

Lutheran Mission Matters



Volume XXV, No. 1 (Issue 50) May 2017

Is Contextualization a Bad Word in the Mission Field?

Tom Park

Abstract: Many scholars have different ideas about contextualization. That sophisticated sounding word brings with it unintended meanings which can be perceived both positively and negatively. Is contextualization a bad word in the mission field? The author will look at this word through his experience working with the Hmong and others of different social and economic background as a pastor.

As a Korean Lutheran pastor, contextualization has played an important part in the mission work among the Hmong and university students. Does contextualization have to be reevaluated? The author believes that missionaries, pastors, DCEs, DCOs, and laypeople need to revisit and (re)define what contextualization is. In order to reach out to people of other cultures, one is faced with the difficult decision and dilemma to distinguish what is cultural and what is theological. This article will highlight the necessity of the critical contextualization.

In this author's personal experience, going to a Lutheran worship service initially was a very challenging experience. The congregation, it seemed like, was a plane on autopilot; the members were responding, standing up and sitting down, and singing in four-part harmony, meticulously, but without much effort. Unfortunately, no one was there to help and guide this hopelessly lost soul both figuratively and literally. Since my initial experience, this newcomer completed a confirmation class, graduated from a Lutheran high school, a Lutheran college, and finally a Lutheran seminary. I have transitioned from outsider to an insider, understanding insider language and able to navigate the "Lutheran World" without any problems. In terms of liturgical worship, I have become like those of the Lutheran congregation members who can follow the liturgy without having to think much about it.



Rev. Tom Park is a professor of theology at Concordia University in Irvine, CA. He teaches basic Christian theology to undergraduate students and instructs future church workers in the area of systematic theology. Prior to coming to CUI, he was a pastor at Bethlehem Lutheran Church in St. Paul, MN serving the Hmong and the entire congregation. Rev. Park also worked with university students at Our Redeemer Lutheran Church in Moorhead, MN. Professor Park also taught at a Lutheran high school in Watertown, SD. He is a PhD candidate studying Missiology at Concordia Theological Seminary in Ft. Wayne, IN. tom.park@cui.edu

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One important lesson that was gained through all these years of assimilation into the Lutheran world was that contextualization should be bilateral rather than unilateral. The proclaimers of the Gospel and the receivers of the *Vox Dei* (Voice of God) inevitably shape one another.

When one looks at the differences between the mission approaches of the Old Testament and the New Testament, one can clearly see the methodological change. The Old Testament demanded that the people of Israel, the chosen nation, had to attract others to Yahweh by their exemplary way of life. The newcomers had to conform to the Hebrew/ Jewish ways. One of the signs of transformation was circumcision, which became the badge of the Chosen People. Walter Kaiser, a well-known Old Testament scholar, coined this as the “centripetal mission” approach.

On the other hand, in the New Testament, one can see the shift in the approach to mission. The Lord Jesus commanded His disciples to go out and proclaim the Gospel.¹ The “going out” kind of mission work is also known as the “centrifugal” approach.

Obviously, one can clearly see the centrifugal mission approach in the Old Testament, especially in Isaiah’s asking the LORD to send him out.

After being sent out by God, the missionary or the apostle had to adapt to the worldview of the hearers of their message. When we talk about worldview, we are not talking about changing theology or the Word of God.² Just as the apostle Paul approached the mission field,³ Christian missionaries followed the footsteps of the messenger to the Gentiles. Terry Wilder says, “Christ-followers engaged in missions and evangelism ought also to look for similar items to pique the interest of their hearers, i.e., ways to connect, conversation starters if you will, as they present the gospel to those who do not know Jesus.”⁴

Without actually noticing, the messengers and the audiences are mutually changing; hence, contextualization occurs with both parties. In this writer’s experience, Lutheran pastors and members adapted their messages based on my spiritual conditions. As Luther stated, “Hence, whoever knows well this art of distinguishing between Law and Gospel, him place at the head and call him a doctor of Holy Scripture.”⁵ As a receiver, I had to “adapt” to the speech patterns and unique vocabularies of the Lutheran messengers. I still vividly remember looking up difficult theological terms that I encountered during the church service, especially in the hymnal.

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Having once been a newcomer, this author can assert that the insiders expect the visitors and new Christians to embrace both the Word of God and the external

trappings of their heritage and culture.⁶ There is a story about a missionary to India during the 1800s who demanded that Indians dress like Westerners and drink tea. When Indians became “fully civilized,” then finally the missionary could share the Gospel with those contextualized Indians. Unfortunately, this is not an isolated occurrence. Cecil Rhodes, a wealthy British business man, wanted to provide funding to help people of other continents become like Europeans.

Some of the pioneer missionaries to Native Americans also embraced a paternalistic approach to missions. In order to be “civilized” many young Native American children were sent to dormitory schools⁷ without their family. The primary goal of their Caucasian teachers and caretakers were to expunge “savagery” from the Native American children. Whenever the teachers would catch children speaking their native languages, they were punished harshly.⁸ Because of the harsh and inhumane treatments, many Native Americans not only despised the European Americans but began to view Christianity as the religion of the “oppressor.” One can view this type of “mission” approach as *passé*, but this Eurocentric and paternalistic methodology is alive and well. When I was visiting one of my classmates’ home for a winter break, we were discussing mission work around the world. My classmate’s father sincerely stated, “We need to go around the world to teach those people to be civilized, which is our number one mission. When they can physically take care of themselves then we can share the Gospel with them.”

On the other hand, we have seen some negative examples of contextualization. In order to find out what would be a healthy and godly contextualization in the mission field, one needs to answer the following questions. What is the Word of God? What are the sacraments? What are the elements that are purely cultural? Which is the non-negotiable item in the mission field? Harold Taylor quotes Dean Gilliland’s definition of contextualization, “That goal is to enable, as far as is humanly possible, an understanding of what it means that Jesus Christ, the Word, is authentically experienced in each and every human situation.”⁹

There are many different flavors of Lutheranism. There are some who would prefer to eat sauerkraut, while some enjoy lutefisk. We love certain things that make us stand out. However, it is imperative and critical to always examine why we do and say certain things. Are we doing certain things because they are cultural things and not a theological matter? When we start to put a priority on our cultural and human elements, even placing these elements above the Word of God, we are erecting a Tower of Babel in our lives.

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In my early years as a Lutheran, I belonged to a notoriously “conservative” Lutheran church body, where the fellowship principle was emphasized a great deal. I understand that unionism and syncretism are problematic and that we should not give the impression that there are no theological differences when, in fact, significant differences exist. However, I have come to believe that there were some times that we expected non-Christians and those with weaker faith to be just like us Christians, and do so in an instant. I got the impression that some were making the fellowship principle more important than justification. As an example, a young pastor brought casuistry to his circuit *Winkel*. He asked, “Is it okay for me to join my local Rotary?” Without a beat, fellow pastors asked, “Is it against our fellowship principle?” I do believe that we tend to be impatient when it comes to other people’s sanctification. I am the first to admit that I want others to be like me and demand others to embrace the application of the fellowship principle quickly without patiently instructing others. A Haitian pastor compared sanctification to cooking black beans; if you rush the process, you are going to ruin the beans. I do agree that fellowship principle is very important. However, it is not beneficial to demand that people follow the application without really explaining the reasons for it. When we are in the mission field or when we are confronting new believers, it is necessary for the proclaimers to patiently teach why we do certain things or to give up doing some things when we realize that they are not essential.

Granted, we have seen some negative examples of the “contextualization.” I consider these to be a kind of pseudo-spiritual colonization. We have a misconception that colonization always involves the color of skin—Europeans oppressing people of color. The reality is that it is about power, that is, the group perceived to be the dominant culture forces the minority to do the things against their interests. Based on my own experiences, the dominant groups needs to focus on the Word of God rather than trying to maintain power or *status quo*. As soon as people perceive the minority to be a threat, the dominant group will be on a defensive mode, making the mission work to be a tool of limiting the Gospel recipients.

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What is a good example of successful contextualization in the mission field? This might be a textbook example, but it was Jesus. “And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”¹⁰ Our Savior took the form of a servant by becoming a man. He learned the culture and language of the land. Jesus became a part of culture. One critical difference was that Jesus rejected sinful behaviors, even though people wrongly labeled some to be cultural things. The religious group in charge, the Pharisees, tried

to force Jesus to operate under their system. The Jewish leaders, in a way, tried to colonize Jesus with their brute power, but Jesus used the Word of God to reveal the true way of the Lord. He practiced a concept called “Critical Contextualization,” coined by late missiologist Paul Hiebert. The true Messiah did not accept the typical view of the anointed one. The Jewish people were expecting and demanding that the Messianic figure be militaristic and use His power to destroy the oppressive force known as the Romans. Even Jesus’ own disciples were steeped in this popular, but misguided idea. The mother of James and John unabashedly asked Jesus to place her sons on His right and left hand.¹¹ Peter used a sword to actualize his deep seated ambition and to grab onto the fast evaporating dream of power.¹² Jesus consistently fought against the *Zeitgeist* and emphasized His *raison d’être* on this earth.

Theologically, if not historically, mission work is never about power. One of my seminary classmates lauded Spanish conquistadors for spreading the Gospel to Incans and Mayans by force. My classmate’s reasoning was that the end justifies the means. After all, many became Christians through this extreme measure. I cannot read the hearts and minds of Mayans and Incans, but some probably claimed to be Christians in order to spare their own lives.

As a missionary to Hmong people who had resettled in Minnesota, I was keenly aware of the power dynamic between dominant and minority groups within a congregation. The Hmong were victims of perpetual tyranny, an ethnic group who never possessed a land of their own. Wherever they pitched their tents—whether in China, Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, or Thailand—the dominant or host racial group mistreated the Hmong. Over two thousand years of persecution did not squelch their identity. Hmong were able to preserve their culture and language. To a group victimized by the abusive of power and tyranny by various racial and cultural groups, Christianity should not be another force trying to destroy their identity by coercion. Some of the zealous Christian mission efforts have been detrimental because many young Hmong are reverting back to their traditional religions.

When I was working with the Hmong, it was necessary to practice the “critical contextualization.” What made Hmong a Hmong? Wilder emphasizes the importance of not compromising the Gospel, “Believers in Jesus do not accept or acknowledge, even for a short period of time, the false ideas or designations of worldviews contrary to the gospel. . . . Believers in Jesus need to learn to expose false ideas that are contrary to the gospel. This is indeed bold preaching.”¹³ It was a challenge to walk a fine line between honoring and respecting the Hmong culture while speaking out against syncretistic practices. For example, in order to appease their friends and family members, some Hmong Christians participate in ancestral worship and wrist string tying ceremonies (*Khi Tes*)¹⁴. When there are occasions to celebrate life events like weddings, graduation, and wedding anniversaries, family members and friends come together to wish people good luck by tying normally white cloth string around the wrists.

In the Hmong culture, funerals and weddings are most important events. During these events, participation of family members and friends are crucial. Within these cultural events, a religious worldview is injected. It is a real challenge to distinguish between what is cultural and what is religious. Many Hmong brothers and sisters in faith have been ostracized for not participating the “Old ways” or Shamanistic rituals.

In order for Westerners to reach populations deeply influenced by the Eastern worldview, contextualization is crucial. As was stated before, one should not contextualize the Scriptures and theology, but it may be necessary to adapt the message to the particular audience.

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When the apostle Paul went to Athens, he did not start preaching to the erudite crowd by saying, “Believe in Jesus right now and be baptized!” But rather, Paul said, “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.”¹⁵ It is crucial to find the common ground, how can we do this? As a Korean person reaching out to the Hmong population, I tried to find the common denominator between myself and the deeply persecuted group. The key that connected us was *Hallyu*, also known as the “Korean Wave.” Hmong, like many others, were amazed by and infatuated with Korean dramas, movies, and pop songs. Coming originally from South Korea, I found that Hmong were very curious about Korean culture and language. Because of my shorter stature, Hmong usually assume that I am Hmong; but as soon as I revealed my true heritage, “*Kuw yog Kaolee*” (I am Korean), then people would smile and ask about Korea. The initial barrier was broken, thanks to Korean movie and music stars! Just the way that Paul moved from something concrete and tangible to spiritual, I was able to make that leap without much resistance.

As I came to appreciate the Hmong culture and people, I began to notice the practices contrary to the scriptural ways. After gaining Hmong people’s trust, as an outsider I was able to address my concerns. Paul Hiebert stated, “Contextualization must mean the communication of the gospel in ways the people understand, but that also challenge them individually and corporately to turn from their evil ways.”¹⁶ I do not claim to be an expert missionary to Hmong and, in fact, very far from being one; but it is clear that contextualization happened mutually. I became aware of Hmong culture and languages. As a pastor, I was able to diagnose their spiritual ailments. For example, some of the Hmong were fighting against spiritual battles like demon

oppression and possession, very similar to what Jesus' disciples were facing in the first century AD. As I was learning Hmong culture and language, the Hmong were observing me and the contextualization was taking place. One of the evidences of this was that my Hmong members started to trust me as their Korean pastor serving at a traditionally German congregation. Without realizing it, I became an honorary Hmong.

Based on my experience as a Korean missionary among the Hmong, I urge future and current missionaries to please be aware of their surroundings. In order to contextualize properly, we need to be aware of materials and practices to contextualize. In order to find them, missionaries and pastors must be in the trenches listening and observing the people to find the opportunity to share the transcultural and transracial Gospel. Contextualization itself is neutral, but the way we use it determines whether it is positive or harmful. As it was addressed numerous times in this article, one should not tamper with and change theology or the Scriptures for the sake of contextualization.

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Endnotes

¹ We know this to be the Great Commission based on Matthew 28:18–20. Missiologists looked at the nature of Trinity and Jesus' command to "send" out His workers in the harvest field; some came up with the concept of "*Missio Dei*." *Missio* is rooted in the Latin word *Mitto* which means to send.

² Gailyn Van Rheenen, *Contextualization and Syncretism: Navigating Cultural Currents* (Evangelical Missiological Society Series, No. 13 William Carey Library, 2006), 120–121. In this work, it is emphasized that there is a fine line between contextualization and syncretism. More "conservative" Christians tend not to meddle with theology or the Bible because these are considered to be very sacred. The matters of outward practices are subject to change to accommodate others with different background.

³ M. David Sills, "Paul and Contextualization," in *Paul's Missionary Methods: In His Time and Ours*, eds. Robert L. Plummer and John Mark Terry (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2012), 197.

⁴ Terry L. Wilder, "A Biblical Theology of Missions and Contextualization," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 55, no. 1 (Fall 2012): 10.

⁵ Martin Luther, Dr. Martin Luthers Sämtliche Schriften, St. Louis ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, N.D.), vol. 9, col. 802. WA 33:429.33–430.41; LW 23:270–271.

⁶ Dana L. Robert (ed.), *Converting Colonialism: Visions and Realities in Mission History, 1706–1914* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008).

⁷ "Boarding Schools," *Indian Country* accessed February 27, 2017,

<https://www.mpm.edu/wirp/ICW-41.html>

⁸ Native American Exhibit at Minnesota History Museum.

⁹ Harold Taylor, “Contextualized Mission in Church History,” in *Encountering New Religious Movements: A Holistic Evangelical Approach*, eds. Irving Hexam, Stephen Rost, and John W. Morehead II (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic & Professional, 2004), 45.

¹⁰ Philippians 2:8 (ESV)

¹¹ Matthew 20:20–21 (ESV), “Then the mother of Zebedee’s sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him. ‘What is it you want?’ he asked. She said, ‘Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom.’”

¹² Matthew 26:51 (ESV), “And behold, one of those who were with Jesus stretched out his hand and drew his sword and struck the servant of the high priest and cut off his ear.”

¹³ Terry L. Wilder, “A Biblical Theology of Missions and Contextualization” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 55, no. 1 (Fall 2012): 12.

¹⁴ “Hmong Rituals,” *Shamanism* accessed February 27, 2017, <http://www.pbs.org/splithorn/shamanism1.html>

¹⁵ Acts 17:22–23 (ESV)

¹⁶ Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 185.