Encounter: Journal for Pentecostal Ministry, Contextualized Church Planting in Twenty-first Century America

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Nothing in Scripture points to the making and sustaining of disciples outside the context of a church and after nearly 2000 years of history, the church is still the primary institution for making disciples. To this end, Donald McGavran recognizes church planting as the primary goal of mission.[1] If Jesus' design, as stated in Matthew 28:18, is the transformation of every people group (*panta te ethne*) into disciples, and if the church is the agency created by Christ to effect said transformation, then it follows that churches must be planted among all peoples—even among peoples of varying cultures within the United States.

The problems facing intra-country church planters are of the same variety as those facing inter-country planters, albeit of varying degrees. Cross-cultural ministry in the United States has often been defined by scenarios such as a city dweller trying to pastor in a rural church or an Anglo ministering among Native Americans. Beyond these types of situations, many people assume that an individual from anywhere in the United States could plant a church in any corner of the country with little-to-no cultural barrier. However, anyone who travels to any degree inside the United States and interacts with the residents of different regions and cities knows this is a faulty assumption. Even a single city has multiple subcultures so different from one another that they may as well be different countries.

Planting new churches requires cultural awareness. Expressions of faith by different people in different places are always cultural. No one cultural form is normative and faith is never expressed devoid of a cultural kernel.[2] Consequently, leaders face the need for contextualization. David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen define 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 put forth in the teaching of Holy Scripture, and that is meaningful to respondents in their respective cultural and existential contexts."[3]
The more church leaders know about contextualization, the more they understand it is a requirement for effective cross-cultural communication of the gospel, and American church planters must join this conversation. The acceptance and success of contextualization rests on three major assumptions. First, the gospel is good news for everyone, everywhere.[4] Second, all cultures need and are capable of "receiving and embodying the gospel."[5] Third, the empowerment of the Holy Spirit present and active in Spirit-filled believers makes Pentecostalism specifically a "religion made to travel" and one capable of taking root wherever the gospel is planted.[6]

THE THEOLOGY OF CONTEXTUALIZATION

Christians often understand contextualization when it crosses national boundaries but fail to apply the same principle within a single nation or region. The New Testament illustrates that both Jesus and Paul encountered people of vastly different cultures as they traveled during their ministries. This is true even though Jesus only traveled an area of approximately 125 miles by 50 miles. Paul's travels took him as far as Rome, but he only actually spanned a distance of 1500 miles East to West and 500 miles North to South. The New Testament describes significant cultural challenges to mission work within these relatively small geographic areas.

"Contextualization is incarnational."[7] In this sense, Jesus' own life is the ultimate contextualized communication of the gospel. He did not become a generic man in the incarnation, but entered the world with a high degree of specificity in language, time, and geography (John 1:14; Phil 2:5-8; Heb. 4:14-15).[8] Jesus understood that within a relatively small geographic area, He daily interacted with other first-century Jewish people from different backgrounds, histories, family situations, and worldviews. He responded by tailoring each parable, story, sermon, and conversation accordingly (Matt. 5:1-12; 8:5-13; 19:16-26; John 3:1-12).[9]

Paul is the key model for contextualized church planting, saying in 1 Corinthians 9:22, "I have become all things to all men." Paul took what had been only a message to the Jews and interpreted it afresh to the Gentiles, requiring considerable contextualization in each new place he ministered (Acts 13:16-41; 14:15-17; 16:11-15; 16:31-32; 17:22-31). The debate at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 and Paul's clash with Peter in Galatians 2 illustrate the intensity of the tension involved in New Testament contextualization. Ultimately, the gospel propelled the interpretive process.[10] Remaining anchored in the Scripture allowed Paul flexibility in the design of each local congregation. Churches today often attempt to be like the "New Testament church," but the churches Paul planted and associated with in his travels are each so different that it is impossible to speak of a New Testament church, but only of New Testament churches.[11] The quest for the New Testament church "does not take seriously enough the diversity of New Testament teaching and practice."[12]

Jesus' incarnation in itself was just one in a series of God's contextualized interactions with humanity. He communicated throughout history by speaking through people "at many times and in various ways" (Heb. 1:1), contextualizing His message uniquely in each one. Charles Van Engen says that God constantly self-contextualized "in new (*kainos*) ways that are different from, yet in continuity with, all past moments of God's self-disclosure throughout human history."[13] John 16:7-15 shows the beginning of yet another movement in God's plan of contextualization through the arrival of the Holy Spirit. [14]

THE NEED FOR CHURCH PLANTING IN AMERICA

Empowered by the Holy Spirit, the Assemblies of God has steadily planted new churches over the last century, including 368 in 2011,[15] with a goal of 410 in 2012.[16] But regardless of advances in church planting by the Assemblies of God, "North America is the only continent in the world where the church is not growing."[17] Johnson summarizes the problem in the West as an unwillingness or inability to keep pace with the changes in culture. "In a nutshell … the

world changed and the operational mode of the church did not."[18] Fortunately, church planting in America has seen a resurgence in the past decade. Much of the increased attention can be traced to the growing need for churches that can reach an ever-diversifying population.

Cultural changes due to generational shifts, immigration, and globalization demand churches stretch to meet the need with contextualized faith communities. Wilbert Shenk indicates that a "large group of people throughout the West have had no direct contact with the church or the Christian Scriptures for several generations."[19]

America does not need more churches of a similar kind to those that exist; it needs new contextualized churches that clearly and persuasively present the gospel in a culturally appropriate way. The American church must adopt a missionary stance towards its own neighbors if it will reach the varying sociopeoples in its communities.[20] Stafford agrees and argues for church planting in America on the grounds that new churches with a missionary approach reach more pre-Christian people than churches fifteen years and older.[21] To address the increasingly multi-cultural population in the United States, the church must determine to cross cultural barriers in the form of new contextualized faith communities in an effort to bring the lost to salvation and meaningful discipleship.

CONTEXTUALIZATION, SYNCRETISM, AND THE HOLY SPIRIT

In 1984, Paul Hiebert outlined a new way to deal with existing cultural beliefs when establishing new churches, warning against the extremes of uncritical acceptance and uncritical rejection. His solution was critical contextualization, the process whereby an existing custom is "explicitly examined with regard to its meanings and functions in the society and then evaluated in light of biblical norms."[22] Critical contextualization always includes a process of discovery to uncover what the local culture contains and why, forcing planters to take on the role of a student and study the area in which they intend to plant a church. Gary Bulley instructs his students to look at seven primary trends for insight into a community: (1) population, (2) building, (3) housing, (4) church, (5) economic, (6) generational, and (7) business.[23] Once the church planter accesses these areas, he or she must bring God's Word to bear on each area.

Avoiding Syncretism

A discussion of contextualization is incomplete without addressing the issue of syncretism— "the conscious or unconscious reshaping of Christian plausibility structures, beliefs, and practices through cultural accommodation so that they reflect those of the dominant culture."[24] Rick Brown calls syncretism "the main threat to God's program of contextualization."[25] And to be sure, God is concerned about syncretism (Exod. 20:1-23; Deut. 6:4; Gal. 2:11-21, and the book of Colossians).[26] Church planters must wade into the tension created by the intersection of gospel and culture since it is the tendency of humanity at all times and in all places to "blend their beliefs and practices with those of the dominant culture."[27]

Some missiologists have developed contextualization scales in an attempt to define and measure the extent of the gospel/culture interaction. The formalized C1-C6 scale has served to shed light specifically on the cultural issues involved in Muslims converting to Christianity.[28] Another common scale used by missiologists shows contextualization as a midpoint of sorts, with irrelevance on one

end and syncretism on the other. Missiologists sometimes speak of going "too far" in contextualization so that one falls into syncretism.[29] On the other end of the scale is irrelevance or "non-contextualization" in which the Christianity preached and practiced is so

foreign to the culture that it is not deeply adopted and brings about little or no transformation.[30] This scale is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Contextualization Scale

| Irrelevant | Contextualized | Syncretistic |

I disagree with the above scale on two accounts. First, it is flawed with respect to the categories it seeks to define. Irrelevance and syncretism are not opposite ends of the same spectrum, but two different spectrums entirely. Second, it is flawed in that it implies one can go too far in one direction and become irrelevant and too far in the other and become too relevant. It fails to capture the concept that gospel communicators and the church can never be too relevant any more than one can become too fluent when speaking a language. I introduce a new contextualization matrix here that better represents the truth of both relevance and syncretism, recognizing that there is always some measure of both in every organized faith community. Churches desiring contextualized ministry would look for a movement downward and to the right.

Figure 2. Contextualization Matrix
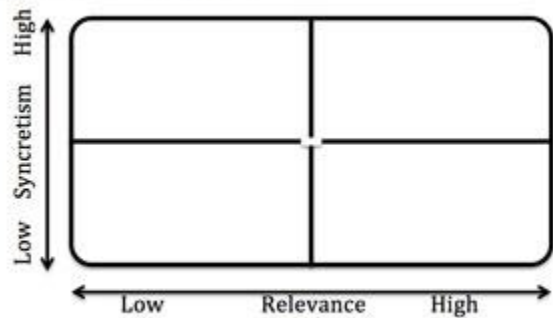
Holy Spirit Empowerment for Contextualization

A thorough understanding of the Holy Spirit's role in contextualization is lacking in the missiological literature and the field of church planter training and practice. After an extensive hearing of testimonies at the Jerusalem Council, the leaders announced, "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (Acts 15:28). The decision concerning how to proceed with the new church plants combined human deliberation and Holy Spirit guidance. Both played a critical role in the process and caused the church to arrive at a decision that made sense spiritually and logistically.[31] Planters today should follow this same pattern.

This combination of strategic planning and keen sensitivity to the guidance of the Holy Spirit was typified in Paul's ministry.[32] Johnson points out the need for modern cross-cultural workers to be Spirit-led and collect information to develop strategy for reaching the lost. Information gathering does not negate the need for reliance on the Holy Spirit, but allows the Spirit to lead in concert with real-time information.[33] Though methods and plans will and must differ among ministers in different contexts, through the Holy Spirit, Jesus can be present in every culture,

time, nation, and people.[34]

Many American churches appear to be carbon copies of each other. This is unfortunate considering the vast cultural differences that exist among the approximately 300 million people living in the United States. Different people from different cultures must be touched, reached, communicated to, and served differently. Just as the Holy Spirit leads church planters in regards to strategy, the Spirit also leads in creativity, which requires that ministry leaders try new methods and techniques to share the gospel. As Bulley rightly advises, "Every church start is a unique creation of the Holy Spirit."[35]

The Spirit-filled church planter will rely on the Holy Spirit for strategy and creativity, but must also practice discernment in hearing what the Spirit is already saying and doing in a community. Planters must become educated in the local culture and determine how it compares with the teachings of Scripture.[36] This appropriate application of Scripture to context will only happen when produced by discerning, Spirit-led interpreters of God's Word. The decision to contextualize is an on-going process as the cross-cultural minister constantly makes choices in order to balance relevance and truth that avoids syncretism.[37] In this missiological church planting praxis, culture is a good place to start, but a bad place to end. Though Van Rheenen's Missional Helix illustrates the church's interaction between cultural analysis, theological reflection, historical perspective, and strategy formation as a process of movement in research, Hausfeld's modified Missional Helix shows the four elements in relationship to and led by the Spirit.[38] Hausfeld's model helps church planters understand the indispensible role of the Holy Spirit in this missiological praxis.

Church planters must understand the need for continual modification and change, since contextualization is dynamic. No community stays the same. Jesus, the gospel, and the church must all be contextualized, but the context is never static. The church must always evaluate its context and monitor changes resulting from globalization, urbanization, and acculturation.[39] If the church remains static when the context changes, even a once-contextualized church will no longer be contextualized.

CONTEXTUALIZATION BENEATH THE SURFACE

The majority of missiologists addressing U.S. contextualization issues (a small number) focus on contextualization of what Murray calls "structural reform or innovation." He argues that church planters often spend undue time and energy contextualizing these structural arrangements, such as governance and administration, at the expense of mission-critical areas such as building relationships with unbelievers, evangelistic action, and social involvement.[40] Though church plants may meet in non-traditional locations, wear casual clothes, or contain coffee shops, most intentional contextualization appears to be superficial. Jonathan Dodson provides an appropriate warning: superficial contextualization that never reaches the deepest parts of people can lead to syncretism and a bland, narrow-minded, and ethnocentric church.[41] Such attempts at contextualization are well-intentioned, but inadequate. The following categories will be helpful in breaking down detailed methods of contextualization: daily living, discipleship, membership, theology and critiquing culture.

Contextual Daily Living

The presence of God's people in a given location will affect daily life as individuals experience a renewal of traditional social patterns. This renewal, however, will substantially be a renewal of

the existing patterns.[42] For this reason, planters must quickly learn the real life issues associated with the people among whom they intend to plant a church. What does it look like for people in this community to celebrate, mourn, confess and repent, encourage each other, and show love? Where do people go to have fun, relax, worship, grow, shop, and eat? These questions address issues of social-relational contextualization that are integral to reaching people from a culture that differs from one's own culture. Understanding transition rituals, crisis rituals, and other types of rituals provides helpful insight for the church planter attempting to understand local life expressions, but may also provide an entry point for the pastor to minister in the midst of these crucial community and family processes.[43]

Contextual Discipleship

Contextualization in church planting is not determined by the pastor's style of dress, but rather by his or her ability to teach converts how to live for Jesus in their homes, at their places of business, and with their friends. New converts do not need to become exactly like the church planter. What is important is that each individual becomes a unique disciple learning to live for Jesus in his or her specific context. Only when they are able to apply God's instructions in the areas of forgiveness, love, proper relationships, and family interactions can the planter claim to have fostered real contextual discipleship.[44]

Contextual Membership Covenants

Each new church must take special care to avoid becoming a carbon copy of other prominent churches, other churches in the area, or an idyllic historical church. Initially, church planters often focus on contextualization of worship styles, church names, public communication styles, and ministries to felt needs. However, other important issues can lie just below the surface and, without the intentional efforts of discovery and reflection may go unaddressed in any meaningful way.[45]

A contextualized membership covenant helps to address some of these issues if it contains specific expectations derived from careful biblical and cultural exegesis. While all church membership covenants may encourage believers to evangelize the lost, financially support the church's ministry, and live in holiness, they should also be culturally focused. For example, churches set in regions openly hostile to the Christian faith might have covenants concerning loving ones' enemies and enduring persecution. Churches set in communities with high crime and violence may covenant to be active in peacemaking and reconciliation. In highly sexualized cultures, covenants might include a commitment to modesty, chaste living, and avoidance of pornography.[46]

Contextual Theology

While the truth claims of Scripture apply universally, how those truths are rooted in local contexts vary widely according to culture. "In the act of reading and interpreting the Bible, the questions of whom you are, where you are and whom you live among as a reader make a difference."[47] Church planters must wrestle with these questions and immediately engage new converts in the struggle as well. Theologizing must take place in the context of mission as a normal and healthy part of church planting, rather than an obstacle to overcome.

Critiquing Culture

The church can and must, in some ways, look like the community. In all of the ways mentioned above, the church strives to speak the cultural language of the people and present the gospel in a manner that eliminates unnecessary obstacles. The goal of this contextualization is not to make the gospel un-offensive, but to make the offense of the gospel clear.[48] As the church holds to the centrality of Scripture and critically engages culture, it should naturally follow that the new community of faith will be a channel whereby the gospel critiques the culture. In this way, an appropriately contextualized body of believers will not only be somewhat "at home" in its context, but will also speak prophetically to it. The church's best example of this brand of contextualization is again the incarnational model of Jesus. He was often in opposition to elements of the local culture and regularly critiqued it, but always did so as an insider who was "one of them."[49]

THE WAY FORWARD

Any prescribed future for American church planting must be located squarely in an incarnational model that uses the example of Jesus' earthly life and ministry. Because God contextualized himself in Jesus, His incarnation makes the church's contextualization "not just a possibility but an obligation."[50] Christ is the head of the church and "every command of Christ is a defacto command to contextualize."[51] The increasing cultural diversity in America intensifies the call for contextual churches, and where Jesus reigns through His church, His lordship will produce particular expressions of the gospel that impact local culture. Pentecostals should expect the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit to enable the multiplication of these culture-impacting churches and the successful rooting of the body of Christ in every context.

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