

Contextualization in the Late-Modern West

Or, How Did I Become a Christian?

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/contextualization-late-modern-west>

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I didn't embrace the Christian faith until I was on my own in college. Growing up in a pastor's home, I was never certain about where my family's faith ended and mine began, which led to me walking away from Christianity. (Maybe I called myself a Christian not because it was true but because of my parents?)

But at college, when a campus minister met with me regularly and showed me the radical nature of grace that could only be found in Christianity, I believed and truly owned my faith.

Now that I'm a minister myself, I face awkward moments when people find out Tim Keller was my father. They'll say, "Wow! If I could've had Tim Keller as my dad, I would have believed a lot sooner" or "If I had your dad as a resource, my child would be a believer." They're then surprised when I tell them I didn't become a Christian until college. They unknowingly assumed that since my father was known to craft a "perfect" gospel presentation, and I heard this presentation regularly as a child, I must have been a Christian my whole life.

Boy were they wrong.

This assumption fails on two levels. First, theologically: The Holy Spirit doesn't respond only to well-crafted and well-articulated gospel presentations. When we think he does, we're unknowingly believing salvation comes through the perfect gospel presenter and not by grace.

Second, this view doesn't account for how our experiences and cultural contexts may make it hard for us to understand key elements of the faith. For instance, imagine you're having a conversation with someone who has a terrible relationship with his father, and that person lives in a culture that says the purpose of life is to find happiness in material goods. It doesn't matter how perfect your gospel presentation might be. That person is going to struggle with the idea that God is a loving Father and that the point of the life isn't about the acquisition of things. A person's experiences and context affect how he hears the gospel.

My own father was loving, but other factors in my life still made it hard to hear the gospel while I was a child. As a result, a young minister fresh out of seminary was able to make the gospel come alive to me. The answer, independent of how the Holy Spirit operates ([John 3](#)), is that context matters. I could hear the gospel from a stranger but not my father

because that minister made the gospel relatable and understandable in a way I hadn't heard before.

The big fancy word for this is "contextualization," which I define as the process of telling people God's truth in the most understandable and persuasive way possible without compromising that truth. It's the process of translation whereby we relate, bridge, present, communicate, and make the truth of the gospel not just clear but real. It isn't about giving people what they want; it's about giving God's answers (which people may not want!) to questions they're asking in forms they can comprehend.

I want to suggest a model of contextualizing the gospel today. But before I do, it's crucial to recognize how culture works if we're going to enter into people's lives, backgrounds, stories, and narratives with the hope of the gospel.

How Culture Works as an Answer Key

Culture isn't just a society's customs and traditions. Every culture also answers life's biggest questions for its members: *What am I here for? What's wrong with this world, and what will put it right?* Most people in any given society don't ask these questions, because they're already answered for us. They're conveyed in the stories we live and breathe.

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For instance, Eastern cultures say our desires are at the core of what went wrong in the world, and what will put us right is eliminating desire. Or consider the story of today's Western secular culture, which says we came from nothing and when we die we go to nothing, but in between we can have significance. What's wrong with the world is that people are trying to control us (let's ignore the irony that this claim may be used to control you), so what will put things right is to live free, follow your heart, and determine your own life. Notice these cultural stories have radically different answers to what's wrong with us and what the solution is.

What about Christianity? It says humans are made in God's image and, therefore, every culture to some degree will reflect the knowledge of God, even if it's suppressed ([Rom. 1:18](#)). However, Christianity also says every culture to some degree will be distorted by sin and brokenness as it demonizes something finite as the problem and elevates something finite as the solution.

If every culture is good but fallen, we can't simply evaluate more traditional, conservative cultures as being more "biblical," and liberal, secular cultures as being more immoral and evil. Conservative cultures often elevate the family, the collective, or the past to an absolute value, leading to moralistic and xenophobic idolatries. Liberal cultures elevate the individual and progress to an absolute value, leading to individualistic idols. Yet both the communal value of the family and the worth of the individual come from the Bible. This means both cultures are mixtures of darkness and light.

If every culture is good but fallen, and no culture is neutral, this means telling people God's truth in the most understandable way without compromise is going to look different to different people. The questions a Muslim is asking are different from the questions a secular humanist is asking, which are again different from those asked by someone raised in a Christian home. We'll need to tailor our approach so we can be both understood and persuasive.

With conservative cultures that elevate the family or collective, we need to speak to their longing for home and family while challenging the moralistic assumptions that lead to inhospitality. With liberal cultures that have a deep skepticism toward traditional institutions because they've idolized individual autonomy and self-discovery, we need to speak to their longing for authenticity and freedom while challenging the individualistic assumptions that lead to loneliness.

We're All Contextualizing

But is the desire to contextualize the gospel just code for compromise? Shouldn't we state the gospel plainly? These questions fail to acknowledge that everyone comes from a particular culture, and what's "plain" in one culture might be opaque in another. Missionaries see this every day when they go from one culture to another—what's presented well in one context doesn't work in another. There's no universal, decontextualized form or expression of Christianity. Each church has, to some degree, brought elements of culture uncritically (that is, unprocessed by the gospel) into its form of Christianity.

Individualistic cultures miss out on Christianity's communal aspects. Authoritarian cultures miss out on the freedom-of-conscience and grace aspects. And those in a different culture can usually see and point out what's missing in your cultural expression of Christianity.

In other words, *every* expression and embodiment of Christianity is contextualized. If you say, "I don't want to contextualize," you'll end up pushing a particular contextual view of Christianity unknowingly. There's no such thing as a universal, ahistorical expression. Jesus didn't come to earth as a generalized being; by becoming human, he became a particular human in a particular time and place. He was male, Jewish, and working class. So the minute we begin to minister, we too must "incarnate" even as Jesus did.

Moreover, Christian practices must have a biblical form or shape and also a cultural form or shape. For example, the Bible clearly directs us to use music to praise God, but as soon as we choose what music to use, we enter a culture. Isaac Watts hymns we consider "classic" in our day would have been labeled "contemporary" in his.

As soon as we choose a language to communicate the gospel, or a particular level of emotional expressiveness, or even a sermon illustration, we're moving toward the social context of some people and away from the social context of others. The fact that I preach my sermons in English contextualizes the message because it allows some people to hear the gospel while others cannot. If I quote *The Simpsons* and *Family Guy* in a sermon, some will hear the message better than others because of their cultural context.

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At Pentecost, everyone heard Peter's sermon in his or her language and dialect. But since Pentecost, we can never be "all things to all people" at the same time. Accepting this truth isn't relativism; it's honestly acknowledging, [as Don Carson put it](#), that "no truth which human beings may articulate can ever be articulated in a culture-transcending way—but that does not mean that the truth thus articulated does not transcend culture."

Contextualization is translating the timeless, true gospel into various languages, cultures, stories, and imaginations. You're doing this whether or not you're intentional and thoughtful about it.

We must be mindful of the dangers of over- or underadapting the message. The danger of overadaptation is that we become so eager to speak to the stories of a particular culture that we dilute the gospel's challenging aspects. Underadaptation fails to connect with the questions under all our stories.

For example, if we take a good theme (e.g., the freedom of the individual in the West) and allow it to be an idol (e.g., individualism) by overadapting, we'll have a church that can't do pastoral accountability or discipline. On the other hand, if we underadapt to a culture, it means we've accepted our own culture's idols without truly listening to the needs of the culture around us. To the degree a ministry is over- or underadapted, it loses the power to transform that culture.

Method for Contextualization Today

If there's no "culture-free" way of sharing the gospel, how should we go about contextualizing? We can do this most faithfully, understandably, and persuasively through affirming, challenging, and retelling our culture's basic storylines and cultural narratives.

What's a story or narrative? It consists of answers to three questions:

1. How are things supposed to be? What am I here for? (Implied in every story.)
2. What has gone wrong?
3. What will make things right?

It ought to be our goal to know our friends, our neighbors, and our cities and areas so well that we know the cultural stories around us. What makes the gospel unique is that its storyline—its answers to these questions—can encompass and complete every other culture's storylines. Whereas other cultures identify some created thing as being the problem and another created thing as the solution that will make things right, Christianity says the root of all problems is sin and the ultimate solution is Jesus.

Consider our culture's narrative of finding your identity in being successful. This story says you'll only be happy if you're successful—prosperous, popular—in life. It idolizes the good values of diligence and achievement, and it demonizes laziness. The problem with this story is that if you're successful, it ends up not being as fulfilling as you thought. Comedian

Jim Carrey once [said](#), “I think everybody should get rich and famous . . . so they can see that that’s not the answer.” If you never get the success you want in life, you’re crushed.

The gospel *affirms* this narrative’s desire for hard work as a good, but it also *challenges* it by saying no amount of production or value you create ultimately can give you the confidence and security you need. It then *retells* this story by showing how, in Christianity, work is good for us but isn’t a way to earn an identity. Rather, we can work as a way to live because we have an identity rooted in Christ. Instead of having to work to get acceptance, in Jesus we know we’re already accepted and loved. We work from a completely different motivation.

Beauty of the Christian Story

The Christian story of creation, fall, and redemption gives us not only the resources to make sense of things but also the ability to appreciate the truth embedded in all cultural narratives.

First, think about creation. Christianity says everything is *good*. God made the world and it was good. Nothing was evil in the beginning. (Even in Middle-earth, Sauron [wasn’t always evil](#).) If everything was once good, we can look for the remnants of that goodness in everything while having wonder and curiosity about all things, knowing that in whatever form we find them, their origin was good. Pornography is the goodness of sex gone wrong. Murder is the goodness of agency and authority gone wrong.

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Second, Christianity says everything is *fallen*. No part of the world is unaffected by sin. No political party, reason, emotion, or education isn’t fallen in some sense, and as helpful as these things might be, they cannot function as “the answer” because they themselves are broken. This should slow our acceptance of any ideology or solution we think will work, as we know it’s marred in some way, and it should keep us from being surprised when we find brokenness in ourselves and others. Every idol we worship, and everything we raise up as an answer—be it power, approval, comfort, or control—cannot be worshiped as ultimate, as good as these created things may be.

Finally, Christianity says everything is going to be *redeemed*. In the last chapters of Revelation at the end of time, heaven comes down to earth to redeem all things. The hopes of any incomplete cultural story will be complete and fulfilled in this story. In the meantime, if everything was once good, we have compassion for all fallen things, knowing we’re fallen as well. At the same time, if everything is fallen, we don’t throw ourselves into any partial story. The Christian, then, can appreciate the truth in any worldview while seeing it as incomplete.

When we contextualize, we must show the destructiveness of making something besides God central, while pointing to the true and better story found in Jesus. [As my dad wrote](#), “Christ fought against the powers of sin and death. He paid the price, made the sacrifice,

and bore the punishment we deserve." In Jesus, all the mini-stories we try to live out incompletely are fulfilled.

When we share the gospel with someone, we aren't saying, "My story is better than your story." Rather, good gospel communication and contextualization says, "Come see how Jesus completes your story better than you can." Lamin Sanneh said in [*Translating the Message*](#) that most antispiritual secular stories come to Africa and tell them their African experiences are invalid. However, the Christian story takes the indigenous African story and doesn't belittle or decimate it but rather completes it in Christ's finished work.

Sanneh [*wrote*](#) elsewhere, "Christianity helped Africans to become renewed Africans, not remade Europeans." This is the final goal of contextualization: to help people see how their deepest longings and hopes are fulfilled in Christ. Regardless of their backgrounds, their experiences, their questions and doubts, they can find satisfying answers in the gospel. This means contextualization is no mere technique but rather an act of love. It's actively asking how we speak the gospel's timeless truth in languages and stories that will resonate with others.

Like missionaries, we must study the stories around us, affirming the good, critiquing the fallen, and showing how those stories' longings are best answered in Jesus. We contextualize whether we know it or not, so let's become better versed in our city's and culture's narratives, connecting God's truth with those who need to hear it.