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ISSUES *in* CONTEXTUALIZATION

Issues in Contextualization

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CHAPTER 1

THE INCARNATION AND INSIDER MOVEMENTS

There are two major issues we want to deal with in the pages that follow. They are *communication* and *expression*. Much of what is dealt with here is communication. Jesus came to communicate God and in the process to show us how to communicate God. The other main topic is expression. I will contend that our model for the expression of the gospel is also Jesus. An insider movement starts with incarnational communication and continues inside a society as an insider activity expressed in insider ways to honor Jesus.

To attempt to understand the implications of insider strategy I present the following discussion of incarnational communication in culture.

HALFWAY BRIDGE COMMUNICATION

Years ago, I was riding with a friend in an American city and saw what to me was a strange sight. As we drove along a river, I noticed a bridge that went halfway across the river. I asked my companion if I was seeing correctly. He assured me that I was, and told me that the bridge was started in 1934 without a proper plan to connect it to the opposite side of the river. Construction was well on the way when the engineers realized that there was no way to connect it on the other side. Some people found the halfway bridge a good place to jump from to commit suicide. But no one could use it to get to the other side.

As I have been teaching missionaries on communication over the last fifty years or so, this picture has come to me over and over again as a way of looking at how we often attempt to communicate Christ. Whether we think of missionary communication or what goes on weekly from our pulpits, much of our communication is like that halfway bridge. We communicate in our language and concepts halfway across the communicational bridge and expect those who listen to build the other half of the bridge to understand what is being said. For many, the communicators are speaking what might be called "theologese." The listeners have to learn the language and concepts that the preacher is using in order to understand him/her, building the other half of

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the communicational bridge. On the mission field, the missionary may use words and concepts that were appropriate at home but are known on the field only to those who have been to seminary and learned the meanings that those concepts are intended to convey. The schooled ones may be able to build the other half of the communicational bridge, but the common people may not have a clue what the communicator has said.

I once listened to a prominent American pastor speak in Japan (through an interpreter) to an all-Japanese audience. But his illustrations were all taken from the American context, and they could only make sense to an American or one who had spent time in the United States. These were the same illustrations he had used many times in the States in a set speech. But he lost his listeners—except, perhaps, for those few who had traveled to the US. Only this small group was able to build the other half of the communicational bridge and understand what my friend was saying.

When we communicate in a culture other than our own, it is possible not only for our words to make no sense, but for our very lives to hinder effective presentations of our message.

THE GOSPEL IS A PERSON MESSAGE

We lose a lot when we reduce the gospel to words. The usual translation of John 1:1, "In the beginning was the Word . . . ," misleads us into a kind of static, word-oriented concept of God's communication. How much better does J. B. Phillips get across the truth of the dynamic character of our faith when he translates John 1:1 as "At the beginning, God expressed Himself." We then recognize the fact that God wrapped that message in a Person, a real live human being who Himself *is* the Message from God. Jesus showed us both the message and the method. *The message is a Person; the method is incarnation, insider communication.* Jesus not only came, He *be*came. Indeed, He became so much an insider that many did not even notice His presence. Or they noticed Him but would not take His presence seriously. Or they discounted Him because he spoke a non-prestigious dialect (Galilean Aramaic).

Communication specialists tell us that *the communicator is the major part of his or her message.* Following this principle, God's supreme method of communication is in the incarnation of the *person* of Jesus Christ. Incarnation focuses on the communicator becoming a part of the culture of the people he or she seeks to win. *Incarnation is by definition, then, an insider approach to getting God's message across.*

Jesus is the Message. When He is communicated properly as an insider, several things come into focus.

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A FOCUS ON FAITH, NOT RELIGION

Incarnational, insider movements focus on the essence of what it means to follow Jesus. We take our faith, not simply our religion. The underlying fact here is that the term "religion" refers to a cultural thing. It connotes a system made up of such things as belief in God or spirits, rituals used to express an allegiance to that God or spirit, doctrines, often a holy book or books, plus a whole lot of other cultural items and beliefs.

Religions, because they are cultural things, can be *adapted* to new cultures. Adaptation is an external thing resulting in smaller or larger changes in the forms (including rituals) of the religion. *A religion cannot be contextualized, only adapted.*

Biblical faith, however, can be *contextualized,* a process in which appropriate meanings may be carried by quite different forms in various cultures. The reason it can be contextualized is the fact that none of the cultural forms in terms of which the essential gospel is expressed are required. All of the cultural forms employed in the expression of Christianity in one culture can be substituted in another culture because essentially the biblical relationship is a faith, not a religion.

In contrast, each religion requires some cultural structures borrowed from the original expression of that religion. Islam requires the Arabic language, pilgrimage to Mecca, praying in a certain posture and in a certain direction, recitation of a statement of allegiance, etc. Buddhism requires cultural elements from the country of origin, as do Hinduism and Shinto. Only animism does not require the same cultural elements wherever it is practiced. Animism can be contextualized and frequently is.

A faith, though it lies beneath the cultural structuring of a religion, is something quite different from a religion. A religion involves one in activities of various kinds. The essence of faith, though, is the commitment to something or someone, a commitment that may or may not be religious. When talking about a faith, it is the commitment or allegiance that is in focus, not the cultural structuring in terms of which that commitment is expressed. Most faiths can be expressed through a variety of cultural structures.

The faith commitment can be to an idea, such as communism or evolution, or it can be to a person, such as the leader of a movement or Jesus Christ. A faith can even be an allegiance to a cultural entity such as an organization or even a religion. But that faith can be expressed in many different ways. It can, therefore, be as differently expressed from culture to culture as any belief or commitment.

The gospel requires none of the original cultural forms. That's how it has historically been "captured" by the West and can be considered Western even though its origin is not Western. *The biblical way is an allegiance, a relationship, from which flow a series of meanings that are intended to be expressed through the cultural forms of any culture.*

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These forms are intended, then, to be inside, chosen for their appropriateness to convey proper biblical meanings in the receptors' contexts.

Jesus spoke of our faith as a seed, not a tree. We have often taken full-grown trees to other peoples, trees that were at home in their native soil but are out of place in the new context. What Jesus meant by picturing our faith as a seed is that the tree or bush that springs from that seed does not look like it came from another place. It is chosen to serve inside, nourished by the new soil, the new water. It is meant to look like it belongs. This is, in fact, what He Himself did in becoming an insider.

As for the differences between a religion and a faith, I offer the following chart (to be discussed further in chapter 6).

A RELIGION (STRUCTURAL)	A FAITH (PERSONAL)
Structural, Cultural/Worldview	Personal/Group/Social
Rituals, Rules	Relationship
Beliefs	Commitment/Allegiance
Perform	Obey
Adapt	Contextualize
Borrow/Accept/Imitate (e.g., worship forms)	Create/Grow (e.g., new cultural forms)
"One size fits all"	Cultural varieties of expression
Like a tree that must be transplanted	Like a seed that gets planted
Like a loaf of bread that gets passed on	Like yeast that gets put in raw dough
An Institution	A Fellowship

TABLE 1.1. A religion vs. a faith

INSIDER MOVEMENTS ARE APPROPRIATE

An insider movement is a movement that is by definition a culturally appropriate expression of a commitment. It is "inside," appropriate to the culture in which it is planted rather than to some outside culture. The judgment as to whether a movement is appropriate or not is to be made by insiders. So such a movement is to be expressed in terms that are understandable by insiders who have not become bicultural through being able to function in another culture.

In Japan (and many other places) it is easy to identify Christian church buildings. They look like they have been imported from eighteenth-century America. They don't look Japanese. Nor do they look to the Japanese like power places. In a Japanese context it is required that a place that purports to serve a religious function look like a

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place of power. If the buildings are to be interpreted as representing the High God and understood as power places, they will need to be built in Japanese style with something that looks to Japanese people like a shrine (a spiritual power source) on the premises.

Now we know that people regularly adopt foreign customs. One or two or a few customs can easily be borrowed from another culture without upsetting things. But if people need to adopt a hundred poorly understood foreign customs to practice a new faith, the situation is quite different. Then the religion feels foreign to insiders. It's as if they were learning to follow a foreign Christ and to speak their language with a foreign accent.

Many who follow Christ in our day have converted to a Western cultural religion as well as to Jesus. They may be called "*Western* Christians," since they have adopted a Western form of the Christian religion, the religion of the visiting carriers of Christianity. A savvy missiologist of yesteryear looking at this problem asked, If Africans poured their full-fledged Africanness into their Christian expression, would the rest of the world even recognize it as being Christian (Taylor 1963)? Perhaps not. There are some African movements to Christ that present just such a challenge to us Westerners.

I believe that *our expression of Christ-centered faith should be as different from culture to culture as our cultures are from each other.* When this is not the case, I believe we are insulting the God who came all the way from heaven to be an insider, to reach others who would accept the faith and express it in insider terms and practices.

OUR MESSAGE IS A PERSON MESSAGE

We tend to think of our message as it is formulated in words. We may even back up that understanding of the gospel by referring to the traditional translation of John 1:1. But seeing the message as primarily a word message is a problem.

Communication theory tells us that *a person is himself or herself the major part of any message he or she brings.* Communication depends on relationships. The message, then, involves the content of the message wrapped in the relationship between the communicator and his or her audience. The relational part of the communication interpenetrates every part of what is said and done, influencing powerfully every aspect of the way the event is interpreted by the receptors.

The scary thing here is that each of us *is* our message, and how we relate to those who receive messages from us is a crucial part of the message we seek to put across. How sad it is when we hear of missionaries who define their ministries in terms of words or tasks. They have been influenced by our society to "wordify" the message. Much of our theological training is word, proposition, and information oriented.

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