

# Making Sure We Are Making Sense

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**T**hose of us in mission circles think a lot about how to communicate the gospel. Along the way we try out those ideas. Let me let you peek into part of a recent discussion between global workers with dozens of years (most over 30) “trying it out” all over the world.

Since contextualization means lots of different things in different contexts, the question that started our discussion was: How might local believers understand biblical ideas in their own (indigenous) culture—rather than importing forms from outside cultures?<sup>1</sup>

We have all heard Bible translators working in a hot, flat place struggle to communicate a phrase like “your sins will be white as snow,” or talk about the “lamb of God” in a place that only knows pigs—like in Papua New Guinea.

At the core we want communication to be understood. So we have to think about what is heard, not just what is said. One brother noted that the incarnation of Jesus is the perfect example of contextualization—both from God’s perspective in sending Jesus, and in Jesus living out the message.


Another brother who has worked in Thailand for 30+ years wrote that too often “contextualization” attempts to move people from their birth community to another community. In that situation

contextualization means trying to make this different (“Christian”) community as familiar to locals as possible, so as to minimize the trauma of the shift. But it is still a different community and often the gospel is then not accepted more broadly among the people. What this brother is trying to do now is make the message “feel at home” in their community. He uses their “dictionary of meaning” to communicate faithfully in their context. The goal is for their birth community to become new but not different or “other.”

Perhaps the clearest summary is in Darrell Whiteman’s IBMR article on the subject. He says that the purpose of contextualization is 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.” He goes on to note that “Good contextualization offends people for the right reasons. Bad contextualization, or the lack of it altogether, offends them for the wrong reasons.”<sup>2</sup>

So...what do we do with that?


Increasingly, no matter where we live, we are being forced to think through these issues. Naturally, global workers are forced to, but what about the rest of us, as we seek to engage people near us from different backgrounds?



The son of one of my friends is in his 30s. While growing up in a solid Christian home, he struggled with his faith. He joined the military and went off to war in the Middle East. At some point he began to get tattoos. I don’t know the whole story of how that started, but he had a passion to reflect his life – his story – on his body. One arm is full of all the guns and equipment he was trained to use (most of which he did!). In the center of his chest is a detailed, color tattoo of his parent’s wedding day.

Even though he is out of the army and has come back to the Lord in a powerful way, he continues to tell his story this way and add more of the story to his body. As a result, he can speak to people with whom we would not have an audience.

I share this to help us think about how many people today look at their lives and “purpose”—especially young people—looking for a way to fit into life and the world. They are trying to make sense of things in ways that most of my generation and much of the Christian church doesn’t understand and doesn’t communicate with well.

Consider what you might do to reach out and learn someone else’s story and love them. Then you will be better able to tell your story of all that God has done to get you to where you are today. 

<sup>1</sup> Often, for the local people/culture, these outside forms have different, little or no meaning[s] at all.

<sup>2</sup> *Contextualization: The Theory, the Gap, the Challenge* by Darrell Whiteman in *IBMR*, January 1997, pp. 2-3. [internationalbulletin.org/issues/1997-01/1997-01-002-whiteman.pdf](http://internationalbulletin.org/issues/1997-01/1997-01-002-whiteman.pdf)