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Communication in Mission

Global Opportunities and Challenges



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Communication in Mission: Global Opportunities and Challenges

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Part 1

Communicating the Gospel through the Language of Words and Art

In these opening chapters the authors focus on the spoken word, whether through preaching, the use of translanguaging, or storytelling. Based on his plenary message, Jared Alcántara reminds the reader of the importance of our words when we preach the gospel. The sermon is a joint proclamation of the preacher and the church sharing a contextualized message with the community. Alcántara guides the reader in thinking not only about the need for contextualization, but the dangers of both syncretism (over-contextualization) and under-contextualization. The reader is challenged to find balance between culture and the good news, between the familiar and the transformational.

John Cheong and Rochelle Scheuermann present various aspects to be considered when preaching the gospel through a translator. These authors point out the breadth and depth of the dynamics of preaching including hermeneutics, the interaction of the preacher and interpreter, communication styles and context, and the role of the Holy Spirit.

Timothy Hatcher highlights the challenge found in multilingual communities, which use language differently than in monolingual contexts and even in standard translation between two or more languages. Multilingual people not only speak multiple languages, but often combine their languages to achieve a unique identity and style of communication. Those engaged in missions in a multilingual context need to learn to engage in translanguaging, the process of merging language experiences in real life contexts as the local speakers do.

Finally, Joy Kim discusses the importance of storytelling among immigrants and refugees. She shares stories from personal experiences that embody the truth of the gospel and connect with the arts, worship, and mission. Kim's goal is to illustrate the connection of the *missio Dei*, people on the move, and the body of Christ. Through this intersection we are better connected in the multilingual and multicultural story God is writing that reaches across cultures and extends around the globe.

—Marcus Dean

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Chapter 1

Preaching between Scylla & Charybdis

Sermons and the Task of Contextualization in the Twenty-First Century

Jared E. Alcántara

Homiletics concerns itself with the faithful and fitting proclamation of God's Word in service to God's people, the church, so that they might hear it, be transformed by it, and bear witness to it in the world. The ministry of proclamation features the preaching of the Word by a person but is not limited to that person's scope or office. The scope of proclamation extends beyond the event of public preaching since the Word announces good news whenever it is used as a wise teacher to the young or the old, as spiritual milk to the new disciple, as life and strength in small group communities, and as a comforting balm to those who suffer. Proclamation finds its center in and through the office of the preacher, even its catalytic spark, but it only achieves its ultimate aim when it belongs to the Body of Christ. The preacher's job is not so much to preach for the sake of the church as it is to help the church preach for the sake of the world. P. T. Forsyth (1970, 79) reminds us of this great responsibility in his famed 1907 Yale Beecher Lectures on Preaching when he exclaims: "The one great preacher in history, I would contend, is the Church. And the first business of the individual preacher is to enable the Church to preach."

Whether the task is proclamation in a general sense or preaching in a specific sense, a wise and skillful preacher knows how to chart a path between gospel fidelity and contextual propriety, between "faithfulness and fittingness," to use terms from homiletician Leonora Tubbs Tisdale (1997). One strives toward faithfulness to the gospel through rightly handling the Word that announces it while also striving to be fitting to the people to whom the Word is preached in a manner that is clear, accessible, and intelligible. The one who proclaims the Word must somehow honor God and reach people; otherwise, he or she has failed to love one or the other, the God of the gospel or the people to whom the gospel of God is preached. What is needed, Tisdale (1997, 31) argues, is a two-fold aim: "Preaching which not only aims toward greater faithfulness to the gospel of Jesus Christ but which also

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aims toward greater 'fittingness' (in content, form, and style) for a particular congregation."

No doubt, Tisdale's two-fold aim strikes a chord among those scholars, pastors, missionaries, and students who wrestle with the challenges of contextualization and who train themselves in the work of contextualizing. Exciting opportunities come about when Christians engage in fruitful discussions about this subject, especially when concrete decisions and actions follow. Alongside these opportunities, we also find the pain associated with failures to contextualize well. So much ground is lost in gospel work when people fail to be fitting to the spaces where they serve.

Tisdale's reminder to preachers to balance faithfulness and fittingness comes with much greater force in a similar warning about balance made by a leader in intercultural studies. This leader offers an admonishment to help practitioners appreciate what is at stake. In *A Word in Season*, Lesslie Newbigin (1994) warns against two opposing dangers which he refers to as "the Scylla and Charybdis between which one must steer" (67). Irrelevance lurks as a monster on one side, an under-contextualized approach that forsakes people. Syncretism lurks as a monster on the other side, an over-contextualized approach that forsakes orthodoxy. "Every missionary path," Newbigin writes, "must find the way between the two dangers. And if one is more afraid of one than the other, one will certainly fall into the opposite" (67).

But, how do we chart this path? How do we navigate the dangers between which we must steer? How do we preach "between Scylla and Charybdis"? To get at the answer, we need to understand the question better. Thus, at the outset, I will put the question into conversation with the larger modern contextualization conversation. Then, I will discuss the perils of under-contextualization and over-contextualization. Finally, at the end, I will imagine what preaching between Scylla and Charybdis might sound like now and in the future.

The Rise of Modern Contextualization Discussions[1]

In his seminal article, "Critical Contextualization," published in 1987, Paul G. Hiebert contends that most of the history of modern Western missions before 1950 is a history of under-contextualized witness (1987, 76; later as a book chapter in Hiebert 1994). In exceptional cases, the missionaries who prioritized contextualization encountered resistance, whether it was a hermeneutic of suspicion from those who opposed their work or under-appreciation

1 Some paragraphs in this section have been adapted from my 2020 article in *Trinity Journal* (Alcántara 2020, 185–98). See pp. 190–92 in particular.

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from those who believed that their work was second order to gospel work. Among Roman Catholics, Hiebert mentions Jesuit missionaries to India who had their efforts to contextualize challenged and undermined by Franciscan missionaries who said that the Jesuits had forsaken the gospel in their attempts to contextualize. Among Protestant missionaries, Hiebert mentions those who labored to learn Indian languages, and who later wrote dictionaries, booklets, and hymns in English and German. Their work played an important role in the cross-cultural learning and interest that followed, but their names were not lifted up as heroes to emulate. Hiebert could have mentioned other names as positive examples, such as Hudson Taylor or William Cameron Townsend. However, his larger point was this: under-contextualization was more the norm and good contextualization the exception (Hiebert 1994, 76).

After 1950, a number of important discussions emerged both in Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. Post-Vatican II, three Catholic theologians—Robert Schreiter (1997, 2007), Aylward Shorter (1988), and Stephen Bevans (2002)—advanced important discussions about "inculturation," the term they preferred to "contextualization." In more recent years, the Latinx Catholic theologian Orlando Espín (2007) has advanced the conversation, opting for "interculturality" over inculturation. It should be noted here that while Bevans' work advanced discussions on contextualization, some of his models also leaned toward a syncretistic and over-contextualized approach to mission.

In the 1950s and into the 1960s, Protestants usually used the language of adaptation or inculturation to describe cross-cultural work, language that gave way later to terms such as indigenization and indigeneity in the late 1960s and early 1970s. However, in 1972, Taiwanese theologian Shoki Coe (1972, 21) challenged scholars to adopt the language of contextualization, which he said was "a more dynamic concept which is open to change and which is future oriented." That same year, the Theological Education Fund argued for the same term, contextualization, which they described as a "theological necessity demanded by the incarnational nature of the Word" (Theological Education Fund Staff 1972, 20).

Since that time, a number of models of contextualization have emerged, such as Charles H. Kraft's "dynamic equivalence" model in the 1970s, David Hesselgrave's work on communicating Christ cross-culturally, also in the 1970s, Paul Hiebert's work on critical cultural contextualization in the late 1980s, and Lamin Sanneh's translation model in the late 1980s (Kraft 1973; Hiebert 1987; Hesselgrave 1991; Sanneh 2009). In the last thirty years, other theorists also made significant contributions, such as Dean Gilliland, Tite Tiénou, Marc Cortez, Charles Van Engen, Andrew F. Walls,

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Orlando E. Costas, and A. Scott Moreau, though it should be noted that some of them were integral to the conversations that took place in the 1970s and 1980s (e.g., Orlando Costas' work at the Lausanne Congress in 1974).[2]

A growing body of research on contextualization in homiletics has also emerged over the last fifty years. The first trajectory of scholarship is *congregational studies*. Through interviews, surveys, and other forms of evaluation and assessment, those who have published works in congregational studies have focused on what listeners hear and experience during sermons (Howe 1967; Allen 2004; McClure et al., 2004). In so doing, homileticians have sought to lessen the gap between the sender and the receiver in communication. A second trajectory is *minoritized voices* speaking out with greater frequency and fervency about preaching in minoritized preaching traditions. In addition to making original contributions to advance the field, these publications forced majority-culture homileticians to recognize, one, that preaching is neither monolithic nor univocal and, two, that some of the claims made about the pulpit and the pew do not necessarily apply when we interrogate White normative assumptions about preaching (Mitchell 1990; Taylor 1977; Arrastía 1992; González and Jiménez 2005; Kim 1999). The final trajectory concerns itself with the *process of contextualization*. By process I mean the *how* of contextualizing in light of the forces that shape the beliefs, attitudes, habits, and practices of listeners. One of the more popular resources in evangelicalism is Timothy J. Keller's *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism* (2015). Keller challenges pastors to contextualize by engaging the secular mind and heart of the non-believer, interrogating the secular web of beliefs to which believers and non-believers are held captive, and presenting the gospel of Christ as the antidote both to irreligion and to religion. One of the more popular resources in mainline liberalism is Leonora Tubbs Tisdale's *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* (1997). Tisdale encourages pastors to become local ethnographers of their congregations, students of context and its sources. These and other resources like them have advanced discussions in homiletics in recent decades.

The Dangers of Under- and Over-Contextualization

Now that I have traced the development of modern contextualization discussions both in intercultural studies and homiletics, I will deal with the Scylla and the Charybdis, that is, the dangers of under-contextualization and over-contextualization, perils that preachers must navigate in order to be faithful in preaching and witness.

2 For an excellent summary of the various models that have emerged, see Moreau 2012.

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