

Contextualization of the Gospel, What Are The Implications for Our Work?

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[World Mission Conference, East Fork, Arizona August 6-10, 1984]

One day some years ago a Christian tourist entered a woodcarver's shop in Tokyo. To his surprise he spotted, mounted to the wall, a carving of Jesus on the cross. "May I ask how you got that crucifix?" he said. "I copied it from one that came from Italy," answered the woodcarver. "Where did you get the original carving?" continued the tourist. "From an American missionary," the shopkeeper replied. Stepping forward to look more closely, the traveler noticed that the face of Jesus was like that of a Japanese. "Was this the way Jesus looked on the crucifix from Italy?" he asked. "No," said the woodcarver, "but that's the way I think of Him."

"That's the way I think of Him." The work of missions is not to bring a foreign Christ or a Westernized Word to people, but the one Word and the one Savior, common to all. That Savior and His life-giving Word cut across time and culture, national boundaries and ethnic barriers, offering to and asking of people the same things everywhere. Yet we who seek to bring this Savior and His Word to the peoples of the world need to be aware that culture and customs do exist. We dare not be ignorant of the different ways and workings of people. So we have before us on the agenda the topic on Contextualization of the Gospel and Its Implications for Our Work.

Be Concerned About The Content

What is this thing called "contextualization"? The more knowledgeable will quickly state that it is a newer term replacing "indigenization," now out of favor because of the parent-child relationship it seemed to project. Others who do their reading will add that it seems to be synonymous with terms like "inculturation," "transculturation," "cultural adaptation," and the like, while other experts will even try to give you different shadings of meanings for each of these. But what does it mean, this term "contextualization," first introduced in the early 1970's?

Byang Kato, at the International Congress of World Evangelization in Lausanne, Switzerland in 1974, explained it this way, "We understand the term to mean making concepts or ideas relevant in a given situation ... Since the Gospel message is inspired, but the mode of expression is not, contextualization of the modes of expression is not only right, but necessary."ⁱ Another author, Bruce Nicholls, offered this comprehensive definition, "Communication includes research into the problem of language and translation, analyzing the changing patterns of culture and religion, and entering into the pain of human suffering caused by political, social, and economic oppression. Communication means personal involvement, discerning areas of spiritual needs as points of contact, areas of agreement as bridges of communication and clarifying biblical thought forms to insure transference of meaning. It recognizes that the Holy Spirit is the real agent of communication."ⁱⁱ Still another definition, this time from a summary statement produced by the Trinity Consultation of Theology and Mission, held at Deerfield, Illinois in 1976, reads, "Within an evangelical framework, cultural contextualization of Christian truth involves a dynamic process of sympathetic understanding leading to empathetic identification with the culture so that Christianity may be inculturated within the indigenous forms of the recipient peoples. Nothing of the supracultural is to be lost or distorted."ⁱⁱⁱ Closer to home, in terms that we can understand and with which we can agree is Prof. E. H. Wendland's definition, "Contextualization is the process whereby the message of the Word of God is related to the cultural context of the society to which it is proclaimed."^{iv} Briefly put, God's Word is to be brought to people where they live, in the cultural soil in which they are rooted, so that they can identify with it, feel at home in it, and express themselves with it in their own

cultural forms. “That’s the way I think of Him,” Apache, Asian. African, South American Christian should be able to say.

Would we disagree? Of course, not. But let the caution flag be run up, right to the top of the staff. Could it happen that in the concern to reach people where they’re at we become less concerned about that with which we are to reach them? Could it happen that, more and more, culture dictates instead of Scripture and that culture becomes the criterion according to which doctrine and practice are judged? These are very real concerns for us who view mission work perhaps differently than almost any other church body.

Remember what that view is? In the *Primary Objectives*, adopted by the WELS, for our mission work we find listed as number 1, “Foremost among the objectives of the Board for World Missions, indeed, the one which shapes all other objectives and to which it is pledged by the Lord and His Church is the pursuit of the God-given purpose to preach and to teach the Gospel of the Lord Jesus, that is, ‘all the counsel of God’ (Acts 20:27) or as Jesus Himself stated it, ‘whatsoever I have commanded you’ (Matt. 28:20), that is, the whole Bible in all its truth and purity in all the world. It is the constant purpose of the Church to ‘extend and conserve the true doctrine and practice’ (Const. IV) with zeal and dispatch, as the Lord exemplified it in His earthly ministry and as He enjoined His Church to do in imitation of His example (Matt. 28:20; John 2:17; Luke 2:49; Luke 4:43; Luke 12:50; John 9:4; Matt. 16:21; Matt. 13:38; Matt. 24:13, 31; Mark 16:15; Mark 13:2-23; Acts 1:8; Is. 54:20.”^v

What a treasure we in the WELS have to hand on to the world! By grace we hold in our hands a Bible which we trust as the inspired, inerrant Word of God, and as the one infallible guide for all we believe or do. By grace we know the true God is the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, and that all others are idols regardless how men label or picture them. By grace, we know that all people are born in sin, separated from God and having no hope for heaven, living lives contrary to Him and digging themselves only deeper into hell’s quicksands regardless how they struggle. By grace we know that God’s love has paid for all sins of all people, that in Christ’s death and resurrection God has reconciled the world unto Himself. By grace we know how the Spirit through His power tools, the Gospel in Word and Sacrament, works in the hearts of unbelievers, cracking those hearts open, creating and continuing faith in them. By grace we know what life is for, to live under Him in His kingdom and to serve Him till we live totally with Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness. All this and more we have by the grace of God. All this and more propels us into mission work. We have the responsibility and the privilege of bringing the truth in its fullness to others. As we carry this blessed treasure to them, we don’t want to lose even one small shred of it.

Do we have to retaylor or reshape such blessed truths to fit people of different cultures? Not unless their needs are different) When God speaks to human beings, He does so not on the basis of the shape of their face or the sound of their language, but on the basis of their needs. We have this thought somewhat illustrated in Acts, chapter 10. There we hear Peter, after the vision which directed him to the Gentiles:, telling Cornelius, the centurion at Caesarea. “Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons (προσωπολήμπτας from πρόσωπον for “face” and λαμβάνω for “to take”). God is no judge who looks at your face and then reacts according to whether he likes or dislikes what He sees there. On the contrary “in every nation he that feareth Him and worketh righteousness is accepted with Him” (v. 35). It makes no difference of what background or nation men are; what matters is fearing Him and working righteousness (φοβούμενος, ἐργαζόμενος - present participles for durative action). When a sinner, any sinner, repents, trusts God’s pardon, follows Christ’s will and way, that pleases God. And this is for everyone for verse 43 says, “whosoever believeth in Him shall receive forgiveness of sins.” Look at Cornelius! If pagan beliefs had been enough, why did he seek the synagogue? If the synagogue had been enough, why was Peter there? God’s truths are supracultural and address people of common needs.

The Standard Epistle Lesson for Mission Festival contains a similar thought. “The Scripture saith, Whosoever believeth in Him shall not be ashamed. For there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek; for the same Lord over all is rich unto all that call upon Him for whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved (Rom. 10:11-13). Everyone who has been brought to trust in Christ can face God and judgment without shame or confusion. πᾶς means just that, ‘everyone’ without exception. Regardless what the Jew

thought about distinctions in his favor, there were none. The Jew and his needs were no better or worse than the Gentile. As in Romans 1:16, Paul mentioned only the Jew and the Gentile, but what he says of them is true of all classes. How can it be otherwise when there is “one Lord of all”? Then Paul quoted from Joel 2:32 to cement it, “Everyone - πᾶς,” he said, even adding ὅς ἄν - “whoever,” making it as general as possible. The same gracious Lord of all is there with the same blessed truths for all. We can’t leave Romans 10, though, without quoting the next verse. It rings in our ears and hearts, “How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach except they be sent?”

In a recent letter Missionary Eric H Hartzell put it this way, “The message we have talks to all people as equals. I don’t think we have to go to all sorts of efforts to make it fit the people. It fits already.” A few lines later he wrote, “I tell the Apaches when I get on uncertain ground so far as my being white and their being Apache, ‘Look, this message is as foreign to me and my ancestors as it is to you and your ancestors. I’m not a Jew either. Christianity is not a white man’s religion. At best a person who wanted to talk that way should call it a ‘Jewish’ religion. It’s not a religion which comes from America. It is God’s religion for people - all people.’” Let’s picture it this way. The Word is the genuine article, the content, while contextualization is the packaging, the wrappings. We must know the content thoroughly so that we lose none of it in the wrapping

It can happen that the wrapping interfere with the content. The Roman Catholic Church has often confused content and packaging. Their missiologists in the 19th and early 20th centuries advocated the Adoption Theory which acknowledged that since Western Catholicism was an adaptation to both Greek and German pagan thought, why not extend this same line of accommodation to Asiatic and African cultures. They urged “a willingness to acknowledge the natural in man and the valuable in heathen religions.”^{vi} Forgotten, of course, was what Scripture had to say about man’s total depravity and the uselessness of heathen religions.

At home we have contextualization in the form of theology like that of Norman Vincent Peale and the more recently in vogue teachings of Robert Schuler. Dr. Peale attempts to sell the “Gospel” to American business men in contemporary psychological terms while Dr. Schuler hawks it smothered in the sweet scent of success for here and now, success for job and business, over problem or pains, in home or marriage. Both have put their finger on quirks in the American culture, and done their wrapping accordingly, but how much content is really left?

And what do we see but contextualization carried to the ‘nth degree in what passes for mission effort and talk in so many circles? We quote Prof. Wendland, “The most recent meeting of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches at Melbourne in 1980 resulted in a mockery of everything that true Biblical Christianity stands for. The theme at Melbourne was the petition of the Lord’s Prayer, ‘Your Kingdom Come.’ The ‘kingdom’ which occupied Melbourne’s discussions was primarily an earthly kingdom. ‘Sin’ was defined as ‘oppression of the poor.’ To ‘evangelize’ meant to make people aware that exploitation of the poor was sinful. The ‘coming of the kingdom’ was thought to be accomplished when the values of justice, peace, and love would become more realized in this life and when one could hope for the ‘ultimate humanization of life.’ In a lead article in Christianity Today Arthur Glasser summarized Melbourne’s results with the statement, ‘Liberation (theology) is in; the unreached are out.’”^{vii} The packaging has become slick and up to date, but where’s that precious content?

Are we against honest efforts to contextualize? How can we be? We surely want those to whom we bring the Word to think of Christ as their own and not some foreign Savior. We surely want them to rejoice in the Lord and worship Him in patterns they can understand. We surely want them to use His Word in honest application to their daily lives, not just as some Sunday morning interlude. But we want them to have this Word in all its fullness: So we start, not with culture, but with Scripture. We look not for an Asian or African theology, but for Biblical theology in an Asian or African setting. We expect the Gospel not just to root itself in their culture, but also to judge that culture. To do less would be to fail to declare all the counsel of God and to shortchange the receptor. To do less would be to forget that every culture has felt the effects of Adam’s fall and needs to be brought under Scripture’s close scrutiny. To do less would be to overlook the fact that the Christian is a foreigner in every society, including his own, if he really tries to be in the world but not of the world.

From Ralph Martens in Puerto Rico comes this example, “A man who was confirmed on Palm Sunday told me Sunday how he prays daily for a little bit more faith to withstand the many temptations which before went undetected, but which must now be overcome. He is still living and working with the same business associates who can’t understand what has taken place in this convert’s heart and life; in short, the fight is on!” From Taiwan and Robert Meister comes the following, “We always have to watch out in Taiwan (as do our men in Hong Kong and Japan) when the customs conflict with Scripture. This most often can happen in the area of funerals, worship of ancestors, etc. Our encouragement of a healthy respect for the aged and the deceased can be a good way to draw people to our church; however, if we give the impression that worship of these same people is encouraged by our church, we’re in trouble. If native custom dictates that people must worship ancestors and/or ancestor tablets (which contain the essence of the spirit of the deceased), then we must patiently but firmly point out to them what Scripture says and not contextualize the Gospel in the sense of allowing for worship of the true God alongside a lesser worship of ancestors.”

The Word in its fullness must be our message. That’s God’s charge to us. Those who would change that Word to make it more palatable to the receptor are practicing a form of contextualization we do not wish to imitate. Rather do we pray that God keep us faithful to His Word as given and reliant upon the Spirit to use that Word to break through into the hearts and lives of people everywhere. The *Primary Objectives* of our Board for World Missions says it rather well, “Instead of broadcasting only a vague and elementary Gospel, it is the duty of Christian missionaries to follow the counsel of the Holy Spirit in furthering and deepening the faith and knowledge in Christ of those whom the Lord has brought to faith through their faithful witness of the ‘full counsel of God.’...In world mission fields, as in the church at home, we must be ever aware of those things, lest we develop a weak church, unable to discern or to take a stand against false teaching which will result in the failure of our missions, despite the illusion of success which might be given through impressive numbers and capable organization. Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ (Col. 2:8). To achieve this, the principle followed by St. Paul, the greatest missionary of them all, must ever govern and guide us: “For I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God’ (Acts 20:27).”^{viii} What’s that saying but be concerned about the content!

Be Careful About the Packaging

Our concern about the content dare not, however, eliminate concern about the packaging: True, the Word of God has all power in itself with nothing whatsoever to be added by us. But we can detract from its power by our handling of that Word. So concern is in place, careful and constant concern, about handling that powerful Word as effectively as possible. As we bring that Word which crosses all cultural boundaries, we need to realize that we don’t. We who bring the Word are immersed in one culture while the people to whom we bring it are immersed in another. The problem will be there that we wrap the Word too much in our own culture because of life long conditioning and also because of a lack of in-depth knowledge of the receptor’s culture. And with such wrappings we might present a foreign Christ and a westernized Word to them.

Paul, the Master Missionary, has some words for us. In 1 Cor. 9:19-23 he wrote, “For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all that I might gain the more. And unto the Jews I became as a Jew that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; to them that are without law as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law of Christ), that I might gain them that are without law. To the weak became I as weak that I might gain the weak; I am made all things to all men that I might by all means save some.” What an approach: For the sake of the Spread of the Word Paul adapted himself to the ways of thinking and the modes of living of those to whom he preached. Make no mistake about it, this was not to ingratiate himself with people or close his eyes to their false teaching or sinful practice, but to save them. In his love for their souls Paul practiced contextualization in the proper sense of the word.

So did our forefathers when they wrote Article VII of the Augsburg Confession. We all know their background and why they wrote, but aren’t their words quite applicable to our world mission situation? In

Article VII they stated, “To the true unity of the Church it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. Nor is it necessary that human traditions, that is rites and ceremonies, instituted by men, should be everywhere alike. As Paul says, “One faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of all, etc. Eph. 4:5-6.”^{xix} Prof. John Meyer elaborates on that thought, “Anything that will help to emphasize the grace of our God for our faith is proper, but anything that might in the least detract from the glory of God, or on the other hand concede any honor to man is improper. As long as the purpose of our public church gatherings is served, the rites and ceremonies, by which they are conducted, make very little difference.”^x

The proper wrappings have concerned us, too, in our Board for World Missions. Back in 1965 the board said in its “*Statement of Principles and Objectives*,” “To implement the program (i.e., the Christian Missioner Program) in a selected area, two mature pastors with small family responsibilities, if possible, will be called and thoroughly trained in the language and culture of the people whom they are to serve.”^{xi} Again it stated, “Missionaries are required to learn the language of the area to which they are sent, as soon as possible.”^{xii} Again, “To carry out these principles the Board for World Missions insists on a training period not less than one year for all missionaries to acquire a working knowledge of the language and to learn the customs and mores of the people in their area.”^{xiii} Concerning the training of national workers the board had this to say. “The curriculum should avoid subjects which serve merely to import or to impose traditional patterns of religious expression or order, such as conventional church buildings, liturgical services, statuary, robing, hymn tunes, and others. It should be kept in mind that the transmission of the true Gospel is the matter of importance, and that the forms, generally speaking, are not essential to proper worship. The Gospel creates many variegated forms for itself (Col. 2:20, 21; Gal. 5:1; Rom. 14:17).”^{xiv} Prof. E. H. Wendland summed it up, “We will want to let other nations express their faith and joy in the Lord in ways which express their own identity. We will want to guard against giving the impression that our Western culture is of itself superior. We will avoid showing a domineering spirit when working in cross-cultural relationships.”^{xv}

Easier said than done, isn't it? World Seminary and Mission Conferences in the past have addressed this concern in one form or another and yet here it is before us again. What's the answer? You men in the field are better qualified to answer than I. Would you speak about the importance of learning the language and culture of those whom you serve? Would you agree with Eugene Nida that “language is not only a part of human activity, it is the most characteristic feature of human behavior, and the possession of distinct languages is certainly one of the most obvious features which distinguish human cultures... Language can and must be learned if the Word of God is to be communicated in the words of men, but this cannot be done outside of the total framework of the culture, of which the language in question is an integral part...Linguistic training is of great help, but it is no substitute for cultural submersion.”^{xvi} Learning the language and culture of those you serve is an ongoing task. one where you will often stub your toe, but it's a necessary one. I can still see gray-haired veteran Venus Winter getting a shoeshine ahead of the hotel in Mexico City conversing with the man doing the shining and then jotting down some new Spanish phrase or vocable into his little black book. Does it ever end?

Would you also speak to us about the need for constant review of methods and forms? Are the twenty minute sermons, tailored after Reu and Caemmerer, in which we were schooled and to which our people are accustomed, the ideal for people of all cultures? Pastor Eric Hartzell writes, “I don't believe we can contextualize the message. That has to remain constant. By message I mean the Gospel. The problem is in speaking the words of the Gospel clearly. This may well best be accomplished in something less than a 20 minute sermon with one theme and two parts. I believe the trick is in learning the figures of speech that the people use, learning how they use their language to express what they want to express, learning the nuances and fine points of the language, observing their life and surroundings to see what could be used as examples ...I think if we master these things, then we can... contextualize the Gospel.”

Would you mention also looking for the right wrappings when it comes to worship? Do we just superimpose Page 5 and Page 15, laced with responses, heavy with introits and graduals, on the people regardless of their culture? Do we insist upon distinctive Lutheran hymns regardless, meanwhile forgetting how Luther borrowed from the culture of his day? Must it be pulpit, altar, lectern, and baptismal font complete and

in the places and styles we are used to? Again we quote the missionaries. “Many of the hymns incorporated into the hymnbook in common use in Lutheran churches in Taiwan are of a distinctively Chinese flavor in melody; these Oriental tunes coupled with sound Lutheran teachings in the hymns make for very edifying hymn singing ... We generally use a liturgy which excludes a lot of singing of page 5 type of liturgy, but which uses a healthy smattering of Scripture passages for confession of sins, absolution, responses, etc; but singing is still very much a part of the service.” “In Barrancas and Humacao and San Juan we are still following what Roger used: the page 5 liturgy up to the absolution, no Gloria Pater or Kyrie or Gloria in Excelsis, and continue with the Salutation and collect, the readings without the Gradual... In short we cut the Liturgy considerably ... Could I write hymns more Puerto Rican? Hardly. Could any of our members? We encourage it, but until one has a more mature faith, even that, not to mention the musical training and ability, is somewhat remote. Are we stuck then with a ‘foreign music’? I guess our answer has been yes ... I look forward to the day when we can talk with our veteran members here and the new about such matters.”

This proper contextualization of the Gospel is an ongoing process, one which can be quite difficult for us from the West because our distance from most other cultures is so great and our preoccupation with our own way of life so intense. Ironically, we who are financially best suited to bring God’s Word to the world might be culturally the least suited. But we try! We give careful effort to contextualize the Gospel we bring. As soon as we can, we must involve the people themselves with their vast knowledge of their own culture. And the best way in the long run to involve them is to ground them and their future pastors as thoroughly as we know how in God’s Word so that they can contextualize that Word correctly for themselves.

What about confessional statements which we have so richly in our Lutheran Church but at which contextualization enthusiasts often look with jaundiced eye? True, those statements have come out of particular historical situations and foreign culture, but is that reason enough to ignore them? The errors they addressed have a way of reappearing every so often in more modern garb. The doctrine they present is neither American, African, or Asian, but Biblical, though the thought patterns and wording may be somewhat strange for others. Many of these confessional statements are already known in different parts of the world. All of them can serve as summaries of Biblical truths and as case studies to show how God’s people reacted to particular situations in history. The time may come when Christians of different cultures will feel the need to prepare their own confessional statements, but meanwhile to ignore what has been written is to deprive people of benefit and perhaps even to label such people as intellectually inferior and culturally insensitive. One cannot shake off the sneaking suspicion that those who speak so vehemently against creedal statements when it comes to contextualization might be speaking more about their attitudes toward creeds than toward contextualization.

That brings us back to where we started. As we carefully examine the packaging, it’s always with utmost concern for the content. Certainly we need to be concerned about methods. Yes, we need constant warnings about being cultural insensitive and paternalistic. But it’s the message that counts! Nothing dare sap that message or stand in its way. Cultures can and do come and go; “the grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God shall stand forever” (Isaiah 40:8).

ⁱ David J. Hesselgrave, *Theology and Mission*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), p. 87.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid*, p. 87.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid*, p. 329.

^{iv} E.H. Wendland, *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 76, 1979, p. 306.

^v *Proceedings*, Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 38th Convention, 1965, p. 242.

^{vi} Johannes Verkuyl, *Contemporary Missiology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978) p. 344.

^{vii} E.H. Wendland, *An Evaluation of Current Missiology*, (Mequon: Seminary Mimeo Company, 1981), p. 5.

^{viii} *Proceedings*, Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 38th Convention, 1965, p. 248.

^{ix} *Concordia Triglotta*, (Minneapolis: Mott Press, 1955) p. 47.

^x John Meyer, *Studies in the Augsburg Confession*, (Mequon: Seminary Mimeo Company, 1965), p. 44.

^{xi} *Proceedings*, Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 38th Convention, 1965, p. 244.

^{xii} Ibid, p. 245.

^{xiii} Ibid, p. 246.

^{xiv} Ibid.

^{xv} E.H. Wendland, *An Evaluation of Current Missiology*, (Mequon: Seminary Mimeo Company, 1981), p. 15.

^{xvi} Eugene Nida, *Customs and Cultures*, (S. Pasadena: Wm. Carey Library, 1954).