

CONTEXTUALIZATION



Contextualizing the Good News

SCRIPTURE FOCUS

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations....” Matthew 28:19

“And what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also.” 2 Timothy 2:2

QUOTES

“The really significant contextualizers are the members of the local community, however important the nonindigenous authorities, theologians, social scientists, and missionaries of the sending and universal Church, especially in the earlier stages of church planting, may be. True metanoia can be effected only from within. True evangelization is ultimately self-evangelization.” Louis Luzbetak

“I would think, rather, the very first principle which must be invoked toward building up the young church is that we do not stay one day longer than is necessary. I think that ninety percent of our problems with the young churches, today, stems from a violation of this principle.” Vincent Donovan

“If the church is to be indigenous it must spring up in the soil from the very seeds planted.” Roland Allen

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

As a result of the readings, discussion and activities in this lesson, the candidate should be able to:

CONTEXTUALIZATION

- understand how the Good News of Jesus Christ transcends cross-cultural differences
- gain a perspective on how best to serve the advance of the gospel through the local faith community
- recognize the difference between accommodation and contextualization
- encourage indigenous expression of faith and worship
- live with an attitude of service and humility in order to facilitate the spontaneous expansion of the church throughout a culture.

CROSS-CULTURAL WITNESS

The aim of cross-cultural witness should not be merely the conversion of lone individuals or the extraction of persons from their cultural settings in order to make them like us. Rather, the aim is that the gospel impacts the whole of a society in such a way that Jesus Christ and the good news are at home in that culture. This kind of pervasive penetration of the gospel has not always been the result of missionary efforts. In fact, in many instances, expatriate missionaries have hindered or even been obstacles to the gospel taking root and being at home in a culture by insisting that it take a particular form or that the way faith is expressed be determined from outside the culture.

It is imperative that those of us who travel to lands other than our own and who seek to give witness to Jesus Christ cross-culturally operate with an understanding of culture change and with an acknowledgment of our specific role in that change. Awareness of the dynamics of culture and change, as well as an acknowledgment of the work of the Holy Spirit within and through new believers, provide a foundation for this understanding. We begin our study with the story of Prakash and his journey toward and then away from Christianity.

CASE STUDY: PRAKASH'S TALE: COMMUNITY, CONVERSION & CHRIST

“The rhythmic sound of bells, the sweet smell of incense, melodious repetition of chants, and brilliant array of colors ... everything sounds, smells, looks and feels so right. I am home.” More than thoughts in his head, this is a settled conclusion that Prakash feels throughout his whole being. He has come home to his village, parents, friends, and his way of life. He has been away for a long time and during that time, he was a man without a home or an identity. He did not know who he was because he lost his sense of where he was from and did not know where he was going or what was expected of him. Now back at home, he no longer has to be called by a western name, James. He can be who he is – Prakash.

Prakash grew up in a village a day's bus journey outside of a large city in northern India. His childhood was like that of all Hindu boys for centuries. His life revolved around the religious events, seasonal rituals, and rites of passage that formed every boy's existence. Even though he is like the other Hindu boys of his village, he has an inquisitive nature and thus is curious about life and people beyond his family, the gods, and the village. His curiosity has been fed by the occasional trips he made with his father to the city of Varanasi. In its crowded streets and bustling markets, he sees people from different parts of India and beyond, hears words

unknown to him, and experiences new foods. He also sees the physical pain and suffering of people, especially women and children, and wonders why life has to be this way.

On one of these trips, Prakash and his father stay at a small guesthouse in the outskirts of the city. Late one afternoon while Prakash sits alone on stone steps at the river's edge, a fair-skinned foreigner walks slowly toward him, greets him in Hindi, and then takes a seat next to him. Most everything about the foreigner is strange to Prakash. The way he sits, his bizarre gestures, and the force of his words do not frighten but baffle Prakash. Prakash asks himself, "what makes this foreigner act this way? And why is he talking to me about a new god? Shiva is our god and has been worshipped by the people of our village forever." Prakash listens as the foreigner talks on and on without a break, without conversation. The volume of the foreigner's voice gets louder and the intensity of what he is saying grows, and then all of a sudden, he stops. He turns his body toward Prakash, looks directly into his eyes, and asks, "Do you want to ask Jesus into your heart?"

MOST OF WHAT THE FOREIGNER HAS SAID MAKES NO SENSE TO PRAKASH AND HIS QUESTION IS THE MOST CONFUSING PART OF ALL.

Most of what the foreigner has said makes no sense to Prakash and his question is the most confusing part of all. "Why would I want a Jesus in my heart?" thought Prakash. The young Hindu stares straight ahead, not knowing how to respond. After a long, awkward silence, the foreigner mumbles something in another language, rises, and briskly walks away. Prakash is once again alone on the steps. Countless questions race through his head: "Was a foreigner really talking to me? Was he trying to be my friend? Why was he looking at me that way? Should I have done something for him, or given him something? Was he trying to trick me into doing something? Should I tell my father about this foreigner and his words?"

Prakash says nothing to his father about the encounter but tries to make sense of it all within his mind. While his feelings for the foreigner's ways are negative on the whole, his fascination with this new god increases. As he makes inquiries about Jesus, it seems as though no one in his village knows anything about this god, until he mentions him to a man who transports vegetables from the village to larger markets. The man explains to Prakash that Jesus is one of the gods of the Christians and to worship him one has to drink blood, eat pork, and dress like a foreigner. The man, a friend of Prakash's father, wags his finger in Prakash's face and warns him about the foreigner's ways. "Shiva is your father's god and the god of your village. Beware of the foreigner who tries to buy you into their god with promises of money and trips abroad. Hungry for converts, they will do anything to lure you. In the end, they will rob you of your name and your family. Conversion from your community and your gods should never take place. These are your *dharma*, your place in life, and can never be changed."

The man's words frighten Prakash so much that he decides to put away any questions about the foreigner's god. He does not think about Jesus again until he is at the university. Because Prakash is bright and inquisitive, he does well in the village school. And because his father knows well-placed people, he finds sponsorship for his application to enter the university. He leaves the village and travels the great distance to New Delhi to study biology.

In the capital city, Prakash discovers a world completely different than his village and even the large, nearby city of Varanasi. While Delhi is an Indian city, full of Indians, it is a different kind of India. Varied ideas and ways of life from all over India and the world collide in its streets,

stalls, and stores. His course of study at the university is extremely discouraging. Because of the poor state of his village education, he has to take remedial courses and attends tutoring sessions before he can even start his university work.

One day, while searching for a tutor's house, he happens upon an odd building ringed by a garden and a brick wall. At first confused by its queer design, he eventually determines that it is a Christian building because of the white cross jutting from its tower. Just outside the gate is a plaque that reads *Church of South India* in English,

*"WHY WOULD I WANT A JESUS IN MY
HEART?" THOUGHT PRAKASH.*

Hindi, and Tamil. Prakash can see from the open gate that the building is full of people, and he hears singing. And they are not foreigners but Indians, and their songs are not in a foreign language but in Hindi. The long-buried questions about Jesus suddenly re-emerge. Most anyone else would have stayed at the gate, but not Prakash. He crosses the garden, enters the building, and takes a seat on the back row.

Prakash wants to know what it is that would make Indians worship the foreigner's god. He notices immediately that even though the worshippers are Indian, they have a way about them that does not agree with their skin color, facial features, or language. Some differences are obvious. They do not wear traditional Indian clothing. Many of the women worship with their heads uncovered. The music is definitely not Indian and the instruments are from somewhere else. Everyone is sitting upright on long benches facing toward the front of the building; no one is sitting on the floor and not a person is prostrating in worship.

The singing stops and a man dressed in a dark jacket and colorful necktie moves to an elevated box and talks for a long time. Prakash tries hard to follow what he says but finds that many of the Hindi words are totally meaningless to him. He does hear the man say that Jesus is the answer to all of life's questions and that he can heal people of all their diseases. Once the man stops speaking, there is another song and several people walk to the front and stand facing the man. One of these, a middle-aged lady, takes the microphone and tells how Jesus healed her of a stomach ulcer. Several others walk to the front and the man puts his hands on them and in a loud voice tells Jesus to heal them.

After another song, everyone turns in unison toward the back of the building and starts filing down the narrow aisle. As Prakash is trapped at the end of the bench, he cannot avoid the greeting and handshake of everyone as they exit the building. He finds this kind of contact to be unnerving, as he does not know who or what kind of person he is touching. One of the last people to pass by and shake his hand is a young lady about his age with a nice smile and soft hands.

Three months later, Prakash converts to Christianity. Through a series of conversations with the young lady, Maria, and others, Prakash decides to leave his Hindu ways and become a Christian.

For Prakash, everything about the Christian way seems to make better sense, to be more advanced, to offer a power against pain and suffering. He has concluded that this foreign religion is superior to his traditional ways. In addition, he is promised a job in the church and education to prepare him for work in the church.

PANORAMA

At his baptism, Prakash publicly renounces worship of the family gods and his meatless diet, and he receives a 'Christian name' – James. In an instant, everything about his life changes. Ties with family, village, caste, nationality, and country die away and Christians become his new community. His father had already told Prakash that if he took Christian baptism, he would be left without anyone to arrange a marriage for him and he would not be welcomed back into the village or their home. And yet, Prakash wants to follow Jesus and have all his questions answered.

Ten years later James sits once again cross-legged on the floor of the temple of his childhood. During the intervening years, James attended Bible school, pastored a small church, and tried countless times to heal people. And yet, he was never really at home in the Christian ways, and Jesus still seemed to be a foreigner's god. And for the missionaries James had come to know, it seemed as though Jesus was merely their business and his name was only invoked to raise money, enforce rules, and to control people. And, to his surprise, James also found that many of the rules and rituals insisted upon in the Christian religion were not in the holy book of Christianity. After ten years, he feels cheated and empty. After all he had gone through, he feels more like Prakash than James. So, he returns to his village, parents, friends, and his way of life. He is home once again and at peace with who he is, but not at peace with his questions about Jesus. As he sits on the temple floor taking in the familiar sounds, smells, and sights, he wonders to himself, "What is to keep me from loving and worshipping Jesus right here, right now, as Prakash?"

REFLECT #1

1. Why was Prakash's first experience with a Christian so confusing?
2. Why did Prakash convert to Christianity?
3. Why did Prakash leave the church and return home?
4. What questions does this story leave unanswered for you?

It seems that three basic questions arise from Prakash's Tale:

1. *Is the Gospel of Jesus Christ universal to every culture?*
2. *What prevents the Gospel from being at home in every culture?*
3. *What are the means for the Gospel to find a home in every culture?*

REFLECT #2

Read the following passages and give a summary of what Scripture tell us about the God and the cultures of the world.

Psalms 22:27-28

Psalms 67:2

Isaiah 66:18

Zechariah 14:9

Matthew 24:14

John 3:16

Luke 24:47

Revelation 7:9-12

Summary:

CONTEXTUALIZATION

SO, IS THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST UNIVERSAL TO EVERY CULTURE?

Scripture is clear that the earth is to be full of God's glory and that all the peoples of the earth will worship Jesus as Lord. The word *all* is used in conjunction with *nations* 119 times throughout Scripture.¹ It is evident that God desires to be known and worshipped throughout every language, people group, and nation. Researchers tell us that there are approximately 13,000 ethnolinguistic groups in existence today.² Each of these has a peculiar language, history, heritage, and culture that distinguish it from all other groups of peoples. And, according to the witness of Scripture, the good news of Jesus Christ is to find a home and thrive in each of these. For the earth to be full of the glory of God means that there will be great diversity of worship from every tribe and tongue and people and nation (Rev. 5:9; 7:9).

It is obvious that the manner and shape of the gospel in each of these cultures will be different. The question is – How should this determine our approach to culture? As we approach other cultures with the gospel, there have been, according to Louis Luzbetak, **three models of missions**: ethnocentrism, accommodation, and contextualization.³

MODEL I: ETHNOCENTRISM

Ethnocentrism is "... the tendency to apply one's own cultural values in judging the behavior and beliefs of people raised in other cultures."⁴

Or Luzbetak expands ethnocentrism to be "... The tendency (to some degree present in every human being) to regard the ways and values of one's own society as the normal, right, proper, and certainly the best way of thinking, feeling, speaking, and doing things, whether it be in regard to eating, sleeping, dressing, disposing of garbage, marrying, burying the dead, or speaking with God."⁵

Paternalism, triumphalism, racism and class prejudice are the most visible expressions of ethnocentrism.⁶ These are clearly seen through secular and mission history as outsiders entered the culture of another and imposed their *ways* of dressing, language, technology, or *brand* of Christianity through rule or military force. And yet, we do not have to go far away to find examples of ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism has been expressed in such statements as...

"Why can't these people drive like we do?"

Meaning: Our way of driving (on the right side of the road instead of the 'wrong' side, in well-marked lanes) is the best or the universal way of driving.

"These people are so slow and lazy. It is no wonder that their country is so backward and underdeveloped."

Meaning: Their way of relating (long visits and slow conversations) and pace of life are not efficient or effective and thus of no value. At the same time, these people may look at the insane pace of our lives, our surface relationships, and rampant depression and pervasive loneliness, and say, how backward and underdeveloped.

PANORAMA

“Everyone knows that one vote by every member is the best way to make decisions or solve problems within the church.”

Meaning: Instead of a communal and consensus-building form of decision-making or problem-solving, the right or even biblical way in which the church is to operate is one that is individualistic and democratic.

REFLECT #3

Give examples of ethnocentrism that you have experienced, witnessed, or have exhibited in your own life.

While all of us have ethnocentric tendencies, it is only the rare person who will try to defend racism, cultural bigotry, and pre-judging of others. Anyone who has spent any amount of time within another culture and tried to communicate or function within that culture can see the value of making cultural adjustments and identifying with the culture. The need for identification and strategies to survive culture shock are discussed in the unit on *Cross-Cultural Living*.

Ethnocentrism is far from an adequate model for the missionary. Instead, Luzbetak points out that the “*Accommodational Model*” has been the chief model for the church and its missionaries as they have interacted with culture.

MODEL 2: ACCOMMODATION

Accommodation is ... “the recognition of *neutral* and *naturally good* elements in non-Christian ways of life. It believes that other cultures contain elements that are consistent with the Gospel. Accommodation insists that, inasmuch as such non-Christian elements can and indeed do exist, the universal Church and the sending churches may, and indeed should, allow local churches to incorporate such elements as part and parcel of the local Christian community behavior. In fact, such *neutral* and *naturally good* elements may be employed as contact points with Christianity. They can form a useful and important bridge between Christianity and *paganism*.”⁷

Accommodation has been the standard mode of operation for missionaries during the majority of mission history. It is a way for the Outsider (the missionary) to reconcile the conflicts of her host culture with the values and norms of her own. The Outsider determines from her cultural vantage point what of the foreign culture is useful or valued and can be assimilated into the church or the communication of the Gospel.

In the *Accommodational Model*, the assumption is that the culture as a whole must be opposed or overcome in order to maintain the integrity or purity of the Gospel. There are certain forms within a culture that are *neutral* or *naturally good* and thus can be used in order to convey the Gospel message. The missionary seeks to determine what is appropriate or can be accommodated for the sake of witness and faith life.

Syncretism

Inherent in the process of accommodation is the fear of syncretism. The Outsider maintains control of the limits of accommodation because of the need to guard Christian beliefs and practices from being tainted by pagan beliefs and practice.

CONTEXTUALIZATION

Syncretism has been defined as . . .

- “the union of two opposite forces, beliefs, systems or tenets so that the united form is a new thing, neither one or the other.”⁸
- “blending of one idea, practice, or attitude with another: Traditionally among Christians, it has been used in the replacement or dilution of the essential truths of the gospel through the incorporation of non-Christian elements.”⁹
- “the attempt to reconcile diverse or conflicting beliefs or religious practices into a unified system.”¹⁰

Fear of syncretism creates the situation where the missionary feels that he or she must protect the gospel. The local community of faith is viewed as being incapable of guiding the process of determining what is or is not appropriate, so the missionary maintains control in the *Accommodational Model*.

Ironically, just the opposite has often been the case. Syncretism frequently resulted from uninformed accommodation by missionaries who were unable to address functions behind forms and integrate faith and culture at the level of a person’s mentality or worldview.¹¹ The accommodation of Gospel to culture only “tended to be shallow, affecting only the surface of culture.”¹² And in the end, the Gospel was not able to answer the deep heart questions of a society.

MODEL 3: CONTEXTUALIZATION

As the Gospel takes root in a culture, the aim is that it gains a depth and dynamism that gives it life and vitality for that context. Sri Lankan, D. T. Niles, illustrates well the hope of missionary work. The Gospel is like a seed that produces a unique plant when planted in different countries. When planted in Britain, it produces British Christianity, and when planted in India, this same seed produces Indian Christianity.

Niles makes the point that all too often the missionary does not seek to plant the seed in a country’s soil, but brings instead the plant and even the flowerpot from his own country to the new country. Niles argues that these pots must be broken and the gospel seed must produce its own unique plant in each country’s soil. When grown from the soil of the country, Christianity is indigenous to that culture, and contextualization of the gospel has taken place.

Dayanand Bharati, a Hindu Christ follower, captures the same notion in the title of his book, *Living Water and Indian Bowl*. He critiques the manner in which the Gospel came to India and the stumbling block its Western form presented to Indians. When the living Gospel of Jesus Christ is presented in an Indian container, Bharati maintains, it can be understood and accepted. When the text is at home in the context, contextualization has taken place.

Contextualization is . . .

- “the various processes by which a local church integrates the Gospel message (the text) with its local culture (the context). The text and context must be blended into that one, God-intended reality called *Christian living*.”¹³
- “a process whereby the Gospel message encounters a particular culture, calling

PANORAMA

forth faith and leading to the formation of a faith community, which is culturally authentic and authentically Christian.”¹⁴

REFLECT #4

In what ways do these definitions differentiate the Contextualization Model from the Ethnocentrism and Accommodation Models?

Contextualization is the process by which comprehensive interpenetration of culture by the faith and the faith by the culture occurs rather than the mere employment of aspects of culture that are deemed as *neutral* or *naturally good*. There is always the possibility that Gospel content will become intermingled and diluted to the point that the truth of the Gospel is compromised. And yet, without risky interpretation, there is the possibility that the Gospel remains foreign and thus unacceptable or irrelevant to the cultural insider.

We have to admit that some level of syncretism is inevitable given the difficult process of communication and the limitations of the hearer and speaker. At the same time, we must insist that it is part of the process and not to be a terminus or ending point. Scripture clearly identifies sinful behavior that must not be condoned (see 1 Cor. 5; 6:9-10; and 1 Peter 4:15). However, as already stated, syncretism most often emerges when certain needs, obvious or hidden, are not being met, but is also due to an effort to accommodate, reconcile, or adapt forms and symbols which may be in competition. So, as the Gospel enters a culture, it will over time confront ideas, patterns of behavior, and attitudes.

Accommodation is an inadequate approach and thus contextualization must be the goal. The transition from accommodation to contextualization is facilitated by 1) an understanding of the connection between form and function and 2) an appreciation for the relativity of culture.

Form and Function¹⁵

Forms of a culture are what can be observed of a culture: clothing, tools, rituals, etc. Accommodation tends to deal with only the forms of a culture and thus only affects the surface of culture. There is a direct relationship of form to function. A change of form does not necessarily translate into a change of function.

Real or lasting change must address the mentality of a people and not just their forms. Thus, conversion must be change at the function level and not just in outward forms, such as dress, actions, customs, etc.

REFLECT #5

Form Without Function

You are a newly arrived missionary in a major city in Southwest China. One of your older colleagues makes the following remark:

“I just don’t understand these people. They make a profession of faith, say that they want to follow Jesus, and renounce their pagan ways. They do fine for a month or two, but then they start going back to the temple little by little. Before you know it, they are saying prayers to their dead ancestors and burning incense to the gods. I guess they just never were saved in the first place.”

How might form and function explain what is going on?

The relationship of form and function poses the following questions:

CONTEXTUALIZATION

1. How might the Gospel be presented in such a way as to address persons and cultures on the function or mentality level and not just form?
2. Who is best equipped to present the Gospel so that conversion takes place in a comprehensive manner?

CULTURAL RELATIVITY

To say that culture is relative means that the adequacy and appropriateness of certain ways and customs are relative to the culture in which they are found. This does not mean cultures are absolute or sacred, or a law unto themselves.

Charles Kraft explains that cultural relativity simply means that we . . .

“accept the adequacy and the validity of [another] culture (or individual), whether or not one’s own set of values predisposes one to approve of the behavior of that people group (or individual). A belief in the adequacy of other cultures does not obligate one to approve of such customs as cannibalism, burning of widows, infanticide, premarital sex, polygamy, and the like. But it does insist that one take such customs seriously within the cultural context in which they occur and attempt to appreciate the importance of their function within that context.”¹⁶

In Scripture, a particular culture is not endorsed above another or named as the *Christian culture*. In fact, we see the Gospel crossing the cultural boundary of Jewish culture and finding a home in the Greek world. A prime example is Paul’s speech at Mars Hill (Acts 17:16-34). He does not oppose the religious and cultural ideas of the Athenians but views them as valid and necessary for the way in which they live their lives. Paul’s hope was that the Gospel he proclaimed would be good news for them and their way of life. In time, the Gospel would challenge some aspects of their culture, but it was not Paul’s task in his witness to oppose their culture but to proclaim Christ.

REFLECT #6

Give two or three examples of customs or lifeways from ‘Prakash’s Tale’ that, while different from your own behaviors or values, may be considered culturally relative.

Cultural relativity moves us to a position where we are able to affirm the good in another culture and appreciate the function that various forms play in the lives of people.

WHAT PREVENTS THE GOSPEL FROM BEING AT HOME IN EVERY CULTURE?

It is clear that, for the Gospel to be known in every culture and expand throughout each culture, it must be contextualized and at home. Usually, this is hindered because of a faulty understanding of the dynamics of culture and who is to play the role of contextualizer.

Who then is the Contextualizer?

The true and appropriate **contextualizer** of the Gospel message and the church is the one who is from within the culture – not the Outsider. There will not be a spontaneous and pervasive expansion of the Gospel throughout the whole of the culture unless people of that culture

PANORAMA

are at the helm of Gospel proclamation and the innovation of forms, rituals, etc. for the new communities of faith. They must be in a position to innovate new forms of worship and these should arise from within the mentality or worldview of the people.

The goal is that there be culturally authentic faith communities that are able to give a vibrant and authentic witness of the Good News to their families, in the market, and to the culture.

Of course, basic to the local believers and faith communities, being the contextualizer is our understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit. There is a place for passing on teachings and modeling Christian principles, but in the end, it is the Holy Spirit and the Scriptures that must instruct, guide, change, shape, convict, and transform the new believer and culture.

REFLECT #7

What do the following Scriptures tell us about the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer?

John 6:13

Acts 4:31

Acts 8:26-29

Romans 8:26-27

1 Corinthians 2:2-5

Galatians 5:22

1 Thessalonians 1:5-6

1 John 5:6-9

If the Gospel is to be at home in every culture, among every people, then we must trust the Spirit to do his work in the life and community of that culture. However, this raises the question of the role of the missionary. If the contextualization of the Gospel is the work of the Spirit in the life of the local believer, then what is the role of the missionary? Does he or she have a role?

INAPPROPRIATE ROLES FOR THE MISSIONARY?

The missionary has a role. However, it will not be the same as it has been in the past. Below are some inappropriate roles missionaries have played that should not be part of their role today.

Master – As Master, the missionary was the Outsider who controlled doctrine and direction of the local faith community. Money, technology, doctrine, and even political alliances were the means of this control. Method in many cases often deteriorated into coercion, enforcement, or strong-arm tactics. In the end, Insiders felt as though they could not take the initiative or act without direction.¹⁷ Thus, Insiders yielded to the more experienced and powerful Outsider.

Mother – As Mother, the missionary provided protection and nurture so that new converts and faith communities might survive the onslaught of culture and local religion. The new convert was viewed as a child who could not fend for itself and thus must be carried through its formative years in hopes that it would one day be able to exist on its own. Love, the stated motivation for such action, easily turned into pity and paternalism. The dependent convert related to the missionary as Mother.

Manager – As Manager, the missionary planned and coordinated activities and means for the new believers. Modern organizational theory and practice informed the missionary's

CONTEXTUALIZATION

understanding of the task and provided methodology that was effective and efficient. In the end, missions became an enterprise or machine that if operated correctly would achieve prescribed results. Mission turned into something akin to a business with products to market. Converts were expected to become proficient in the skills necessary to carry on the operation of organizations and entities they would one day inherit.

Militant – As Militant, the missionary battled against religious and cultural forces that opposed Christianity. Since Hinduism and Islam were the opponents of Christianity, the goal of missions was to define Christianity over against them and to do battle through strategies and tactics. As the missionary attacked religious and cultural ideals that were central to tradition and identity of the new convert, it was soon concluded by the convert that these were antithetical to Christianity. So, new believers were schooled to reject their religious and cultural identity for those of the missionary.

The end result in each case was that the missionary was in control. He or she was the central and determining player in the expansion and establishment of the faith. History has taught us that such roles may have been helpful in creating *beachhead churches* but have not facilitated the rapid and spontaneous expansion of the church throughout the whole of a people and culture. Missionaries must be formed to operate in a different mode other than master, mother, manager, or militant if the Gospel is to be contextualized.

Identity Formation

The issue of missionary role is an issue of the missionary identity. The chief concern is no longer with what title the missionary has, the position he holds, or what he does, but who he is. He is a witness (Acts 1:8). This identity should supersede his role and form the essence of who he is.

Roles change and may even disappear, but identity does not. This witness identity builds upon and clarifies a person's character, personality, and purpose. Identity is what remains when title, position, and organization disappear. Witness is the chief role we play as missionaries.

Since identity is anchored in God, not in role, relationship with Christ must fulfill the personal, professional, and cultural aspirations of the missionary. Thus, if identity and not title or vocation is the aim, then a specific process of identity-formation should be the missionary's chief pursuit. Identity is not passively conferred, as one would be duly commissioned and receive a title, but must be actively and intentionally pursued. Also, since such formation is contrary to the normal pursuit of position, prestige, and power, the missionary will have to resist external and internal pressure to settle into prescribed roles. Identity encompasses secular and sacred, mind and heart, habits and decisions, and thus, its formation must address the whole person and be achieved by means of integrative practices.

REFLECT #8

1. Why do we have such a hard time 'just' being a witness of Jesus Christ?
2. How might you ensure that your identity as a witness is fully formed?

WHAT ARE THE PRACTICES OF THE MISSIONARY IN CONTEXTUALIZATION?

If the local believer and the local church are the primary contextualizers of the Gospel, what might the missionary do in the contextualization process?

The missionary is to recount God's story to others.

We tell the story of God's love and redemption in our own life in particular and for the world in general. Along with many individuals in Scripture, we simply report that we were once blind, lame, broken, impoverished, diseased, and condemned, but now we are whole, cleansed and forgiven.¹⁸ The bare story, not its explanation or defense, is what marks our lives. We may teach, compute, sell, or farm but above all, we recount God's story.

The missionary is to relate well with others.

Because we are human beings, we live in solidarity and friendship with fellow human beings.¹⁹ We know that of all the things that we might give to another, the most expensive gift is ourselves. The South Indian Christian, V. S. Azariah, told the delegates at the 1910 Edinburgh Conference that "through all the ages to come, the Indian church will rise up in gratitude to attest the heroism and self-denying labours of the missionary body. You have given your goods to feed the poor. You have given your bodies to be burned. We also ask for love. Give us FRIENDS."²⁰ I had been in Sri Lanka for a less than a week when a veteran missionary informed me that I should never form friendships with *nationals*. I can report that I found his advice to be false. Some of the most enriching and rewarding friendships of my life have been with Sri Lankans. We may go to another country and even experience a sacrificial death, but if we do not have love we are like a clanging cymbal.

The missionary is to receive from others.

We recognize that we are in desperate need of God's ongoing transformative work in our lives. We admit that our conversion is far from complete. We also acknowledge that our understanding and experience of God's mercy and grace is limited and mono-cultural and that we need the enrichment of others. Rather than seeing ourselves as the sole source of truth and benefits, we desire to be recipients of God's truth and benefits from others.²¹

The missionary is to pilgrim among others.

The work of God does not begin or end with any of us. Nor does it rise or fall with us. We participate at the gracious invitation of the Spirit and confess that the good accomplished through our lives is because of the Spirit's work. We pass through others' lives and situations as aliens, sojourners, pilgrims – the perpetual Outsider.²² We acknowledge that we do not own anyone or anything but are humble stewards of the relationships and responsibilities entrusted to us.²³

For some, these suggested activities will seem too passive or not enough. Our tendency toward activity and control is because of a lack of trust in the work of the Holy Spirit and possibly because of a tendency to do rather than to be. Being a friend, Gospel storyteller, and fellow pilgrim is more than enough if we do them well.

CONTEXTUALIZATION

PRINCIPLES OF CONTEXTUALIZING THE GOSPEL

The following are the key principles highlighted in this session that you might apply as you anticipate missionary service.

- While accommodation has been the chief model by which the church has expanded throughout history, it falls short of the ideal.
- The Gospel has the greatest chance of affecting the whole of a society when it springs from the soil of the culture rather than being transported in the pot of a particular culture.
- The primary agent of contextualization is not the missionary but the local believer.
- The primary role of the missionary is that of a witness to the power of God to change lives.
- The missionary should not succumb to the temptation to use power or control to manipulate people or control cultural change, but he or she should serve the primary contextualizers and learn from them.
- A basic mode of a missionary existence is one of love and friendship.

LEARNING ACTIVITIES ~ BEFORE YOU GO

Because we seek to control the way the Gospel is communicated and what the church looks like in another cultural setting, we must take decisive and formative steps in order that we choose not to operate out of a mode that manipulates and ultimately counters the power of the Gospel. The following activities will help you to actively and intentionally prepare to operate in the contextualization model.

As you try these activities, record your difficulties, struggles, and successes.

Posture of Wonder

We either enter another culture as one who knows everything or one who is a learner. The posture of a learner is not just a device or technique, but a way of life best exemplified by curiosity and wonder. Practice the posture of learning by entering a strange or difficult situation and asking genuine questions or seeking new information.

Role of Servant

Because many in the world still view the American culture with some deference, it is hard to assume the role of a servant. However, for many of us, we do not serve in our own culture. Look for ways in which you might serve others rather than expecting them to serve you – take your/another person's dishes to the sink, anticipate what your spouse/friend might need and get it before being asked, or enquire as to what assistance someone might need.

Maker of Disciples / Friends

As in most cross-cultural situations, our role will be in the shadows as a disciple-maker and friend. Therefore, we need to become well-versed in how to disciple and the ways of nurturing friendship. Try to initiate a new friendship with someone totally unlike yourself and seek to converse about spiritual matters.

Trust in the Holy Spirit

In the final analysis, the question is – Can we trust the work of the Holy Spirit in the culture and in the lives of new believers? Our tendency is to manage and control in the name of guarding orthodoxy, or because we want to help others to avoid our mistakes. In either case, we reflect a lack of trust in the power of the Gospel and the work of the Holy Spirit.

An Attitude of Humility

A large part of humility is confessing that we do not have all the answers, do not always know what is best, and that our view of any situation is limited and partial.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR *CONTEXTUALIZATION*

Allen, Roland. *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church and the Causes Which Hinder It*. 1962, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1962.

Roland Allen presents the classic argument for a contextualizing approach to missionary witness and work. Even though the language is a bit dated and archaic in places, this is a 'must read' for any person contemplating missionary service. 157 pages.

Bharati, Dayanand. *Living Water and Indian Bowl*. Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2004.

Bharati provides a vivid and engaging example from the Indian setting of how the way of Jesus is to be contextualized. 247 pages.

Donovan., Vincent. *Christianity Rediscovered*. Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2003.

In a moving account of self-discovery and faith, Donovan recounts the story of witness and conversion among the Masai of Africa. In the end, it is Donovan who rediscovers the power and universality of Christianity.

Kraft, Charles H. *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective*. Revised 25th Anniversary Edition. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2003.

Kraft presents a groundbreaking and at times controversial perspective on the cross-cultural witness to Christ and the establishment of the church. Whatever one might think of Kraft's models, he cannot be ignored. 314 pages.

Luzbetak, Louis J. *The Church and Cultures: New Perspectives in Missiological Anthropology*. Revised. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988.

Church and Cultures is a standard work that methodologically establishes a thorough anthropological understanding of how culture operates as a holistic, comprehensive blueprint for living. Luzbetak writes from a Christian perspective and attempts to frame cultural anthropology for the missionary task. 410 pages.

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

CONTEXTUALIZATION

Hiebert offers a practical guide to issues related to missionary work in cross-cultural settings. 298 pages.

Walls, Andrew F. "The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture." In *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith*, 3-15. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996.

In an engaging and readable article, Andrew Walls contrasts two principles that must be held in tension in the transmission of the Gospel: the "Indigenizing" and "Pilgrim" principles. 13 pages.

Yamamori, Tetsunao and Charles Tabor, Editors. *Christopaganism or Indigenous Christianity?* Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1975.

This book contains papers presented and responses at a symposium on accommodation and syncretism of the Gospel in 1974. The discussion has moved a good bit beyond the concepts and points made at this conference but the book serves as a good reference point for the discussion. 249 pages.

NOTES

¹In addition, 'all' is used with 'earth', 'ends of the earth' or 'world' 91 times and 'flesh' 15 times.

²See research cited by World Christian Database. (log-in required to access) <http://worldchristiandatabase.org/wcd/>

³See the full discussion of these three models in Louis Luzbetak, *The Church and Cultures: New Perspectives in Missiological Anthropology*, revised (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988), 64-84.

⁴Conrad Philip Kottak, *Cultural Anthropology*, 6th edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994), 45.

⁵Luzbetak, *The Church and Cultures*, 65.

⁶Ibid., 65-66.

⁷Ibid., 67.

⁸Alan Tippett, "Christopaganism or Indigenous Christianity" in *Christopaganism or Indigenous Christianity?* Edited by Tetsunao Yamamori and Charles R. Taber, pp. 13-34 (Pasadena: William Carey Library), 17.

⁹Scott A. Moreau, "Syncretism" in *Evangelical Dictionary of Christian Missions*, edited by Scott A. Moreau (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000).

¹⁰Bruce J. Nicholls, *Contextualization: A Theology of Gospel and Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 29.

¹¹See Luzbetak, *The Church and Cultures*, 286, 360-73.

¹²Ibid., 68.

¹³Ibid., 69.

¹⁴Wilbert R. Shenk, *Changing Frontiers of Mission*, American Society of Missiology Series, No. 28 (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999), 56.

¹⁵For fuller discussions on the interplay between form and function, see Charles Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, revised 25th anniversary edition (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2005), 52-78; Luzbetak, *The Church and Cultures*, 73-78; and Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1985), 37-48.

¹⁶Kraft, *Christianity in Culture*, 41.

¹⁷“A tradition very rapidly grows up that nothing can be done without the authority and guidance of the missionary, the people wait for him to move, and, the longer they do so, the more incapable they become of any independent action.” Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods, St. Paul's or Ours?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 81.

¹⁸Matthew 8:1-34; Mark 10:46-52; Luke 8:43-56; 9:37-43; and John 9:1-12.

¹⁹Missionary anthropologist Louis Luzbetak emphasizes mutual respect, accessibility, and true friendship as essential to the cross-cultural encounter. See Luzbetak, *The Church and Culture*, 322-28.

²⁰Cited in Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission and Appropriation of Faith* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002), 70.

²¹Andrew Walls and others call for two-way rather than just one-way traffic, in order that there is sharing and receiving. Andrew F. Walls, *Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996), 239.

²²Hebrews 11:13; 1 Peter 1:17; and 2:11.

²³Vincent Donovan admonishes his fellow missionaries: “I would think, rather, the very first principle which must be invoked toward building up the young church is that we do not stay one day longer than is necessary. I think that ninety percent of our problems with the young churches, today, stems from a violation of this principle.” Vincent Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered: Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2003), 98.

AUTHOR

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CONTEXTUALIZATION

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