

# CONTEXTUAL AND MISSIONAL

Timothy Keller

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## CONTEXTUALIZATION

An important part of becoming missional is contextualization. Contextualization “incarnates” the gospel into a culture. It is the process by which we present the gospel to people of a particular worldview in forms the hearers can understand. It is adapting gospel ministry into a culture without compromising the gospel.

True contextualization, then, is concerned *both* to challenge the culture *and* to connect and adapt to it. If we fail to do one or the other we obscure and lose the gospel, either by identifying it too much with the culture we’re trying to reach or by identifying it too much with the culture we are from. Contextualization is not “giving people what they want,” but rather giving God’s answers (which they may not want!) to questions they are asking, and in forms they can comprehend. Everything about a church must be contextualized—its message, its discourse, its approach to decision-making, its leadership approaches, its worship, its use of the arts, its outreach, its instructional methods, and its preaching.

### I. The mixed nature of culture

All cultures are mixed. That is, all cultures are complex, interweaving godly and ungodly elements together very closely. This occurs because all human beings are radically fallen yet made in the image and likeness of God. It also occurs because of the varying degrees of natural and special revelation that may be present within cultures.

Even in cultures where the Bible is influential, the depravity of human nature creates idols that reign within. On the other hand, cultures with little or no influence from the Bible may still (depending on the level of God’s common grace) contain many positive elements, for God gives people a knowledge of moral truth in their consciences (Rom. 2). To some degree, therefore, every culture reflects the knowledge of God that each person possesses, even if that knowledge is suppressed (Rom. 1). At the same time, to some degree every culture will be distorted by sin, namely the elevation of finite values to the position of the absolute (idolatry).

This means we can’t simply consider more traditional, conservative cultures as being automatically more biblical, and liberal, secular cultures as being more immoral and evil. Conservative cultures often inappropriately elevate the family or their race to an absolute value—leading to the idolatries of racism, tribalism, patriarchy, and other forms of moralism and oppression. Liberal cultures elevate the individual and human freedom to an absolute value—leading to the erosion of family, community, and integrity in both business and sexual practices. The importance of the family as well as the worth and freedom of the individual are each rooted in a biblical worldview, so *both* the “collectivist,” traditional culture *and* the “individualist,” liberal culture are mixtures of darkness and light.

This mix is quite important for Christians to recognize, because their reaction to culture tends to be far too simplistic, lacking any analysis beneath the behavioral level. They simply see contemporary culture as “bad” and the more traditional culture as better. What has led them to this conclusion?

First, this comes from a theologically “thin” view of sin, which sees sin as a series of discrete acts of non-compliance to God’s regulations. In this view, Christian growth is primarily a matter of seeking environments where you are less likely to perform these sinful actions. Sin is seen as something that can essentially be removed from a person. (This view comports with a lack of understanding of the thoroughness and richness of Christ’s gracious work for us: if we have to earn our salvation, we need a view of sin that is easier to deal with by conscious effort.) Conversely, a theologically “thick” view of sin sees it as a compulsive drive of the heart to produce or discover idols.

- A thin view of sin compels us to remove anything that could tempt us to overt actions of sexual immorality, profanity, and violence. By withdrawing such cultural “texts,” or content, from our view, we may feel less sinful, but that is not the case. The complex, organic nature of our sin will still be at work, making idols out of things that are not overt forms of law-breaking, such as our moral goodness, or financial security, or our family, or doctrinal purity, or pride in our own traditional culture, and so on. In fact, too much emphasis on withdrawal makes the likelihood of slipping into respectable idolatries greater.
- A thick view of sin—as idolatry that pervades all we do—should lead not to withdrawal or to uncritical consumption, but rather to humble, critical engagement with the culture. This includes identifying and avoiding cultural idolatries in the popular culture, but also recognizing and repenting for the seeds of the same that lurk in our own hearts. (There is certainly room for specific withdrawal from some texts of popular culture—or from “high,” refined culture!—especially when we are younger, but the point under discussion here is blanket withdrawal vs. uncritical consumption.)

Second, this comes from a theologically thin view of common grace, or what is sometimes called general or natural revelation. As mentioned above, Christians have long recognized that all people have a knowledge of God that they suppress, according to Romans 1–2. Many conceive of this knowledge mainly (or strictly) as cognitive information that can be retrieved somehow as we argue with people about the existence of God, the truth of Christianity, and so on. In other words, innate *knowledge of God* is thought of in intellectual terms.

The language of Romans 1:18–25, however, offers a much more comprehensive and dynamic picture of how general revelation or common grace works in lives. The “truth” is being suppressed (v. 18), but it continues to bear down on us. Verse 20 states, “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities...have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.” But the verbs *nosumena* (“are being understood”) and *kathopatai* (“are being seen”) are in the form of *present* passive participles, which means the reality of God’s nature and our obligations to him are continuously present to us. This knowledge should not be thought of as static, innate ideas or information, but as a continually fresh, insistent pressure on the consciousness of every human being.

In short, every artifact of human culture is a response to God’s general revelation (see Isa. 28), but always marred by an idolatrous heart that does not want to acknowledge the total sovereignty of God (Rom. 1:21). Consequently, all cultural production results from a *dialogue* between God’s general revelational grace and the idolatrous nature of the human heart. As R. C. Zaehner notes, “Loss of faith in a given religion does not by any means imply the eradication of the religious instinct. It merely means that that instinct, temporarily repressed, will seek an object elsewhere.”<sup>1</sup>

Because every human being producing culture (and everyone is!) is in a deep dialogue with the general revelation of God, human culture is an extremely complex mixture of brilliant truth, marred half-truths, and overt resistance to the truth. We should be willing to be very engaged with general human culture produced by non-Christians. Why?

- First, a thick view of sin means that even overtly Christian-produced culture *will always have some idolatrous discourse within it*. When we become Christians, we continue to have powerful residual sin remaining in us. We continually struggle with the idolatrous impulses that linger. Our Christian-cultural production will not be free from these.
- Second, a thick view of grace means that even overtly non-Christian-produced culture *will always have some witness to God’s truth in it*. Even the angry, overtly anti-God culture is to a degree a testimony to God’s reality. Many of these cultural efforts have an air of desperation about them, as they vainly try to “put out” what they know in their hearts.

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<sup>1</sup> R. C. Zaehner, “Dialectical Materialism,” 393-407, in *Encyclopedia of the World’s Religions* (Barnes & Noble Publishing, 1997), 393.

Consequently, Christians are never as good as their “right beliefs” should make them, and non-Christians are never as bad as their “wrong beliefs” should make them. In general, then, the appropriate stance is one of *critical enjoyment* of human culture.

## Conclusion

We should espouse neither an “absolutist” view nor a “relativist” view, but a biblical view.

- An absolutist view claims cultural forms are either pure (because the commanding truths of that culture are based on good theology) or impure (because the commanding truths are based on bad theology). Every cultural product can therefore be evaluated as acceptable or unacceptable.
- A relativist view claims cultural forms are neutral and relative, because the ultimate commanding truths of any culture are all relative and arbitrary. There is no absolute truth.
- A biblical view creates a much more nuanced understanding of culture. Its foundation is a biblical understanding of the gospel (Christians are saved but sinners), of the image of God (people are lost but indelibly reflect the nature of God), and of common grace (all people suppress the truth about God). Cultures are mixed, and each has valuable elements and demonic elements.

## 2. The unavoidability of a contextualized gospel

Contextualization is the incarnation of the gospel into a culture. Because each culture has a worldview or “world story” at its heart, to reach a culture the gospel must enter, challenge, and re-tell the story of that culture. Two equal and opposite errors can result.

- If the culture is not truly *entered*—that is, if the gospel communication comes in the undiluted cultural form of its sender—then the receptors will merely have a “cultural conversion.” They will not actually encounter God, but will simply adopt the culture of the sender.
- If, on the other hand, the culture is not truly *challenged* and re-worked—that is, if the basic idol(s) of the culture are not really confronted and removed—then the receptors also will have only a cultural conversion. They will simply get a lightly Christianized version of their own culture!

The simple fact is that every expression and embodiment of Christianity *is* contextualized. There is no such thing as a universal, a-historical expression of Christianity. Jesus didn’t come to earth as a generalized being. By becoming human, he had to become a *particular* human. He was male, Jewish, and working class. To be human, he had to come as a socially and culturally-situated person, so the minute we begin to minister, we must “incarnate,” even as Jesus did.

Actual Christian practices must have a biblical form or shape as well as a cultural form or shape. For example, the Bible clearly directs us to use music to praise God—but as soon as we choose a music to use, we enter a culture. As soon as we choose a language, as soon as we choose a vocabulary, as soon as we choose a particular level of emotional expressiveness and intensity, as soon as we choose even an illustration as an example for a sermon, we are moving toward the social context of some people and away from the social context of others.

Every society has a dominant group or a majority. Members of that majority have trouble understanding the very idea of contextualization. On the other hand, members of minority communities understand how different their own cultures are from the dominant culture regarding how decisions are made, emotions expressed, relationships and communication conducted, and even how time and space are conceived. For example, in the U.S., African Americans know there is a “white way” to do all these things and an African American way (and they usually know something about Hispanic and Asian ways as well). White people, however, don’t see their way of behaving as “white.” They simply think theirs is the way things are done. They are, in general, unaware of the very concept of culture, so they tend to absolutize nearly everything about the way they do church and ministry. This makes it difficult for members of the dominant society to understand contextualization.

Because we can never be all things to all people *at the very same time*, adaptation to culture is inevitable. This is not relativism! “No truth which human beings may articulate can ever be articulated in a culture-transcending

way—but that does not mean that the truth thus articulated does not transcend culture.”<sup>2</sup> It is important to keep the balance of this statement! If you forget the first half, you will think there is only one true way to communicate the gospel. If you forget the second half, you will lose your grip on the fact that there is, nonetheless, only one true gospel. Either way, you will be ineffective in ministry.

Paul himself does not change the gospel, but he does adapt it very heavily. Although this approach may open the door to abuses, refusing to adapt to culture out of fear also opens the gospel to abuses! The balance is to neither succumb to relativism nor to think contextualization is really avoidable. Both are gospel-eroding errors.

### Summary

- If we over-adapt to a culture we are trying to reach, it means we have bought into that culture’s idols. We are allowing that culture too much authority. For example, we may take a good theme (e.g., the Western concept of “the freedom of the individual”—which fits with the “priesthood of all believers”) and allow it to be an idol (e.g., “individualism,” which undercuts the church’s exercise of pastoral accountability and discipline).
- If we under-adapt to a culture, it means we have accepted our own culture’s idols. We are forgetting that our own version of Christianity is not biblical, but simply cultural.

To the degree a ministry is over- or under-adapted, it loses culture-transforming power. Trying to avoid the very real dangers of contextualization by simply holding onto old, familiar ways is impossible. Moreover, under-adapting is as much a cultural trap as over-adapting.

### 3. The gospel and contextualization

Religion (“I obey; therefore, I am accepted”) leads either to pride (if I am living up to standards) or inferiority (if I am failing to live up to standards), but the gospel (“I am accepted through Christ; therefore, I obey) makes us both humble and confident simultaneously.

This makes us contextualizers! Seeking the approval of the receiving culture too much shows a lack of gospel confidence, but seeking the trappings of our own culture too much shows a lack of gospel humility. It would be prideful to imagine that other Christians living in other cultural contexts did not experience much grace in those contextualizations. It would also be prideful to dismiss new cultural trends as lacking any grace. Richard Lovelace observes:

Thus [those] who are not secure in Christ cast about for spiritual life preservers with which to support their confidence, and in their frantic search they not only cling to the shreds of ability and righteousness they find in themselves, but they fix upon their race, their membership in a party, their familiar social and ecclesiastical patterns, and their culture as means of self-recommendation. The culture is put on as though it were armor against self-doubt, but it becomes a mental straightjacket which cleaves to the flesh and can never be removed except through comprehensive faith in the saving work of Christ. Once faith is exercised, a Christian is free to be enculturated, to wear his culture like a comfortable suit of clothes. He can shift to other cultural clothing temporarily if he wishes to do so, as Paul suggests in I Corinthians 9:19–23, and he is released to admire and appreciate the differing expressions of Christ shining out through other cultures.<sup>3</sup>

### 4. Paul’s contextualization of the gospel

Although Paul is adamant in Galatians chapter 1 that there is only one true gospel, in the next chapter he speaks of being entrusted with “the gospel for the uncircumcised” while other apostles are given “the gospel for the circumcised” (Gal. 2:7, NRSV). Older liberal commentators used this terminology to argue that several different gospels existed, rather than one set of standard gospel content. (This does not square at all with Paul’s vehement protest to the contrary in Galatians 1:6–9.) Some conservatives have gone to the opposite extreme, however,

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<sup>2</sup> Donald A. Carson, “Maintaining Scientific and Christian Truths in a Postmodern World.” Reproduced from *Science & Christian Belief*, vol. 14, no. 2 (October 2002), 107-22. Available online at <http://www.scienceandchristianbelief.org/articles/carson.php> (accessed on April 22, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Richard F. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 198-199.

arguing that these terms mean nothing more than taking the very same message—in form and content—to two different audiences.

Leon Morris, Donald Guthrie, and others strike a good balance. Morris translates the term as “the gospel of the uncircumcision” (rather than “for” the uncircumcision) and says in his commentary on Galatians 2:7, “What Paul means here is that [the gospel] is presented in one way to those who were circumcised and in another to those who were not.”<sup>4</sup> There is only one gospel, of course, but it must be presented in different ways to different audiences.

How do we know Morris is right? In Acts, we see what have to be considered rather drastic differences in gospel presentation, depending on the audience and culture. Jay Adams, in fact, wrote a book titled *Audience Adaptations in the Sermons and Speeches of Paul*. In Acts 13:16–43, Paul shares the gospel in a synagogue with those who believed in the God of the Bible, while in Acts 14:14–17 he shares it with a pagan, blue-collar crowd. The differences and similarities are striking.

a) The differences include the following:

- Paul’s citation of authority differs greatly. In the first case he quotes Scripture and John the Baptist. In the second, he argues from general revelation and the greatness of creation.
- His content differs in emphasis. With Jews and God-fearers, he ignores the doctrine of God and gets right to Christ. With pagans here and Acts 17, he labors the very concept of God and either refers to Christ obliquely or not at all.
- His final appeal—how to “close” with Christ—differs in form. In Acts 13:39, Paul speaks of the law of God to the Jews and God-fearers and says, essentially, “You think you are good, but you aren’t good enough! You need Christ to justify you.” But in chapter 14, Paul he tells his pagan audience to turn from “worthless things”—idols—“to the living God,” who is the *real* source of “joy” (Acts 14:15–17). God, not material things, is joy’s source, so Paul says, in effect, “You think you are free, but you are not! You are enslaved to dead idols.”

b) Despite all these very profound differences, the passages show many commonalities.

- Both audiences hear about a God who is powerful yet good (13:16–22; 14:17).
- Both hear that they are trying to save themselves the wrong way—moral people by trying to obey the law (Acts 13:39) and pagans by giving themselves to idols and gods that cannot satisfy (Acts 14:15).
- Both are told not to turn to some scheme of performance, because God has broken into history to accomplish our salvation. Even Paul’s spontaneous speech of chapter 14, though it doesn’t mention Christ directly, points to salvation as something accomplished by God for us in history, not as something we do.

Perhaps the most important text on contextualization is I Corinthians 1:22–25. There Paul says that when he spoke to Greeks, he first confronted their culture’s idol of speculation and philosophy with the “foolishness” of the cross, and he then presented Christ’s salvation as true wisdom. When he spoke to Jews, however, he confronted their culture’s idol of power and accomplishment with the “weakness” of the cross, and he then presented the gospel as true power.

In both cases, Paul offers Christ’s salvation in a way the culture could relate to (offering true power to the Jew and true wisdom to the Greek) and which connected to their baseline cultural narratives. At the same time, Paul’s gospel presentations confronted each culture’s central idolatry (calling Jews to repent of works-righteousness and Greeks of intellectual hubris) with the meaning of the cross. Here we see, then, that Paul presented the gospel differently to Bible-believing people who thought they would be justified by works on judgment day, and to pagans. As we have seen, the two approaches Paul alludes to in Galatians 2 and I Corinthians 1 can be readily discerned in the speeches he makes in Acts.

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<sup>4</sup> Leon Morris, *Galatians: God’s Charter of Christian Freedom* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 72.