Barriers to the Gospel:
Approaching Contextualization
from a Confessional Lutheran Perspective

Mike Rodewald

Abstract: The term *contextualization* has undergone a series of definitions based upon differing theological understandings of the Gospel in mission. This article explores a confessional Lutheran understanding of the Gospel message in Gospel proclamation and what this means for defining contextualization from a confessional Lutheran Christian perspective.

Introduction

In Liberia, a new Western missionary was giving an account of Noah and the Ark to members of the Bandi ethnic group. One listener asked, "Why did God also destroy the animals?" The Westerner explained through a translator, but it was apparent that the people didn't accept what he said. They talked among themselves. Finally, one local man stood up and said, "The animals were included because the groundhogs eat our rice!" Immediately all shook their heads and agreed—man is created the foremost creature and so the animals suffer with man.[1]

Contextualization seeks to encapsulate in a single word the process of proclaiming God's Word so that it may be heard in all its fullness by those within a different cultural context, often a challenge to the Church in mission. Failure to understand the implications of God's Word may occur, not because the Gospel is irrelevant, but because the messenger inadvertently misleads or is misperceived. This should not be. As the "power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Rom 1:16), the Gospel, and thus Christianity, is translatable. It is able to be "equally at home in all languages and cultures, and among all races and conditions of people."[2] In the above episode, though the Western missionary wished to explain with his words the same concept as the local man, he largely failed in his answer. Not until the answer was "translated" by one who glimpsed what the missionary was trying to explain was it given meaning in that context and accepted by all.

Mike Rodewald serves as Executive Director for Lutheran Bible Translators. He served previously with Lutheran Bible Translators in Liberia from 1981–92 and Botswana from 1993–2007, and in South Africa with the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod as Regional Director–Africa from 2008–20014. He holds an MA in Linguistics from the University of Texas–Arlington and a PhD in Missiology from Concordia Theological Seminary in Ft. Wayne, IN.

In Search of a Definition

The term *contextualization* was first brought to theological prominence in the context of the World Council of Churches. A 1972 Theological Education Fund report stated, "renewal and reform in theological education appears to focus on a central concept, *contextuality* [italics mine], the capacity to respond within the framework of one's own situation."[3] The report advocated this contextuality as a response to "the widespread crisis of faith and meaning in life; the urgent issues of human development and social justice; the dialectic between a universal technological civilization and local culture and religious situations,"[4] and when authentic, "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."[5]

This initial coining of "contextualization" emerges from the premise of the Bible as the audible Word of God that inspires faith in man. Contextualization is realized as a meaningful response within the framework of one's own particular situation and, as summarized by David Hesselgrave, focuses on "communicating the Gospel, not so much in terms of what God in Christ has done in past history in order to procure our salvation, but more in terms of living out the implications of the 'Gospel' of whatever we determine that God is saying and doing in our moment in history."[6] Ultimately, this "prophetic" notion of contextualization finds a home in varied liberation theologies throughout the world.

This first understanding underwent meaning-shift as those with other theological suppositions began using the term and infusing it with new meaning. Early evangelical definitions reflected a need to make the Gospel meaningful through translation, expressing the task in terms of "making concepts or ideals relevant in a given situation"[7] or "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 situation."[8] Others defined contextualization as "the process of conscientization of the whole people of God to the hermeneutical claims of the Gospel,"[9] and "properly applied [contextualization] means to discover the legitimate implications of the Gospel in a given situation. . . . Implication is demanded by a proper exegesis of the text."[10]

While these definitions arise from the supposition that the Word of God is unchanging, perhaps as a reaction to the earlier focus on implications within the receiving culture, they tend to focus on the action of the messenger. Later evangelical efforts, though more comprehensive, continue subtly in this vein. Hesselgrave and Rommen wrote of contextualization as,

> the attempt to communicate the message of the person, works, word, and will of God in a way that is faithful to God's revelation, especially as it is

put forth in the teachings of Holy Scripture, and that is meaningful to respondents in their respective cultural and existential contexts. Contextualization is both verbal and non-verbal and has to do with theologizing; Bible translation, interpretation and application, incarnational lifestyle, evangelism, Christian instruction, church planting and growth, church organization, worship style—indeed with all of those activities involved in carrying out the Great Commission.[11]

A definition by Darrell Whiteman expresses contextualization similarly as one's "attempts to communicate the Gospel in word and deed and to establish the church in ways that make sense to people within their local cultural context, presenting Christianity in such a way that it meets people's deepest needs and penetrates their worldview, thus allowing them to follow Christ and remain within their own culture."[12]

All of these definitions, when taken as a whole, capture much of what we understand contextualization to be. Yet each falls short because they focus on the action, either of messenger or hearer, as the central foci of contextualization. For a proper understanding of contextualization, we must look from a different perspective; for, as Hesselgrave rightly observes, "our theology will determine how we understand and go about the contextualization task and how we evaluate the contextualization attempts of others."[13]

A Confessional Lutheran Perspective

Though the term *contextualization* is found neither in Scripture nor in the foundational faith statements of the Lutheran Church, *The Book of Concord*, *The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, the precepts for contextualization are seen in both. The model for contextualization is Jesus, the Son of God, the Word made flesh and living among us—God's sending His Son to humankind in a way that He be made known to us in all of His glory (Jn 1:14, 18). This incarnational understanding of God and His Word is foundational for contextualization, and the early apostles proclaimed the Gospel under this understanding of their missionary task: "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you" (Jn 20:21). God's message is for all (Gal 3:28), and its ability to be transferred out of Jewish cultural practice is seen in Acts. In chapters 10–11, Peter is confronted with the understanding that the Gospel is for all, an idea that he twice rejects. Only on the basis of a third repeat of a vision could Peter finally accept that God accepts people of other cultures and races. In Acts 15:1–18, Paul and Barnabas confront those who teach that circumcision according to the Law of Moses was a necessary requirement for believers to gain salvation. Again, Peter bases his defense on the action of the Holy Spirit as evidence that no one is discriminated against when it comes to the call of the Gospel. God is the author and initiator of mission, and He and His Word are for all people.

The precept of God and His Word as foundational for mission has been implicitly understood throughout the history of the Lutheran Church. Luther wrote that, "God has always been accustomed to collect a church for Himself even from among the heathen."[14] And again, "Therefore God gathered a church in the world not only from the one family of patriarchs but from all nations to which the Word made its way."[15] Though the Gospel is not a human message (Gal 1:11–12), it does not act magically.[16] Rather it is the Triune God calling all to Himself through His Word. As recorded in the Lutheran Confessions, "No one has ever written or suggested that people benefit from the mere act of hearing lessons they do not understand, or that they benefit from ceremonies not because they teach or admonish but simply *ex opere operato*, that is, by the mere act of doing or observing."[17] The Gospel must be communicated to others (Rom 10:14–17), and it is in the communication of the message that we find ourselves facing a missiological dilemma.

While God's Word and action is universal, our actions are not. Cultural barriers sometimes cause a misperception to the message even to the point that the message is no longer perceived as pointing to Christ, but away from Him, as Paul and Barnabas find in an encounter with the Lystrans recorded in Acts 14. In this biblical text, an event of healing is misconstrued by those with the local worldview exhibited through their use of the Lycaonian language that Paul and Barnabas did not understand. Reactions to the event were shaped by an ancient legend—recorded by Ovid in *Metamorphoses*—relating that two gods had previously wandered around the region in human form and been rebuffed by many. An elderly couple took pity and gave from their poverty to care for them. Later, inhospitable citizens were punished and the elderly couple rewarded by the gods.[18]

It is not surprising that the Lystrans imprinted their own understanding upon the healing. They did not want to be guilty of not recognizing the gods again. For the majority of Lystrans, the event of healing did not point to Christ. Rather they deified Paul and Barnabas.[19] Though Paul and Barnabas operated as messengers faithfully communicating a pure Gospel, that message was not accurately conveyed to those who held a very different spiritual worldview. In Gospel proclamation, what is desired to be proclaimed is not always proclaimed. As Charles Kraft rightly observes, "It is the receptor who has the final say concerning what is communicated."[20]

Bible translation pioneer and anthropologist William Smalley notes that as we translate, communication is always something either more or less than what was contained in the original message.[21] Thus we must consider what happens to the Gospel message as we proclaim through cultural boundaries. As such, it is useful to look at Nida's one-, two-, and three-culture communication models[22] to see how communication distortion occurs.

In the single culture model, communication begins when the source (messenger) encodes a message for the receptor (hearer). The receptor decodes the message and

encodes feedback, thus enabling the source to know how the message is received. Both the original message and subsequent feedback are susceptible to "noise"—interference causing the message to be not fully received. Understood this way, even within a one-culture setting, communication is an imprecise process as the encoded message is frequently decoded imperfectly. Chomsky's example of a grammatically agreed surface structure with ambiguous meaning—"flying planes can be dangerous"[23]—demonstrates possible ambiguity even among members of the same culture and English mother tongue.

The communication process becomes more complex in the two-culture process that occurs when one interprets Scripture. The original message occurs within a particular biblical context. The message is "heard" by the contemporary exegete across a time and cultural boundary. In spite of his or her best efforts, it is not impossible that the exegete imperfectly decodes the ancient message. Subsequently he encodes his version to pass to another who again decodes imperfectly.

Three-culture missionary communication is even more susceptible to distortion. The exegete from one culture interprets the message encoded within historical biblical culture, encodes his understanding of the biblical message, and passes it to receptors from another culture, who decode it according to their own understanding, an understanding which is certainly shaped to some extent by their cultural worldview. The situation becomes even more complex when the members of the third culture "hear" the biblical message directly through their own study and interpretation of the biblical text and find that their conclusions differ from the Gospel version communicated to them by messengers from another cultural context.

An article in *Newsweek* magazine corroborates the difficulty of cross-cultural communication. Scientists are surprised at how deeply culture seems to shape the brain. Studies in the relatively new field of cultural neuroscience show striking differences in the active neural circuits of the brain when people from different cultures are provided the same stimuli. Information is processed in different ways. One study noted that when East Asians were shown complex, busy scenes, they perceived them with areas of the brain that process holistic context. In contrast, Americans (English-speaking Asians included) used parts of the brain that recognize individual objects. Another researcher concluded in a study comparing Asian and Western math computation, "One would think that neural processes involving basic mathematical computations are universal, [but they] seem to be culture-specific."[24] Of course, the cross-cultural missionary has always experienced the fact that culture shapes how a society's members look at the world. We cannot be surprised that science corroborates it.

Understanding the possible distortions inflicted by human boundaries within the communication of the Gospel message is paramount to understanding the importance of minimising distortions by proclaiming the Gospel in a form sensitive to context. The account of Paul in Athens (Acts 17:15–34) is an excellent example.[25] Paul used

a local point of understanding, the unknown god, as an entry point for hearers to come to a new understanding of the unknown God. Though distressed at the large number of false gods, he did not begin by publicly opposing them. Rather, first he talked with local Jews and converts from Judaism and in the marketplace with others including Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. He took the opportunity to establish relationships and find out more about the local worldview and culture before he presented the Gospel publicly. At the meeting on the Areopagus, Paul used culturally appropriate forms. He appealed to the Athenians' religiosity and philosophical disposition by telling them what they did not know. Some understand the implications of the message. The violent scenes of Lystra are not repeated. While some ridiculed his message, some wanted to hear more and some believe (vv. 32–34).

This is not to say that those who proclaim the Gospel must do so perfectly. The recognition that God is the initiator of mission precludes this. The power of the Gospel is not in what we do but in the action of the Holy Spirit in those who hear (Rom 1:16; 15:18–19). Reflecting this, the Lutheran Confessions state, "To obtain such faith God instituted the office of preaching, giving the Gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit who produces faith, where and when he wills, in those who hear the Gospel."[26] Additionally, "we may know that the Word and sacrament are efficacious even when they are administered by wicked people"[27]—a powerful witness to the notion that mission is God's work not ours.

In this understanding of God and His action in the world, there is implication for what our view of contextualization must be. As God's action, we acknowledge the Gospel purely retained, proclaimed, and heard within the community of believers—the true Church—as the Holy Spirit works through proclamation of the Word and the sacraments to call and sanctify.[28] Yet, scrutinising our communication of that Gospel to others, we do well to attend to statements from missiologists such as the South African David Bosch: "there is no such thing as a pure Gospel isolated from culture."[29] Our part adds nothing but distortion to the message. As its messengers and hearers, we are its corruptors. Our efforts in contextualization cannot be viewed as proactive—making the Gospel more meaningful, or even wrapping it in a different package. The Gospel is already for all. It only needs preserving from our distortion. Thus, contextualization properly approached is simply that of preserving God's pure Gospel message so that, in its proclamation, the power of the Gospel is free to work in the receptor's heart and incorrect understanding does not limit the benefits of the Gospel to the receptor.

We note that there is a danger to such a concept if misunderstood. The process and purpose of such contextualization is not to preserve static form, but rather to let the Word be free, so that, as Luther colourfully wrote of translation, the "boulders and clods" do not hinder one from the message and "the Word may have free

course."[30] As Luther says, it is a matter of "relinquishing the words," no matter what emotional attachment they have for us, and "rendering the sense."[31] It is for all within the true Church to "feel and think the same, even though we may act differently."[32]

Though preservation of the Gospel through contextualizing rightly begins with God and His unchanging Word, the process also integrally includes man and his changing world. This requires not only looking at the context of another for the purpose of passing the message, but also continuing to look at one's self and one's own context in light of the same Gospel. The messenger, and thus the Church, is challenged as God's Word calls in ways that confront one's own suppositions. Missiologist Lamin Sanneh writes, "Africans began earnestly to inquire into the Christian Scriptures, which missionaries had placed into their hands, to see where they had misunderstood the Gospel. What they learned convinced them that mission as European cultural hegemony was a catastrophic departure from the Bible. . . . they went on to claim the Gospel, as the missionaries wished them to, but in turn insisted that missionary attitudes should continue to be scrutinised in its revealing light."[33] Whether Western, Asian, Latin, or African, there is constant need to scrutinize one's own version of the Gospel. Hesselgrave cautions those operating out of the Western Christian context: "[W]e err when we (perhaps unconsciously) allow the results of centuries of contextualizing in the Western world to determine the way in which [Western missionaries] present the biblical message to our target culture audiences."[34] We err equally when we fail to consider history, since historicity is always a part of one's context. In the end, we realize that contextualization is as much for the faith of the messenger as for the faith of the hearer and, at least for confessional Lutheran Christians, can never be a realized goal but remains always an ongoing process.

Conclusion: a Confessional Lutheran Understanding of Contextualization

Thus are set the parameters for defining a confessional Lutheran Christian understanding of the contextualization process, which may be stated as follows:

The Gospel message is universal and for all. God has chosen us not only as receivers of this message, but also as its messengers. True contextualization, therefore, springs from the action of the Gospel message upon the heart of the messenger and preserves God's universal message to others through such scriptural means as the messenger has at his disposal. It is initiated and accomplished by the power of the Holy Spirit through discovering and lowering the barriers to the Gospel that man erects through his sinful self and sinful world.

Contextualization is not a tool to be used in the pursuit of efficiency. If it were so, mission and Gospel proclamation would be mere method. Rather,

contextualization is God's action in the world through Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit's calling and involving us in His purpose and using us as means to call others. It is God and His Word, involving both messenger and hearer, who, in faith given, preserve and express that Word throughout the world's many peoples and cultures. We proclaim and hear the Gospel imperfectly. Yet God calls us anyway and works in our hearts and minds, and so we witness to what He has done for us through His Son. As messengers, we understand ourselves as integral to the message, but also as its corruptors. Thus, we constantly seek, by the wisdom of the Holy Spirit, to remove barriers and corruption and preserve that message so that the Word may have free course.

Endnotes

[1] Rodewald Missionary Newsletter, 1982.

[2] Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989), 51.

[3] *Ministry in Context: The Third Mandate Programme of the Theological Education Fund* (Bromley, Kent England: The Theological Education Fund, 1970–77), 20.

[4] Ibid.*,* 13.

[5] Ibid., 20.

[6] David Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 136.

[7] Byang H. Kato, "The Gospel, Cultural Context, and Religious Syncretism," in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, ed. J. D. Douglas, 1216–23. (Minneapolis: World Wide Publication, 1975), 1217.

[8] Bruce J. Nicholls, "Theological Education and Evangelism," in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*. J. D. Douglas, ed., 634–45. (Minneapolis: World Wide Publication, 1975), 647.

[9] Harvie Conn, "Contextualization: A New Dimension for Cross-Cultural Hermeneutics." *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 14 (1978): 42.

[10] George W. Peters, "Issues Confronting Evangelical Missions," in *Evangelical Missions Tomorrow*, ed., W. T. Coggins and E. L. Frized, 156–71. (Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 1997), 169.

[11] David Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 202.

[12] Darrell L. Whiteman, "Contextualization: The Theory, the Gap, the Challenge," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 21, no. 1 (1997): 2.

[13] Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally*, 137.

[14] Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Vol. 8 : Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 45–50*, ed. J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald and H. T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999, c1966), 135.

[15] Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Vol. 6: Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 31–37*, ed. J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald and H. T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999, c1970), 227.

[16] Syncretistic church practices in Africa include such as inscribing Scripture verses on paper and ingesting the paper as a way of tapping into the power of the words. Also during the Reformation period and following, the elements of the Eucharist were commonly seen as

efficacious to one's own purpose and used to influence for good or ill in daily life (R. W. Scribner, *Popular Culture and Popular Movements in Reformation Germany* [London: The Hambledon Press, 1987], 41, 249.).

[17] Ap. XXIV in Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, ed., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. Charles Arand, Eric Gritsch, Robert Kolb, William Russell, James Schaaf, Jane Strohl, Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 258.

[18] Ovid, *The Metamorphoses,* 2000, trans. A. S. Kline, accessed February 2, 2014 http://takaboo.com/library/Ovid-Metamorphosis.pdf, 412–419. Also Frank E. Gaebelein, ed. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 9 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 435.

[19] *New Interpreter's Study Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 1983. Also Georg F. Vicedom, *The Mission of God*, trans. Gilbert A. Thiele and Dennis Hilgendorf (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1965), 40.

[20] Charles H. Kraft, *Communication Theory for Christian Witness* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983), 49.

[21] William A. Smalley, *Translation as Mission* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1991), 3.

[22] Eugene A. Nida, *God's Word in Man's Language* (New York: Harper & Row, 1952), 45–46; Eugene A. Nida, *Mission and Message*, rev. ed. (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1990), 37–55; Gailyn Van Rheenan, *Missions: Biblical Foundations and Contemporary Strategies* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990),114–121; David Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meaning, Methods and Models* (Grand Rapids: Baker House, 1989), 107–108.

[23] Noam Chomsky, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1965), 21.

[24] Sharon Begley, "West Brain, East Brain: What a difference culture makes," *Newsweek Magazine*, 1 March 2010, 22.

[25] See F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1997), 235–247.

[26] AC. V in Kolb, *The Book of Concord*, 40.

[27] Ap. VII and VIII in Kolb, *The Book of Concord*, 177.

[28] AC. VII and Ap. VII and VIII in Kolb, *The Book of Concord*, 42, 177.

[29] David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), 297; also see Lesslie Newbiggin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1986), 40.

[30] Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, "Concerning the Order of Public Worship" in *Vol. 53: Liturgy and Hymns*, ed. J.J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald and H. T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999, c1965), 14.

[31] Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Vol. 35:* "Defense of the Translation of the Psalms" in *Word and Sacrament I*, ed. J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald and H. T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999, c1960), 213.

[32] Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, "An Order of Mass and Communion for the Church at Wittenberg" in *Vol. 53: Liturgy and Hymns*, ed. J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald and H. T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999, c1965), 31.

[33] Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 162–163.

[34] Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally*, 203.