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Encountering Mission

Paul's Greatest Missionary Sermon: A Lesson in Contextualization from Acts 17

James Tino

Abstract: What is "contextualization"? Is it really necessary? Is it a biblical concept or an unwanted invasion of social science into the territory of Gospel proclamation? This article explores the concept of contextualization by looking at the example of the apostle Paul, specifically at his sermon in Athens (Acts 17). Contextualization is compared to translation with an emphasis on how meaning is communicated. We are challenged to consider what we really mean by "Gospel proclamation" and how the Gospel communicator may begin the task of bringing God's Good News to people of other cultures.

"We are all sinners," I said. And that's where I lost them. I was teaching a class on Lutheran doctrine to a group of four young adults in Venezuela. They were the first fruits of a new evangelistic ministry in the city of Barquisimeto, and I had high hopes. Each of them had come to faith in Christ during my first year of ministry there, and I thought they showed great potential. Their first real exposure to the Gospel had come through an evangelistic Bible course. Eager to learn more, we continued our studies with Luther's Small Catechism. Now, nine months later, we were engaged in a deeper study of the Lutheran faith.

"Pastor," one student said, "you always say that we are all sinners. But I have to say, I am not." The others around the table nodded their heads in agreement.

Rev. Dr. James Tino is the director of Global Lutheran Outreach and the president of the Association of Lutheran Mission Agencies. He served as a missionary in Venezuela for 13 years, and later as an Area Director for LCMS World Mission. He has also served on the faculties of Concordia Theological Seminary (Ft. Wayne), Trinity International University (S. Florida), and Ohio Christian University. He and his wife, Liisa, currently live in Santiago, Chile where they are serving under the auspices of the Confessional Lutheran Church of Chile. revtino@hotmail.com

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Clearly, we had a crisis of understanding. How could it be possible that after several months of intensive Bible study and catechesis, my students did not understand sin? Was I that bad of a Bible teacher? I began to sweat. Desperately casting around for a life ring, I took a Socratic approach.

"What is 'sin'?" I asked.

"'Sin' is murder. Or armed robbery," the student responded. "I understand that God offers His forgiveness to all of us in Jesus, even to murderers. But I personally have never killed anyone, and I always try to help others safeguard their personal possessions, like we learned in the Small Catechism. If someone drops even a *locha* (a worthless coin) on the ground, I don't keep it, but I pick it up and give it back to the person."

With that explanation, things began to make sense to me. Although I had provided a biblical definition of sin many times over the past several months, it was clear that those efforts had been insufficient to replace the culturally-infused Venezuelan definition of sin. The problem was compounded by the Venezuelan manner of speaking, which can seem very indirect. For example, if a person is going to confront a mistake, it is common to speak in such general terms that it is not clear (to the outsider, at least) who is the subject. When I said, "We are all sinners," my students drew the conclusion that I was confessing to being a murderer, or a thief—or both! With that in mind, their decision to continue studying the Bible with me was an act of faith of truly heroic proportions!

That little anecdote illustrates both the challenge of contextualization and the danger of ignoring the need to contextualize a message. When dealing with the relatively minor interactions of daily life, inadequate contextualization doesn't make much of a difference. Aside from generating sometimes-humorous misunderstandings and sometimes-avoidable frustrations, no real harm is done. But when tasked with the eternally important job of teaching or preaching the Word of God, contextualization becomes a critical issue. As Lutherans, we have a robust regard for the power and efficacy of the Word. We know that the Spirit of God works through the Word to produce repentance and faith in the hearts of the hearers. If our cross-cultural teaching and preaching were limited to simply reading the Word in the heart language of the hearers (with proper pronunciation!), then we would not have to concern ourselves with contextualization. But we don't simply read the Word. We teach, expound, explain, apply, and amplify. We want things to make sense, and that means contextualization.

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Contextualization involves language, culture, and worldview. Like the water in which the fish swims, our culture and corresponding worldview are so natural to us as to be invisible. We don't easily realize how much we are a product of our culture, which has shaped not only external elements such as our behaviors, dietary habits, and clothing, but it also profoundly impacts the way we process information and make decisions. The cumulative effect of all the elements of culture is to provide us with a "lens" or worldview through which we perceive and understand ourselves, others, and the world around us. Among other things, one's worldview establishes evaluative categories such as better and best, acceptable and unacceptable, rude and polite, and even right and wrong. In other words, culture teaches us how to think.

The transmission of meaning from one cultural context to another (contextualization) also involves presenting the ideas or thought-chain in a way that fits into the mental framework of the hearers.

Communication is, at its core, the transmission of meaning. More than the relatively simple matter of presenting the right words in the right order, the transmission of meaning from one cultural context to another (contextualization) also involves presenting the ideas or thought-chain in a way that fits into the mental framework of the hearers so that the words can be processed without distorting the message—in other words, framing the message in the way that people think.

Luther understood this. When reflecting on his efforts to translate the Bible into colloquial German, he said:

> We must not, as these jackasses do, ask the Latin letters how to speak German; but we must ask the mother in the home, the children on the street, the common man in the market place, how this is done. Their lips we must watch to see how they speak, and then we must translate accordingly. Then they will understand us and notice we are talking German with them.[1]

As Luther points out, for the Gospel communicator, it's not enough to be technically correct. Effective proclamation requires the right words, but also the right speech patterns and thought patterns. This is hard enough to do in one's own language and culture. Communicating cross-culturally only compounds the difficulty, as missiologist Detlev Schulz affirms: "The translation of the Christian message is bound to context. However, the task of contextualizing the Gospel is a challenging endeavor. . . . The attempt of conveying the meaning of the biblical truth to a given context as effectively as possible becomes an incredibly difficult and challenging one."[2]

If it is so difficult, then why attempt it at all? Why not let each people group concern themselves with witnessing to their own kind? The answer, simply put, is that boundary-crossing witness is the heart of mission, and mission is the heart of God. Ever since God divided the one language of mankind into many languages in order to separate sinful humanity at the Tower of Babel (Gn 11), communication with those who do not share our language, life-ways, and worldview has required intentional, boundary-crossing efforts. When a person shares the Gospel with people of their own geography, culture, and language, i.e., our own kind of people, we call that "evangelism." But when one is required to cross boundaries in order to share the Gospel, we have entered into the territory of "mission." Missiologist James Scherer calls such boundary-crossing witness, "the heart of mission":

> *Mission* as applied to the work of the church means the *specific intention* of bearing witness to the gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ at the borderline between faith and unbelief. Mission occurs when the church reaches out beyond its inner life and bears witness to the gospel in the world. . . . The heart of mission is always making the gospel known where it would not be known without a special and costly act of boundary-crossing witness.[3]

The "boundaries" that Scherer speaks of include the things that separate the peoples of the earth, such as geography, language, and culture. As one or more boundaries are crossed, contextualization becomes necessary in order to avoid distortion or misunderstanding of the message. With my fledgling Christians in Barquisimeto, I used the word for "sin" (*pecado*) that was 100% linguistically correct, yet the message was completely distorted.

The primary mission boundary is the "borderline between faith and unbelief." In order to be "mission," the witness of the Church must be proclaimed at that boundary. Yet different from the other kinds of boundaries, this one is not crossed by the missionary. Rather, as the Spirit of God creates faith, those living in the darkness of unbelief cross the boundary to belief in Christ. The missionary message, therefore, is that which is proclaimed across the boundary of unbelief, to those who are unbelievers. If no unbeliever hears the message, can it then be considered to be a "missionary" message?

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These realities establish the parameters in which contextualization takes place. While challenges of contextualization may seem insurmountable, the apostle Paul

provides a God-breathed description not only of *what* it is, but also of *how* to do it. First, what it is:

> For though I am free from all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more. To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law though not being myself under the Law, so that I might win those who are under the Law; to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, so that I might win those who are without law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some. (1 Cor 9:19–22, NASB)

Over and over, Paul says that he has "become" (Gk: γινομαι). Commonly used throughout the New Testament, the word means "to be made" or "come into existence." Paul *made* himself to be like those he was trying to reach; he very intentionally identified as closely as possible with the people to whom he was sent. To "become as a Jew" doesn't simply mean to speak Hebrew; it would include adopting their clothing styles, dietary restrictions, customs and habits, as well as patterns of thought and speech. In the same way, to become "as (those) without the Law," i.e., Gentile, was not limited to use of the vernacular (likely Greek), but would mean setting aside the distinctives of the Jewish culture in order to enter more fully into the life-ways of the receptors of the message.

That's the *what*; now for the *how*. Paul leaves us a wonderful example of a contextualized witness to the Gospel in his sermon to the Athenians in Acts 17:22–31, but in order to find the treasure, we need to do a little excavation.

In a doctoral-level class that I taught regularly, one of the assignments was for each student to make a list of ten "non-negotiables" of the Christian faith. That is, what are the ten most important doctrines or teachings that a person must know if they are to be considered Christian? Not all of the students in the program were Lutheran, and so the answers varied, although even among the Lutherans there was quite a bit of variety! Yet, a typical list of the "essentials of the Christian faith" looked something like this (not in any particular order):

1. There is only one God, the creator of all.
2. The Bible is the Word of God.
3. All people have sinned.
4. Jesus was born and is true man.
5. Jesus is true God.
6. Jesus died on a cross to forgive our sins.
7. Jesus rose again from the dead.

8. God will judge the world.

9. There is a heaven and a hell.

10. We will all be raised, either to eternal life or to eternal condemnation.

After some discussion and debate, the class was usually able to settle on ten statements, which often adhered pretty closely to the Apostle's Creed.

Next, we analyzed Paul's message at the Areopagus in Athens and attempted to identify the Christian teachings or doctrinal points from that sermon. Our collective list often ended up looking something like this:

1. God is knowable (v. 23, "what therefore you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you"; and v. 27 "seek God, if perhaps they might grope for him and find him, though He is not far from each of us").

2. God is the creator of all things (v. 24, "God who made the world and all things in it"; v. 25, "He Himself gives life and breath and all things"; v. 26, "He made from one, every nation of mankind").

3. God is supreme (v. 24, "since He is Lord of heaven and earth"; v. 25, "neither is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything").

4. God is spirit (v. 24, "does not dwell in temples made with hands").

5. We are God's children (v. 28, "in Him we live and move and exist . . . for we are also His offspring").

6. God is uncreated (v. 29, "we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man").

7. God is merciful (v. 30, "having overlooked the times of ignorance").

8. God calls us to repentance (v. 30, "God is now declaring to men that all everywhere should repent.").

9. God appointed One to judge (v. 31, "He has fixed a day in which he will judge the world in righteousness through a Man who he has appointed").

10. The resurrection (v. 31, "furnishing proof to all men by raising Him from the dead").

Upon analyzing Paul's sermon, one who is accustomed to Lutheran-style preaching might well ask, "What is going on here?" His message in Athens can be frustrating to us, not because of what he says, but because of what he does *not* say. Chief among these omissions is the name of Jesus, which is not mentioned even once in the sermon. Neither do we find the crucifixion, heaven, or hell. Paul quotes no other Scripture, though he does quote an Athenian poet. Sin is not specifically mentioned, but it is at least implied by the call to repentance in verse 30.

Some commentators explain away these omissions by asserting that we have here only a summary of Paul's message.[4] Yet, these are the words that God has

preserved for our "teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:16–17)—including the "good work" of proclaiming God's message of salvation across the boundary to unbelievers. Certainly, Paul was capable of presenting a much more complete message, as evidenced by his sermon in the synagogue at Antioch (Acts 13:16–41), among other examples. Knowing that, we must conclude that we have everything God wanted us to hear from this particular message, which is the only sermon to Gentiles recorded in the New Testament. We agree with Lutheran commentator R. C. H. Lenski, who says, "Paul's address is a masterpiece in every way: in its introduction, in its line of thought, in its aptness for the audience, in its climax."[5]

Much has been written about the context of Paul's sermon.[6] Athens had a reputation as a center for religion and philosophy, being the home of the great Parthenon, the temple of the goddess Athena. Athens was also the home of famous Greek philosophers, such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. The Areopagus itself was a sort of council or tribunal, originally established to render verdicts on criminal matters. Though Paul was not formally on trial in Athens, his teachings were being evaluated by some of the most learned people of Athens. It was critical, therefore, that Paul present the Christian faith in a way that would make the most sense to the hearers.

Paul, who "become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some" (1 Cor 9:22), here "becomes" as a Greek philosopher, as an Athenian, in order to communicate God's message in a way that the Athenians will hear and understand. In other words, he contextualizes the message. The clear emphasis of Paul's sermon is the sovereignty of God, emphasizing a number of His attributes: knowable, creator, supreme, spirit, uncreated, merciful, and just. One could even provide a title for the sermon: "Who is God?"

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The first question has the potential to make us squirm. Scripture tells us that "faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ" (Rom 10:17), and "that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved" (Rom 10:9). We

are pretty confident that this means that a clear proclamation of Christ crucified and risen must therefore precede faith. But in Paul's sermon in Athens, the crucifixion is completely absent, and Jesus is referred to simply as the "Man." The effect of the sermon on the hearers, however, is recorded for us: some were derisive and "began to sneer," and some wanted to hear more later, "but some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them" (Acts 17:34).

According to God's Word, some people believed, and that's a win. Whenever the Word of God is proclaimed and the Spirit produces faith, then that is a great victory over Satan. Some may contend that those who came to faith must have heard Paul speak about Jesus more explicitly, either before the Areopagus when he was speaking in the marketplace or afterwards. However, I stand with Lenski on this one: "But now comes the glorious result. Some men were drawn closely to Paul. . . . And Luke at once adds that they believed, believed already on the strength of what Paul had said. The aorist[7] is historical."[8] They began to believe at the conclusion of this very sermon. While it is possible that those who believed may have heard more about Jesus prior to the message, it is also possible that they had not and that this was the only Christian message they had ever heard. There simply is no firm evidence to say that Dionysius and Damaris and the others with them had listened to Paul or to any other Christian on a previous occasion.

Is this sermon lacking the Gospel? Or, is it the Gospel contextualized for this audience? Dr. William Schumacher makes the incisive point that "each of us hears the saving gospel in a cross-cultural communication. The word of God is not native to my tribe, or to yours. With the help of lots of people who were listening to that word of God before I was, the gospel was brought to bear in my life in specific ways that I could *hear*."[9] So . . . maybe the Gospel is there, but we are not "hearing" it in this sermon because we are not first-century Athenians.

As American Lutherans, we have a formula by which we believe the Gospel is best heard: first preach the Law to afflict the conscience and bring the hearer to repentance, then proclaim the Gospel (life, death, and resurrection of Christ) to bring life-giving faith. Of course, we understand that the creation of saving faith is entirely the work of the Holy Spirit, yet it seems to us that a proclamation which follows the Law-Gospel order will somehow give God's Spirit His best chance of working faith.

At the risk of appearing anti-Waltherian,[10] I wonder if our "first the Law, then the Gospel" outline for presenting God's message of salvation is perhaps at least partially due to our American cultural preference for pragmatism and a reliance on formulas. After all, we believe, teach, and confess that "the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, and sanctified and preserved me in true faith."[11] What about if one were to present first the Gospel, and then the Law?

Would the Spirit of God be prevented from working? Or how about starting with Sanctification, then the Gospel, and then the Law?

Dr. Herbert Hoefer makes a compelling case for rethinking the way in which the Gospel is presented in non-Western societies, especially among Hindus or Muslims. In his enticing article, "Gospel Proclamation of the Ascended Lord," Hoefer first distinguishes between guilt-based and shame-based societies:

> In the guilt-based society, individuals have internalized a set of moral standards, and they feel personal guilt if they fail to live up to those standards. In the shame-based society, individuals are very aware of the judgment of their social peers and authorities. If they violate these people's expectations, they feel great shame.[12]

Hoefer contends that the Western presentation of the Gospel appeals specifically and particularly to people from a guilt-based culture:

> The Western evangelistic appeal has been based on the values of a guilt-based society. People are warned that God has set the absolute standards, and we know them in our individual hearts. When we violate these standards, our conscience itself informs us that we deserve God's eternal judgment and punishment (cf. Rom 2:15–16). Because of our moral failures, we do not deserve eternal life. However, Jesus Christ took the punishment on the cross that we deserved, and so we are set free and receive eternal life as God's gracious gift because of Christ.
>
> This Gospel proclamation addresses one's fear of God and His judgment, but leaves unaddressed the crisis of lifelong shame and exclusion that one would face in a shame-based society. In the shame-based society, the great spiritual anxiety is "What will people say?"[13]

To summarize the rest of Hoefer's article in a very general way, he goes on to say that shame-based peoples seem to "hear" the Gospel better when the starting point is Jesus who is alive and active today. Later, when a person believes in Jesus, one can address the questions of why He died in the first place (crucifixion and atonement) and how He came to be alive again (resurrection). While I think the Areopagan audience was probably more guilt-based in their outlook than shame-based, Hoefer's observations are relevant. The Spirit of God works through the Word—all of the Word, and not just from our prescribed starting-points.

Any number of people have written (sometimes extensively) on the ways in which Paul's command of the culture and mindset of the Athenians are reflected in this sermon—the thought progression, choice of vocabulary, and so on.[14] We won't belabor that point. As a missionary, stumbling along in the footsteps of Jesus, I can only hope that one day I will be able to "become as one" with those to whom God has sent me. Though my attempts at contextualization may be imperfect or

incomplete, the lesson from this text is clear: Contextualization of the message begins with the people's misconceptions of God. Paul's audience had many mistaken notions of God; and so, throughout the sermon, Paul emphasizes again and again the theme of "who God really is." Any attempt to contextualize the message of the Bible must begin with an understanding of what the people already believe about God. Do they think there is one God or many gods? Is God arbitrary or predictable? Is He vindictive or merciful? Is He petty, disinterested, and distant, or is He approachable, loving, and engaged? Once we understand the misconceptions, we can address them with God's own revelation of Himself in the inspired Word.

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The essence of Gospel contextualization is incarnation. Christ Himself is the most perfect example of the contextualized Gospel because He "became flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn 1:14). Jesus did not come in the form of a god-man, an angel, a supreme being, or a foreigner, but rather was "made like his brethren in all things" (Heb 2:17). Those who received His message did not do so based on outward appearances, the lure of novelty, or financial inducements, but rather because the Spirit of God worked faith in their hearts. In the same way, those who rejected His message did not do so because the messenger was too different or because His words were unintelligible, but because the Gospel itself was offensive to them.

The goal of contextualization should be that the messenger disappears—in other words, that the person who presents the Gospel witness is no longer a consideration in the reception or rejection of the message. "He must increase, but I must decrease" (Jn 3:30), until all they see is Christ.

Endnotes

[1] Martin Luther, cited in Ewald M. Plass (compiler), *What Luther Says: A Practical In-Home Anthology for the Active Christian* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), 107.
[2] Klaus Detlev Schulz, *Mission from the Cross: The Lutheran Theology of Mission* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009), 176.
[3] James A. Scherer, *Gospel, Church, and Kingdom: Comparative Studies in World Mission Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1987), 37.
[4] For example: "In such an obviously abridged report of a speech by Paul as that found in Acts 17, one should not expect the whole of his gospel message to be reproduced." in C. Gempf, "Athens, Paul At", *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1993), 53. Or, "Though the cross is missing in this summary report of his talk, the death of Christ must have been mentioned for him to mention the resurrection." in Ajith Fernando, *Acts: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1998), 477.

[5] R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles, 15–28* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1944 and 2008), 720.
[6] See, for example, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, pp. 51–54. Or Richard N. Longenecker, *The Ministry and Message of Paul* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1971).
[7] "aorist" is a Greek verb tense indicating past, completed action.
[8] Lenski, op. cit, p. 740.
[9] William W. Schumacher, "Theology for Culture: Confrontation, Context, and Creation," *Concordia Journal*, 42:3 (2016), p. 217.
[10] C. F. W. Walther, a founding father of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, wrote a book entitled, *The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel*. This work has shaped the Lutheran approach towards understanding an applying the Word of God in preaching and teaching for generations of Lutherans.
[11] Luther's Small Catechism, II:6 in Theodore G. Tappert, ed., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), p. 345.
[12] Herbert Hoefer, "Gospel Proclamation of the Ascended Lord," *Missiology: An International Review*, Vol. XXXIII, No. 4 (Oct. 2005), p. 436.
[13] Hoefer, op. cit., p. 437.
[14] See, for example, Lenski, op. cit., pp. 720–739.