

“Contextualization: My Method”

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Contextualization is essential to cross-cultural evangelism. The authors of “Contextualization: Meanings, Methods and Models” present several methods of contextualization customized for various ethnic groups. The creators of these methods approach the task in a way they feel is most effective for their target audiences. Many of these methods were not appealing to me. However, Tim Matheny’s *Reaching the Arabs by a Felt Need Approach*¹ is one method that I feel is effective and consistent with my personal theology, beliefs and values. I believe genuine Christian contextualization begins with biblical theology and establishing an understanding of the audience’s culture through the lenses of the Scripture.

Biblical theology is essential to an effective contextualization model. The intended message of the Bible authors must be understood and presented accurately. While there are many social and political messages that may be beneficial to a group of people, the gospel message is one of salvation from sin and death. This is the primary message and the foundation of a Christian contextualization model. Once a strong biblical foundation is established, the messenger can begin to address the culture of his/her audience. There are many benefits to having an in depth understanding of the target audience, including having the ability to communicate effectively and gaining the respect of those individuals.

Tim Matheny builds his *felt need approach* model on two basic assumptions about his target audience. Through research he determines which groups of Muslims are more receptive to the gospel and which method of communication is most effective to that group. I believe that this is a very effective approach for establishing a model of contextualization. Narrowing the target increases the potential for success especially when dealing with such large, diverse populations. Secondly, determining the best method of communication can be beneficial to minimizing intercultural meaning-discrepancy.²

¹ David J. Hesselgrave. *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods and Models*. (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library Publishers, 2013).

² Ibid

There are important components to building relationships which is helpful when establishing an effective contextualization model. Matheny's model does so through an intense study of his audience. He analyzes cultural and religious themes as well as social structures of this group of Muslims. From his cultural analysis, he determines the values that are most important to them. I believe that embracing a culture requires understanding its idiosyncrasies. Studying their religious themes, for example, gives insight into the importance that is placed on religion, how religion influences their everyday life, and their worldview. Understanding the culture and religion uncovers their social structure and how their worldview is impacted. Having this type insight into a group that we are attempting to present the Gospel is significant to the success of our efforts. The values of a community reveal why they interact in a specific manner with one another and others; and being able to relate their value system with the teachings of Christianity can be a key component to our message.

There are four goals that Matheny encourages evangelists/missionaries to set for themselves as a strategy. Of the four goals, I would incorporate three. The first goal is to disassociate the gospel from Western culture. I would incorporate this goal because the Western church has intertwined so much of Western culture into the doctrines and practices of the Church that there must be a separation before approaching non-Western cultures. Western evangelists must embrace accurate biblical theology, which as I for stated is the foundation for an effective Christian contextualization model. Matheny's second goal is to gain the ability to identify with the Muslim. I believe this is key because identifying with the target audience by understanding their religions, languages, and customs is a sign of respect that can open the door to an opportunity to build relationships. And for those cultures that are tribal, relationships can be vital to reaching an entire family with the Gospel. The third goal Matheny presents is ensuring that conversion takes place. I am not sure how Matheny would suggest validating a decision for Christ. Conversion is an inward change that is not easily or immediately confirmable. I would

not incorporate this goal because it could result in requiring a specific, predetermined experience which could lead back to the issue that is expressed in the first goal. Matheny's fourth goal is establishing an atmosphere for converted Arabs to worship. In my opinion, this is extremely important and must be incorporated in a successful strategy. Like the first goal of disassociating the gospel from the western culture, I believe there needs to be a disassociation of acceptable worship from Western culture as well. There are many practices of various cultures that are completely appropriate to continue even after accepting Christ as Savior that are not practiced in western culture. Being open to these practices can bridge a cultural gap. However, as the authors discuss in the text, there are "limits of contextualization"³. Not all practices can be accepted. They must be examined through the lenses of the Scripture. The limits of contextualization determine the liberties that can or should be taken when attempting to communicate and connect with a non-Christian group or culture. This is where the issue of syncretism can come into play when unrelated religious ideas are merged together without any substantive connection to the truth. Syncretism increases the possibility of obscuring the message with unrelated foreign and cultural ideas. I believe that there are boundaries that must be laid and that contextualization is only successful when the authenticity of the faith and the gospel are maintained.

To be effective witnesses, Christians must adopt contextualization methods that reflect both a sound biblical theology and an understanding of the culture of the target audience. A viable contextualization model does not obscure the intended message of the biblical authors, the Christian faith, or the gospel of Jesus Christ. It does show respect to the culture of its audience by embracing and incorporating practices that are not in conflict with the Scriptures. It also builds relationships with the people of the culture by gaining knowledge of the culture, its

³ Ibid

language and its customs. These elements in my opinion make an appealing contextualization method.

Bibliography

David J. Hesselgrave. *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods and Models*. (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library Publishers, 2013).