum-stances, resulting in some misunderstandings by the locals in Lystra (Acts 14:11-15). But despite this confusion that occurred, a church was established and disciples were made. God can choose to work and use us in many ways. But the principle remains that in order for the gospel to get to new places and new peoples, cross-cultural workers must do the demanding work of learning language and culture in order to effectively communicate and contextualize the gospel.

Helpful tips to improve language learning

Where do you go from here? Maybe you are convinced that learning the heart language is important, but maybe you are overwhelmed by the

---

12 Examples include elders appointed at the end of the first missionary journey (Acts 14:21-23), Lydia and her household being in entrusted with the ministry in Philippi (Acts 16:40), and Priscilla and Aquila's ministry in Corinth and later in Ephesus (Acts 18:1-4, 18-19. Paul's personal greetings in Romans 16 also testify to the numerous leaders raised up and entrusted to ministry by Paul.

thought of learning another language. Maybe you even think you are too old to do it. Maybe you just don't know where to start.

There is a misconception that children learn language better and faster than adults. They are able to learn some aspects such as pronunciation and intonation easier than adults, but overall, their capacity to learn a language does not seem to be significantly higher.[13] Children are simply put more often into situations where they have to learn the language quickly; for example, they go to school 8 hours a day in the host language and must make friends with kids who do not have a base in English. We, on the other hand, leave our language classes and revert to English. We have someone translate for us when we get stuck or switch the conversation to English. We talk to friends back home or escape with English media at the end of the day. In short, we do not force ourselves to learn the language the way we force our children, yet we are all capable of language learning. Here are a few suggestions that could help in the language learning process:

1. Begin with a humble attitude and be willing to make mistakes. Use the language. Try it out. Don't let a language mistake make you hesitant. Boldly go out and try the words you know.

2. Try to immerse yourself in the language. As easy as it is to revert to English, try to stay in your host language as much as possible. Develop and maintain friendships in the language. Listen to podcasts, read a news article, watch TV in the language, listen to the local radio, etc. When we do these things, we not only absorb more of the language, but we also learn more about the culture and its values.

3. Make small consistent improvements over time. This goes a long way in learning a language. Do a little each day. Break it into small, bite-sized pieces. Challenge yourself to learn and use a few new words each day. Even once you pass a fluency test, keep it up. Read a few pages of a book in the language each day. Memorize Scripture in your host language this year. Find what works for you and keep at it. Five minutes a day long-term really do add up.

---

13 Lindsay Patterson, "Do Children Soak Up Language Like Sponges?," *The New York Times:* https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/16/parenting/children-language-development.html, accessed 29 July 2023.

4. To begin, focus on practical, everyday language. Begin with what you need to know and use to survive and build relationships. Start with a few simple Bible stories that you can use to connect with your people group. As you improve, add more complexity and variety to your language learning.

5. Find language partners to practice with. Besides tutors, find people who can help teach you about the language and culture. Find nationals who are good at evangelism and have them help you learn tools and terms in the language. Find someone who is good at discipleship and have them do the same with discipleship tools. Coming in asking for help instead of having all the answers not only helps us learn the language, but it helps us learn more about the reality where we are as well as helping develop trust and building partnerships.

6. Learn to pray in the host language as soon as possible. We often revert to our own heart language in prayer, but there is something powerful in praying for someone in their heart language. Even when teaching a theological English class at our local seminary, I close by praying for the students and their specific requests in their language instead of English. It is meaningful for them. The effort to understand should be on our side, not on our people, so begin learning short prayers in the host language and use them.

These practices can help us lay a strong foundation for effective cross-cultural ministry.

Jonathan Sharp has served with the International Mission Board in Portugal since 2013. He teaches evangelism and missions at a local seminary and is involved with church planting. He hold a Pd.D. in Missions from New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. He is married to Bethany and has two daughters.

Local Ownership of the Theological Task

C. S. Barefoot

Theologians and missiologists have rightly highlighted the importance of theological contextualization throughout the Majority World.[1] Contextualization is the comprehensive endeavor to express and embody the truth of Scripture in ways that make sense in a given context, such that people may perceive Christianity for what it truly is—both contextually relevant and prophetically challenging.

Theological contextualization refers to the "expressing" component of that endeavor. In fact, all expressions of theology are contextual. Dean Gilliland explains, "Theology clarifies what the Christian message is, in a continuing effort to understand the faith and to demonstrate obedience to Jesus Christ in all dimensions of life.... This is to say, for the purpose of missions, that

---

1   For example, see Wilbert R. Shenk, "Theology and the Missionary Task," *Missiology* 1.3 (1973): 295–310; "The Seoul Declaration: Toward an Evangelical Theology for the Third World," *IBMR* 7.2 (1983): 64–65; Harvie M. Conn, *Eternal Word and Changing Worlds: Theology, Anthropology, and Mission in Trialogue* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 211–338; David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1989); William A. Dyrness, *Learning about Theology from the Third World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 29–34; Dean E. Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2005), 296–322; David K. Clark, *To Know and Love God: Method for Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2010), 113–22; See also the essays in the following edited volumes: Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland, eds., *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006); Jeffrey P. Greenman and Gene L. Green, eds., *Global Theology in Evangelical Perspective: Exploring the Contextual Nature of Theology and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012).

there must be a maximizing of the meaning of Christian truth for the particular situation in which and for which the theology is being developed."[2] In other words, theological contextualization is important because it brings the Word of God to bear on contextual issues and thus helps Christians navigate treacherous currents of their cultural contexts.

Moreover, local churches and their members should ultimately become the agents of such contextualization. According to missiologist Brian A. DeVries, "Evidence of the new church's spiritual maturity includes the practice of self-theologizing, the confessing and teaching of biblical truth (Word) by indigenous people within the local church (receiver) in the language and worldview of the local context (receiving culture)."[3] He refers to this stage of maturity as "ecclesial contextualization," in which "the agents who engage in contextualization are indigenous Christians from the local culture, ideally guided by the spiritual leaders of the local church."[4] In other words, the maturation of local churches includes the local believing community assuming responsibility for contextualizing its theology.

Mission practitioners can play a vital role in facilitating such local theological agency. While some Majority World churches have, over time, become agents of their own theological convictions, many others have relied on borrowed theology from churches outside of their context. In South Asia, mission practitioners have addressed this deficit in local theologizing by equipping leaders of emerging churches to develop their own doctrinal statements through a process called *Confessing the Faith.*[5] This approach might serve as a helpful model for other practitioners laboring in the fields of theological education and pastoral development. By embracing the *Confessing the Faith* model or one similar to it, missionaries can help cultivate theological ownership among emerging churches and set them on a path of long-term theological health.

---

2   Dean S. Gilliland, "Contextual Theology as Incarnational Mission," in *The Word Among Us: Contextualizing Theology for Mission Today*, ed. Dean S. Gilliland (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1989), 12.

3   Brian A. DeVries, "The Contexts of Contextualization: Different Methods for Different Ministry Situations," *EMQ* 55.4 (2019): 12.

4   DeVries, "Contexts of Contextualization," 12.

5   N. Shank and K. Shank, "Confessing the Faith within Church Planting Movements: A Guide for Training Church Planting Networks Toward Contextual Theology," https://www.imb.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/57-Seconds-S1E14-Confessing-the-Faith.pdf, 2011.

Biblical Warrant for Local Theologizing

A foundational warrant for local theologizing rests in the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. Hank Voss defines the doctrine as "the believer's sharing in the Son's royal priesthood through faith and baptism resulting in participation in the *missio Dei* and spiritual sacrifices of Worship, Work, and Witness."[6] A foundational component of most Protestant ecclesiologies, this doctrine finds its most common support in 1 Pet 2:4–9, in which Peter declares, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (v. 9). This doctrine also holds deep roots in other parts of the biblical narrative, including the call of Israel to be a kingdom of priests (Exod 19:6), Isaiah's portrayal of the royal-priestly Servant and his seed (Isa 40–66), the apostolic interpretation of Melchizedekian priesthood in Psalm 110 (e.g., Heb), Matthew's narrative portrayal of Jesus as the royal priest-king, and John's picture of an eschatological kingdom of priests (Rev 1:6; 5:10).[7]

In the Old Testament (OT), priests served as mediators between God and the people, a role that included the task of instruction in God's Law. Voss explains, "[O]ne of the priests' original responsibilities was to serve as oracular spokespersons. They were to inquire of the Lord, and to speak his Word to the people."[8] The prophet Malachi rebuked Israelite priests in his day for failing in this task (Mal 2:1–9). They had not upheld the standard that God established with Levi: "For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the Lord of Hosts" (Mal 2:7). Pointing to this verse, Voss asserts, "The importance of the priests' responsibility to know the Word of God so as to be ready to teach remained throughout Israel's history."[9]

---

6   Hank Voss, *The Priesthood of All Believers and the Missio Dei: A Canonical, Catholic, and Contextual Perspective* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2016), 6. See also: Uche Anizor and Hank Voss, *Representing Christ: A Vision for the Priesthood of All Believers* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016).

7   For an excellent biblical theology of the priesthood of all believers, see Voss, *Priesthood of All Believers*, 25–99.

8   Voss, *Priesthood of All Believers*, 226.

9   Voss, *Priesthood of All Believers*, 227.

The events of the New Testament (NT) radically broadened this priesthood. The tearing of the temple veil at Jesus' crucifixion (Matt 27:51) and the subsequent descending of the Holy Spirit through tongues of fire (Acts 2:1–13) symbolize the new reality that all followers of Christ now share the same priestly access to God that OT priests had maintained. Moreover, this access carries with it the priestly responsibility for all believers to serve as heralds of the faith. No longer does the responsibility to declare and teach rest solely upon a select caste of clergy; it rests on all those who name and follow Jesus as Lord and Savior.

This broadening of the priesthood to include all believers carries significant implications for theologizing. It signifies that disciples of Christ are agents of theology—priests with access to Truth and an ability to discern and teach that Truth. For example, the Apostle Paul praised the Roman church because its members were "full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to *instruct* one another" (Rom 15:14, emphasis added). Read in light of Malachi's rebuke of Israelite priests, this passage indicates that these Roman Christians were faithfully upholding the theological standard to which those priests had failed to adhere. The recipients of Malachi's warning had dishonored God's name (Mal 2:2), corrupted the covenant (Mal 2:8), and failed to guard or instruct the people in theological knowledge (Mal 2:7–8). These Roman believers, however, were carrying out their priestly duty to embody sound theology and instruct one another in it.

In other words, the call to priesthood is a call to local theologizing. Paul encouraged the Colossian church, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, *teaching* and *admonishing* one another in all wisdom" (Col 3:16, emphasis added). The local believers addressed here were not merely passive recipients of theological understanding, handed down by ordained officials. Rather, they themselves—sharing in Jesus' royal priesthood—were to serve as agents of theology, instructing others from biblical convictions cultivated by the Word of God within them. Karl Barth thus rightly declared, "In the Church there are really no non-theologians."[10]

Stuart Murray, a mission practitioner and scholar on Anabaptism, therefore refers to the "priesthood of all believers" also as the "theologian-hood" of all

---

10 Karl Barth, *God in Action: Theological Addresses,* trans. E. G. Homrighausen and Karl J. Ernst (New York: Round Table Press, 1936), 57.

believers.[11] He contends, "'Trickle-down' theology, disseminated by academic theologians via graduates from theological institutions to passive congregations, must be replaced by theological reflection on the frontiers of mission and partnerships between those who know what questions matter and those who can offer biblical, historical, and theological resources."[12] Such local theological reflection, however, has not been a common emphasis in the work of Western missionaries and mission agencies over the past few centuries, particularly during the Modern Missions Movement.

Historical Deficit in Local Theologizing

Missions history reveals a quite different precedent, one at odds with the priesthood of all believers. A deficit in local theologizing was becoming apparent as far back as the turn of the twentieth century. For example, a report from the World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh in 1910 detailed a lack of local theological reflection across the Majority World.[13] It noted that in every mission field there existed a danger both to the missionaries and the local believing communities. In reference to missionaries, it declared, "The danger is that the teacher may seek at each stage to introduce from without, in an external and mechanical way, systems of truth, knowledge, and practice, which are the results of western experience, but do not vitally appeal to the mind or even to the Christian consciousness of the local Church."[14]

This precedent of foreign theological imposition rendered local believers and churches as passive recipients who looked to Western churches, denominations, and agencies for their theological convictions. The Edinburgh report explained,

---

11 Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World*, 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018), 220.

12 Murray, *Post-Christendom*, 220.

13 David Esterline, "From Western Church to World Christianity: Developments in Theological Education in the Ecumenical Movement," in *Handbook of Theological Education in World Christianity: Theological Perspectives–Regional Survey–Ecumenical Trends*, ed. Dietrich Werner et al. (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2010), 13–14, points this out in his historical survey of ecumenical theological education.

14 *The Church in the Mission Field: Report of Commission II* (Edinburgh: Oliphant, Anderson and Ferrier, 1910), 189–90.

> [W]estern teachers appear to them to be the official custodians of a religion in which truth has already been fully gathered and systematized in theological forms, so that theology itself, instead of wearing its true aspect of a search for the many-sided truth which is vital to spiritual life, appears rather as a *hortus siccus* which has exhausted, and contains, in improved and final form, all that is to be found in the Bible.[15]

The danger for local believing communities within this precedent is to either acquiesce to foreign theological teachers and adopt their theological systems and textbooks wholesale or reject foreign teaching altogether.[16] Missions history both before and after Edinburgh 1910 indicates that many churches succumbed to the former danger.[17]

In fact, reports from around the world, which constituents issued to the those leading the Edinburgh 1910 conference, indicated a pervasive lack of local theologizing. In their own, subsequent report, conference leaders noted, "In another part of our enquiry we have put the question whether there are any indications of original and formative native thought in theology, and the replies are, with noticeable unanimity, in the negative."[18] Others around that time, like Charles Cuthbert Hall, Roland Allen, and Arthur Judson Brown, also highlighted and critiqued this precedent.[19] Later in the twentieth century, evangelicals within the Lausanne Movement expressed similar sentiments. Lausanne's Willowbank Report recognized that Western missionaries had often indoctrinated Majority World Christians "in western

---

15 *Church in the Mission Field*, 190. *Hortus siccus* refers to a systematized collection of dried plants.

16 *Church in the Mission Field*, 190–91.

17 For an overview and case studies of this precedent, and for a survey of Majority World reflections on Western theological imposition, see C. S. Barefoot, "Hermeneutical Community: Recasting the Outsider's Role in Local Theological Development" (PhD Diss., Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2023), 20–173.

18 *Church in the Mission Field*, 190.

19 Charles Cuthbert Hall, *The Universal Elements of the Christian Religion: An Attempt to Interpret Contemporary Religious Conditions* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1905), 42–52; Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours* (London: Robert Scott, 1912), 187–99; Roland Allen, *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church: And the Causes which Hinder It* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 43–59; Arthur J. Brown, *Rising Churches in Non-Christian Lands* (New York: Missionary Education Movement of the United States and Canada, 1915), 188–90.

ways of thought and procedure. These westernized local leaders have then preserved a very western-looking church, and the foreign orientation has persisted, only lightly cloaked by the appearance of indigeneity."[20]

This precedent left many churches throughout the Majority World without biblical answers to the cultural challenges they faced, thus rendering them susceptible to syncretism. René Padilla perceptively explains,

> Those who object to the contextualization of the Gospel out of fear of syncretism must take into account that precisely when there is no conscious reflection as to the form that obedience to the lordship of Jesus Christ must take in a given situation, quite easily conduct is determined by the culture instead of being controlled by the Gospel.... [S]yncretism will enter through the back door and product [*sic*] a "culture Christianity" that simply assimilates the values of the surrounding culture.[21]

In other words, when the theology governing a church does not provide appropriate guidance to local Christians seeking to navigate challenging cultural contexts, those Christians will often turn to other, non-Christian sources for direction. The Edinburgh report thus rightly declares, "[S]urely the production of such [local theological] thought should be one of the principal aims of any really living system of theological teaching."[22]

---

20 Lausanne Theology and Education Group, "The Willowbank Report," in *Down to Earth: Studies in Christianity and Culture*, ed. Robert T. Coote and John R. W. Stott (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 329.

21 C. René Padilla, "The Contextualization of the Gospel," in *Readings in Dynamic Indigeneity*, ed. Charles H. Kraft and Tom N. Wisley (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1979), 299.

22 *Church in the Mission Field*, 190. The reports adds, "We advocate no new Gospel, and our chief concern is with the permanent and fundamental elements of theology. These are neither oriental nor occidental, but in order to build up the Church on these lasting foundations Christian theology must be written afresh for every fresh race to whom it comes, so that it may justify itself to all as the abiding wisdom that cometh from above, ever quick and powerful, and not misrepresented as if it were no more than a precipitation from the antiquated text-books of the West" (p. 191).

Contemporary Model for Local Theologizing

One way for mission practitioners to begin facilitating such local theologizing—and thereby strengthen local churches against false teaching from within and cultural challenges from without—is to lead local believers through a creative process of engaging the biblical text with the needs of their context in mind. N. Shank and K. Shank, missionary church planters in South Asia, developed such a process for emerging church leaders. Their method, called "Confessing the Faith within Church Planting Movements: A Guide for Training Church Planting Networks Toward Contextual Theology" (henceforth *Confessing the Faith*),[23] serves as an innovative way forward in local theological development.[24]

Confessing the Faith is a one- to two-year process by which local church leaders develop, in community with one another, indigenous theological statements on core doctrines (e.g., soteriology, ecclesiology) and important cultural issues (e.g., ancestor veneration, church-state relations). For Shank and Shank, this process builds on prior biblical, hermeneutical, and homiletical training. It is important that participating church leaders begin *Confessing the Faith* with a strong understanding of the biblical meta-narrative in tow and an ability to interpret Scripture and teach others from it.[25]

This process involves a series of monthly multi-day gatherings, in which emerging church leaders pursue biblical answers to questions related to classic doctrines of the faith.[26] Each gathering focuses on one doctrine. The practitioner leading the *Confessing the Faith* process does so with four objectives in view:

1. A systematic survey of the Bible's teaching on the doctrine.

2. The creation and/or introduction of frequently asked questions within the cultural context of church planting leaders.

---

23 Shank and Shank, "Confessing the Faith."

24 One finds a forerunner to Shank's model in John Gration, "Willowbank to Zaire: The Doing of Theology," *Missiology* 12.3 (1984): 297–309. Gration's model is less developed, but shares similarities to Shank's later approach.

25 Shank and Shank, "Confessing the Faith," 1.

26 *These gatherings range from two to four days in length, depending on the particular doctrine in focus, and can also occur on alternating months.*

3. Progress toward consensus answers to these questions as a group.

4. The creation of a "statement of faith" related to the doctrine among the participants.[27]

The goal for the missionary practitioner here is to cultivate local ownership of the theological task among local churches and pastors.

Confessing the Faith begins with the practitioner soliciting questions regarding the doctrine in focus for that meeting. According to Shank and Shank, this step

> involves the creation of questions relevant to the local cultural setting and additional challenges of false teaching or misunderstanding within the church planting network. Typically questions suggested by the participants will range from very broad (among newer leaders) to more specific (among leaders with longer ministry experience).[28]

The practitioner leads participants to prioritize the questions and then writes their most important questions at the top of a sheet of chart paper.

Step two of the process requires participants to spend several hours reading deeply through passages of Scripture that bear upon the doctrine in focus. The practitioner provides participants with a list of passages to peruse but encourages them to study other passages with which they are familiar that might also inform a right understanding of that doctrine. The purpose of this step is to "listen as the Bible speaks on the chosen topic."[29]

Steps three and four involve group discussion and the pursuit of answers both to the general question *What does the Bible say about this doctrinal topic?* and to the prioritized questions from step one. In step three, the practitioner arranges participants into small groups, in which they begin to discuss possible answers from Scripture. This step can last several hours. Participants use the chart paper to write provisional answers drawn from various biblical passages. Then in step four, the practitioner facilitates discussion among

---

27 Shank and Shank, "Confessing the Faith," 2.

28 Shank and Shank, "Confessing the Faith," 2.

29 Shank and Shank, "Confessing the Faith," 2.

the larger group concerning possible answers to the above questions. At this stage, participants offer up for consideration and discussion the provisional answers they developed in small groups. The practitioner here acts as a facilitator with the goal of encouraging deliberation among the group and "where possible lead them toward consensus."[30]

Finally, in step five, the practitioner allots time for the group to jointly write a statement of faith concerning the doctrine in focus. "Using the questions and answers created in steps 1–4 (recorded on the chart papers) the participants should be encouraged to write as comprehensive a statement as possible. The statement will be written in paragraph form with the verses listed at the bottom of the provided chart paper."[31] Ideally, this statement of faith would not only highlight major components of the biblical doctrine, but also respond to contextual challenges facing the churches. For example, among South Asian participants, a statement of faith on soteriology might highlight not only justification by faith, but also the nature of biblical salvation in contradistinction to the notion of reincarnation—a common religious tenet in South Asia.

As participants grow in their understanding of this theological process over the series of gatherings, they assume increasing responsibility for facilitating the steps involved. That is, the missionary begins to entrust the process to local church leaders, who then guide their fellow participants through the steps of biblical study and confessional theological development. This entrustment helps mitigate foreign dependency and promote sound local theologizing in its stead.

In doing so, the process of *Confessing the Faith* seeks to buttress local churches against cultural challenges from without and potential false teaching from within. Participants walk away from this process with local confessions of theology—written in their own words and language—that can guide their churches and ministries as they face such challenges. Shank and Shank add, "We consider the ability to refute those teaching false doctrine to be the role of local emerging leaders (Titus 1:9). Our goal is for this workshop to provide

---

30 Shank and Shank, "Confessing the Faith," 9.

31 Shank and Shank, "Confessing the Faith," 3.

an intentional response in such cases and perhaps create a tool across multiple churches for the fellowship of sound doctrine."[32]

Conclusion

This approach does not entail a local break from the wider Church or historic theological orthodoxy, but rather a deep, direct engagement with the text of Scripture by local believers with the aim of theological ownership. In the process, the missionary outsider serves as a facilitator and—when necessary—a voice for orthodoxy as participants discern biblical truth in hermeneutical community.[33] Further, even if the process yields conclusions similar to theologies of the West, it remains a valuable endeavor because—borrowing Gilliland's words—it allows local believers to "be able to process, reflect upon, and organize biblical truth so that the Book and the truth *become their own.*"[34]

Confessing the Faith thus provides an opportunity for local Christians to take ownership of the theological task, rather than outsource their convictions to Western theological voices. Local churches that live off borrowed theological convictions compromise their ability to stand firm in the face of cultural pressures. Paul Hiebert explains, "[S]olid theological foundations are needed to keep a church true to Christian faith in the long run."[35] Yet the building of such foundations must entail local agency. As Hiebert notes, "To grow, spiritually young churches must search the Scripture themselves, and if—for fear that they will leave the truth—we do not allow them to do so, we condemn them to spiritual infancy and early death."[36] By adopting an approach like *Confessing the Faith*, mission practitioners can instead encourage

---

32 Shank and Shank, "Confessing the Faith," 10.

33 Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament*, 318, contends, "[B]iblically informed contextualization calls for *communal* hermeneutics and theologizing.... Today doing theology and interpreting the Word of God within a particular context is not something reserved solely for academic 'experts' or for church officials. It is the responsibility of the whole people of God. It is done best when a faithful community of cultural insiders can dialogue and wrestle with how the gospel intersects their world. At the same time, those with theological and biblical training, such as pastors, theological educators or missionaries, can play a key role in guiding and providing critical input to the process," *emphasis original.*

34 Gilliland, "Contextual Theology as Incarnational Mission," 15, emphasis original.

35 Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), 204.

36 Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights*, 208.

the maturation and long-term health of emerging local churches—an end to which missionaries must continually strive (Eph 4:11–16; Col 1:28–29).

C. S. Barefoot (PhD, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary) serves as a missionary with the International Mission Board in South Asia. He labors alongside national believers and churches to make disciples and plant churches. His recent academic research has focused on historical processes of theological development in the Majority World and the promotion in missiological literature of local theologizing.

Bilography

Allen, Roland. *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours.* London: Robert Scott, 1912.

———. *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church: And the Causes which Hinder It.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963.

Anizor, Uche, and Hank Voss. *Representing Christ: A Vision for the Priesthood of All Believers.* Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016.

Barefoot, C. S. "Hermeneutical Community: Recasting the Outsider's Role in Local Theological Development." PhD Dissertation, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2023.

Barth, Karl. *God in Action: Theological Addresses.* Trans. E. G. Homrighausen and Karl J. Ernst. New York: Round Table Press, 1936.

Brown, Arthur J. *Rising Churches in Non-Christian Lands.* New York: Missionary Education Movement of the United States and Canada, 1915.

Clark, David K. *To Know and Love God: Method for Theology.* Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2010.

Conn, Harvie M. *Eternal Word and Changing Worlds: Theology, Anthropology, and Mission in Trialogue.* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984.

DeVries, Brian A. "The Contexts of Contextualization: Different Methods for Different Ministry Situations." *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 55.4 (2019): 11–14.

Dyrness, William A. *Learning About Theology from the Third World.* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990.

Esterline, David. "From Western Church to World Christianity: Developments in Theological Education in the Ecumenical Movement." Pages 13–22 in *Handbook of Theological Education in World Christianity: Theological Perspectives – Regional Surveys – Ecumenical Trends.* Edited by Dietrich Werner, David Esterline, Namsoon Kang, and Joshva Raja. Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2010.

Flemming, Dean E. *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission.* Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2005.

Gilliland, Dean S. "Contextual Theology as Incarnational Mission." Pages 9–31 in *The Word Among Us: Contextualizing Theology for Mission Today.* Edited by Dean S. Gilliland. Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1989.

Gration, John. "Willowbank to Zaire: The Doing of Theology." *Missiology* 12.3 (1984): 297–309.

Greenman, Jeffrey P., and Gene L. Green, eds. *Global Theology in Evangelical Perspective: Exploring the Contextual Nature of Theology and Mission.* Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012.

Hall, Charles Cuthbert. *The Universal Elements of the Christian Religion: An Attempt to Interpret Contemporary Religious Conditions.* New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1905.

Hesselgrave, David J., and Edward Rommen. *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models.* Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1989.

Hiebert, Paul G. *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries.* Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985.

Lausanne Theology and Education Group. "The Willowbank Report." Pages 308–42 in *Down to Earth: Studies in Christianity and Culture.* Edited by Robert T. Coote and John R. W. Stott. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980.

Murray, Stuart. *Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World.* 2nd ed. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018.

Ott, Craig, and Harold A. Netland, eds. *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006.

Padilla, C. René. "The Contextualization of the Gospel." Pages 286–312 in *Readings in Dynamic Indigeneity*. Edited by Charles H. Kraft and Tom N. Wisley. Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1979.

Shank, N., and K. Shank. "Confessing the Faith Within Church Planting Movements: A Guide for Training Church Planting Networks Toward Contextual Theology," 2011.

Shenk, Wilbert R. "Theology and the Missionary Task." *Missiology* 1.3 (1973): 295–310.

The Church in the Mission Field: Report of Commission II. Edinburgh: Oliphant, Anderson and Ferrier, 1910.

"The Seoul Declaration: Toward an Evangelical Theology for the Third World." *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 7.2 (1983): 64–65.

Voss, Hank. *The Priesthood of All Believers and the Missio Dei: A Canonical, Catholic, and Contextual Perspective*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2016.

Faithful in the Complexity: The Challenge and Necessity of Contextualization in Global Cities

Jon Staples

Global Cities

It is no secret that the world is becoming more urban. Estimates show that almost 70% of the world will live in a metropolitan area by 2050.[1] Not only is the world moving to cities, but it is continuing to become more global. Although COVID-19 temporarily may have slowed globalization, three years later, globalization is again growing with the advent of new technology and further interconnectedness.[2] The future of our world is both a global and an urban one.[3] As globalization and urbanization continue to grow, global cities are emerging.

Kearney, the leading firm analyzing the global cities of the world, defines global cities as those that are "uniquely international in their connectivity

---

1   United Nations, *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2018 Revision (New York: United Nations, 2019).*

2   Afshin Molavi, *"Is Globalization Rising Once Again? The UAE Minister for Foreign Trade Outlines His Ambitious Vision for Future Trade Growth," The Wilson Quarterly 47, no. 2 (March 22, 2023).*

3   Michael D Crane, *"Emerging Global Cities and the Tilt of Influence," Radius Global, 2020.*

and character."[4] The migration of people worldwide to cities and the rise of globalization have created a new phenomenon of the global city. Though cities have existed for thousands of years, the global interconnectedness and size of cities on today's scale have not been around long. As Richard Longworth points out, global cities as they exist today have been around for only about 30 years, and they are becoming more significant and globally connected daily.[5] Urbanization and globalization are causing the world's cities to change rapidly.

As workers seeking to see healthy churches planted everywhere and among every people, missionaries will find themselves more and more in the world's global cities. This is why the IMB has made one of its 2025 goals to have plans to engage 75 global cities comprehensively.[6] These cities, however, are complex environments for carrying out the missionary task, especially when one considers contextualization. The complexity of the global city means that carrying out the missionary task in these cities requires thoughtful and intentional contextualization with the impact of globalization and the diversity of these cities in mind. Given these new realities in cities, our approach requires us to reexamine our practice of contextualization. The message is the same, the church is the same, and yet the contexts are changing rapidly. In today's rapidly changing world, contextualization plays a crucial role in mission in cosmopolitan global cities.

Contextualization

Before thinking about contextualization in global cities, it is essential to examine the meaning of contextualization. Dean Flemming explains, "Contextualization has to do with how the gospel revealed in Scripture authentically comes to life in each new cultural, social, religious and historical setting."[7] In this definition, contextualization is a process that occurs throughout the whole task of missions. It is not limited to evangelism only since being faith-

---

4   Kearney, *"Readiness for the Storm--the 2022 Global Cities Report,"* 2022.

5   R.C. Longworth, **On Global Cities** *(Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2015), https://globalaffairs.org/sites/default/files/2021-01/On_Global_Cities.pdf.*

6   *"IMB Fights Cruel Realities in Global Cities - IMB," accessed July 12, 2023, https://www.imb.org/2021/08/04/imb-fights-cruel-realities-global-cities/.*

7   *Dean Flemming,* **Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission** *(Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2005), Kindle Locations 46-47.*

ful to the "gospel revealed in Scripture" and seeing it lived out authentically happens throughout the missionary task. Likewise, Will Brooks defines contextualization as "considering the ways the message of Scripture can be explained, understood, or lived out in a specific context."[8] The key here is that contextualization involves everything from communication to the practical application of the gospel in a particular context.

Contextualization is about living and communicating faithfully, thoughtfully, and intentionally in a specific context. To do this kind of contextualization, the missionary must know the context. In urban missions, Michael Crane suggests that to contextualize faithfully, the church planter must know their city geographically, demographically, historically, culturally, and religiously.[9] Doing this work requires much study and living among the city's people. Far too often, missionaries assume they know a particular context after living there for a significant period. Conversely, contextualization requires a lifetime of learning.

Tim Keller points out that these efforts to contextualize have one goal: the gospel proclaimed to people "in language and forms they can comprehend, and through appeals and arguments with force they can feel, even if they reject them."[10] Therefore, the missionary seeking to do faithful contextualization is constantly learning about his or her context and always thinking about new ways to communicate the truths of Scripture faithfully. This is what contextualization aims for, but why is it necessary to consider contextualization in the global city in particular?

---

8   *Will Brooks, Interpreting Scripture Across Cultures : An Introduction to Cross-Cultural Hermeneutics (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2022), 64.the pastor of the immigrant church in your town, and you yourself all come before the same Bible, even the same verse, and walk away with completely different understandings and applications. In an increasingly globalized and multicultural world, how can we learn to see beyond our own cultural influences, understand those of others, and learn from each other in order to better understand and apply the word of God? How do we stay faithful to the text when our contemporary cultural perspective is so different from the original author's? This book will enable you to understand the common pitfalls and dangers related to cross-cultural hermeneutics while also equipping you with principles and real-life examples for how to interpret Scripture in such situations. Additionally, given the fact that our world is increasingly digitized and people are less and less likely to read, we will consider the issue of oral hermeneutics and how those who can't read or choose not to read can interpret Scripture faithfully.","archive":"eBook Religion Collection (EBSCOhost*

9   *Michael D Crane, "Know Your City: Urban Exegesis with Church Planting in Mind," Radius Global, n.d.*

10 *Keller, Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City, 89.*

The Complexity of Contextualization in Global Cities

Contextualization is difficult in any context. It is challenging to enter a place and then learn the culture, history, language, and communication methods. Doing so requires years of hard work. However, there are several reasons that the complexity of contextualization is intensified in global cities.

Diversity

First, global cities are diverse. They tend to be diverse ethnically, socioeconomically, linguistically, and culturally.[11] For example, much of the population of Singapore is of Malay, Chinese, and Indian descent, but there is significant ethnic diversity even among these groups.[12] In London, 1.83 million people speak a language other than English at home.[13] Of the 7 million people in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia's largest city, 48% are expatriates from around the world.[14] This diversity adds to the complexity of contextualization in global cities.

As Crane points out, much of the missions community's focus has been on "ethnic based contextualization" in recent years.[15] Since the advent of people group missiology, much of cross-cultural missionary work has focused on groups that are more homogenous ethnically.[16] However, the global cities of today are anything but homogenous. The late Tim Keller, who spent much of his life thinking about contextualization in the city, proclaims that cities are

---

11 *Longworth, On Global Cities.*

12 *"Singapore - Multicultural, Diverse, Cosmopolitan," in Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed July 14, 2023, https://www.britannica.com/place/Singapore/The-people.*

13 *London, "Census 2021 Reports," accessed July 14, 2023, https://apps.london.gov.uk/census-2021-reports/#/main-language-ep.*

14 *Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, "Population Size - GASTAT Portal," Saudi Census, accessed July 14, 2023, https://portal.saudicensus.sa/portal/public/1/15/45?type=DASHBOARD.*

15 *Michael D Crane, "To the Ends of the Earth through Strategic Urban Centers: Reexamining the Missions Mandate in Light of the New Testament's Use of the Old Testament," in Advancing Models of Mission: Evaluating the Past and Looking to the Future, Evangelical Missiological Society Series 29, 2021, 17.*

16 *John Mark Terry and Jervis David Payne, Developing a Strategy for Missions (Encountering Mission) : A Biblical, Historical, and Cultural Introduction, Encountering Mission (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2013), 114-123. As the authors point out, a focus on people groups originated with Donald McGavren and the Church Growth Movement in the 1950s. McGavren called for "people movements" and ethnically homogenous churches so that the gospel could spread faster among peoples.*

"filled with ironic, edgy, diversity-loving people who have a high tolerance for ambiguity and disorder."[17] This diversity complicates contextualization, especially when missionary training is often suited toward those going to homogenous environments where most people come from the same ethnicity, speak the same language, and have a similar culture.

In more homogenous environments, missionaries can often create tools and ways of explaining the gospel that resonate with a large population group. Instead, Keller claims Christians must be "committed to the complexity" of faithful contextualization in diverse cities. Therefore, they must realize "there is no 'one size fits all' method or message that can be used with all urban residents."[18] Keller realizes that the city's diversity requires various approaches to seeing the gospel and church flourish in the city context. This level of complexity requires thoughtfulness in recognizing the diversity of the city.

Globalization

Another distinguishing factor in global cities is the influence of globalization. The Kearny report above shows that global cities have an international flavor. When people migrate with their own language, culture, and worldview to a city and mix with people from other parts of the world, it creates something new and different. This is not to say that globalization is causing traditional or local cultures to cease to exist, but globalization is influencing people's worldviews and perspectives as they are exposed to and interact with people in from other cultural backgrounds.[19] This mutual influence is especially true in cities that have high populations of internationals. New cultures interacting creates a unique and changing culture. This is a challenge as missionaries seek to constantly adapt to new ways of communicating, new ideas in a culture, and changing worldviews.

Do the impacts of globalization and diversity on these cities mean that missionaries and churches do not need to think about contextualization? Absolutely not. Although these factors intensify the complexity of contextualization, they also demand more intentionality and thoughtfulness from the missionary. Although globalization and the mixing of cultures are influ-

---

17 Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City*, 173.

18 Keller, 177.

19 Netland and Ott, *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity.*, 11.

encing peoples and places across the globe, people still come to the gospel and Scriptures with their own unique worldview influenced by their culture. This means that even though a group of people speak the same language and live in the same community, they may ask questions, communicate, and hear things differently. Therefore, pastors, missionaries, and church planters in global cities must not assume that the impact of globalization flattens the city's culture, but they must instead engage people thoughtfully and intentionally, recognizing the diversity and global cultural influences at play.

The United Arab Emirates: A Complex Example

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a small country of about 10 million people on the Arabian Peninsula.[20] The UAE has experienced globalization and urbanization like the rest of the world, but at a record pace. For example, 87% of the UAE is now urban, while 50 years ago, the cities of the UAE were small villages.[21] The two largest cities today, Abu Dhabi and Dubai, were ranked 9th and 11th on the Kearney Global Cities Outlook looking at the future of the world's global cities.[22] There are over 100 languages widely spoken in the UAE, with more than 200 nationalities present.[23] This means that the cities of the UAE are filled with people who speak Arabic, Hindi, Russian, English, Afrikaans, Urdu, Dari, and more. The world has come to Dubai and Abu Dhabi. However, most people living in the UAE are still from unreached peoples.[24]

The impact of diversity and globalization is evident upon first arrival in Dubai or Abu Dhabi. If one tries to order food in Arabic in most parts of either city, they will be met with a blank stare because much of the food service industry does not speak Arabic. Instead, English is the lingua franca, with most of daily life, from commerce to education, occurring in English. There

---

20 UAE Government, *"Population and Demographic Mix,"* accessed July 14, 2023, https://u.ae/en/ information-and-services/social-affairs/preserving-the-emirati-national-identity/population-and-demographic-mix.

21 World Bank, *"World Bank Open Data,"* World Bank Open Data, accessed July 14, 2023, https:// data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.URB.TOTL.IN.ZS?locations=AE.

22 Kearney, *"2022 Global Cities Report/Steering between Storms,"* 2022, https://www.kearney.com/ industry/public-sector/global-cities/2022#.

23 UAE Government, *"Fact Sheet,"* The Official Portal of the UAE Government, accessed July 14, 2023, https://u.ae/en/about-the-uae/fact-sheet.

24 PeopleGroups.org, *"PeopleGroups.Org - United Arab Emirates,"* accessed July 14, 2023, https:// peoplegroups.org/explore/CountryDetails.aspx?genc0=ARE#topmenu.

has even been a unique English dialect emerging in the Gulf cities called Gulf English.[25]

Even young Emiratis, the citizens of the UAE, are multilingual. For young Emiratis, speaking English and Emirati Arabic is not only typical but also expected.[26] However, one would be incorrect to assume that all ministry in these cities can be done in English. Though English may be the overall lingua franca of the cities, different neighborhoods often have their own preferred language. For example, in the Mussafah neighborhood of Abu Dhabi, the lingua franca is the South Asian language of Urdu, while the lingua franca of the Bani Yas neighborhood is Gulf Arabic. Not only do lingua francas vary throughout the cities, but they vary from person to person according to what language someone prefers to speak.[27]

To the praise of God alone, the church is also growing in the UAE.[28] Much of the growth has been in English-speaking, multi-cultural churches.[29] These churches tend to be very diverse, just like their surrounding contexts, often with 30+ nationalities in the congregation. However, as mentioned previously, many of the peoples and places of these cities are still unreached, having few to no churches among them.

Thoughtful and Intentional Contextualization in the UAE

What does faithful contextualization look like in the global cities of the UAE? It takes intentionality and thoughtfulness. Though many examples are possible, three will be given from evangelistic, discipling, and church health perspectives.

---

25 Peter Siemund, Ahmad Al Issa, and Jakob R. E. Leimgruber, "Multilingualism and the Role of English in the United Arab Emirates.," *World Englishes* 40, no. 2 (June 2021): 191–204.

26 Sarah Hopkyns, Wafa Zoghbor, and Peter John Hassall, "The Use of English and Linguistic Hybridity among Emirati Millennials.," *World Englishes* 40, no. 2 (June 2021): 176–90.

27 Siemund, Al-Issa, and Leimgruber, "Multilingualism and the Role of English in the United Arab Emirates."

28 Aubrey Sequeira, "Global Christianity Needs a Reformation," *Journal of Global Christianity* 5, no. 1 (2019): 4–15.

29 Dave Furman and Scott Zeller, "International Churches," *Journal of Global Christianity* 3, no. 1 (2017): 91–100.

Take the example of an evangelistic Bible study in Arabic. Some that would be a part of the group may have grown up in traditional families who spoke often of God's judgment. This could be very different than the Bible's portrayal of God and his judgement. Therefore, they may come to the Scriptures with some understanding of sin and judgement, however wrong it may be. Yet others may have grown up in families where more of a light universalism was taught with the idea that all religions are basically the same and good. These Arabic speakers might have no concept of sin and God's judgment. It will require thoughtfulness to address the questions that each of these Arabs comes to the Scriptures with and to faithfully help them see the reality of sin and God's judgment in the Bible. Even though they both speak the same language and are from the same culture, both individuals have grown up with different worldviews that require a unique approach to helping them understand the gospel.

Another example is one of discipling two new believers. One comes from a Gulf Arab background, and one comes from a Western European culture. The Gulf Arab assumes that sex outside of marriage is wrong because of his cultural background and family upbringing. However, the Western European, growing up in a secular environment, assumes sex outside marriage is morally acceptable. As these two believers approach the Bible and what it says about sexual immorality, they will come with different assumptions and questions. The discipler must intentionally address these cultural assumptions that each brings to the table. This will most likely involve bringing up the issue sooner with the Western European. In either case, it involves a different intentional plan for discipleship.

There is also a multitude of issues related to healthy church. For example, consider an English-speaking Baptist church comprised of East Asians, Africans, Arabs, South Asians, Europeans, and Americans. As Baptists, this church values the voice of the whole congregation and the priesthood of all believers. The leadership hopes to see the entire congregation using their gifts to build up the body, interpreting the Bible for themselves, and teaching one another. Yet, some of its community are from an East Asian context where submission to authority is highly valued. Therefore, some members from that context may hesitate to speak up, teach others, or question the church's leadership.[30]

---

30 Paul Luo, "Congregationalism for a Church Plant in the Confucian Culture," *The Great Commission Baptist Journal of Missions* 2, no. 1 (May 1, 2023), https://serials.atla.com/gcbjm/article/view/3244.

Faithful contextualization seeks to tackle this issue by helping the members from the East Asian context see how they can and should learn to read and interpret the Bible themselves. Yet, this takes intentionality from the leadership. It would be easy for a leader from a non-East Asian context to overlook this issue. As seen in this example, even in English-speaking international churches, contextualization becomes an important issue. Cultural and communication issues arise as people from diverse backgrounds with different communication styles live in community with one another.

Using the definition above from Brooks about the message of Scripture being "lived out in a context," what might contextualization look like in the global cities of the UAE? It will be complex and diverse. It will take healthy, multi-cultural churches in Arabic, English, Hindi, Urdu, Afrikaans, Taglog, Pashtu, and more. It will take missionaries willing to address questions about the deity of Christ from an Arab Muslim and later that same day address an issue from a gospel perspective about a witch doctor from an animistic sub-Saharan African. It will take church planting-churches among the men of labor camps and the uber-wealthy.

All of this must be done with thoughtfulness and intentionality to address the contextual issues of each person in the city. This kind of contextualization must look to each individual person's background, culture, and worldview, as contextualization "does not begin with statistics or assumptions; it begins with people."[31] Contextualization in the UAE is complex, and it challenges our usual assumptions about how to contextualize. It must be done faithfully, intentionally, and thoughtfully.

Conclusion

This article has argued that contextualization in global cities, though complex, is essential and requires both intentionality and thoughtfulness with the diversity and impact of globalization in mind. This argument does not involve a "how-to" approach to contextualization in these cosmopolitan environments but instead calls for thoughtful and intentional contextualization with the impact of globalization and the diversity of these cities in mind.

---

31 *Wade Stephens et al.,* **Tradecraft : For the Church on Mission.,** *1st ed. (Urban Loft Publishers, 2013), 155.*

The reality is that our thinking on contextualization must be adapted to our new globalized world. This new reality may not fit into many of our current missiological categories of contextualization. Our thinking and practice must reflect the diversity and interaction across ethnic and cultural lines that occur daily in our world, especially in cosmopolitan cities.

The IMB Foundation document states, "The gospel can make itself at home in any culture, while challenging and transforming every culture."[32] The gospel that is for everyone can make its home everywhere. The gospel is good news for the world's most diverse cities. All of history is moving forward toward a new global city with people from all tribes, languages, and nations. Though complex, we must seek to see the gospel flourish in the cosmopolitan cities of today. Contextualization in a global city is a difficult task. However, faithfulness to the Great Commission requires it. It requires intentional life-long learning of the cultures of your city. For God's glory, may the global age be filled with faithful Christians willing to do the hard work of seeing the gospel preached and the church flourish in the context of the world's global cities.

Jon and his wife Joanna have been serving in the Middle East for the past 5 years. They lead a team of missionaries focused on a global city in the Middle East and serve at an international church. Jon has an Mdiv from Southern Seminary and is currently a PhD student at SWBTS.

Further Study: *Center Church*, Tim Keller

https://radiusglobal.org/resources

References

Crane, Michael D. "Emerging Global Cities and the Tilt of Influence." *Radius Global*, 2020.

---

32 *International Mission Board, "Foundations" (IMB Training, June 10, 2022), 55, https://issuu.com/ trainingdev/docs/imb_foundations.*

———. "Know Your City: Urban Exegesis with Church Planting in Mind." *Radius Global*, n.d.

———. "To the Ends of the Earth through Strategic Urban Centers: Reexamining the Missions Mandate in Light of the New Testament's Use of the Old Testament." In *Advancing Models of Mission: Evaluating the Past and Looking to the Future*, 97–113. Evangelical Missiological Society Series 29, 2021.

Flemming, Dave. *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission.* Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2005.

Furman, Dave, and Scott Zeller. "International Churches." *Journal of Global Christianity* 3, no. 1 (2017): 91–100.

Hopkyns, Sarah, Wafa Zoghbor, and Peter John Hassall. "The Use of English and Linguistic Hybridity among Emirati Millennials." *World Englishes* 40, no. 2 (June 2021): 176–90.

"IMB Fights Cruel Realities in Global Cities - IMB." Accessed July 12, 2023. https://www.imb.org/2021/08/04/imb-fights-cruel-realities-global-cities/.

International Mission Board. "Foundations." IMB Training, June 10, 2022. https://issuu.com/trainingdev/docs/imb_foundations.

Kearney. "2022 Global Cities Report | Steering between Storms," 2022. https://www.kearney.com/industry/public-sector/global-cities/2022#.

———. "Readiness for the Storm--the 2022 Global Cities Report," 2022.

Keller, Timothy. *Center Church : Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City.* Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2012.

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. "Population Size - GASTAT Portal." Saudi Census. Accessed July 14, 2023. https://portal.saudicensus.sa/portal/public/1/15/45?-type=DASHBOARD.

London. "Census 2021 Reports." Accessed July 14, 2023. https://apps.london.gov.uk/census-2021-reports/#/main-language-ep.

Longworth, R.C. *On Global Cities.* Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2015. https://globalaffairs.org/sites/default/files/2021-01/On_Global_Cities.pdf.

Luo, Paul. "Congregationalism for a Church Plant in the Confucian Culture." *The Great Commission Baptist Journal of Missions* 2, no. 1 (May 1, 2023). https://serials.atla.com/gcbjm/article/view/3244.

Molavi, Afshin. "Is Globalization Rising Once Again? The UAE Minister for Foreign Trade Outlines His Ambitious Vision for Future Trade Growth." *The Wilson Quarterly* 47, no. 2 (March 22, 2023).

Netland, Harold A., and Craig Ott. *Globalizing Theology : Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity.* Baker Academic, 2006.

PeopleGroups.org. "PeopleGroups.Org - United Arab Emirates." Accessed July 14, 2023. https://peoplegroups.org/explore/CountryDetails.aspx?genc0=ARE#topmenu.

Sequeira, Aubrey. "Global Christianity Needs a Reformation." *Journal of Global Christianity* 5, no. 1 (2019): 4–15.

Siemund, Peter, Ahmad Al-Issa, and Jakob R. E. Leimgruber. "Multilingualism and the Role of English in the United Arab Emirates." *World Englishes* 40, no. 2 (June 2021): 191–204.

"Singapore - Multicultural, Diverse, Cosmopolitan." In *Encyclopedia Britannica.* Accessed July 14, 2023. https://www.britannica.com/place/Singapore/The-people.

Stephens, Wade, Rodney Calfee, Larry McCrary, and Caleb Crider. *Tradecraft : For the Church on Mission.* Portland, Oregon: Urban Loft Publishers, 2013.

Terry, John Mark, and Jervis David Payne. *Developing a Strategy for Missions: A Biblical, Historical, and Cultural Introduction.* Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2013. http://aaron.swbts.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=636853&site=eds-live.

UAE Government. "Fact Sheet." The Official Portal of the UAE Government. Accessed July 14, 2023. https://u.ae/en/about-the-uae/fact-sheet.

———. "Population and Demographic Mix." Accessed July 14, 2023. https://u.ae/en/information-and-services/social-affairs/preserving-the-emirati-national-identity/population-and-demographic-mix.

United Nations. *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2018 Revision.* New York: United Nations, 2019.

Will Brooks. *Interpreting Scripture Across Cultures : An Introduction to Cross-Cultural Hermeneutics.* Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2022.

World Bank. "World Bank Open Data." World Bank Open Data. Accessed July 14, 2023. https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.URB.TOTL.IN.ZS?locations=AE.

Ecclesiology of Deaf Churches as Reflected in Corporate Prayer

Mark Sauter

In this article, I seek to present an ecclesiology of the Deaf church as reflected in one of the most critical areas of the church's life and ministry: corporate prayer.[1] My wife, Vesta, and I were church planters among the Deaf in several Eastern Europe countries for over a decade. Prior to that, we worked as volunteers in Romania for five years and led Deaf teams to evangelize, disciple, and plant Deaf churches in multiple cities. We have planted churches among Deaf peoples in many countries and on multiple continents.

Deaf Ministry or Deaf Church?

Each of our church planting efforts was tied in some form or fashion to a local hearing Baptist church. These hearing churches wanted to integrate the Deaf people into hearing worship using sign language interpreters. We faced this challenge in nearly every country where we sought to plant Deaf churches. Our commitment remained resolute to focus on reaching Deaf people with the gospel, to begin discipleship, and then to establish a local, autonomous Deaf congregation. We have sought to train Deaf church leaders with the Bible as a guide for principles and let the Spirit of God lead churches in the

---

1   "Deaf" is capitalized where it refers to the Deaf as a distinct people group that have more linguistic and cultural affinity with each other than with the hearing in their own country. When used as an adjective (e.g., "a deaf person"), it appears in lower case.

practices of what is meaningful culturally. In fact, "the Bible only becomes useful when it is made Deaf."[2] Starting autonomous Deaf churches rather than Deaf ministries in hearing churches has been much more strategic and fruitful. Some places offered more resistance to that strategy than others, but the results of planting autonomous, indigenous Deaf churches have been very consistent.

Indigenous Deaf Church

When a group formed, the starting point has always centered on the Acts 2:42-44 passage and the basic functions of the church:

> [42] They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. [43] Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. [44] All the believers were together and had everything in common. (NIV)

Deaf people are oral learners – they attach important truth to narrative. Thus, we use biblical story sets in all phases of planting Deaf churches. One of the story sets we have used with the Deaf people who have come to faith centers on each of these basic functions: fellowship, baptism, Lord's Supper, the study and proclamation of the Bible, and prayer.

Each of these areas is basic to the formation and functionality of the local church. As with any linguistic, cultural group, the distinct activities may have unique features to them as they align with biblical ecclesiology. In the case of the Deaf, there will be Deaf-centric applications when it comes to the practice of biblical teachings on the church.

Corporate Prayer in the Life of the Deaf Church

Corporate prayer is, of course, one of the most critical aspects of the church functions. The Deaf face some daunting challenges in corporate prayer. Wayne Morris correctly points out that "access to worship for Deaf people

---

2   *Wayne Morris, Theology Without Words: Theology in the Deaf Community (Farnham, Surrey, UK: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd. 2008), 108.*

has often been on hearing people's terms using hearing people's ways of worshipping."[3] This is evident in several ways.

Prayer Posture is Different

Without exception, we have witnessed Deaf people, believers and unbelievers alike, bow their heads and close their eyes when prayer was introduced initially. The image of people praying like that is all they had ever seen, and in order to pray "correctly," they followed that pattern. Yet, this is completely foreign to how the Deaf communicate with each other. To close one's eyes and look away or down would be extremely disrespectful in conversation with another deaf person. This applies to prayer. Yet, looking to heaven and using their sign language to pray to the Father does not seem to occur naturally to the Deaf.

"God Doesn't Know My Language"

Suggesting to a deaf person that they can look to heaven and use sign language to pray often evokes the response, "God would not know sign language, would He?" Sign language has always been looked down on and ridiculed by the majority culture as a form of communication considered inferior, even illegitimate, when compared to the majority language of the people around them. Certainly, God would not understand such a remedial, barbaric form of communication that lacks the depth of spoken languages.

The Deaf Heart Language is Different from Hearing

Part of the rationale for the view mentioned above of sign language is reinforced by the fact that as recently as ten years ago, only 44 of 120 countries in the world had even recognized the national sign language as a legitimate language.[4] That mentality carried over into the church in most settings and thus, churches did not see sign language as a real option for communicating biblical truth or for establishing credibility of a Deaf-centric approach to ecclesiology.

Hearing churches often therefore reinforce expectations that the Bible can be expressed only with more detailed language, and this carries over into ex-

---

3   Morris, *Theology Without Words*, 84.

4   *Amyl Wilson and Nickson Kakiri, "Best Practices for Collaboration with Deaf Communities in Developing Countries" in Deaf Around the World: The Impact of Language, eds., Gaurav Mathu and Donna Jo Napoli (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011), 291.*

pectations of how the Deaf should pray. So, when Deaf people follow Christ, they often awkwardly try to copy how hearing people pray in the majority language—even spelling out terms they may or may not understand—so that the petition will resonate with God's understanding.

The reality is that the common language of the majority population restricts the full expression of the heart by Deaf People, perhaps similar to the challenge anyone feels when attempting to pray in a second language. Harlan Lane, in making a comparison between English and American Sign Language, says, "the two are as unrelated as any two languages could be."[5] It is only in the visual expressions of the national, or local, sign language that we have seen Deaf people embrace responsibility and ownership over the way in which God made them and in how they relate to him, especially in prayer.

Outstanding Features of Corporate Prayer in a Deaf Church

Posture Driven by Heart Language

Watching Deaf people experience true liberation when they pray—opening their eyes, looking up, and using their hands to make their petitions known—has been thrilling to observe over the years. The realization that God not only understands sign language, but that the various sign languages are part of His entire linguistic plan for the peoples of the earth validates not only their faith but also their identity, culture, and language. It is what Sherman Wilcox refers to as "the language of consciousness."[6] The realization that they can pray in their heart language, without having any understanding of a majority language, is like being unshackled before their Creator for the very first time. It elevates their language, and it elevates them as God's creation.

Event-oriented

Like other oral cultures around the world, Deaf communities are event-oriented and not guided by the clock, and this is evident in their corporate prayer. This is not a unique characteristic for the Deaf, or for oral cultures for

---

5   Harlan Lane, *The Mask of Benevolence: Disabling the Deaf Community (San Diego, CA: Sign Dawn Press. 1999), 110.*

6   Sherman Wilcox, "Struggling for a Voice: An Interactionist View of Language and Literacy in Deaf Education" in *Literacy and Deaf People: Cultural and Contextual Perspectives*, ed., Brenda Jo Brueggemann (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 2004), 184.

that matter, but it is a defining characteristic of their culture. When the Deaf come together for worship, it is not a gathering that gives focus to a schedule defined by a start and finish time. When they come together to pray, it is not something controlled by a certain spot in the program. They are there to worship, and they are there to pray. There are no time parameters in the schedule.

Hand Mnemonics and the Disciple's Prayer in Corporate Prayer

Very often the prayer part of a Deaf worship experience can last for hours. It is not unusual for corporate prayer in worship to see everyone participate multiple times. Because the Deaf community is familial, everyone is expected to participate.

This kind of community participation is evident in the initial teaching on prayer from the Disciple's Prayer in Luke 11:2-4 (as we will see more clearly later in this article):

> [2] He said to them, "When you pray, say:
>
> Father, hallowed be your name,your kingdom come [3] Give us each day our daily bread. [4] Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. And lead us not into temptation" (NIV)

One other significant part of the teaching on prayer (and for that matter in all aspects that help make teaching reproducible with Deaf people) is the use of hand mnemonics (hand movements that aid in remembering). These are particularly effective in helping them commit stories, and groups of stories by topic, to memory. The Deaf do this for each part of the Disciple's Prayer from Luke 11 as part of Corporate Prayer.

Due to the brevity of Luke's version of the prayer, we initially teach this passage to new Deaf believers. It offers the basics of what Jesus taught and later, when we begin to expand teaching on prayer, we bring in the Matthew 6 passage as well as other passages like John 15.

The first part of the Disciple's Prayer gives focus to acknowledging and edifying God alone: "Father, hallowed by your name, your kingdom come" (Luke 11:2). There is no element of surprise on the part of Deaf people that prayer would give attention to praising God and recognizing him. However,

the strong statement at the beginning for teaching the disciples to pray gives guidance to Deaf people who desire to follow the model Jesus taught. Taking time to honor the Father and acknowledge Him alone as the One they endear themselves to allows for the proper alignment of His place, and theirs, from the very beginning. Pointing to the index finger on one hand is used as a reminder of the starting place for following the prayer Jesus modeled by acknowledging and honoring the Father.

The second section reflects God's rule, or kingdom, and is a request that God's plans, not ours, move forward unimpeded: "Your kingdom come" (Luke 11:2). There is always a discussion about the term "kingdom." Here is an effort to help the new believers understand the necessity of seeking God's plan and making a concerted effort to line up to it, rather than planning to do something for Him and then asking Him to bless it. For new believers in a corporate setting, the opportunity to focus on His ruling and command, both individually and within the body, brings understanding about what is priority for the church. At the same time, each individual will point to the middle finger of the other hand as the reminder of the need for God's rule to prevail in their lives, too.

"Give us each day our daily bread" (Luke 11:3) takes us to the next part of the prayer that centers on needs. Many prayers give time and focus to asking God for blessings, healing, direction, etc. Here is where we ask the new believers to be honest about deep desires and needs of the heart. Within a corporate setting of new Christians, there can be a hesitancy to admit honest needs if they do not know each other well, if folks have a history, or if there is no background together. Here we have often seen the development of a stronger, more unified church as people openly begin to let down a façade that protects their reputation and instead embrace a community, a family, of faith. Nothing is off the table for the individual believer or for the congregation. Pointing to the ring finger is the reminder, the mnemonic, for this part of the Disciple's Prayer.

Forgiveness is the next element addressed by the Disciple's Prayer: "Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us" (Luke 11:4). Since Deaf people grow up as a marginalized, oppressed minority, this part of the prayer often takes time and indicates the struggle of individuals with diverse backgrounds.

Nearly all Deaf children grow up without access to sign language within their immediate family, and the frustration, bitterness, and anger that result are understandable. Yet, within the context of a Deaf church, these shared experiences actually lead to a brokenness before the Lord when coming to understand that the individual is created in the image of God, has been forgiven, and has opportunity to make things right in the heart even if resolution with many oppressors in the hearing world never comes. The corporate prayer meetings where forgiving and receiving forgiveness are given their part are some of the most significant times of communion with God and with each other. The little finger is pointed to as the remembrance for this aspect of the Disciple's prayer.

The concluding section of this model prayer is about asking God for strength, courage, and protection: "And lead us not into temptation" (Luke 11:4). With this section, there is always the discussion about who is responsible for temptation and who is responsible for sin. Often we will reference the Matthew 6 version of the prayer that asks for deliverance from the evil one. Yet, the main point of dialogue has to do with whether God would lead someone into temptation.

We have often witnessed the Spirit of God working to teach individuals, as a part of the corporate body, the source of temptation and the importance of asking for strength, courage, and protection. Most of the understanding Deaf people have about the spirit world is misinformed, distorted, and without any biblical basis. The body of Christ rejoices with the truth that although temptation comes to everyone, God always makes a way for escape and is, in fact, stronger than any evil spirit, including Satan. The thumb is the digit on the hand that is a reminder of this part of the Disciple's Prayer.

There is no magical formula for how to pray most effectively, but utilizing the Disciple's Prayer as a model has been liberating and has offered freedom and transparency in the settings where we have taught it. Copying what Deaf people have seen in hearing churches often results in frustration, stagnation, and dependency. That is why our whole strategy for reaching Deaf people and gathering them together has been an exclusive focus on planting indigenous Deaf churches.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article has centered around the practice of corporate prayer in the Deaf church setting within our mission experience. The bottom line for us has been, and continues to be, that Deaf people have opportunity to come to faith, have biblical discipleship, be a part of biblically based, Deaf-centric church, and be trained to carry on the work of the Great Commission.

Mark Sauter holds a Doctor of Ministry Degree from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and has been serving with the International Mission Board since 1996. After serving in church planting roles in Eastern Europe and East Asia for many years, he and his wife, Vesta, assumed the role of Affinity Global Leaders for the Deaf Peoples in 2008. They are privileged to serve alongside of many Deaf and hearing colleagues, and Deaf national believers, in efforts to train and empower leaders for the missionary task around the globe.

References

Allen, Roland. 1997. *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church.* Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock (Original work published 1927).

Wilcox, Sherman. 1994. "Struggling for a Voice: An Interactionist View of Language and Literacy in Deaf Education." In Brueggemann, Brenda Jo (Ed.). 2004. *Literacy and Deaf People: Cultural and Contextual Perspectives* (pp. 168-190). Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press.

Lane, Harlan. 1999. *The Mask of Benevolence: Disabling the Deaf Community.* San Diego, CA: Sign Dawn Press.

Morris, Wayne. 2008. Theology Without Words: Theology in the Deaf Community. Farnham, Surrey, UK: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd.

Wilson, Amyl, & Kakiri, Nickson. 2011. Best Practices for Collaboration with Deaf Communities in Developing Countries. In Mathur, Gaurav & Napoli, Donna Jo (Eds.). *Deaf Around the World: The Impact of Language* (pp. 271-296). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Paul G. Hiebert and Critical Contextualization

Philip Barnes

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 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

---

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.

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.

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 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 dictio-

---

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

nary. 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 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]

---

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.

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

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 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

---

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.*

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.

---

he showed where the various approaches have fit into their historical setting by framing the conversation around a discussion of different eras.

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. 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

---

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.

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]

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 pro-

---

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.

phetic -- 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, 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

---

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.*

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.*

---

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 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.

---

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

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

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

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.

Philip Barnes (PhD, SBTS, 2011) served as an IMB missionary for twelve years. He currently serves as the Pastor of Missions and Equipping at Grace Church in Waco, TX and as an Adjunct Professor at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Phil is one of two pastors being sent out of Grace Church to plant Hope Church in Robinson, TX. He and his wife Laura have two sons, Daniel and Jonathan.

Contextualization Informed by Scripture and Baptist Tradition

Dylan Blaine

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 wine[1] (or juice) consumed, or someone immersed in water.

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 under-

---

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. Pesaḥ. 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).ʿA. J. Köstenberger,* ["Wine,"](#) *ed. Joel B. Green, Jeannine K. Brown, and Nicholas Perrin, Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, Second Edition (Downers Grove, IL; Nottingham, England: IVP Academic; IVP, 2013), 993.)*

stand 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 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]

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.

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

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 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 re-

---

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

4   Ibid.

5   Ibid.

ceived, 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 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*

---

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

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 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 perspec-

---

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.*

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.*

tives (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 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.

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.

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.

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 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:

---

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.

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

> 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 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

---

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.*

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 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.

Dylan Blaine serves as professor of missiology at a Baptist seminary in Latin America. Since 2019, he has worked as a theological education consultant, strengthening connections between Southern Baptists and Baptists in Latin America at both the seminary and local church level. His main objective is to foster the growth and maturity of the next generation of church leaders and missionaries, as they carry out evangelism, discipleship, and church planting. Dylan and his wife actively participate in their local Latin American Baptist church, collaborating with local believers

---

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

in two church planting initiatives among underreached populations. He holds a PhD in World Religions from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Bibliography

Banks, Robert J. *Paul's Idea of Community: Spirit and Culture in Early House Churches.* 3d ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020.

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

Catholic Church. *Catechism of the Catholic Church.* 2nd Ed. Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000.

De Jonge, Marinus. *"Christ." The Anchor Bible Dictionary on CD-ROM.* Logos Library System Version 2.0c. 1995, 1996. Print ed.: David Noel Freedman, ed. *Anchor Bible Dictionary.* 6 vols. New York: Doubleday, 1992.

Frame, John M. *The Collected Shorter Theological Writings.* Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2008.

Green, Joel B., Jeannine K. Brown, and Nicholas Perrin, eds. *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, Second Edition.* Downers Grove, IL; Nottingham, England: IVP Academic; IVP, 2013.

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

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

———. *Analysis and Interpretation of Ethnographic Data: A Mixed Methods Approach.* Lanham, MD: AltaMira, 2012.

McGlothlin, W. J. *Baptist Confessions of Faith.* Philadelphia; Boston; Chicago; St. Louis; Toronto: American Baptist Publication Society, 1911.

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

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

VOICES FROM THE FIELD

An Inside Look at Contextualization on the Field

Karen Pearce

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.[1]

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:

---

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

As we think seriously about contextualizing the message of the Bible, let's remember that we must also labor to bring about, in 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).2

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.

---

2   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."[3] 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.

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.

---

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

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.*[4] 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 and leads to a compromised gospel message and a compromised Christian life.[5]

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

---

4   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.

5   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/.

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 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.

RESOURCE REVIEWS

Book Review. New Funding Models for Global Mission

Welch, Tim. *New Funding Models for Global Mission: Learning from the Majority World.* **Littleton, CO: William Carey Publishing, 2023.**

Reviewed by Baron Muga, SSAP

Tim Welch served as a missionary in Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire for thirty-one years with SIM, including twenty-two years as national director. Currently, he serves as the SIM Ministry Point Person for Literature, based in the US. In this book, Welch seeks to expand the mission funding paradigm from the traditional western approach to new ways and possibilities stemming from his experience and research on this subject. Welch offers alternative funding approaches, a refreshing review of biblical foundations for funding, and seeks to repaint the old perception of the majority world from back-of-the-line recipients of trends and economic assistance to one of inevitable importance, contribution and creativity in God's mission and world influence.

Without a doubt, Welch's thought to offer new ideas on mission funding is a step forward in a direction the global Church needs to take. He is not the first
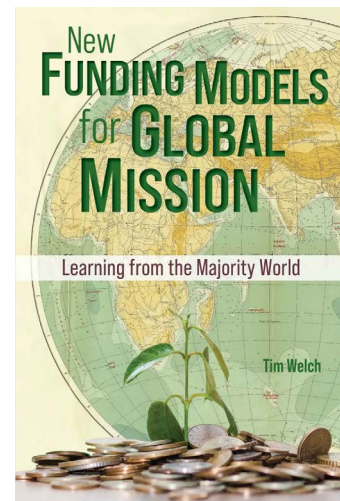
nor the last in his efforts in this regard. Welch's book, so far as I know, is the first to address this with a contemporary lens with a global perspective and application at a local level. The book fills a gap. Welch gives innumerable examples of options and possibilities that can be applied or tried in various contexts to fund missionaries and mission endeavors. Every reader of this book will come across at least one or two suggested possibilities that they can seek to immediately deploy in their context. Welch's effort to review missionary support in the Bible while paying attention to majority world representation is also a welcome addition that further stimulates us to think Biblically about funding missions.

Welch's approach, in my view, could be improved in two areas. There is a lack of structured categorization of the suggested ideas. It would have been helpful for a reader interested in the subject matter to find some way to categorize all the suggestions he gives throughout the book. Indeed, Welch provides us less with models for funding global mission, and more with examples of funding possibilities. He defines *the traditional* model as one where the missionary seeks the funding (pg. 4). One can consider that a model because it can take many forms with the defining characteristic being that the missionary is the one that seeks the funds. Following this categorization, it may have been helpful to group the subsequent alternate suggestions he provides as part of models maybe based on who request/obtains the funds (e.g. church initiated, family initiated, self-initiated, agency initiated if that is the case, etc.) Other possible models could be based on the source of the funds, nature, or frequency of funding. These are just some ideas that would help a reader have a handle on which to peg the examples given and even categorize their own contextualized examples.

A second weakness of the material is that many examples and ideas are repeated using different terms. For example, the "mission designation" *model* (pg. 48) he mentions is conceptually the same as the "handful of rice" *model (*pg. 45*)*. Though these models serve well as examples of regular planned giving by church members, they are essentially the same concept explained and applied in different ways. Readers of this book may find themselves feeling that ideas are being rehashed as different concepts but are in fact examples of the same possible model.

That said, this resource is valuable for a missionary to stimulate their ideas regarding missionary funding for themselves and, more so, for those they reach and disciple who are considering the call to take the gospel to the ends

of the earth. The book will be a resource for offering options and propelling thoughts around the endless possibilities of funding for missionaries. Personally, this subject continues to be a focus as we are seeking to see more African Churches send African missionaries to the Ends of the Earth and we continue to think through and attempt the implementation of paradigms that will facilitate missionary work in, through and from the African continent.

Welch's book is a timely resource that begins to bring greater focus and definition to the issue of mission funding in today's reconstituted landscape. It has begun the journey of structuring this topic and I hope, as others engage it, we will continue to see this topic addressed in theory and practice with consideration to present realities for the sake of the expansion of His Kingdom.

# Book Review. Central and Eastern European Bible Commentary

Corneliu Constantineanu(†) and Peter Penner, eds. *Central and Eastern European Bible Commentary.* **Carlisle, UK: Langham Partnership, 2022.**

Reviewed by Preston Pearce, PhD, Field Personnel, Europe

Summary

The Langham Partnership has produced several one-volume Bible commentaries in different regions of the world, one of which is the *Central and Eastern European Bible Commentary* (CEEBC). All 104 contributors are from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), nations that "bear the ideological scars of totalitarian regimes" (vii) and are from many denominations. Incidentally, Russia is represented in the *Slavic Bible Commentary* (2016) rather than CEEBC.

The contributors write at a level that is accessible to pastors, teachers, church leaders, and lay people. Because of the many languages in the region, CEEBC is written in English, the most common second language. NRSV is the English translation used. It has section introductions, book introductions, commentary, and articles.
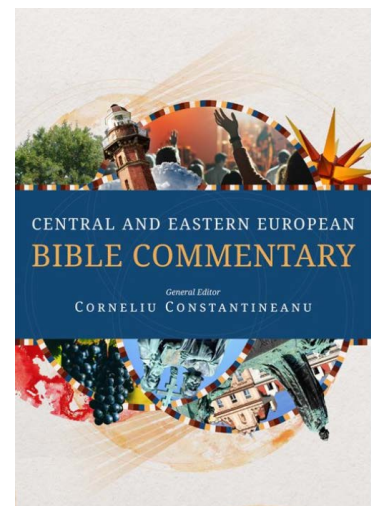
The editors have two major goals for CEEBC. One is to give a voice to Christians in the region, whose theological contributions are under-represented in global Christianity. Another is to be relevant to the CEE context, including both its communist past and its secular, pluralistic present. This relevance should contribute to the transformation of Christianity in the post-communist nations (vii) and "present the gospel as public truth by reflecting biblically and theologically on issues" (ix-x).

The desire to be relevant to the CEE context is evident in the commentary and in the articles. Each commentator is intentional to relate his/her material clearly to the CEE context. CEEBC also has 125 short articles about a wide variety of topics; most are on current issues of importance in the current CEE context, e.g., abortion, euthanasia, gender, genocide, human trafficking, patriotism and nationalism, refugees, and secularism. CEEBC also includes articles related to the information & technology age, e.g., Artificial Intelligence, Electronic Gaming, and Virtual Reality. Articles about Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, Reformation & Counter-Reformation, Ecumenism, and Evangelicalism reflect the complex historical religious scene in CEE.

Strengths and Weaknesses

CEEBC represents a valuable contribution to understanding global Christianity, as it seeks to give a voice to Christians from a region that is under-represented in resources such as this. Resources like CEEBC help believers realize that they sometimes bring assumptions that may be more cultural than exegetical to their own interpretive process.

Another strength of CEEBC is the earnest attempt of each contributor to connect the message of Scripture with the contemporary CEE context. This appears in biblical book introductions, commentary, and articles.

Unsurprisingly, CEEBC also has some good articles on topics like expository preaching; on marriage, divorce, and remarriage; on singleness; on sexuality; on the prosperity gospel; and more.

CEEBC could be strengthened by greater integration of biblical theology into the commentary – that is, more intentionality in placing the books not only in their historical setting and relating them to contemporary CEE culture, but also explaining them in their context in redemptive history. Awareness of the biblical metanarrative is essential in the process of understanding any text of Scripture and thus is a critical part of the task of biblical interpreta-

tion. The lack of integration of biblical theology is evident also in specific areas, e.g., the lack of connection of the prophetic ministry in Israel to the Mosaic covenant and the lack of connection of Matt.20:28/Mark 10:45 with Isaiah 53.

CEEBC has a wealth of information. Yet it would be helpful to have deeper discussion of some core biblical issues, e.g., propitiation, election to salvation, and inspiration of Scripture (especially in light of discussions about authorship of Pentateuch and Isaiah).

The theological diversity on nonessential issues is commendable but in some instances it can cause confusion to the reader. For example, regarding gender roles in the church, one contributor takes the egalitarian position with no mention of other views (7); another describes the views in somewhat polarizing terms (1500); another presents a balanced view (247). The reader needs to be aware of key passages in order to find and weigh the different views. In another example, the commentator's admirable attempt to navigate the difficult issue of apostasy in Hebrews 6 – admittedly difficult – was hindered by jumping to the Calvinist-Arminian debate without giving adequate attention to what the text says.

CEEBC is valuable in that it provides a resource for those in CEE to see Scripture's relevance to their context, and for outsiders to better understand an underrepresented segment of global Christianity. Again, despite any differences or weaknesses mentioned above, Langham should be commended for producing the valuable resource.
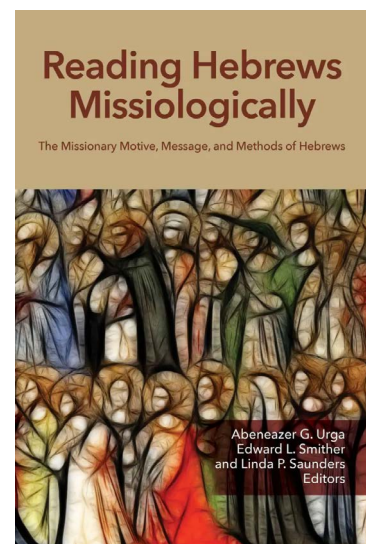
Book Review. Reading Hebrews Missiologically

Abeneazer, Urga, G; Smither, Edward, L; Saunders, Linda, P. *Reading Hebrews Missiologically: The Missionary Motive, Message, and Methods of Hebrews.* **Littleton, CO: William Carey Publishing, 2023.**

Reviewed by Wendal Mark Johnson

Reading Hebrews Missiologically is a theological and missiological collaboration between bible scholars and missiologists connected to Columbia International University. This book aims to help readers understand and apply the latent biblical missiology found in Hebrews. While some scholars have argued that Hebrews primarily deals with internal church issues, *Reading Hebrews Missiologically* presents a compelling case to the contrary. It argues that Hebrews has a missional theology that manifests itself in robust missional applications for Christian missions and ministry.

This book brings together 12 evangelical authors with specializations in biblical studies and missiology to consider Hebrews' unique missional motives, messages, and methods. The authors are men and women from diverse cultural backgrounds, which makes their theological insights and missional applications of Hebrews even more interesting. In

general, the essays in *Reading Hebrews Missiologically* are characterized by robust theological, historical, and missiological engagement, all written within a clear context of evangelical theology and active missional engagement.

Summary of Contents

Reading Hebrews Missiologically is divided into three broad categories. The first four essays deal with the missionary motivation of Hebrews. The next three essays expound on the missionary message of Hebrews. Then follows an additional four essays that engage with the missionary methods of Hebrews. Finally, the book concludes with a helpful critical review of the text itself offered by veteran missiologist, Robert L. Gallagher.

In Chapter 1, Matthew Bennett argues for the fascinating missiological hypothesis that Hebrews is a narrating of the world's true meta-narrative in the light of the person and work of Jesus Christ. In chapter two, Linda Saunders argues that the *Missio Dei*, understood to be the story of God's plan of redemption revealed in the person and work of Jesus, is the grand narrative of Hebrews. In chapter 3, Allen Yeh argues the idea of Christ being outside of the gate, mentioned in Hebrews 13, and helps the Christian reconfigure where mission ministry should best occur in the present-day reality. Michael Naylor argues, in chapter 4 that Christ's incarnation was essential for Jesus to fulfill his role as messianic heir and great high priest. Based on his fulfillment of these two roles, God's plan of redemption is fulfilled, and God's global mission advances.

In part 2, the book shifts focus to consider Hebrews' missionary message. In chapter 5, Ed Smither highlights the book of Hebrews' emphasis on missionary hospitality. Jessica Udall shows, in chapter 6 that Hebrews presents a picture of God's people on mission in this world as pilgrim people passing through this world, not as permanent citizens of this world. In chapter 7, Irwyn Ince argues that Hebrews teaches that Christ can be trusted to be in control amid the chaos that defines so much of life and ministry for so many of God's redeemed.

In part 3, *Reading Hebrews Missiology* takes up the question of Hebrews' missionary methodology. In chapter 8, Abeneazer Urga argues that Hebrews has a robust missionary theology. In chapter 9, Sigurd Grindheim makes the case that the coming of the New Covenant in Jesus Christ has direct missional applications, particularly in how Christ's incarnation modeled how all rela-

tionships of power should be conducted. Jessica Janvier shows how African Americans used Hebrews for missional motivation from the antebellum period in US history to the twentieth century, in chapter 10. Sarah Lunsford concludes this section in chapter 11 by showing how Hebrews gives priority to rigorous discipleship. This commitment to robust discipleship should continue to define and conduct missionary engagement around the world.

Finally, in chapter 12, Robert Gallagher provides a critique of *Reading Hebrews Missiology*. I found his critique to be both helpful and insightful. His observations are measured and are a good example of objective analysis and amicable critique.

Critical Evaluation

A brief critical evaluation of this book requires three key points: a big idea, an observation on the use of key missiological words, and a comment on a lost missiological opportunity. First, a big idea. As a rule, I found all the essays to be well-researched, easy to read, and seeking to tease out genuine missiological applications from the book of Hebrews. I found Matthew Bennett's article to be truly thought-provoking. Bennett argues that Hebrews narrates the biblical worldview for those newly coming to faith in Christ, showing that the biblical worldview responds to the great questions asked by all: From where do I come and why am I here? What has gone wrong with the world? What is the solution to the world's greatest problem? Where is this world going? Hebrews introduces the new believer to this comprehensive worldview and invites the new believer to embrace this worldview as his or her new identity. I found this to be a tremendous missiological insight.

Second, the book's essays are all defined by clear evangelical commitment. However, the reader will do well to keep in mind the difference between missional and missions. Several of the articles engage with ideas that most readers would understand to be traditional missionary engagement, that is, in the sense of engaging in the core missionary task: engaging the lost, evangelism, discipleship, church planting, leadership training, and exit to partnership. Several of the articles speak of local church ministry according to Hebrews as being missional. This is certainly an appropriate usage. However, the reader would be advised to remember that missions and missional are not always used synonymously. The term *missions* normally refers to the core missionary task, as mentioned above. The term *missional* could best be described as the church's identity having "to do with its very nature, what

the church *is* in light of its being created by the Spirit."[1] It is the church living out its mission to be the church in its ministry context. Remembering this simple distinction helps the reader understand and appreciate several of the articles that regularly use the term missional.

Finally, I felt Allen Yeh missed an opportunity to show how Christ calling His people to join him outside the camp was a calling to join him in his mission to the Gentiles. Yeh explains Christ's going outside of the camp[2] as a calling for his followers to work among the poor. He understands this calling from the perspective of Liberation Theology.

Having lived and worked in Latin America for 30 years, I am keenly aware of Liberation Theology, both in terms of its philosophy and its actual practice. I weekly worship and minister in an urban poor community. I respect any call and any practical engagement that brings Kingdom hope to those living in soul-crushing urban poverty.

However, I disagree with Yeh that Christ's calling His people to the margins was a missiological end in and of itself as if God's preferential option for the poor and ministering in that context was the essence of the Christian mission. On the contrary, God's people are called to the margins of societies because the Christian mission calls God's people to reach the least, the last, and the lost. Not always, but often, the least, the last, and the lost are to be found in the margins of any given society. For this reason, God's people must be there as well, ministering the Gospel truth in word and deed. F. F. Bruce commented on Hebrews 13.13 with these words:

> Jesus claimed the world outside for himself. Other Jewish Christians, Hellenists like themselves, had taken the initiative in evangelizing the Gentile world. The future lay not with the "camp" but with the Gentile mission; let them exchange the imagined security of their old associations for the new venture to which Jesus was leading his followers. Time and again in the history of the people of God a similar call has come when a

---

1   *Craig Van Gelder and D. J. Zscheile,* The Missional Church in Perspective *(p. xvii). (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, 2011), xvii.*

2   *"Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured." Hebrews 13:13, ESV.*

new advance must be made into the unknown and unfamiliar,
to occupy fresh territory under the leadership of Jesus.[3]

It has been my experience that Liberation Theology does not advance the Christian mission and many times does little to alleviate the very suffering that all desire to see improved. As an alternative option, *Business as Mission* (often referred to as BAM), a concept deeply grounded in the Great Commission's belief and practice, is often the best way to bring about lasting, substantive change for those suffering most from urban poverty's soul-consuming grind.

In conclusion, I recommend this book for those desiring to read a rigorous biblical and missiological analysis of a key biblical book. The reader will be rewarded with a broader and deeper understanding of how God's mission works itself among the nations in a book that has so much to say about God's redemptive plan of salvation.

---

3   F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1990), 382.

Book Review: Missionary Motivations

Burden, Matthew. *Missionary Motivations: Challenges from the Early Church.* Littleton, Colorado: William Carey Publishing, 2023.

Reviewed by Lucy Witten, IMB Field Personnel, Asia Pacific Rim.

Many scholars of early Christian missions publish works about that period. *Missionary Motivations* focuses specifically on the impetus for Christian missions in the rapid expansion of the early church. The Great Commission and concern for unreached people groups may seem obvious reasons for missions today, but these concepts are largely absent from the early writing on missionary motivations. What were the theological concerns that drove the church to global missions?
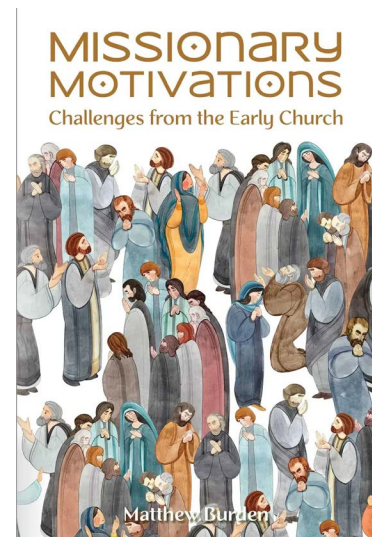
Matthew Burden asserts that the early church understood Jesus Christ to be the Messianic Priest-King and triumphant victor over sin, death, and Satan. His followers are his kingdom and royal priesthood, called to live holy, Christ-like lives and

establish gospel communities. These truths shaped the way Christianity grew. Burden writes, "There was an overriding conviction that an entirely new stage of history had begun, a glorious age of Christ the Priest-King's reign, and that the Christian church constituted the embassy outposts of that advancing reign, expanding its influence until it touched the very ends of the earth" (4). Christians wanted to see this messianic age come to full completion.

Christianity spread rapidly around the world. In the book, Burden details the major participants, methods of evangelism (both active and passive), and motivations as the gospel spread throughout different regions. After surveying the history, *Missionary Motivations* draws some conclusions about the mission strategies of early Christianity and gives the reader present-day applications to consider.

Strengths and Weaknesses

Burden provides a concise, easy-to-read understanding of the missionary motivations of the early church and their implications for today. *Missionary Motivations* avoids harsh critique of current missionary reasoning. Rather, the book presents the motivations of the early church as compliments to the driving forces of current missionary work.

The book is honest in its description of early church expansion. At times evangelism was intentional through witnessing, preaching, and church planting. Other times converts were the by-product of monks seeking solitude, sectarian conflicts, or political motivations. Burden details this history without lauding sinful behavior or inflicting presentism upon early church practices.

The author does acknowledge one limitation of this work. While we know much of what happened in the early ex-

pansion of Christianity, little record exists of the specific missiological ideas of those missionary movements. Early missionary motivations cannot be directly quoted but must be inferred from the data available.

Significance for Cross-Cultural Work

I would highly recommend this work to missionaries and missions supporters. Today's missionaries do not work in a vacuum. Understanding past motivations and practices helps us to be better missionaries today. Personally, the focus on planting gospel communities encouraged me. Burden writes, "It was the community of faith that was considered the central incarnation of the reign of Christ, and so it was the establishment of new communities that took on preeminent importance" (90). While individual conversions are essential, I have seen the planting of local churches to also be foundational in mission work. Believers united in the church demonstrate God's kingdom and love for the world in a clear way.

I was also intrigued by the early church's gratitude, sense of responsibility, and desire for holy living. These Christians understood that the gospel changed every aspect of their lives. The Christ-like changes in their daily practices led others to want to know the Savior they worshipped. Today, we can talk about evangelism strategy and reproduction, but we must never forget the witness of a Christ-shaped life.

Matthew Burden's *Missionary Motivations* unpacks the practice of the early church and challenges modern missions to let every aspect of the gospel propel our efforts. I highly recommend this book for all who want to see Christ exalted among all peoples.