



WHAT IS CONTEXTUALIZATION

The process of telling people God's truth in the most understandable and persuasive way possible without compromising the truth.

GOD'S TRUTH: The process of becoming a disciple and the process of making disciples, necessitates God's truth.

And Jesus came and said to them, All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age (Matthew 28:18-20)

We must be taught God's truth to become a Jesus follower and we must teach God's truth so that others might become Jesus' followers.

How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!" But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us (Romans 10:14-16)

The entire Christian life is centered then around God's truth being continually taught to us and taught by us. For apart from the truth of God's Word, there is no salvation or sanctification.

Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth (John 17:17)

How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word. With my whole heart I seek you; let me not wander from your commandments! I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you (Psalm 119:9-11)

UNDERSTANDABLE: Truth must always be communicated in a manner that is comprehensible to a particular audience. Being understood gets to the most basic use of language, culture, maturity, and setting. Even the most profound truth must be understood to have effect.



Jesus answered him, are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things (John 3:10)

Therefore, for God's truth to impact the heart it must be shared in such a way that can be understood by the hearer. ¹

TABLE DISCUSSION: When was the last time you heard someone teach or preach God's Word but you couldn't understand it? What made their teaching difficult to comprehend? What could have made it more understandable for you?

PERSUASIVE: God's truth is not merely for informing the mind but for the transformation of the mind by faith.

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect (Romans 12:1-2)

Therefore, when communicating God's truth we must not just impart information or engage in debate.

And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God (1 Corinthians 2:3-5)

Timeless gospel principles are a call to action – a call to repent and believe time and again. The process of being a disciple and making disciples necessitates continually being persuaded by the *betterness* of God's truth time and again.

TABLE DISCUSSION: Who has God used in your life to persuade you with the Word of God? What made their persuasion affective in your heart & mind?

WITHOUT COMPROMISING: Contextualizing God's truth must never result in comprising God's truth (2 Samuel 15-17 tells us of a wise counselor named Ahithophel, who compromised the truth based on contextualization). We must never acquiesce to the culture or contextualize to please men. However, we must carefully discern the culture so that we can speak God's truth rightly to whatever

¹ Never forget – the Spirit of God is the ultimate One who does the work of illumination but He has chosen to use the normal means of communication to declare His truth.



cultural moment we are in. The ultimate goal is that we are conformed to the Word of God, not the Word of God conforming to us.

CONTEXTUALIZATION: The process of telling people God's truth in the most understandable and persuasive way possible without compromising the truth.

A CAUTION: The Bible super-naturally confronts our fallenness and points all people to their ultimate need for a Savior that is outside themselves, not within themselves. *This truth is by definition offensive* (1 Corinthians 1:18). Contextualization must never remove the offense of the gospel.

EXAMPLES OF CONTEXTUALIZATION GONE WRONG

#1: What if you are in a culture that is matriarchal (where women lead in the home and society). It would be tempting to change what the Word says about male headship in the home or in the church. This would make the *truth* more palatable, but it would be a form of compromise.

#2: What if you are in a culture that is patriarchal (where men lead with a heavy hand). It would be tempting to use the Bible to allow men to be harsh, demanding leaders. However, this would be a compromise since God's Word clearly values women and honors them uniquely in the home and society.

#3: What if you are in a culture that is poly-theistic (meaning that there are many gods). It would be tempting to allow people to believe in Jesus while also believing in their other gods. However, this would compromise the clear teaching of John 14:6.

#4: What if you are in a culture that claims sexual identity is your identity. It would be tempting to love and affirm people without calling them to repentance. However, this would compromise what the Word says about human identity and our ultimate identity being found in Christ alone.

TABLE DISCUSSION: How have you subtly compromised God's truth for the sake of contextualization?



WHY WE MUST CONTEXTUALIZE GOD'S TRUTH

Because we love all people, we are committed to speaking timeless gospel truths directly to the culture that will both make sense to and impact the hearer.

LOVE ALL PEOPLE: God's love has been poured into our hearts.

And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us (Romans 5:5)

And so we love all people with a gospel-empowered love.

By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another (John 13:35)

This gospel-enabled love is what compels Christ-followers to cross the street and show compassion to their neighbors. It is also what compels them to go to other cultures and lands so that more might become right with God by faith in Jesus. Christ's love caused him to be the ultimate example of contextualization (i.e. leaving heaven, taking on human form, suffering human weaknesses, etc.). How much more should Christ-like compassion propel us towards contextualizing the gospel so that more might know, love, and follow Jesus!

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing (1 Corinthians 13:1-3)

SPEAKING TIMELESS GOSPEL TRUTH: Once we have discerned the Main Argument of the text and once we have connected that argument to the rest of God's big story – it is imperative that we speak that timeless gospel truth to others (for how will others ever know and follow Jesus better unless we speak God's truth to them). Life on life discipleship demands modeling the life of faith, but it also demands clearly speaking God's timeless gospel truths into all of life.



For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ (2 Corinthians 2:17)

DIRECTLY TO THE CULTURE: Whereas the Timeless Gospel Truth does not change, how it is spoken into a particular culture must be carefully nuanced. Truth that is not nuanced to a particular culture will miss the mark of hitting the heart.

TABLE DISCUSSION: At your table, read Acts 17:22-32. How did Paul tailor the timeless gospel truth for the particular audience in Athens?

TABLE DISCUSSION: At your table, read Acts 3:17-26. How did Peter tailor the timeless gospel truth for the particular audience in Jerusalem?

TABLE DISCUSSION: Imagine that you have a Hindu and a Muslim co-worker. How would you need to nuance the gospel differently to effectively bring God's truth to their heart?

MAKE SENSE: In order for the heart and mind to be effected by God's truth, it must be understood. This is the idea of making sense. Contextualization is crossing the bridge to understand the person you are talking to, so that you can communicate God's truth in such a way that makes sense to the hearer.

For he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes (Matthew 7:29)

But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking (Acts 6:10)

IMPACT: For the goal of God's Word is not information but transformation. God's Word is always meant to persuade the mind and affect the will. We are literally arguing from the text of Scripture – showing how God's truth should change their lives by faith. Of course – the Holy Spirit is ultimately the One who presses the truth into the heart, but we are called to persuade others with it.

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil. Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others. But what we are known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience. We are not commending ourselves to you again but giving you cause to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast about outward appearance and not about what is in the heart (2 Corinthians 5:10-12)



THE HOW TO'S OF CONTEXTUALIZATION

GENERAL PRINCIPLE: EXEGETE THE AUDIENCE

In order to rightly communicate God's Timeless Gospel Truths, you must rightly exegete your audience. If you wrongly exegete your audience, you might deliver truth (which God could use) but it will not fit the occasion and therefore will not be understood by your audience. Just like Christ incarnated himself (took on human form, became a Jewish man, spoke the common language of the people, etc.), so we must be willing to learn and become all things to all men that we might reach some (1 Corinthians 9:22).

A POST CHRISTIAN SOCIETY

The majority of America today is a post-Christian society. People are no longer sympathetic to religion nor do they see religion as a generally good thing. They do not think in categories like objective truth, morality, consequence, etc. Majority culture is skeptical when it comes to organized religion. People are generally ignorant of the Bible – without a framework for sin, who Jesus is, believing in life after death, etc. When sharing God's truth in a post-Christian culture you cannot make any assumptions when it comes to people's knowledge about God, religion, the Bible, etc.

A RELIGIOUS SOCIETY

In a religious society, people are generally sympathetic to religion. The majority of people attend church, even if it is differing faith systems. They are comfortable in conversations about faith and religion. They are generally sympathetic to the Bible, even if they don't believe it or if they explain it differently. Conversations about religion will typically be welcomed and engaging, even if it is with someone of a differing religious ideology. Sharing God's truth in a religious society is often easier, but it requires the careful definition and nuancing of terms biblically. When this does not happen, assumptions will be made that you have fundamental agreements when that is not the case (for example - when talking to a devout catholic or mormon, terms will be similar but definitions will be massively different).

In a religious society, you might have common ground when it comes to politics or morality, but that can be dangerous. Due to these similarities, you might get along better with your non-Christian, religious neighbor. However, this might make it even harder to call your neighbor to repent and believe in Jesus (since you have so many areas of cultural agreement).



CROSS-CULTURAL CONTEXTUALIZATION

Even in a single community (like our own), we have a variety of cultures. Majority culture is often ignorant of these cross-cultural components. Whereas minority culture is well aware of the differences. If we are going to effectively disciple one another, it is imperative that we learn one another's cultures so that we bring the right truth to the right moment. Not only that – cross-cultural contextualization takes humility and discernment because we intuitively apply the Word within our own cultures and we can assume our application of the Word onto other cultures.

In a highly missional context – it is even more crucial to be a cross-cultural learner. Biblical ideas like God, father, son, forgiveness, eternity, sheep, and much more are examples of how contextualization is necessary in a missional cross-cultural context. Assuming biblical terms and cultural ideologies is a pathway to confusion.

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

#1: Read Ephesians 4:17-24 – take a few minutes to discuss what is the Main Argument for us today.

LEADERS GUIDE: Don't take too long on this question since it was worked out last week. Maybe hear from a few people and see if the group generally agrees with the main argument that has been stated.

#2: CONTEXTUALIZATION: Take the Main Argument of Ephesians 4:17-24 and teach them to the following audiences:

LEADERS GUIDE: Don't have everyone share for each scenario, but try to get everyone in the group to at least take one. Remind the group that we are goal is to make progress, not get it right. Ideally, you'd be able to hear from a few people on each scenario.

POST CHRISTIAN: a person who does not believe in ultimate truth, does not believe in the existence of a singular God, and has very little exposure to religion in general.

LEADERS GUIDE: All people fundamentally know God exists (Romans 1:20). However, this can be more of an argumentative tone at times. Help the group navigate how it is an act of love to listen and understand why a person believes what they believe. As a group, workout what timeless gospel truths could be contextualized to help this kind of person listen to and understand the gospel.



WESTERN RELIGIOUS PERSON: a person who has attended church for many years (catholic or main-line denominations) but is unclear on how to actually be right with God by faith in Christ alone.

LEADERS GUIDE: Be careful to not get into apologetics for the sake of winning an argument. The goal is not to prove someone else's religious system as flawed but rather to show them what God's Word clearly teaches and call them to believe it by faith. As a group, workout what timeless gospel truths could be contextualized to help this kind of person listen to and understand the gospel.

A YOUNG CHRISTIAN: a person who has genuinely repented and believed the gospel, but is super young in their faith and needs truth broken down simply for them to understand.

LEADERS GUIDE: The goal is increased convictions (which come from seeing truth in the Word) that lead to conformity to Christ (which comes as the Word is submitted to by faith). Without being harsh or condemning, help this younger Christian work out the life of faith according to Ephesians 4:17-24.

If the group is struggling to answer this question, add a few details to the story: For example – Bob is a new Christian and he doesn't see how sports is his functional idol. It's clear to everyone else that Bob lives for sports, but he sees it as a hobby. Without being a legalist, use the main argument of Ephesians 4:17-24 to help Bob see his heart and what the Word might compel him to do by faith).