

Contextualization 101: Listening the Word and the World

What is Contextualization?

- The process of communicating the gospel in ways that are clear and compelling in a given social and cultural setting.¹
 - Involves demonstrating how the gospel connects with and confronts the beliefs, values, assumptions, and existential cries of a particular culture/person
 - Goal → remove barriers to the gospel through clear & compelling communication
- **Key Question** → “How and why is the gospel good news for this person?”
- Jesus is a master at contextualization → one gospel, many presentations
 - **John 3** → Nicodemus → “you must be born again”
 - **John 4** → Samaritan Woman → “I can give you living water”

Double-listening

- **John Stott:** “We stand between the Word and the world with the consequent obligation to listen to both. We listen to the Word in order to discover the eternal truths which God has revealed to us to be believed and obeyed. We listen to the world in order to discover the needs and aspirations of human beings, the principal themes of their culture, and the currents of contemporary thought.”
- **Two Dangers:**
 - **Under-Contextualize**
 - Listening to the Bible while ignoring culture → incoherence
 - **Over-Contextualize**
 - Listening to culture while neglecting Scripture → compromise

Paul in Athens: Acts 17:16-34

Paul contextualizes the gospel for a non-Jewish, Athenian audience in five steps:

- **1) EXAMINE (observation and interpretation)**
 - a) Paul is attentive and intentional about observing the context around him
 - v.16 “he saw that the city was full of idols” → v.22 “I observed the objects of your worship” → v.23 “I found also an altar with this inscription: “To the unknown god.”
 - Contextual evangelism begins with noticing
 - Macro → culture → news, media, art, politics, celebrations,
 - Micro → what does this person talk about? What excites, bothers, worries, and enlivens them? What gives them hope? How do they spend their time, money, and other resources?
 - b) Paul interprets his observations → v.22 “I perceive...you are very religious”
 - When we identify someone’s core values, beliefs, assumptions we find unique entry points to the gospel
 - Despite trends in religious disaffiliation, people are still religious and our culture is still full of idols

¹ See <https://rtim.org/faithful-contextualization-in-missions/>

- To be human is to be a worshiper → all of us are looking to something as the grounds of security and significance
 - **Tim Keller:** *“[An idol] is anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give... whatever you look at and say, in your heart of hearts, “If I have that, then I’ll feel my life has meaning, then I’ll know I have value, then I’ll feel significant and secure.” There are many ways to describe that kind of relationship to something, but perhaps the best one is worship.”*
 - Idols → money, material possessions, sex and romantic relationships, career advancement, ease/entertainment, social approval/acceptance
 - All of us believe a story that elevates one or more of these idols and looks to it for salvation → we begin to worship/orient life around it
 - Underneath this idol in an existential cry for security and significance
- **2) ENTER (incarnation and conversation)**
 - a) Paul practiced “incarnational ministry” by going to people and meeting them where they already were (e.g. synagogues, marketplace, etc.)
 - b) Paul’s practice of evangelism was marked by conversation
 - v.17 “he reasoned” → greek *dialogomai* → dialogue
 - Effective evangelism engages in dialogue, listens carefully, asks questions, takes interest in other people’s perspective
 - Jesus regularly engaged in conversations and asked questions
 - e.g. Nicodemus, the woman at the well, the rich young ruler, the lame man at the pool by the sheep gate, the blind beggar, a religious lawyer
- **3) ENGAGE (connect and confront)**
 - Paul starts inside the world of his Athenian hearers then connects and confronts their culture with the gospel as he moves outwards towards the uniqueness of Jesus
 - **Connect → v. 22-23**
 - Starts with something they recognize, understand, value → “unknown God”
 - In the ancient world, people related to gods transactionally; in exchange for service/veneration the gods would bless/protect them; failure to rightly worship could provoke the God’s to attack
 - “Unknown God” → admission of ignorance & “safety precaution”
 - Paul starts within their context and affirms their existential cries:
 - The desire to and avoid divine judgement → security
 - The desire for transcendence → significance
 - The awareness that they are missing something
 - **Confront → v.24-27a**
 - Paul contrasts Greek idolatry with the true Creator
 - The Greeks believed gods created humans to serve their needs, lived in temples
 - The true God is the Creator of heaven and earth → source of life and giver of every good thing → sovereign over the ordering of nations → created humans to seek him
 - Paul essentially says “the unknown God wants to be known”

- **Connect → v.27b-28**
 - Paul quotes Greek poets that would have been familiar to his hearers
 - ‘In him we live and move and have our being’ → Epimenides of Crete
 - ‘For we are indeed his offspring’ → “Phainomena” by Arastus
 - Paul affirms the truth in these statements and, on their basis, he makes a contrast again...
- **Confront → v.29**
 - Paul demonstrates what Tim Keller describes as “form[ing] an alliance between the Bible and one of the listener’s beliefs”² → “*Since you believe this, wouldn’t you agree that?*”
 - Since you believe that we are God’s offspring, and we are living beings, wouldn’t you agree that Creator must be greater than his creation, not like a stone idol made by human hands?
 - Evangelism is not about convincing people they are wrong about everything!
 - We can affirm what is true, good, beautiful, in another worldview while helping people see their inconsistencies and how their intuitions find their fulfillment in the biblical story
- **4) EXPLAIN (how/why the Gospel is good news) → v. 30-31**
 - a) God has allowed the nations to wander from him in ignorance but now he has acted decisively in history by raising Jesus from dead and appointing him judge of all
 - “How and why is the gospel good news for this person/people?”
 - The gospel fulfills the existential cry of the Athenians
 - The unknown God wants to be known, he created you to know him, he wants you to seek him and has revealed himself in Jesus
 - Bad news → you’re worshipping idols, and not rightly honouring him so...
 - b) Paul says God is calling people to repent
 - In this context repentance looks like turning from wandering/idolatry and seeking/worship the true God revealed in Jesus (faith)
 - Repentance → inward reorientation of worship and allegiance, not just confession of sin or behaviour modification
- **5) ENTRUST (God with the response) → v. 32-34**
 - a) Rejection → “some mocked”
 - b) Interest → “We will hear you again about this”
 - c) Faith → “Some men joined him and believed”
- **Notice what Paul does NOT do (unlike when addressing Jewish audiences)**
 - ...does not refer to Jewish history/prophecy → no one new/was interested in
 - ...does not quote Jewish Scriptures → a text no one read or saw as authoritative
 - ...does not use phrases like “Jesus died for your sins” or “going to heaven”

² Tim Keller, *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism*, 112.

Gospel Vocabulary

- Traditional evangelism methods have often been limited to a guilt/forgiveness paradigm, but there are many ways to describe our condition and the hope offered in Christ:
 - **Our condition** → sinful, guilty, shameful, brokenness, enslaved, fearful, exiled, alienated, dead, hopeless, lost, blind, lawless, darkened
 - **Gospel results** → forgiveness, honour, healing, freedom, acceptance, belonging, rest, wholeness, restoration, reconciliation, righteousness, redemption, hope, transformation, deliverance, covering, cleansing, life