

Contextualization and Gospel Proclamation
Week 8
Slightly edited from CHBC's Core seminar

Class goals

- Address challenges of communicating the gospel cross-culturally and the need for language acquisition.
- Explain dangers of over and under-contextualization (i.e. 'bad contextualization') and the necessity of 'good contextualization.'
- Highlight problems with 'insider-movements' and claims that religious forms are culturally neutral.
- Emphasize that the power of conversion and evangelism is in God's sovereign use of means.

Introduction: Challenges of Communicating the Gospel Cross-Culturally

It has always been difficult for Christians to communicate the gospel cross-culturally. One missionary reflected on the challenges of sharing the gospel with Tibetan's whose very language is tied up in Buddhist philosophy.

"We take up a word in Tibetan, unconsciously giving it a Christian content. For them, however, it has a Buddhist content. We speak of God, and in our minds this word conveys to us the concept of the supreme and Eternal Spirit, Creator and Sustainer of all things, Whose essence is Love, whose presence is all holy, and whose ways are all righteous. For them, the Tibetan word god means nothing of the kind. We speak of prayer, the spiritual communion between God our Father and His children. For them prayer is a repetition of abstruse formulae and mystic phrases handed down from time immemorial. We speak of sin. For them the main emphasis is in the condemnation of killing animals...

We speak of the Saviour. They think of Buddha or the Dalai Lama. We speak of God being a Trinity. They will say, 'Yes, god the buddha, god the whole canon of Buddhist scripture, and god the whole body of the Buddhist priesthood.' We speak of man's spirit being dead in sin and his thus being cut off from God. They cannot understand. A person, they say, is only

soul and body. What do you mean by the third concept, a man's spirit? When a man dies, they believe his soul escapes by one of the nine holes in his body; we know nothing of his spirit, they say. We speak of a revelation from God, His own Word which we are commanded to believe, and they know no word but the vast collection of Buddhist sayings, which only one in a thousand even vaguely understands.”¹

A former missionary from GRBC added that this difficulty was the same for them in the Muslim world. For example, if we use their equivalent of the word “grace,” we have to explain that it means the undeserved favor of God, otherwise the Muslim hearers will assume their own meaning for that word, which is more like the idea of some kind of magical, mystical blessing from God.

To address these challenges, missionaries often speak of ‘contextualization.’ What is contextualization?

What is Contextualization?

The term 'contextualization' grew out of a series of gatherings of the World Council of Churches. At a meeting in Louvain, Belgium in 1971 they wrote the following,

“A careful distinction must be made between authentic and false forms of contextualization. False contextualization yields to uncritical accommodation, a form of culture faith. Authentic contextualization is always prophetic, arising always out of a genuine encounter between God's Word and His world, and moves toward the purpose of challenging and changing the situation through rootedness in and commitment to a given historical moment.”²

¹ Geoffrey Bull, *When Iron Gates Yield* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1976), 97-99. Cited in Hesselgrave, 150-151

² David J. Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally: An Introduction to Missionary Communication* (Zondervan, 1991), 135.

Another definition goes like this. Contextualization is,

“The translation of the unchanging content of the gospel of the kingdom into verbal form meaningful to the peoples in their separate culture and within their particular existential situations.”³

Personally, I like Pratt, Sills, Walters definition best: *“Taking something from one place and putting it in another while retaining faithfulness and sensitivity to the original intent of the thing. For our purposes, contextualization is communicating the gospel, planting churches, discipling others, training leaders, and establishing Christianity in other areas of the world while being both faithful to God’s Word and sensitive to the culture.”*⁴

The Inevitability of Contextualization

The fact is that we are always *contextualizing*. As missiologist David Bosch writes, “The Christian faith never exists except as ‘translated’ into a culture.”⁵ For instance, in the first century, Jewish Christians faced the difficulty of communicating the gospel to Romans, for whom the Greek word for God (*theos*) had connotations of a plurality of lower-case-g ‘gods’ of the Greek and Roman pantheon. So when Paul and Barnabas bring the gospel to Lystra, the locals even refer to Paul and Barnabas as gods! (Acts 14:12). Paul continues to preach to them but has to distinguish God as the “one who made heaven and earth” (Acts 14:15–17). The same thing happens at Athens in Acts 17 when Paul preached to pagans. Again he had to explain who the true God is, clarifying in verse 24 that he is “The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man.” All this was essential background for proclaiming Christ’s resurrection (Acts 17:22–34).

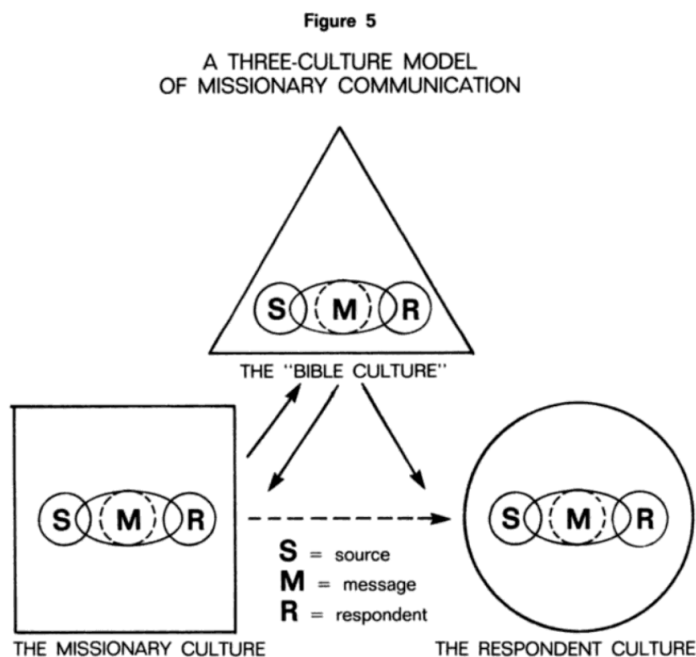
³ David J. Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally: An Introduction to Missionary Communication* (Zondervan, 1991), 136

⁴ Zane Pratt, M. David Sills, and Jeff K. Walters, *Introduction to Global Missions* (B&H Publishing Group, 2014), 149.

⁵ David Jacobus Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Orbis Books, 1991), 447.

Three Cultures

The same is true for us. David J. Hesselgrave talks about the “Three-culture model of Missionary Communication.”⁶ Meaning, a missionary is always dealing with three cultures when sharing the gospel. First, there is the “Bible culture”—that is the context of the biblical text you are explaining, whether it’s ancient Israel or the New Testament context of the church in Rome. Second, there is the missionary’s own culture—as an evangelical Christian and American. Third, there is the “respondent culture”—or the local culture of the people being reached with the gospel. All three of these cultures come into play when communicating the gospel cross-culturally.



The challenge, when sharing the gospel cross-culturally, lies in avoiding two extremes: one the one hand, not squarely imposing the “missionary culture” on the “respondent culture,” and on the other hand, not shrinking from challenging

⁶ David J. Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally: An Introduction to Missionary Communication* (Zondervan, 1991), 107-8.

aspects of the “respondent culture” that are at odds with the clear teachings of Scripture.⁷

For the purpose of this class, we’re going to make this very simple by talking about *good* contextualization and *bad* contextualization.

Good and Bad Contextualization

‘Bad contextualization’ either treats non-essentials as essential or essentials as non-essential. Good contextualization treats non-essentials as non-essential and essentials as essential. Bad contextualization could mean treating essential aspects of the gospel, the Bible’s teaching on the church, or biblical morality as culturally flexible, *OR* taking non-essential aspects of Western culture—such as dress codes and instrumentation—and treating these as essential. Good contextualization involves flexibility in non-biblical cultural forms. Distinguishing what’s essential to Scripture from what is simply a matter of Western culture is key to biblically faithful contextualization.

Note, this is not affirming “cultural neutrality” as if all cultural forms are inherently good. Instead, we affirm with Henry Van Til that “Culture is religion externalized.”⁸ That is, culture is simply the superstructure of religious beliefs. The question is whether those religious and cultural beliefs are consistent or contrary to Scripture.

⁷ “There are two potential hazards which must be assiduously avoided in [evangelism]: (1) the perception of the communicator's own cultural heritage as an integral element of the gospel, (2) a syncretistic inclusion of elements from the receptor culture which would alter or eliminate aspects of the message upon which the integrity of the gospel depends.” David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models* (William Carey Library, 2000), 1.

⁸ “The radical, totalitarian character of religion is such, then, that it determines both man’s cultus and his culture. That is to say, the conscious or unconscious relationship to God in a man’s heart determines all of his activities, whether theoretical or practical. This is true of philosophy, which is based upon non-theoretical, religious presuppositions. Thus, man’s morality and economics, his jurisprudence and his aesthetics, are all religiously oriented and determined.” Henry R. Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1959), 42.

1. Bad Contextualization

Under-Contextualization is Bad Contextualization

Under-contextualization is *bad* contextualization because it treats non-essentials as if they were essential. It is overly rigid and prescriptive on cultural matters that ought to be treated with flexibility. So for example, in many Eastern cultures, it is customary to remove your shoes when you enter someone's home. The same applies to religious services. Insisting on keeping your shoes on when entering someone's home or gathering for worship, would be an example of under contextualization, since it involves blatantly ignoring local customs and values on a matter that Scripture does not address.

One of the dangers of under-contextualization is that you are binding consciences where Scripture doesn't bind them. In their book *Conscience*, Andy Naselli and J.D. Crowley discuss this issue at length in their chapter, "How Should You Relate to People in Other Cultures When Your Consciences Disagree?" As they explain, unless the missionary distinguishes his own cultural values from the teachings of Scripture, they are likely to face misunderstandings and frustration.⁹ For example, "American missionaries internalize deeply held moral ideas about punctuality, egalitarianism, individual rights, privacy, cleanliness, etc., which derive much more clearly from their culture than from the Scriptures."¹⁰ If you cannot learn to distinguish between your own cultural values and the teachings of Scripture, you will not be well-suited for the missions field.

Under-contextualization especially characterized nineteenth century missions. As Vern Poythress explains, "Some nineteenth-century missionaries made the mistake of thinking that the task of missionary work was to "civilize the heathen" and make them Europeans; Christianizing was part of the total package of civilizing." The problem is, Poythress explains, is that "That extreme view obviously does not respect the diversity of cultures, and makes a mistake analogous to requiring Gentiles to become Jews."¹¹

⁹ Priest, "Missionary Elenctics," 297 cited in Naselli & Crowley, *Conscience*, 124. "In an intercultural situation each interactant will... tend to condemn the other morally for behavior about which the other has no conscience."

¹⁰ Priest, 300. Cited in Naselli & Crowley, 125.

¹¹ Vern S. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Books, 2009), 144-145

→ **Discussion Question:** What are some of the dangers of under-contextualization?

Over-Contextualization is Bad Contextualization

Another form of bad contextualization makes the opposite error by treating biblical essentials as if they were non-essential. If the first error was to be too rigid, this second mistake is to be too flexible and fall into the error of syncretism for the sake of trying to make the gospel message more palatable.

And let me just say, this is, in all likelihood, the more relevant danger today. It isn't a new temptation by any stretch of the imagination. In his book *Introduction to the Science of Mission*, originally published in 1954, Johann Hermann Bavinck, the Dutch missionary to Indonesia and nephew to Herman Bavinck, described this as widespread in his own day. Many people were trying to 'find a point of contact' between Christianity and indigenous cultures and make that the starting point of their gospel presentations. But "From the point of view of Scripture," Bavinck writes, "to seek such a point of contact is erroneous. All such endeavors mistakenly suppose that somewhere within non-Christian religions, perhaps in a hidden nook or cranny, there lie hidden moments of truth, and that it is to these that one should join his argument."¹² Advocates of such methods propose that the missionary task consists not in "preaching to those who are completely without the gospel," but "'expounding the way of God more perfectly' as Priscilla and Aquila did in the case of Apollos (Acts 18:26)." But "[a]ll such efforts and outlooks," Bavinck writes, "are to be rejected as improper and illegitimate."¹³

The fact is that every human culture—even our own culture!—contains idolatrous elements and features that must be evaluated in light of Scripture and rejected.¹⁴ "Some [cultural] forms," Craig Ott and Gene Wilson explain, "such as the use of animal sacrifices in worship or ritual prostitution, will be outright

¹² J. H Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1960), 135.

¹³ J. H Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1960), 135.

¹⁴ Vern S. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Books, 2009), 131. "Growth requires the abandonment of some practices from the past. A people group must give up anything that is sinful itself, whether in language practices like lying, or in cultural practices like prostitution or false worship, or in mistreatment or hostility or prejudice toward other cultures. In addition, in building relations with other groups, especially within the church, the people in various groups must practice loving their neighbors."

rejected. Still other forms will be used but adapted to conform to biblical values.”¹⁵ “Syncretism occurs when the purity of the gospel message or the essential functions of the church are sacrificed at the altar of relevance.” This can happen just as easily in the West as in the East, such as “a compromise with elements of another religion or with secular gods such as materialism, consumerism, and *me-ism*.”¹⁶ So, arguably, the Prosperity Gospel is an example of bad contextualization—of over-contextualization of the gospel’s message to make it desirable in a Western consumeristic, self-centered society.

All such forms of over-contextualization must be rejected.

And this is where we, as Christians, are running against the grain of broader society. So many are quick to condemn under-contextualization as wrong, because in the name of *cultural diversity*, it destroys indigenous cultures. We would agree that under-contextualization is wrong, but we must not make the opposite error of blindly embracing diversity as an end in itself. As Vern Poythress explains, “The opposite mistake in contextualization is the “postmodern” mistake, that is, the mistake of uncritically celebrating every kind of diversity. In the name of contextualization, a missionary can make his version of the “gospel” fit in so well with the target culture that it is indistinguishable from the culture and does not challenge it at a fundamental level.”¹⁷

Before we discuss, let’s hear a couple of examples of over-contextualizing from a former missionary from GRBC:

- 1) Once, our local guard at our office, a Muslim, had a stroke overnight in the office. A couple of weeks later, he died. One of the other local Muslim employees of our office suggested that we needed to have a chicken or something sacrificed in the office to sort of “cleanse” the office from the terrible thing that had happened there. To my surprise and dismay, my supervisor, another missionary, was planning to allow this to happen in our office, a non-profit we had set up to represent Christ to the city. I adamantly denied that we should allow this to happen because it would seem like we as

¹⁵ Craig Ott and Gene Wilson, *Global Church Planting: Biblical Principles and Best Practices for Multiplication* (Baker Books, 2010), 121

¹⁶ Craig Ott and Gene Wilson, *Global Church Planting: Biblical Principles and Best Practices for Multiplication* (Baker Books, 2010), 124

¹⁷ Vern S. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Books, 2009), 146

an organization were endorsing it. It even rose to the level of a shouting match. I protested to the point that I would resign from the non-profit which was my only way of keeping my visa and remaining in the country. Eventually, my supervisor reluctantly gave in, but not before I lost a lot of trust and respect in him.

- 2) Another time, a similar event happened with the same supervisor. As Southern Baptists missionaries, we had made an agreement with the mission board before going to the field to not consume alcohol while employed. But in the former Soviet Union, we were often pressured by locals to drink vodka with them. They would be very offended if we refused. My supervisor's solution was that we should pretend to sip the vodka, so as not to offend the locals and so as not to technically break the rule of our mission board. These are two examples of over-contextualization. By the way, my eventual solution, which my supervisor also eventually adopted, was to tell these locals that we had taken a "vow" (a strong word with a very religious connotation) not to drink alcohol. This very well satisfied our local Muslim friends.

→ **Discussion Question:** So we've talked about these two errors—over and under contextualization as examples of *bad* contextualization. Which extreme do you think you are more likely to fall into personally?

2. Good Contextualization: Paul's Posture of Personal Sacrifice

So we talked about how 'bad contextualization' either treats non-essentials as essential or essentials as non-essential. Good contextualization on the other hand, treats non-essentials as non-essential and essentials as essential. The best place we find this in Scripture is in the Apostle Paul. By his relentless faithfulness to God's Word, Paul *neither* imposes his personal unscriptural standards on others, nor sacrifices biblical fidelity on the altar of cultural relevance and accommodation. Instead, Paul models *personal sacrifice* in non-essentials for the sake of *biblical fidelity* in gospel proclamation.

1. Paul models *biblical fidelity* for the sake of gospel preservation.

Let's first look at Paul's evangelism as a model of biblical fidelity. This is where we see Paul treating essentials as essential. Open your Bibles to Galatians 1 and read verses 6-10 with me:

⁶ I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— ⁷ not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. ⁸ But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. ⁹ As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed. ¹⁰ For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ.

The error Paul is addressing is one of imposing cultural forms (the Jewish rite of circumcision) in a way that obscured the clarity of the gospel. So Paul had no interest in compromising or accommodating his message for the sake of inclusivity.¹⁸ He rightly treated essentials as essentials!

But at the same time—and this is number two—Paul models remarkable cultural flexibility for the sake of gospel proclamation.

2. Paul models *cultural flexibility* for the sake of gospel proclamation

When it came to non-essentials, Paul was always willing to sacrifice his personal preferences for the sake of the gospel. Look at 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 with me. (Read entire chapter if time). This is the definitive text for contextualization in missions.

¹⁹ For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. ²⁰ To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win

¹⁸ “Paul never tolerated immorality in the churches, he never tolerated theological diversity, and he never tolerated compromise of the message in order to make it more acceptable to those who heard it. Rather, this context [1 Cor. 9] speaks to his willingness to give up things he had a legitimate right to enjoy, like taking along a believing wife or eating certain kinds of foods, if doing so would give him a better hearing for the gospel.” (Zane Pratt, M. David Sills, and Jeff K. Walters, *Introduction to Global Missions* (B&H Publishing Group, 2014), 64).

Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law.²¹ To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law.²² To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some.²³ I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.

Earlier in the chapter Paul discussed several things that he had a *right* to. He talked about his right to “eat and drink” (9:4), to marry (9:5), to be paid for his work (9:6-7). But he explains that instead of insisting on his rights, he happily laid them down, for the sake of what? Verse 23: “I do it all for the sake of the gospel.”

“Christian liberty,” Naselli and Crowley write, “is not about you and your freedom to do what you want to do. It’s all about the freedom to discipline yourself to be flexible for the sake of the gospel and for the sake of weaker believers.”¹⁹ If you’re a missionary, this might mean *eating dog* when served in a native village. Or being okay with people walking into your house without knocking because it's the local culture. (“*This very thing happened to us when we lived with a local family. They would walk into our side of the house without knocking, and if we didn’t answer, they would open our windows without knocking on them either!*” - former missionary from GRBC) “Within the bounds of Scripture (an all-important caveat),” Paul was always “willing to adapt to the culture, and even the scruples, of the people he was trying to reach.”²⁰

Where does this kind of self-forgetful love and service come from? According to Paul, it comes from the local church.

3. The local church is God’s laboratory for recalibrating your conscience and loving those who differ.

This is the insightful point that Andy Naselli and J.D. Crowley make in their book, *Conscience: What it is, How to Train it, and Loving those who Differ*. Turn to Romans 15:7-9.

¹⁹ Andrew David Naselli and J. D. Crowley, *Conscience: What It Is, How to Train It, and Loving Those Who Differ* (Crossway, 2016), 132.

²⁰ Zane Pratt, M. David Sills, and Jeff K. Walters, *Introduction to Global Missions* (B&H Publishing Group, 2014), 64.

“Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God’s truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.”
(Romans 15:7-9a)

Paul has just wrapped up an extensive section in Romans 14 on loving those who differ in matters of conscience. Then he sums it all up in this pithy statement in 15:7: “Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.” Why should we love and welcome those who differ from us in disputable matters?

Because (v. 8) that’s what Jesus did! He became a servant to the Jews. Why shouldn’t the Jews then become servants of the Gentiles?

Differences in local churches are inevitable. But they are just warmups for the misunderstandings and differences that will inevitably develop on the mission field, either between missionaries and locals, or between the missionaries themselves. As Naselli and Crowley write, “God intends the little clashes of culture in your church to get you ready for the really difficult clashes of culture in missions and evangelism”²¹

How are you doing at responding in self-deferential service and love toward those who differ from you in disputable matters?²²

One of the main testing grounds for missions is how you respond to conflict in the local church. How you respond when your personal preferences are disappointed might be the best test for whether you are fit for missionary service.

Paul’s goal is to *preserve* the gospel and *proclaim* the gospel. Toward that end, he never let *cultural flexibility* obstruct *biblical fidelity*. He did not pit proclamation against preservation—as if biblical fidelity were the problem. Nor did he treat cultural flexibility as an optional aspect of missionary work. For Paul, both went hand in hand.

²¹ Naselli & Crowley, *Conscience*, 136

²² All of this takes humility. As Poythress writes, “Followers of Christ also pay a price in their own way, because each one must give up his pride... But since sin has come in and contaminated human relations, human pride distorts our attitude toward our native language and culture. We have a protective pride, and with that comes a disdain or hatred for what is different. This is a sin, for which the gospel is the remedy” (Vern S. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Books, 2009), 142).

→ **Share time:** How has God grown you in laying aside your personal preferences for the sake of others?

In terms of missions more broadly, over-contextualization is certainly the more pervasive error. To bring all of this together, I want to give you an example of a live debate over contextualization in missions today, regarding the ‘C-Spectrum’ and so-called ‘Insider Movements.’

(When I taught this class the first time, this is as far as we got, but I thought I would still include this next section anyway in case others still have time to include it -Jason)

3. The C-Spectrum and “Insider Movements”

(note: THE academic polemical work against the Insider Movement is was written by the direct field supervisor of a former missionary from GRBC- It is: *A Theological Analysis of the Insider Movement Paradigm from Four Perspectives: Theology of Religions, Revelation, Soteriology and Ecclesiology*, by Doug Coleman (Pasadena: EMS Dissertation Series, William Carey International University Press, 2011)) One can also listen to an interview 9 Marks did with Coleman about Insider Movements here: <https://www.9marks.org/conversations/on-the-insider-movement-with-matt-bennett-doug-coleman-missions-talk-ep-23/>

Over the past twenty-five years, the dominant paradigm for thinking about contextualization has been the so-called “C-spectrum.” Developed by a missionary named John Travis, it provides six levels of contextualization as a way to discuss the relationship of Christian communities in Islamic contexts to Islamic culture and religious identity.²³

C1 would refer to traditional churches using outsider language and forms. For instance, an international, English-speaking church in a Middle Eastern country. This would be the least contextualized and least syncretistic approach.

C2 would look very much the same as C1 except that it is using the local language rather than English. But in terms of worship style, church organization, etc, it very much resembles an ‘outsider’ culture. So both C1 and C2 would

²³ J. Travis, “The C1 to C6 Spectrum: A Practical Tool for Defining Six Types of ‘Christ-centered Communities’ (“C”) Found in the Muslim Context,” *EMQ* 34.4 (1998): 407-8.

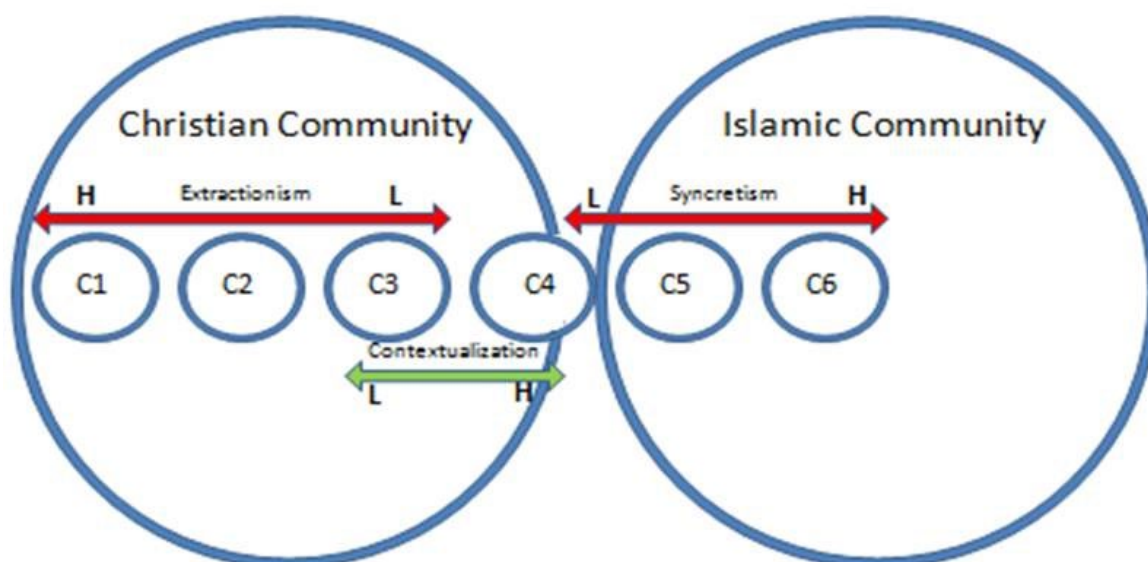
potentially be examples of bad contextualization since they are under-contextualized.

C3 is more contextualized, with Christian community using more insider-language and cultural forms, perhaps referring to God as *allah*, perhaps meeting on Fridays rather than Sundays, and using their own musical instruments and style for worship rather than Western tunes.

C4 refers to Christian communities that continue to use Islamic language and some Islamic religious and cultural forms such as avoiding pork, raising hands while praying, and wearing traditional Islamic garb. They refer to themselves as 'followers of Isa the Messiah' and are usually not seen as true Muslims by their contemporaries.

C5 communities claim to follow Jesus but remain culturally and officially Muslim. They consider themselves 'Muslim followers of Jesus' but are viewed as Muslims by their community. They meet with other 'underground' believers and continue to use many Islamic forms in their meetings, such as praying the *shahada*, wearing Islamic dress such as the *Burqa*, and honoring the Qu'ran and Prophet Mohammed. Some may continue to worship at Islamic mosques.

C6 refers to secret, isolated, or underground believers, not as a contextualization model but a survival strategy. (i.e. Mo in Mecca).



²⁴ Carlos G. Martin, "A BIBLICAL CRITIQUE TO C5 STRATEGIES AMONG MUSLIMS" (July, 2012), GlobalMissiology.org.

The whole debate, really, comes down to whether C5 is a valid missiological strategy. The question is whether a genuine Christian can retain the public identity of “Muslim” and remain a member of that community “while living under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the authority of the Bible.”²⁵ Within the IMB, I’ve been told, the saying has been for years, “C4, no more.” But many western missionaries are actively pushing this as an evangelism strategy. That is, they are encouraging Muslim-background believers to follow *Isa Al Mesih* (Jesus the Messiah) but to continue to attend Mosque services, pray the Shehada, pay the *Zakat*, and live in the Muslim community.²⁶ Why? Well, they argue that it is the best way to reach their family members and neighbors. The only alternative is to publicly identify as a Christian and risk losing their life or be forced to flee. Moreover, they think that outward acts have little to do with *inward* faith. And they say things like, “As long as we argue over where to draw the line, we will never get far in understanding what God is doing in the world, encouraging people to know and understand Jesus in a wide variety of religious and cultural contexts.”²⁷

→ **Discussion Question:** What do you think? Is C5 an example of good or bad contextualization, and why? They claim they are simply being flexible in non-essentials. What do you think?

As always, we need to ask what does the Bible say about all this? What does the Bible say about contextualization and where to draw the line?²⁸

²⁵ Lewis, Promoting Movements to Christ within Natural Communities" (Four Perspectives), 75. Cited in Andrew James Prince, *Contextualization of the Gospel: Towards an Evangelical Approach in the Light of Scripture and the Church Fathers* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2017).

²⁶ Darrell L. Whiteman in David Hesselgrave and Ed Stetzer, *MissionShift* (B&H Publishing Group, 2010), 110

²⁷ Darrell L. Whiteman in David Hesselgrave and Ed Stetzer, *MissionShift* (B&H Publishing Group, 2010), 123

²⁸ The following sections are taken, with the author’s permission, from Caleb Morell, “Can You Become a Christian without Identifying with Christ?,” *Radius International Pre-Field Church-Planting Training* (blog), January 20, 2021, <https://www.radiusinternational.org/can-you-become-a-christian-without-identifying-with-christ/>.

1. Following Christ means counting the cost (Luke 14:25-33)

Jesus set the terms for discipleship in Luke 14:25-33 when he taught that “Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple” (14:27). To unpack this Jesus gives the illustration of a man building a tower or a king going out to battle. In either case it is necessary to “count the cost” (14:28). *This is no less true in the decision to follow Christ. A cost-less discipleship is a Christ-less discipleship.* There simply is no other way. As Jesus concludes, “Any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple” (14:33).

Counting the cost matters because there is a pressure in missions to present following Jesus as less radical than it really is. But as J.I. Packer has written, to “alter or revise the gospel in order to make it more palatable to the modern mind would be treachery to Christ.”²⁹ Yes, contextualization must happen. To quote Packer again, “The meaning and application of the gospel must be explained to men and women in terms of their actual situation.”³⁰ But the purpose of contextualization is never to make the gospel comfortable, but to make it clear.

Insofar as C5 undermines the biblical requirement to count the cost, it must be rejected.

2. Following Christ especially means Publicly Professing Christ through Baptism

Insofar as C5 downplays publicly identifying with Christ, it must be rejected. Following Jesus involves obeying his command to be baptized. And what is baptism? Baptism is a public act of identifying with Christ and his people. This isn't a Western discipleship plan. This is Jesus' discipleship plan. This is the first aspect of “making disciples” that Jesus explains in Matthew 28:19 is “baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Nor is this an optional aspect of discipleship to Christ. After all, Paul could assume that all of the believers in Rome, many of whom he had never met, had been “baptized into Christ Jesus” (Romans 6:3-4).

Publicly identifying with Christ through baptism is like putting a spotlight on someone and saying, “Watch how they live and see if there's a difference.” I asked one Muslim-background believer from the Middle East about whether he

²⁹ J.I. Packer, *Fundamentalism' and the Word of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1959), 136.

³⁰ J.I. Packer, *Fundamentalism' and the Word of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1959), 136.

thought it was important to publicly identify with Christ and here's what he told me.

“It is the holy distinction of Christian life from Islamic life that inspires this kind of change. ... Muslims must see a clear and inspiring distinction in the way Christians live. Without this cultural, lifestyle-distinction, Christianity offers little hope to Muslims so forcefully ensconced in their own religion and Islamic culture.”

Identifying with Christ is neither private nor secret (Matthew 5:14-16). Followers of Jesus must profess their faith publicly through baptism.

3. Following Christ involves identifying with Christ's People, the Church.

This decision to obey Jesus' command to be baptized is not simply an individual decision. It is a decision of the community of faith—the church—to recognize and affirm the genuineness of your profession of faith. And it is the decision of the individual being baptized to publicly identify themselves with God's people.

This decision is so stark, that Jesus says it will often be interpreted as hatred of father and mother. Luke 14:26: “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.”

From the first days of the Apostles down to the present day, baptism has always been understood as an initiatory act into the people of God. Even non-Christians of other religions recognize this fact and will therefore wait to cut ties or disown family members until the point of baptism. And if family members and friends perceive baptism to be an act that indicates a change of allegiance, that's because that is exactly what it signifies: a new citizenship (Philippians 3:20), a new king (Acts 17:7), and a new family (Luke 18:29-30).

So what does all this mean for contextualization? There needs to be a *real* distinction between true believers and false religion. To blur that line is to confuse the *true* gospel with false gospels.

Moreover, our evangelistic strategy should never be guided by how we can avoid persecution. “All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim. 3:12). “Remember the word that I said to you,” Jesus told his disciples. “‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you” (John 15:20). Believers in persecuted countries know this better than American missionaries do—so is it any surprise that it’s the American missionaries, not the indigenous believers who are advocating these strategies that avoid persecution?

But you know what the indigenous believers say—who have left everything to follow Jesus. They say, “You’re telling me, that I could have had it all? I didn’t have to leave my family? I didn’t have to risk my life and leave everything to follow Christ? I could have just continued to go to the Mosque and call myself a ‘Muslim follower of Jesus,’ saying the Islamic prayers but knowing all along that I was saying them to Jesus in my heart?” How insulting is that to believers who have given everything to follow Jesus.

I’m not saying that it’s going to be easy. In Egypt, for instance, there are numerous personal, legal, financial, and social consequences for converting to Christianity from Islam. Legally, your ID lists your religion: Muslim, Christian, or Jew. According to law, Christians and Jews can have their ID’s changed to Muslim, but Muslims cannot change their religious status to Christian or Jew. Moreover, let’s say you want to get married. They won’t issue a marriage certificate unless your religions match on your ID card. These legal challenges make it extremely difficult for Muslim-converts to Christianity to assimilate to the Christian community.

Conclusion

We’re not the first Christians to face these questions of contextualization, and to what extent we can be Christians while refusing to publicly identify with Christ in order to avoid persecution. The Epistle to the Hebrews was written, in part, to Jewish-Christians who faced that very same temptation, and needed to be reminded to hold fast to Christ despite persecution.

Before converting to Protestantism, the sixteenth-century theologian, Peter Martyr Vermigli, was a prominent Italian theologian. He was the rector of a prominent school in Luca. But little known to his superiors, he had secretly become a Protestant. Under his leadership, this school secretly became an

underground training center for Protestants in Italy. In fact, it has been called “the first and last reformed theological college in pre-Tridentine Italy.”³¹ But all was not well with Vermigli. As his theology matured, he realized that his continual participation in the Roman Mass, whose theology he repudiated, was sinful and idolatrous. After struggling for over a year, on August 24, 1542, Peter Martyr Vermigli fled Italy. He had plenty of reasons to stay. He could have made a case for the strategic nature of his position. His possible influence over the Italian reformation. He certainly had no reason to leave the Italian cuisine and scenery for the life of a nomad. But he wrote to his canons on August 24, 1542, informing them of his action, repudiating the Roman Church and declaring himself “free from hypocrisy by the grace of Christ.” He spent the rest of his life as a teacher in Zurich and later at Cambridge in England, and his writings, both in Latin and Italian, influenced generations of Reformers. His preface to the 3rd edition of his *Commentary on the Apostle’s Creed*, published in 1572, gives this defense of his choice to flee:

"When the enemies of Christ and his True Church cannot lay hold of us to take away our life, they usually accuse us falsely of having deserted our native land and settled among heretics under the impulse of the spirit of the devil.... [But] We have been liberated from an oppressive captivity and come into the true Church of Christ to serve him with a free conscience according to the purity of his Word."³²

May that same willingness to suffer, to sacrifice, and to serve—that marked the Apostle Paul and Peter Martyr Vermigli—mark each one of us. Let’s pray

³¹ Philip McNair, *Peter Martyr in Italy*, 221.

³² Prefatory letter in *Trattato della vera chiesa catholica*, A.2-4, tr. Mariano Di Gangi in Peter Martyr Vermigli, *Early Writings: Creed, Scripture, Church*, Vol. 1, Mario Di Gangi & Joseph C. McLelland, trans. & eds., pp. 22-23.