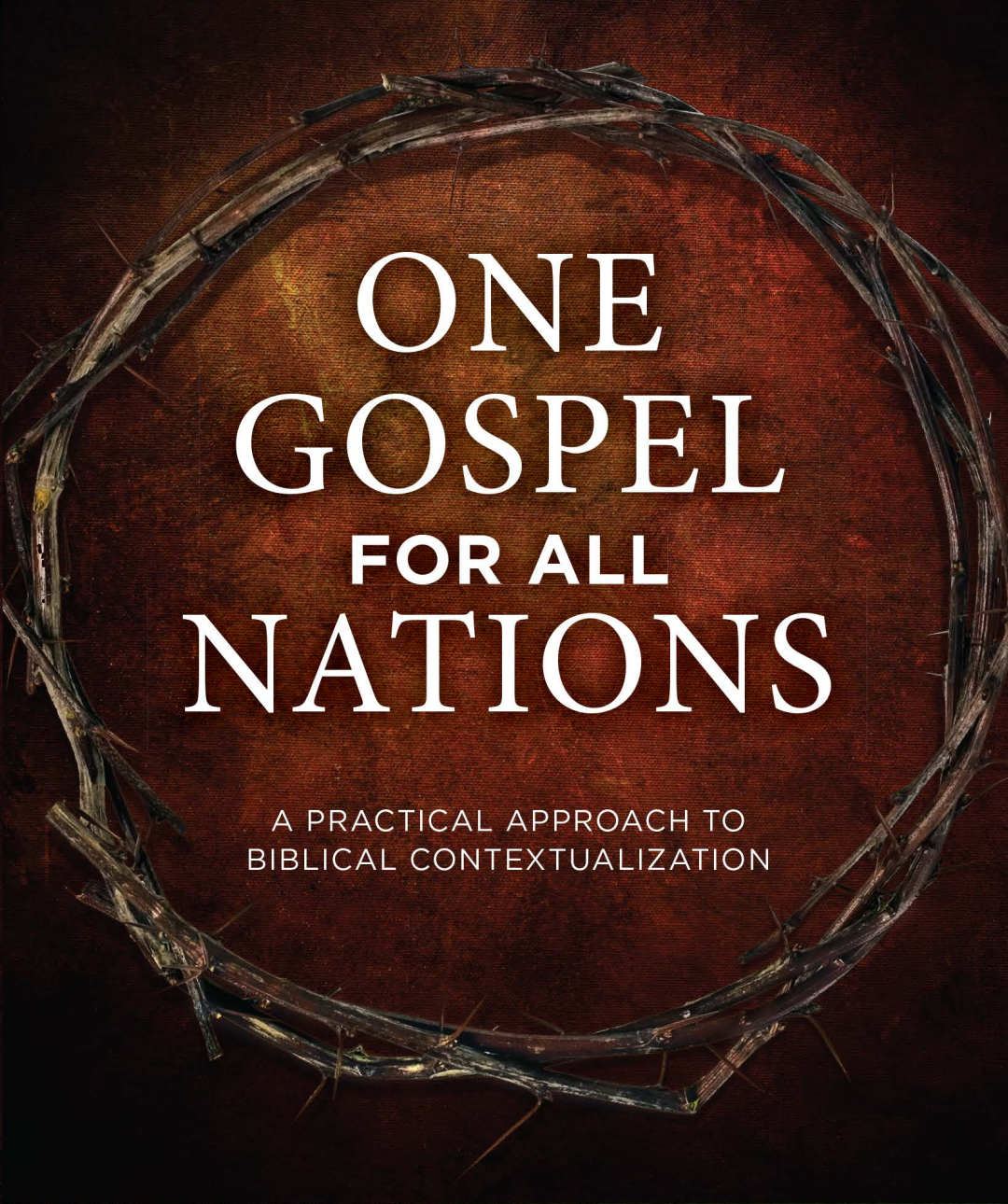


ONE GOSPEL FOR ALL NATIONS

A PRACTICAL APPROACH TO BIBLICAL CONTEXTUALIZATION

BRAD VAUGHN

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Context Is King: A New Perspective on Contextualization

I once heard New Testament scholar N. T. Wright retell a conversation he had with his wife upon finding out that he was writing his book called *Simply Jesus*. At that point, he had already written a few books about Jesus. Wright explains more fully:

> When my wife knew I was writing this book, she said, "But you've written two or three books on Jesus already."
> And I said, "Well yes, that was a little while ago."
> She said, "Well, has Jesus changed during that time?"
> I thought for a minute; I said, "Well no, but *I* have."[3]

Wright stumbles onto a truth few have grasped, much less applied: the Bible's original meaning does not change, *but we do*. As result, we will notice new things as we mature or our personal circumstances change. It also means that we naturally either overlook or underemphasize certain aspects of the text that lie outside our common experience. The situation is further complicated when we imagine the many legitimate perspectives that other people might bring to the text.

Perhaps someone might complain by saying it doesn't matter what any person thinks; instead, we just need to start with Scripture. We should ask, "What does the Bible mean?" In fact, even this question is less straightforward than it seems. In using that question, a person could be asking, "What is the

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author's *meaning* in his original context?" On the other hand, a person might intend to ask, "What is the *significance* of the passage for us today?"

These two questions are different. The first one concerns interpretation; the second has to do with implications for the reader. There is a difference between an interpretation and its implications. Many people normally think about contextualization as nothing more than the latter. Once we have a right interpretation, we can get on with the business of contextualization—figuring out the correct application or illustration to help people obey the gospel.

All this talk about the reader and application may overlook something more basic. It is not always so easy to figure out the author's original meaning. Just like any letter or book, there are levels of meaning to a given biblical text. Interpreting the Bible is not always about having the right or wrong answer; one also must discern varying shades of emphasis. These observations should serve as a warning. When talking about contextualization, we can quickly get ahead of ourselves.

We never want to make interpreting and applying the Bible more difficult than it really is; however, I do not think that is the issue we face here. Truthfully, we may suffer the opposite problem—we may actually underestimate the challenge before us. The idea that interpreting and applying the Bible could get any harder will make some readers want to close this book right away. I encourage you not to do that. Be assured that denying the problem doesn't make things any easier; it will only lead to more difficulties. The problem is not going away anytime soon.

This complex dynamic is exactly what contextualization is about. Contextualization is concerned with the truth in the concrete. Yet, it will take something of a counterintuitive approach to help ease the tension between text and contexts. Contextualization takes a big-picture view of a situation to get at the underlying dynamics at work. At first, contextualization appears too abstract, lacking much practical value. In reality, contextualization reflects the problem it tries to solve. Although it is full of complexity and nuance, contextualization involves finding practical solutions for specific problems and places. It brings about change by helping people see things from multiple angles. In every area of life, there are few things more practical than perspective. Greater perspective reveals to us more of the truth. As a result, we gain humility and wisdom to face reality.

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For the moment, let's not get ahead of ourselves. Understanding the concept of contextualization is the first step and is a formidable task in itself. Learning to do contextualization can initially feel overwhelming. It's like trying to discern the story being told by a piece of symphony music while your child whispers questions in your right ear and your boss continues to send text messages to the phone in your left hand about the big meeting you have the next day. This chapter (and the book) takes a serious and practical look at contextualization. When possible, it's best to keep things simple. So we begin with the question, "What is contextualization?"

What Is Contextualization?

The word "contextualization" inspires two opposite kinds of responses. On the one hand, many people seem to agree that contextualization is important. One increasingly hears people even say that contextualization is essential and necessary. On the other hand, there are others who are less enthusiastic about the whole idea. The reasons vary. A biblical scholar once asked me why the fuss over contextualization, "Why can't we just go right from the text to application?" Of course some missionary practitioners scratch their heads, readily admitting that they are not quite sure what contextualization even means.

It is understandable that most definitions of "contextualization" are rather general. To some degree or another, contextualization involves multiple cultural and historical contexts as well as a plethora of academic disciplines. The sheer variety within the topic makes defining contextualization a feat in itself. Nevertheless we can hardly apply an idea when we only have a vague notion of it in our heads.

This chapter attempts to bring some needed clarity to the conversation. It lays the foundation for doing contextualization by both explaining its meaning and its significance. Without rehashing the various books and articles that have been written on contextualization, this chapter identifies a number of points about which evangelicals can agree. In addition, I hope to advance the discussion by identifying some areas that have not received adequate attention. In so doing, readers can see clearly why contextualization concerns more than simply cultural "relevance." Contextualization is not merely an important additive to mission theory; it is inevitable. In the same way architectural plans

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determine the design for a building, so also contextualization is an essential element of mission strategy.

Evangelical Views on Contextualization[4]

How have evangelicals defined "contextualization"? David Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen's *Contextualization* is a standard evangelical book on the subject. Their definition echoes the view of many others. They write,

> Christian contextualization can be thought of as the attempt to communicate the message of the person, works, Word, and will of God in a way that is faithful to God's revelation, especially as it is put forth in the teachings of Holy Scripture, and that is meaningful to respondents in their respective cultural and existential contexts.[5]

They further emphasize the point that the gospel does not change; rather, contextualization is concerned with discerning its implications for a given culture. In particular, contextualization seeks ways to communicate and apply the biblical text.[6]

When we look at other writers, certain patterns emerge. First of all, they consistently attempt to define the relationship between the Bible and culture. As one person succinctly put it, "We understand contextualization as the various processes by which a local church integrates the Gospel message (the 'text') with its local culture (the 'context')."[7] Kevin Greeson says contextualization tries "to adapt the style, form and language of the Christian faith and message to the culture of the people one is seeking to reach."[8] Scott Moreau summarizes the most common approach among evangelicals, "There is a core message of universal truth which must be translated into each new cultural setting in a way that remains faithful to the core. Because the content of that message is absolute and authoritative, the contextualizer's task is to change the form of the message."[9] In short, the message in Scripture is constant; however, its presentation depends on the culture. Somehow, unchanging truth is conveyed through any number of flexible forms.

Second, authors repeatedly narrow their focus on communication or application. David Sills plainly states, "Contextualization is simply the process of making the gospel understood."[10] Moreau's summary reflects the opinion

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of many others when he says, "Contextualization is the process whereby Christians adapt the forms, content, and praxis of the Christian faith so as to communicate it to the minds and hearts of people with other cultural backgrounds."[11] For many, this understanding of contextualization follows naturally from an evangelical view of Scripture. If God's self-revelation is without error and transcends culture, then contextualization should not change the meaning of the Bible itself. Accordingly, many attempts to contextualize the gospel center on communication "bridges" and "redemptive analogies."[12] Thus, evangelicals typically regard contextualization primarily as a task concerning the communication and application of timeless truths.

Do We Need a New Perspective?

So what is the problem? Why do we need a new perspective on contextualization?

A growing number of thinkers have challenged the typical way of looking at contextualization, especially the relationship between theology and culture. Lesslie Newbigin highlights a fundamental problem in the way people often separate gospel and culture. Accordingly, he asserts, "We must start with the basic fact that there is no such thing as a pure gospel if by that is meant something which is not embodied in a culture."[13] More recently, Baker and Dean Flemming distinguish contextualization from mere communication, arguing that contextualization "touches on *how we do theology*,"[14] such that one's cultural context actually shapes the message.[15]

As radical as these comments may sound at first to some, they are not isolated objections. Rather, they reflect the growing concerns of many Christian theologians and missionaries. In essence, some worry that we inadvertently compromise the gospel by abstracting it from culture. Consequently, we settle for a simple "kernel" of truth.[16] By comparison, consider Christ's incarnation. We see the divine and human united in Christ's nature. Although Christ in deity transcends culture, he revealed himself in a specific historical and cultural setting. Without compromise, Jesus' humanity expressed his deity. This is how we know Christ—concretely, not merely as an abstraction. Even in resurrection, he is known as Christ in bodily form. In the same way, we understand God's revelation in Scripture through a particular cultural lens.

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