

Contextualizing on the Mission Field

Scripture: Acts 17:16–31

Code: B111007

Many thanks to Tommy Clayton for overseeing the contextualization series. He did a great job in spooling up the posts, and monitoring and responding to some good comments in the com-box.

But before we leave this series behind, I wanted to highlight a couple of helpful posts from the last comment thread. Two missionaries had some useful things to say about contextualization. One of them (he deleted his posts, so I won't name him) is a missionary in Europe; the other was a missionary in Papua New Guinea.

Here's the essence of the question they raised and dealt with: *Is there any legitimate form of contextualization, especially as it relates to the mission field?*

Answer: Maybe. Depends on what you mean by contextualization. Both our missionary friends were very helpful in that regard, providing specific examples of what they meant.

And that's the important thing to keep in mind in any discussion of contextualization, redeeming the culture, or whatever. You've got to get specific, compare or contrast it with Scripture, and then see what's what. Getting specific provides the kind of clarity and definition that makes the matter obvious.

Some people point out how necessary it is to engage in contextualization on the mission field. They point to things like translating the Bible into the common language, wearing clothing common to people in the area, or participating in non-sinful cultural practices (like taking up soccer in Latin America) as contextualization. If that were *all* that was meant by contextualization, then there is no controversy. Who would disagree?

But those clearly legitimate practices provide cover for others that aren't as easy to accept. And that's where one of our missionary friends was so helpful. He said contextualization could mean substituting less familiar words or concepts of biblical culture with words or concepts familiar to people in the target culture. The goal is to make the translation or teaching clear. For example, would you tell someone who was born, has lived, and grown old in the deep heart of a jungle that his sins could be washed whiter than snow when he's never seen snow? Would you tell an Eskimo about shepherds and sheep when he's never seen the like? Why not substitute the word "sheep" with the word "seal"?

He described a second form of contextualization in terms of redeeming the culture—using pagan holidays, music, or other aspects of unredeemed culture to convey biblical truth. Because this form of contextualization isn't specific to the mission field—it's the very thing we're dealing with on our own turf—I'll cover this one in a later post.

Our missionary commenter, Tim Spanton, who served in Papua New Guinea, provided this spot-on

response to the question raised by our European missionary. Here's what he said (with very little touch-up on my part):

My wife and I were missionaries in Papua New Guinea where we spent two years learning the Myu language and culture before teaching the scriptures and presenting the gospel. Our culture studies were so we could properly understand how they would hear what we taught.

Rather than changing the scriptures we took time to teach about sheep and shepherding and other Old and New Testament practices. One of the ways we did this was during our literacy program. The Myu language had never been learned by an outsider or written down prior to our arrival. Along with teaching and translating the scriptures was a priority to teach the adults and children how to read and write their own language.

In one of our primers we focused on the main biblical cultural topics that would come up in our gospel teaching. We showed them pictures of sheep and pictures of ourselves in the snow back home in Upper Michigan. They did not have words in their language for sheep or snow so we used the common trade language (Melanesian English) words for them. The isolated Myu people are very intelligent and had no trouble understanding foreign biblical culture when it was properly explained.

It would be dangerous to try to find a Myu cultural equivalent to replace the biblical account because none of them are exact representations of scripture. And the Myu Bible teachers are now able to articulate biblical culture in teaching the culture rather than coming up with some local example that falls short. Once you localize the scriptures you would be stuck trying to find "equivalents" that would constantly fall short. This is very dangerous.

There is absolutely no need to change the inspired word of God. It is no different than how we are to teach here at home. Explain the biblical culture so we can truly understand God's intended meaning. For "All scripture (*graphe*, written biblical text) is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness . . ." (2 Timothy 3:16).

Thanks for that, Tim. Here's the money-quote: "The isolated Myu people are very intelligent and had no trouble understanding foreign biblical culture when it was properly explained." And here's why I think that's such an important point, and I'm so glad it came out in what Tim said.

Changing biblical words and concepts to make them easier for people in other cultures to understand is inherently insulting. I think it fails to acknowledge the *imago dei*. God has stamped His image on each and every individual in each and every people group of the world. The people of whatever target area we're trying to reach aren't "dumb natives"—they are intelligent sinners who need to hear and understand the grace of God in truth. If you could hear and understand, so can they.

As I said, we'll come back to the issue of contextualization as redeeming the culture. That concept is everywhere, and we'll see what we can do to bring some clarity.

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