



Ethical Implications of Contextualization

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Preaching in Babel: Telling a Fickle World of the Unchanging God

Missions exists at the boundary between the infinite and the limited, the perfectly incorruptible and the degenerate. Naturally there is a chasm between the eternally consistent nature of God and the flighty, inconstant habits of us mortals. As apostle/missionaries¹ we, through Christ, are the intermediaries between the solid rock of the unchanging God and the shifting sands of a broken and fallen humanity.

Navigating this “no-man’s land” (or rather the *Son of Man’s* land) is understandably difficult. In various places and at various times in history, the gospel has been understood differently by different groups of people. Some choose to emphasize one aspect of the gospel over others. In certain periods, for example, God’s judgment has been the dominant theme of Christian preaching and discourse. In present day America, God’s affectionate love for his children has been preached, often to the neglect of other aspects of the gospel. Humanity is the image of God broken into 10,000 rough pieces. Experience shows that although God is pure light, his light is refracted differently through the prisms of our many broken pieces. In this dizzying kaleidoscope called *Babel*, God’s message never changes, but humans can’t always (*can’t ever*) see or hear all of it.

As messengers of the gospel, we must wrestle with this question; How do we represent the unchanging God in a world of constant change where so much is in upheaval? Do we adapt the message to cater to the whims of human nature?

Ethics are Immutable, Culture is Relative

*He stood, and shook the earth;
he looked, and made the nations tremble.
The ancient mountains crumbled
and the age-old hills collapsed.
His ways are eternal.
Habakkuk 3:6*

The word ‘ethic’ and the word ‘ethnic’ share a common root, the Greek word *ethos*, meaning ‘custom,’ ‘nature’ or ‘habit’. But whereas ‘ethic’ came to mean the ideal customs of righteousness and truth, ‘*ethnos*’ describes the various sets of customs practiced by groups of people. ‘*Ethnos*’ came to mean ‘nation.’

This leads us to an important truth about reality. God’s customs, his practices, can be called ‘ethics.’² No other set of practices, no *ethnos*, ethnicity or culture, can claim righteousness, godliness and truth. The nations shake, they rise and fall, but God’s ways are eternal.

Nothing could be more solid and unchangeable in the Christian worldview than its ethics. This is because the Christian ethic is based on the very nature of God itself. Presbyterian ethicist and legal scholar George Sharswood wrote in 1890, “We may say without the slightest irreverence ... [that] God himself cannot make right wrong or wrong right. They are as eternal as the Deity... The will of God existed co-eternally with himself; and that will, infinitely perfect and incorrupt, never could do else than choose the right and refuse the wrong. Right and wrong are not created existences.”³ A sense of absolute “right” and “wrong” is central to the Christian paradigm because it is modeled on the nature of God. That which is consistent with God’s nature is defined as good; that which is not is defined as evil. The Bible consistently affirms

¹ The words ‘missionary,’ and ‘apostle’ both originally meant ‘messenger’ and come from the Latin and Greek words *missio(n-)* and *apostolos* respectively. These, in turn, come from the roots *mittere* and *apostellein* meaning ‘send forth.’

² Here we discuss *Christian* Ethics. This paper does not use the term “ethics” to refer to alternate moral systems.

³ Commentaries on the Laws of England, George Sharswood pg 29

God's nature as unchanging as in I Samuel 15:29: "He who is the glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind; for he is not a man, that he should change his mind."

Culture, on the other hand is a pitching sea. Social mores differ between different groups and, even, within a group, change radically over time. In a span of 50 years in America, homosexuality has gone from being taboo to fashionable. Honesty, once a considered a virtue in a businessman, is now reckoned a liability. In the Middle East, only 15 years ago smoking the water pipe was considered a bad habit, but 50 years before that it was considered healthy. Now children are encouraged to partake. There is nothing constant in the seas of culture, and there are no stars to navigate by. Culture is really no more than the whim of the crowd. As many have observed, the same bunch that cried "Hosanna" on Palm Sunday were crying "crucify him" by Friday.

Paul explains the situation rather well in Romans chapter one. Man became vain in his thoughts and his foolish heart was "darkened." Thus he no longer discerns right from wrong but actually begins to think that right is wrong and wrong is right. This is the state of culture. Dominated by our depravity, human cultures, without exception, promote what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness.

In stark contrast to the secular humanist view of culture as a positive, or at least morally neutral, expression of diversity, the Biblical view of culture is one of darkness. Every human is fallen, and society is nothing more than the sum of many humans. Each and every society is also fallen and bears the scars of sin.

Those who work with Biblical contextualization must constantly bear in mind that, just as in every individual, there exists in each culture a fragment of the image of God. But sin dominates and permeates every aspect of culture, just as it does every aspect of the individual. Each of us must go through a total transformation and renewal, and so must each society change. The gap is wide, but, as the Bible tells us, we are God's ambassadors.

The Need for Contextualization

Contextualization is one answer to the dilemma of Babel; it attempts to somehow address the vast diversity of human cultures, customs and world views. True communication across cultures can be difficult to achieve. Contextualization undertakes to bypass the barriers and "bridge" the gap.

Influenced by a permissive and secular academic elite, however, contextualization is too often used to promote "cultural preservation" rather than cultural and spiritual *transformation*. Contextualization can be a powerful tool to communicate the gospel, or it can be used to water down the gospel message and lessen its impact.

Three Biblical Uses for Contextualization and One Ethically Hazardous Type of Contextualization

There are at least three legitimate reasons why context needs to be taken into account. Additionally, there is one tempting but ultimately false motive to contextualize.

1. Recognizing, addressing and confronting the needs of the audience

Christ gave us a model of contextualization. He preached condemnation to the Pharisees but told the women caught in adultery "neither do I condemn you."⁴

Some individuals, before trusting Christ, are very aware of their own sin and depravity although they may seriously doubt God's love and ability to forgive them. These people do not have the same needs as those who cavalierly assert their own righteousness. The messenger of the gospel should be prepared to preach a message of God's love to the one,

⁴ Matthew 23:27 and John 8:11

while emphasizing God's justice and coming judgment to the other. To preach judgment and condemnation to the humble would be a mistake, just as it would be a mistake to preach "God loves and accepts you just the way you are" to the proud. Clearly the image of God, though obscured in all of us, is not defaced *in the same way*, in all of us. The message must be tailored to the needs of the individual. In the same way, some societies have different strengths and different needs. The message needs to be adjusted to the needs of the audience.

Jesus has given us precious few examples of cross-cultural ministry, but the principles are the same. On his trip through Samaria in John 4:21-24 Jesus' knowledge of the Samaritan culture led him to conclude that they were stubborn about their traditions and haughty about their worship. Therefore he declared to the Samaritan, "believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks."

Jesus did not hesitate to critique the errors of Samaritan worship. He was not restrained by fears of perpetuating Jewish cultural imperialism even while lambasting "the Jews" elsewhere for breaking the command of God "for the sake of [their] traditions."⁵ He did not shy away from the statement "you worship in ignorance." But where the Samaritans were to be commended, for fervently worshipping God, he also subtly affirmed them by implying that they *did* worship in spirit, if not in truth. His cultural knowledge served to identify areas of need. In this case he showed the need to overcome the stubbornness that Samaritans had about dictating to God their own means of worship. Jesus confronted the issue by challenging the woman to worship in *truth*.

2. Avoiding *unintentional* alienation or confusion

Misunderstandings caused by cultural differences are regrettably frequent, and a thorough student of culture is able to better navigate these treacherous waters.

In Matthew 17:27 Jesus, knowing the important symbolism of the temple to the Jews, reasons that he, as God's Son is exempt from paying the temple tax. Yet he instructs his disciples to pay it anyway that they "may not offend them."

Paul also attempted to avoid causing unnecessary or fruitless offense. When rumors were flying that Paul tried to "teach all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to [Jewish] customs."⁶ Paul chose to bow to godly customs. Mind you, these were *Jewish* customs of devotion to the true God. Paul joined in their purification rites and paid the expenses of four men so that they could have their heads shaved in order to show that he was "living in obedience to the law". (In that instance, his actions still didn't appease the crowd; he was seized and nearly killed.)

The default position of Jesus, Peter and Paul seems to have been that they should make the most of any opportunity to make a stir for the advancement of the kingdom. This often meant flouting conventions, customs and even laws.⁷ At the same time, there seem to have been cases where they chose not to needlessly offend. Chiefly, these were situations such as the two above where their actions might have been misinterpreted by others. They did not want to allow others to consider their behavior irreverent or disobedient to God.

⁵ Matthew 15:3

⁶ Acts 21:21-24

⁷ Peter says *directly* to the Sanhedrin, "'Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God.'" (Acts 4:19) In Acts 10:27 he visits Cornelius, fully knowing that it was unlawful for him to do so.

3. Facilitating communication

Paul's speech in Athens⁸ demonstrated a great deal of cultural knowledge which he used to the advantage of the gospel. Being aware of what the Athenians believed allowed Paul to know where to start in communicating with them. Paul used local ideas to illustrate the truth of God's word. He also used local examples to rebuke and confront sin within Athenian society and to call Athenians to repentance and faith in the resurrected Christ.

When preaching to Jews, Paul, as well as Peter and Stephen, used the prophets as a starting point.⁹ But in Athens, Paul started with creation since the prophets meant very little to them.

Paul was fluent in the language of Athens and quoted both their poets and philosophers.¹⁰ He understood and exploited the curiosity of the Athenians regarding new ideas and chose to address the crowds in a forum very appropriate for presenting them, the Areopagus.

Paul also understood the divisions within the assembly between the Stoics and the Epicureans. The Stoics taught that Zeus was not a personal being, nor a creator but an impersonal power or force. Epicurus taught that the gods were personal and material, but they were far away and had little interest in human activity. Common Athenians believed that the gods could be appeased by sacrifice. Paul exploited these internal divisions within the group, just as he later did with the Pharisees and Sadducees in Jerusalem.¹¹ In Athens he did this by affirming the Stoic belief in an omnipotent, omnipresent God who "cannot be represented by an inanimate object."¹² The Stoics, who used to decry the Greek practices of idolatry, probably cheered these words, spoken so eloquently and forcefully. Where Stoic philosophy aligned with God's commands about idols, Paul thus subtly affirmed it and used it to illustrate God's truth. In Paul's words, you can almost hear the echos of God's words of Psalm 50:12: "If I were hungry I would not tell you, for the world is mine, and all that is in it," Some of Paul's Stoic listeners would have been pleased to hear Paul boldly proclaim that God "does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else." (vs 24-25) But if any Stoic philosopher present was pleased by *some* of Paul's words, he would have had his philosophy directly confronted by other words Paul boldly proclaimed. Paul was *not* preaching Stoic philosophy. Paul confronted each of the Athenian views.

Because of his awareness of the issues within Greek thought, Paul was able to confront not only the idolatry of some segments of Athenian society, but also the cold "rationalism" of another segment. Paul asserted that God is creator; that he "made the world and everything in it" and that, far from being removed and impersonal, he is active and involved in creation.¹³

⁸ Acts 17:15-34

⁹ Acts 13:16 (Paul), Acts 3:13 (Peter) and Acts 7:2 (Stephen)

¹⁰ Paul refers to at least three Greek writers. He directly quotes Aratus, a Stoic philosopher and poet who wrote of Zeus, "For we are indeed his offspring..." (Phaenomena 1-5). He reveals a deep knowledge of Greek thought by saying "*poets*" (plural) since Cleanthes, another Hellenistic poet, expresses the same idea, that mankind is the offspring of Zeus in "Hymn to Zeus." "In him we live and move and have our being" is from Epimenides, the same poet/prophet Paul humorously quotes in Titus 1:12: "one of their own prophets has said, "Cretans are always liars"... this is true."

¹¹ Acts 23:6

¹² *The Apostle and the Poet: Paul and Aratus* by Dr. R. Faber, Clarion Vol. 42, No, 13 (1993).

¹³ By calling him "the Lord" (Greek: *kurios* "controller") he introduces a more Hebrew and more personal title for God.

To make this contrast plain, Paul used many verbs to describe God's actions and thus his personhood. God *created* the world, (vs 24) he *gives* life and breath, (vs 25) he *makes* every nation for a purpose, he *determines* the times and exact places for mankind (vs 26) for a *reason*: he desires intimacy "so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him." God in the past *overlooked* but now *commands* all people to repent. (vs 30) He has *set a day* when he *will judge* and he has *given proof* through the resurrection of Christ. (vs 31)

Because he understood the tendency of Greeks, Stoic and Epicurian, to either worship idols, or else view God (or gods) as distant and impersonal, Paul went out of his way to emphasize God's interaction with his creation at every turn. This is Biblical contextualization in action.

Ethically hazardous contextualization: Attempting to lessen the legitimate offense of the gospel

At its best, contextualization can help to reduce some of the barriers in human communication and offer some bridges to understanding. By obtaining a high degree of cultural awareness, a person can more easily identify and address areas of potential misunderstanding and offense. Controversy arises, however, when there is a lack of clarity on the *purpose* of contextualization.

Often, unfortunately, contextualization becomes the practice of conceding certain elements of a foreign belief system that the contextualist deems to be non-essentials in order to facilitate the acceptance of the "essential parts."

Contextualization thus deals with the ever-changing landscape of culture by attempting to constantly adapt the message to establish relevancy and to gain acceptance.

Contextualization as it is currently taught by many in the ascendant generation of ivory tower missiological academics, has a suspect and tainted lineage. Heavily influenced by secular academic disciplines, especially anthropology, many missiological leaders have unwittingly accepted numerous unbiblical presuppositions. Modern anthropology since at least the 1940's has promoted the principle of cultural relativism as an axiom. Anthropologist Franz Boaz, in 1887, wrote "[What we believe] is not absolute, but ... is relative... our ideas and conceptions are true only so far as our civilization goes."¹⁴ He elevated the 'ethnos' above any ethical absolute. Cultural relativism leads to a specific and false ethical stance: moral relativism.

The terrible history of colonial missions has done much to exacerbate these problems. Colonial era missions frequently held up the culture of the colonizers and attempted to suppress or exterminate the indigenous cultures. Saddened by that ugly history and fearful of repeating the error, modern contextualists have over-compensated. Whereas it used to be "our culture is better," now it's "your culture is better." It should be, "we're all broken, but God wants to heal us."

Battered by atrocious memories of the crusades and painfully aware of the history of Muslim-Christian conflict, the twenty-first century missionary to Muslims is chastened from bold proclamation both by the failings of his predecessors and by his own blindness. Often all he has left is an attempt to build consensus, avoiding confrontation that might seem like arrogance and toning down the call for change as he focuses on whatever agreeable 'truths' he thinks may be held in common.

Thus, in modern missions, a strange and sterile hybrid has been born. A prophetic call for repentance has been replaced by a pathetic call for watered-down 'dialog.'¹⁵ The gospel, when stripped of anything controversial to say, has *nothing* to say.

¹⁴ Franz Boas 1887 "Museums of Ethnology and their classification" Science 9: 589

¹⁵ See the article, "The Global Zoo" in the Appendix.

Paul, in Athens, did not shy away from confrontation in order to “win friends and influence people.” To do so would have been disingenuous. Understanding his context, he realized that the Athenians were a people who took great pride in their knowledge. They were the city of many truly great thinkers and mathematicians that are still studied today. Acts tells us of their devotion to new ideas and philosophy. They literally worshipped thought, represented by Athena, the goddess of Wisdom. But Paul knew that “the foolishness of God” renders the best of human wisdom folly, and so he attacked their philosophies head on. He picked up on the theme of the “unknown god” and boldly proclaimed that *he* would explain to *them* that of which they were ignorant. He boldly pointed out their foolishness (verses 25 and 29) and ignorance (23 and 30) and told them that God would overlook their former ignorance, but they must repent. Even what seemed like a compliment was actually a jab. He said, “Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious.” Yet *both* the Epicurians *and* the Stoics discouraged making sacrifices and building temples. Finally he ended with what he *knew* they would scorn, the resurrection. He preached the foolishness of God to the wisest men on earth.

Most scorned, but some listened.

I suspect that modern contextualists would deride Paul’s approach as ethnocentric. Rather, it is etho-centric because it is focused on Godly culture.

By putting a heavy emphasis on cultural factors, modern contextualization runs into a number of practical difficulties and ethical questions as well as issues of effectiveness. Let us examine some of the ethical hazards inherent in this approach.

Contextualization and the Ethics of Communication

Ethics and Translation

C.S. Lewis once wrote in a letter: “Odd, the way the less the Bible is read the more it is translated.” This is very often the case. Guided by some promoters of contextualization, much of what we today call translation, however, goes far beyond the meaning of the term. In zeal to make the gospel known, some “translators” have been misguided by the faulty human wisdom of modern contextualization and have turned to twisting and editing the plain words of Scripture. They have done so, apparently, in order to lessen the offense and ease the acceptance of Scripture by what they judge to be a hostile audience.

Muslim critics have long accused Christians of having twisted and changed the word of God to suit their needs. Christians, they argue, do not honestly translate the Scriptures but instead make “versions” to suit their desires. Although this is a great exaggeration,¹⁶ sadly, some contextualists are proving their case.

To attempt a translation, regardless of what you are translating, requires a certain integrity and carries a great responsibility. You are representing someone else’s thoughts and expressions. You must speak for them. Imagine if a mere translator at the UN decided that he could improve upon the ideas of the Head of State for whom he was translating! How much more sober is the responsibility of the Bible translator. To render the words of God is no light matter! How then can some ‘play fast and loose’ with some of the essential and core concepts in the Bible?

¹⁶ I often point out to my Muslim friends that when Christians find a textual variant in manuscripts of the Bible, they make a footnote. But when Muslims find a textual variant in manuscripts of the Qur’an, they make a bonfire.

In articles written over several years,¹⁷ Rick Brown, a modern contextualist “Bible scholar and missions strategist” promotes a shocking strategy to overcome Muslim objections to the Bible. He advocates stripping the terms “Son of God” and “sons of God” from the pages of the Scripture and replacing them with “Christ of God,” “Christ sent from God” or “Word of God.”¹⁸

He argues, “Muslims have heard that Christians call Jesus the ‘offspring of God’ and this has been presented to them repeatedly as Exhibit A in the case against Christianity and its ‘corruption’ of the Bible.” He says, “there is a dire need to correct these misunderstandings and to invalidate the accusation in a timely manner. This can be done in communications of every sort, but by all means it should be done in the Scriptures.”¹⁹

With the wave of his hand Rick Brown wants to wipe away the greatest and most powerful images in all of God’s revelation to man: the Fatherhood of God, the begotten Sonship of Christ, and that Father’s invitation *for us to be his children*.²⁰

This is clearly far beyond the scope of a translator. The word ‘son’ has a simple, clear and easily understood meaning in every language on earth. The biological reality of reproduction means that every people group on earth has a word for ‘son’. Brown is not content to simply translate. He judges the content itself to be unwise and imprudent.

What about the offense that Muslims take when they hear the phrase ‘Son of God’? People may be equally offended when they learn that in Genesis 22:2, God asks Abraham to kill his own son. It may turn them off to the entire message of the gospel, but that does not give any translator the right to remove that passage and skip right from chapter 21 to 23.

Furthermore, God knew full well exactly how Muslims would take it. Not much differently, in fact, than the Jews themselves took it. They were enraged that Jesus was called ‘Son of God’.²¹ In John 5:18 the Jews tried all the harder to kill him; because “he was even calling God his own Father.” John 19:7 tells us that the Jews insisted, “we have a law, and according to that law he must die, because he claimed to be the Son of God.” It was offensive to some Jews then, and in the same way, it is offensive to some Muslims now. But others are stunned at the revelation that God calls himself their Father.²²

Brown, by deeming himself worthy and capable of rewriting the Scriptures and of improving on them, is not only being astoundingly presumptuous, he is also vastly overstepping the bounds of what can ethically be called a ‘translation.’ He has plainly moved into the realm of pushing an agenda of propaganda, even at the cost of the integrity of the Scriptures

¹⁷ “*The Son of God*” *Understanding the Messianic Titles of Jesus*, International Journal of Frontier Missions, Vol. 17:1 Spring 2000; *Delicate Issues in Mission Part I: Explaining the Biblical Term ‘Son(s) of God’ in Muslim Contexts*, IJFM Vol. 22:3 Fall 2005; *Delicate Issues in Mission Part II: Translating the Biblical Term ‘Son(s) of God’ in Muslim Contexts*, IJFM 22:4 Winter 2005.

¹⁸ IJFM 22:4 pg. 143.

¹⁹ IJFM 22.3 pg. 95.

²⁰ Staggeringly woeful arguments are made on the way to this conclusion such as the wholesale dismissal of the Gospel of John, and all but the “high Christological” passages of Paul, as well as piles of Arabic idiomatic expressions, but space does not permit a more in-depth refutation of his arguments.

²¹ John 10:33-35,

²² “*I Dared to Call Him Father*” by Belqis Sheik is one touching example.

themselves. In so doing, he risks validating the claims of “the case against Christianity and its ‘corruption’ of the Bible” that Muslims level against the Holy word of God.

No one can rewrite the Scripture to suit every circumstance or context.

Disingenuous Communication: An Ethical Breach

Imagine that a Peace-Corps volunteer has recently returned from Zimbabwe and is carrying in his pocket a banknote of \$50,000,000 Zimbabwe Dollars, worth about one US Dollar. Suppose that he meets an attractive, business oriented woman at a coffee shop and tells her, “I have over \$50,000,000 that I am free to invest. I would like to take you to dinner to further discuss your ideas.”

This, of course, would be an unethical method of getting to know that woman.

“But,” he may protest, “strictly speaking, it is a totally honest statement. It’s not a lie.”

It is unethical because it is a statement which he *knows* will be misinterpreted by his audience. It’s not a lie, but it certainly is a deception.

When contextualists such as John Travis (a pseudonym) advocate that new “believers” (he prefers not to use the term ‘converts’) use the term “Muslim” or “Muslim follower of Isa”²³ to describe themselves and their religion, they usually justify it by pointing out a history of misunderstanding and confusion about the term “Christian.”

Travis writes: “In the Muslim context, the word “Christian” is now largely devoid of its original spiritual meaning. It now connotes Western culture, war (the Crusades), colonialism and imperialism.”

Bernard Dutch, likewise, argues against the term. “Muslim clerics have preached against Christianity for generations,” he says, “and fostered numerous malicious misconceptions about Christians.”²⁴

But rather than attempting to change negative perceptions and stereotypes, Dutch and Travis are prepared to abandon the term “Christian.” We are asked to consider “how different listeners will perceive [it]” But that does not go nearly far enough. Let us consider how Muslims will understand the alternative; calling yourself a “Muslim follower of Isa.”

Travis points out that the term ‘Islam’ is Arabic for ‘submission’ [to God.] He argues that God’s “original plan for true Islam” was “obedience to Christ.” Therefore, the argument goes, if “Muslim follower of Isa” means “one submitted in obedience to Christ,” then no believer should have any trouble using that name.

But what does the ordinary Pakistani understand when she hears the word ‘Muslim’? To her, Muslim means Muslim.

Here we uncover a fatal double standard: when considering the word “Christian” we discard the original or true meaning of the term and focus on the perceptions of the hearer, but when considering the term “Muslim,” we ignore the common meaning and resort to semantics.

“With such negative perceptions of the church rooted in negative stereotypes of the West,” Travis writes, “it’s little wonder that “joining Christianity” is often seen by Muslims as betraying one’s family and community to join the heretical camp of their enemies.”

²³ *Messianic Muslim Followers of Isa* - IJFM Vol. 17:1 Spring 2000.

²⁴ *Should Muslims Become “Christians”?* - IJFM Vol. 17:1 Spring 2000.

Yes, this is hard, and it is tragic. But the Scripture makes it clear. There *are* two camps, the children of darkness and the children of the light. Does your family see you as ‘betraying’ them to come to Christ? Jesus told us in Matthew 10:21 that it would happen: “Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.”

Christ also said in Luke 14:26 that “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters -- yes, even his own life -- he cannot be my disciple.”

It is very hard for a Westerner to understand why Jesus said this. But any Muslim convert who has had his mother, in tears, tell him, “you hate me by what you have done!” will understand.

Contextualization and the Ethics of Identity

Honesty about Self Identity

For some extreme contextualists, an ethically dangerous situation arises over the issue of deception. In 1998 Phill Parshall, a respected missiologist and himself a pioneering contextualist, strongly warned his own peers against what he saw as a growing trend of deception among Christian missionaries.²⁵ Parshall had become deeply disturbed at the numbers of Christians posing as Muslims to reach Muslims which he called “C5 missionaries,” to say nothing about those who would call themselves “C-6”!

The missionary in that situation must ask this question: “What would my supporters back home say if they knew that I tell all my neighbors that I am a Muslim?” The answer to that question could be telling. Deception is poisonous not only to one’s own soul, but also to the ministry and the very unity of the church.

In response to his warning, Parshall’s concerns were dismissed by Massey (1999), Gilliland (1998), and Winter (1999) among others. Travis also defended his own stance, refusing to condemn the practice of missionaries converting to Islam.²⁶

The strongest arguments against missionary deception, however, come not from missiologists like Parshall, but from Muslims themselves. One cultural observation that Arabs often make about Americans is that they are terrible liars. Many Arabs, on the other hand, are practiced in the arts of deception from an early age.²⁷ I have had conversations with Muslims who have said, “I think that so-and-so is an undercover Christian, but what a coward! He’s afraid, so he calls himself a Muslim! He is waiting to prey on the weak and unsuspecting.”

This trend has not escaped the attention of Muslim leadership. When interviewed by Mother Jones Magazine for an article about undercover missions, a Muslim leader, Sayyid Syeed, Secretary General of the Islamic Society of North America, was aware of the issue. “Once you have this kind of sneaky way, the respect for the holy is gone,” he said. “Sacred rituals, such as prostration and the Ramadan fast, are used to lure people away from their own religion. The missionary,” says Syeed, “is seen as someone who is stabbing you in the back.”²⁸

Deception, to our shame, has become a mark of the missionary. Woe to us if we thus drag Christ’s name through the mud. The same article reports the following exchange between Rick Love and a class of missionary candidates:

²⁵ “*Danger! New Directions in Contextualization.*” Phill Parshall, *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 34(4):404-410. 1998.

²⁶ *IJFM* Vol. 17:1 Spring 2000.

²⁷ I write this as an Arab-American myself and with the greatest affection for both peoples.

²⁸ *The Stealth Crusade* Barry Yeoman, *Mother Jones Magazine*, May/June 2002.

Love asks the class...“Did Jesus ever lie?” In unison, the class says, “No.”

“But did Jesus raise his hand and say, ‘I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?’” Again, 20 voices call out, “No!”

Would it not be better if we were to follow the example of the apostle who said, “rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing.”²⁹

Ethics and the Power Dynamics of Contextualization

Power and Information: Withholding power by withholding information

When a contextualist decides which parts of the message to share and which to omit, a dangerous power dynamic develops. The control over the message can give undue power to the messenger over the one who receives the message. In some forms, contextualization can insult the intelligence of the hearer and deny the work of the Holy Spirit.

In many cases foreign workers isolate the new believer in order to have a “blank slate” to test their theories or out of fear that their followers will be “contaminated” by others with a different view. This exertion of power can have a damaging effect on a young believer. Just as God gives us freedom, we must also allow new believers freedom to explore their faith.

Power and Culture: Colonialism and Contextualization

In the desire to develop a truly indigenous church, an inadvertent neo-colonialism can develop. Colonialism asserted that since the colonial power had a superior culture, ‘the natives must be encouraged to adopt practices x, y, and z.’ Contextualization runs the risk of repeating this error in a new way: in order to develop an indigenous church we must avoid poisoning the local culture with undue Western influences, therefore ‘the nationals must be encouraged to adopt practices x, y, and z.’ In both cases the problem is the same. Outsiders, with social, economic, and educational advantages are making decisions in what they believe is the local's best interest. It's good to bear in mind that, after the resurrection, Jesus himself did not stay around too long. He let the disciples take over.

We must allow the Holy Spirit to interact with the local believers to direct the expression of the church. All too often the theories, agendas and training of the missionary takes precedence over the leading of God among his people. I have known young people in church-plant situations to clash with foreign workers over the music in worship. The young people want to use guitars, but the missionaries fear that it will make the church sound ‘too Western.’ In a tragic situation in Lebanon, a church was strangled to death by a zealous contextualist missionary who insisted that believers must call themselves “Muslim followers of Isa.” Many refused, saying, “I'll deny any other name before the name of Christian.”³⁰ In another devastating case in Jordan, missionaries pressured a Christian-background man to formally convert to Islam in order to marry a Muslim convert girl who was legally a Muslim, even though there were other options for their marriage. The incident tore the church and the couple in two, and the damage was done.

Conclusion

The word “mission” has the same root as the word “missile,” a root meaning “sent”. As missionaries we have to be true to the aim of the one who sent us.

²⁹ II Corinthians 4:2-3

³⁰ In Arabic ‘Christian’ can be translated as “one belonging to Christ”

It is not our prerogative to change, edit or streamline the gospel message. The Bible tells us that we are God's 'ambassadors.' An ambassador holds a position of honor and respect, but not one of independence. She acts only as the *representative* of the one that sent her. She is not free to re-negotiate the terms of treaties or to change the wording of official letters.

God gave careful instructions to Israel as to how they should eat, dress, weave their clothing and even wear their hair! He did this not because there was anything *sinful* about cutting your beard, or anything *holy* about tying Scriptures to your door frame, but to symbolize their *distinctiveness* with regard to other nations, so that all people could see that they were different.

We would do well to remember what God told his people after he brought them into their inheritance among the nations: "Be careful not to be ensnared by inquiring about their gods, saying, 'How do these nations serve their gods? We will do the same.' You must not worship the LORD your God in their way, because in worshiping their gods, they do all kinds of detestable things the LORD hates... See that you do all I command you; do not add to it or take away from it."³¹

Our inheritance, of course, *is* the nations.³² That's the whole purpose of the mission after all, to call the *ethnos* to conform to the *ethos* of God.

Appendix

The Global Zoo

André Houssney

Take a look at the pictures in the glossy color brochures of most missions agencies and you will see one thing in common: exotic faces. A henna-covered woman in a veil, a weathered-faced man wearing a turban, a New Guinean highlander with a bone in his nose. Looks a lot like the pages of National Geographic Magazine. And a prevailing view among missionaries is shared with the National Geographic editorial staff. It is an ideal I call "The Global Zoo."

We go to the zoo to see animals, in all their colors, shapes and forms. We like to see them in exhibits approximating their natural habitat. These animals, however, are in captivity. They do not have their freedom. They exist in zoos not for themselves but for our pleasure and education.

Turn on the Discovery Channel or flip open a National Geographic Magazine, and you can see people treated in much the same way. A boat makes its way up river in a documentary on the Amazon. Far in the jungle the crew disembarks to

³¹ Deuteronomy 12:30-32

³² Psalm 2:8

be met by a band of rain forest dwellers; one of them is wearing a cotton T-shirt. The narrator intones about the tragedy of encroaching civilization and the loss of their traditional way of life. He never for one moment pauses to think that this man chose to wear the T-shirt because he may like the protection it gives him against sun and mosquitos. He ignores the fact that the metal knife he now has saves him endless hours of work. His plastic bottle allows him to carry water with him and keep it clean. The narrator begrudges the man these simple things; he wishes to keep the man in a global zoo. In his "natural habitat," the Amazon native provides viewing pleasure for all those at home with their televisions--giving them education and entertainment, their refrigerators--keeping their food from spoiling, their medicine, schools and other benefits of modern life. This is the self-serving and unloving attitude of the secular world. The film crew is there not to give, but to take. They use the locals to create images and stories, the more colorful, the more they will get money and fame.

Buoyed by the false belief in the corrupting influence of the modern world, the idea that traditional societies live in some kind of perpetual Garden of Eden until Westerners disrupt their paradise, secular anthropologists are not only content to impassively observe their subjects from the exhibit fence, they actually wish to prevent them from changing. There is no such nostalgia for their own societies, however. Academia is labeled "liberal" because they want to change their own societies. Other cultures, however are locked in the zoo. This is simply another face of colonialism, a double standard which has unfortunately been adopted by the missions community.

Long ago it was considered acceptable to display "primitive" people such as Pygmies and Indians in zoos. This was the same period in which colonists were attempting to force their culture on peoples around the world. Today attitudes have changed only slightly. People are no longer literally in zoos, but the attitudes are little different. No longer do Westerners force their own culture on others. Rather is it some idealized version of the "other" culture that is being projected on them. But it is still the Westerners that are the deciders, enforcing their preference on others.

The reality is that very few of the world's citizens today live in the same way that their grandparents did. Like it or not, the world is changing. The photos on the covers of missions brochures do not truly represent the people of the world; they are more representative of the global zoo. Do we love the real people of the world or the false image which seems more colorful? The people God has called us to love are more likely to go to work on a dirty bus than on a camel, donkey or ox-cart, and to wear a T-shirt than a turban. Do we love the real people of the world, or are we enamored by the exotic? Are we willing to bring a message of freedom or would we rather lock people up in a zoo?