

What is Contextualization

by Rev.T. Aicken

Every generation of theological thought has its own buzzwords, its own jargon consisting of catchwords which may have little or no exact meaning. Some of the buzzwords of today are “missional”, “relevance” and “contextualization”. It is too often assumed, however, that we all mean the same things when we use these words, but that in itself is a major mistake. Take, for example, the term “contextualization” as a case in point. This one word is used in radically different ways, and, until we agree on a commonly accepted definition of the term, those who continue to use it in their writings will only add to the confusion which already abounds.

Messenger Contextualization

At one end of the spectrum, we have many people like Tullian Tchividjian (I have chosen him because he has written on this subject) who insist that the principle of the apostle Paul in 1 Cor. 9:22, to become all things to all men that by all means he might save some, is what contextualization is about, that it is nothing more than adapting one’s own life and methods of communication in ways that are most appropriate for his listeners to learn and so evoke from them a thoughtful response. He cites as a good example of this the Sunday School teacher who uses language, concepts, and illustrations to teach his (Tchividjian’s) young daughter, so that she might understand as he faithfully teaches her the Bible. Let me state, categorically, that I have no difficulty with this concept of contextualization, or with those who talk about it in these terms. Of course we should adapt ourselves, and our speech, in order to communicate the gospel as effectively as we possibly can to our target audience.

This is what William Schweitzer calls “messenger contextualization”, an established biblical principle which is vital for every communicator of the gospel to employ if he is to communicate his message effectively. Messenger contextualization is about the communicator’s personal behaviour. This is what he does, himself, to aid communication. The apostle Paul, for instance, taught that a messenger of Christ should tailor the way that he lives in order to cause as little offense to his hearers as possible. He must not play down the offense of the cross – the message of the cross (including its offense) is the very thing with which all men need to be confronted, for it is the power of God unto salvation to all who believe – but he must be careful at the same time not to make himself an offense, which too easily becomes an excuse that men use for not believing. So, let the messenger tailor the way that he lives, and, by extension, let him tailor the way that he speaks to any particular crowd in order to be understood, 1 Cor. 14:19. When, therefore, Paul said, “I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some”, 1 Cor. 9:22, he was talking about changing himself (not the message), doing whatever is most appropriate, in other words, and in the most appropriate manner, so that he might communicate the same gospel message, clearly and persuasively, to all the different people groups which he has occasion to address.

A good, clear example from the Bible of this important principle, messenger contextualization, is to be found in Paul circumcising Timothy, but not Titus, so that Timothy might preach the gospel more effectively to Jews. Notice, Timothy was not to change his message; he was not to teach that others needed to be circumcised. No, he was to change only himself, or at least how he came across to people, so that he might thereby adapt himself to minister better and more effectively to the people whom he had been called to serve.

Message Contextualization

At the other end of the spectrum, however, we have many more people (including a good many who profess to be evangelicals, who have become convinced despite that claim that the message of the Bible is not fixed but fluid, that it is culturally conditioned, that it must accommodate the changing times if the church is to survive and communicate effectively to the world around her), and these are people who embrace a very different view of contextualization. For them, the gospel is not offensive, and, if it appears to be, then it is probably not the gospel that has been preached, or at least not preached very well. Hence, the message itself must be changed.

This is what Schweitzer calls “message contextualization”, a principle which is very different from the messenger contextualization that we have just examined. I want to show that the Bible does not support but warns us against such contextualization, and I also want to show with concrete examples how widespread it has become, not only in the Emergent Church Movement where we would expect it, but even throughout the evangelical world where we would surely not expect it.

The Influence of Postmodernism

But first, where and when, we may wonder, did such a view ever arise? I do not mean to attribute it to any one author, nor do I wish to imply that it is a relatively new idea. Neither would be true. Nevertheless, if we are looking for one name that stands out, the name of someone who is the father of this current trend of thought, it would have to be Lesslie Newbigin. Newbigin, like other postmodernists, did not accept the inspiration and authority of Holy Scripture. If modernism struggled to know the truth, searching for the historical Jesus between the lines of the Bible, postmodernism endeavours to analyze why every such attempt is fundamentally flawed. Truth cannot be known, according to this view, partly because it is constantly changing (nothing in religion is absolutely and ultimately true), and partly, too, because it is culturally determined (our understanding of anything outside of the natural realm is, at best, based on a very limited number of ideas that we have at any given time; someone else, operating out of a different set of ideas, will arrive at very different conclusions). Hence, nothing can really be known for sure, nor is anything that is believed even more likely to be true than anything else.

Newbigin did not accept the Bible for what it is, the inspired, inerrant and infallible Word of God, nor would he accept it as the only rule of faith and life. If there are principles that might be drawn from it, enduring principles (not facts) which are worth preserving, these same principles, he said, are to be found in the writings of all world religions. Those Christians are foolish who think that they have a monopoly on what is right and good, who suppose that ideas and principles of equal value cannot be found elsewhere. What I find surprising in this, surprising and very disappointing, is not that someone would come up with these notions, but that so many self-professed evangelicals would fall in line with such thinking. One part of the purpose of this present paper is to challenge those who do that, and the other part is to caution others against following their lead.

The Unchanging Word of God

What really matters in all this, and ultimately the only thing that matters, is what the Bible has to tell us of such contextualization. The Scriptures of the Old and New Testament present themselves as verbally inspired (Matt. 5:17, 18; 1 Tim. 3:16, 17.) This means that not only the ideas generally, but even the words specifically, may be counted on to express accurately what the Divine Author had intended to reveal. This does not exclude the need for word studies, for examining every passage in its historical context, or the age-old principle of scripture interpreting scripture; what it does affirm, however, is that the Bible does not contradict itself, and that it has an unchanging message which is to be proclaimed trans-culturally.

The example of the apostle Paul is particularly noteworthy. In Acts 20, he told the elders of Ephesus that he had not shunned to declare to them the whole counsel of God (v.27), that he taught both Jews and Greeks the same

message, a message of repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ (v.21). He told the Corinthians, similarly, that he did not waver from this message of Christ and Him crucified, nor did he try to dazzle them in his preaching with excellence of speech or with persuasive words of human wisdom lest their faith should stand, not in the power of God, but in the wisdom of men (1 Cor. 2).

Paul often travelled to many different places, speaking to people from very different cultures (Acts 16:10-13), yet he never wrote of accommodating his message for anybody, nor did he ever imply that it would have been better had he done so. When he addressed the Athenians in the Areopagus (Acts 17), he introduced his message with a reference to their unknown god, and so got their attention, but he did not change his message in any way or leave out preaching on the resurrection which he knew many of them would reject (v.32).

Paul suffered a great deal because of his preaching, because of his unwillingness to accommodate his message in order to entice men to believe it, which suffering those who do accommodate their message never seem to experience. Yet he remained adamant that changing the message is strictly forbidden, and that, if he had sought to please men, he could not have been a servant of Christ (Gal. 1).

Examples of Message Contextualization Today

It is time now to look at some concrete examples. Not everyone who engages in contextualizing the message does so in the same manner, of course, or even with the same purpose in view. I will endeavour to give some very different examples, therefore, yet, in doing so, I realize that I am barely scratching the surface of what is a major and rapidly growing problem today.

First, contextualizing the message very often provides the target audience with what they will most readily accept, and thus it ignores or even denies the negative features which may too easily be rejected by them. As a marketing tool, this is known as “packaging”. It is not blatantly deceptive, perhaps, or may not mean to be, but the one promoting a particular cause is well aware of what he has to say in order to make the pitch successfully, and of course what he needs to omit in order to draw attention away from its less attractive (or even offensive) features. We find this in the preaching ministry of Billy Graham, who determined very early in his career that he would bring out only positive elements of the gospel, nothing that would offend Jews, Greeks or anybody else.

Notice, this approach does not necessarily deny the gospel, and many people sitting under such a ministry may yet be brought to a saving knowledge of Christ in spite of the fact that they are not hearing, as they should be, the whole counsel of God. I am very thankful to God for the several people I have known who have come to Christ under Graham’s ministry, and I do not wish to minimize that. Such strategizing however, is still fraught with dangerous tendencies and it robs people of vital truths. Also, it does in effect deny the work of the Holy Spirit in preaching, and relies too much on those persuasive words of human wisdom which Paul was so careful to avoid.

It is of interest to note, and I cannot help but think that there is a connection here, that, once having started down this path, Graham says that he now no longer believes that pagans in far away countries are lost if they do not have the gospel preached to them at all. “They may not know the name of Jesus”, he says, “but they know in their hearts that they need something they do not have, and they turn to the only light they have, and I think that they are saved and they are going to be with us in heaven” (*Evangelicalism Divided*, Iain Murray). This is a good if sad reminder to us all. Let us be careful what path we take; what appears to be a relatively minor and even innocent departure from the narrow way in the beginning can lead us down dangerous alleys which take us a long way off course.

Secondly, contextualizing the message is too often the vehicle for the communicator himself to unload on his unsuspecting audience his own views of any subject, everything from subjective interpretation to blatant compromise. This is more serious, because it involves not merely “leaving out” what should be said, but actually “watering down” and deliberately changing the substance of the message. It allows the communicator, under the guise of superior knowledge, to superimpose his own thinking on the teaching of the Bible and to represent it as coming from the Bible.

This was a common practice of the Pharisees, and we find it all through the synoptic Gospels. They did this, for example, in regard to divorce. The Pharisees talked a lot about the law of God (Deut. 24:1), but in doing so they presented the interpretation of the ancient rabbis as if God’s law really said what they said it did. In this way they could make divorce a very easy thing, whereas the Lord Jesus made it clear (Matt. 5:31) from the law of God itself that, while divorce may be permitted in certain cases, it must never be easy or an automatic choice. The biblical principle is, after all, that a husband and wife are to remain as one.

Do we find this same thing today? Indeed, we do, and it appears more often than our biblically illiterate generation is even aware. I have written elsewhere of how Tim Keller, a theistic evolutionist, compromises the Genesis account of creation to the point of denying certain key features of the gospel itself in what it tells us of the two Adams, Rom 5 and 1 Cor. 15. (*The New Calvinism: A Critical Assessment*)

But now let me give another example from this same author. The classic definition of sin is that it is “any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God” (the Westminster Shorter Catechism). Really, sin has to be defined this way, because it has no possible meaning except as some kind of breach of the law of God (Rom. 3:20; 4:15; 1 John 3:4). Keller, however, prefers the definition of Soren Kierkegaard, that sin is building one’s identity on anything but God. But what does that mean? And in what possible sense could it be considered to be better? Building one’s identity on anything but God is not in any way a ‘dynamic equivalent’ of the classic definition, but is something altogether different. Who, in fact, but the most ardent atheist does not think that he builds his identity on God? Keller says that Kierkegaard has defined sin “in a way that is rooted in the Bible but also is accessible to contemporary people”, and this is therefore a good example of contextualization (*The Reason for God*, Tim Keller). I submit that this definition of sin is not rooted in the Bible, that it should not be represented as if it is, and that it opens the door to all kinds of things that God’s law does not allow while closing the door to anything that one might find to be personally objectionable. In other words, with this definition one gets to determine what sin is pretty much according to his own rules of play. Kierkegaard was an existentialist philosopher. His concept of sin will surely be more agreeable to contemporary people, yes, but only because it is less clear, less offensive, and gives them a licence to do pretty much whatever they want. This is what the Pharisees did (see their view on divorce above) and the very thing that our Lord condemned, teaching for doctrine the commandments of men. This is a good example of what is so wrong with the present trend of contextualizing the message of the Bible when it may and will be better understood without it.

Thirdly, contextualizing the message is often a shortcut to rewriting the Bible without having to change a single word of what it actually says. The example that I am taking here is from Hank Hanegraaff, the host of The Bible Answer Man radio program. Someone phoned in and asked Hanegraaff about I Tim. 2:11 & 12, which is about not permitting a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but having her learn, rather, in silence and with submission. It was a good question, surely, but the radio host did not attempt to exegete the text or even take it seriously. He said that it had to be contextualized. He then demonstrated what he meant by that. He dismissed the text as something that was culturally conditioned, something that had to be understood in terms of first century thought and practice. If Paul were writing today, in the twenty-first century when women are better educated and enjoy greater freedom, Hanegraaff continued, undoubtedly he would have expressed himself in a very different way and acknowledged the woman’s fundamental right to teach and exercise authority over a man

whenever and wherever she has occasion to do so.

Briefly stated, there are two points here that need to be considered. On the one hand, no one has the right to twist any scripture to make it say what is different from, let alone the opposite of, what it really does say. And on the other hand, if Hanegraaff had gone on to examine vv. 13 – 15, where we read of Adam and Eve in all this, he would have discovered that the principle of women not usurping authority over men comes not from culture but from creation, from the fall of man, specifically, and God's own holy purpose for him.

I am not looking (as it may seem) to be critical of Graham, Keller or Hanegraaff, nor do I question the genuineness of their conversion. I have simply chosen three men who appear to have little in common, except that they are all widely perceived to be evangelical leaders, and that each one employs his own kind of message contextualization which has the effect of leading his disciples, not into but away from, the teaching of the Bible. This is a matter of great concern, for so many people are affected by it; we are instructed to be diligent, not needing to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth (2 Tim. 2:15).

In my opinion, contextualization (contextualizing the message of the Bible) is the latest image portrayed in the changing face of liberalism, and that, as such, it has become the newest front in the battle to contend for the faith once entrusted to the saints. What a shame that it is spreading like hazardous spores of mould inside the walls of the badly neglected, and already teetering, house of evangelicalism! This is a problem that the Church of our generation must address, and let us pray that she does so sooner rather than later.