

Further Reflections

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We talk about the idea of contextualization from many different angles that I've wondered what people think when they hear that word. On one extreme, some say, "the gospel needs no contextualization... the message doesn't change!"

Probably, if you are reading *Mission Frontiers*, you have a different perspective. Still, I'm sure that we each might land in a different place on the contextualization continuum—beyond which (we fear) the message might become syncretized. However, perhaps more often, new workers go to serve cross culturally before they have fully understood how much the faith of their upbringing is also syncretized. Well known historian Kenneth Scott Latourette recounts the fascinating history of the spread of Christianity globally, tracking **both** the impact of the gospel on new cultures **as well as** how those cultures impacted established Christian traditions and changed the faith.

Recently, I found a simple way to describe contextualization in a series of tweets which NY pastor and author Timothy Keller posted on February 4, 2022.¹ Here are his posts, from a seven-part tweet:²

The recent post I made about Stephen Colbert's partial answer about his faith and the ensuing comments has shown me American Christians still have a long way to go on understanding Col 4:5–6, how to be "wise in the ways you act toward outsiders."

¹ <https://bit.ly/37MhooW>

² I have merged Keller's 7 tweets together, smoothed out the flow, format in order to highlight his points clearly. Bold emphasis is mine.



This is called **contextualization**. What is contextualization? Its adapting your message to be understandable and compelling to particular hearers without compromising the truth in any way.

Why contextualize?

First, because everyone already does it. As soon as you choose a language to speak in, and vocabulary and illustrations, and arguments, you are adapting to some human hearers more than others. If you don't become conscious of how you are contextualizing—which is inevitable—you won't contextualize well.

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Second, because Paul contextualizes in his speeches. See how he presents to Bible believers in Acts 13, blue-collar pagans in Acts 14, educated pagans in Act 17.

Third, because the biblical writers contextualize. See John's use of Greek philosophy's "Logos" in John 1. See the use of the Hittite Sumerian treaty form in the book of Deuteronomy. See Paul's contextualization of the gospel to Greek and Jewish cultural narratives in 1 Cor 1:22–24.

Fourth, because Paul calls us to contextualization without compromise in 1 Cor. 9:19-23.

Fifth, because the incarnation itself was a kind of contextualizing. So we could understand—the Word made flesh.

Sixth, keep in mind you can't and shouldn't say everything every time when bearing a public witness to your faith. In Acts 17 Paul spoke of judgment but not of the cross or how to get forgiveness. So it wasn't a full gospel presentation. It was laying a foundation for talking to people later.

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Two days later, Keller added:

Over-contextualization makes an idol of the hearers' culture and is the mistake of liberal Christianity. Under-contextualization makes an idol of the speaker's culture and is the mistake of fundamentalist Christianity. We all make both mistakes—but which do you do more?"

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Acts 17 is, indeed, instructive here, as Keller notes. I love his point that not every presentation of the gospel is a *full* gospel presentation. But often it is "laying a foundation for talking to people later."

My hope when I share about my faith and life, is that it would challenge the person to think more deeply about Jesus and the Scriptures and give them a longing to know Him. The Holy Spirit can encourage us to call for a decision, but that doesn't mean we will do so every time.

I'm considering a new way to engage people with the gospel, which I hope to write up in the next issue (or two). I wonder if the methods we usually use are the best in every situation. It seems like each cultural context and each generation need fresh expressions of ancient truth about Jesus and what it means to be a part of the kingdom. Thinking this through well will be a help to all of us, no matter how different the cultures around us are or become. ▣