

The Necessity and Limits of Theological Contextualization in Contemporary Missiology: A Critical Assessment

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Abstract: This paper examines one of the most important and widely debated aspects of contemporary applied theology: the contextualization of theology. Interpreting and applying the message of the Gospel is no easy task, especially when it is communicated to different communities and cultural traditions. A recurring challenge in the proclamation of the Gospel concerns the question of the relevance of Scripture. Contextualization aims to address precisely this issue. The purpose of this instrument is to create a connection between the message of Scripture and the diverse cultural particularities of the contemporary world. However, as with any instrument used in theology, contextualization requires careful evaluation regarding its validity. Therefore, this study aims to offer a critical evaluation of the contextualization of theology in contemporary missiology, demonstrating that, beyond its necessity and effectiveness, there are certainly limits that we should not disregard when constructing an overall picture of the contextualization of theology, limits that are of utmost importance, especially when considering the preservation of the integrity of the Christian message.

Keywords: Theological Contextualization, Missiology, Evangelism, The Gospel, Culture, Relevance, Translation

Introduction

Reading Scripture does not merely involve going through information. Whenever a person interacts with the Bible, they consciously or unconsciously undertake at least two actions: interpretation and application. Being both spiritual and historical in nature, the Bible compels us to apply its spiritual principles in light of the era in which we live. As evidence, all activities centered around Scripture, such as reading, study, academic research, church services, etc., periodically confront the issue of Scripture's relevance. Does it contain truths that are valid for contemporary society? Can a book at least two thousand years old retain its value? Are there solutions to bridge the vast gap in time? These are questions we cannot answer easily or simplistically. The answer cannot be reduced to the notion that the Bible interprets itself.

In addressing this issue, the appropriate solution appears to be contextualization. Richard Engle explains how, in the practical areas of Christianity, such as missions, contextualization has proven to be an effective means of conveying the Bible's relevance across all aspects of human life. Validated by experts in missiology, today the tool of contextualization is widely used as a bridge between interpretation and application, between the unity of Scripture and the diversity of cultures (Engle, 1983, pp. 85–86). However, like any tool for interpreting the Bible, it must be examined and evaluated for its accuracy. Therefore, in the present study, we intend to evaluate the effectiveness of the contextualization tool and to identify its advantages and dangers in the context of evangelism and Christian mission. The goal is to understand to what extent contextualization succeeds in responding effectively and accurately to the questions posed above. The sources used will be exclusively theoretical.

Defining the Concept of Contextualization

The concept of contextualization is not a new one. It is only the term itself that has been part of theological vocabulary since the 1970s. The Church has always been concerned with adapting the teachings of Scripture to the culture in which it found itself. This process was known as the

dialogue between the Church and culture, accommodation, etc., and took place whenever there were changes in culture, language, and transitions from one era to another. We attribute the first attempt to contextualize the Bible to the early Church, amid the tension between Jewish culture and the Greco-Roman world. The Church's interest throughout the centuries has been to correctly relate the Gospel to culture, depending on the geographical area and other socio-human aspects. Unlike the classical principle of adaptation, the term "contextualization" has a deeper and more dynamic meaning. It evokes a wide range of existential realities on which it depends, being in a causal relationship with them (Whiteman, 1997, p. 2). Researchers such as Engle argue that the socio-political context of emerging Third World countries played a crucial role in the emergence of the concept. Political and economic independence paved the way for a reflection on cultural identity, which translated not into ideological discourse but into religious concerns. The church in these countries has taken on a decisive role in addressing social issues such as health, education, and social injustices. Contextualization emerged within Christian liberalism as a solution to the countless forms of social alienation that missionaries encountered (Engle, 1983, p. 86). Thus, in the liberal sense, contextualization focuses primarily on human social problems, whereas in the evangelical view, the term shifts focus away from such problems, which remain secondary, and emphasizes the Bible's cross-cultural dimension and the accurate transmission of divine truths in a way that all people can understand (Engle, 1983, pp. 90–91).

As noted, the theology and theological discourse of Christian thinkers throughout history have involved contextualization, but it has been reduced to an instrumental value, and the relationship between theology and contextualization has been constrained and often limited. Since contextualization has been regarded as a theological discipline in its own right, the scope of the dialogue and the implications of using contextualization in contemporary practical theology have taken on an entirely different dimension. Its use is no longer implicit and natural, but explicit and delimited (Pears, 2010, pp. 7–8). These differences are directly linked to the widely promoted postculturalist thinking, which strongly influences the interpretation of theology. The emphasis on cognitive and conceptual relativism has shed new light on theological research. Even though Scripture is infallible and tradition is important, Angie Pears notes that both these and the theology inspired by them have been influenced by culture and are therefore amenable to the use of contextualization to enhance the effectiveness of missionary work (Pears, 2010, pp. 8–9).

Contextualization in Applied Theology

Conducting academic research is not the same as proclaiming the Gospel. In the former, we deal with a world of ideas – abstract concepts – that we can easily manage and correlate. In the latter, we deal with individuals who think and live in a real world, defined and shaped by culture. And based on these considerations, it becomes clear why applied theology tends to make use of contextualization and why Timothy Keller speaks of "intentional contextualization." Not only can we not relate to people as we do to ideas, but we are also compelled to take certain human characteristics into account. The proclamation of the Gospel differs depending on the target group, location, etc. Where the proclamation of the Word fails, there may be a problem of relevance in the message being conveyed (Keller, 2012, p. 89). Contextualizing and adapting the Bible to the people we are addressing does not necessarily mean compromise and bias. On the contrary, the reality is that this is the only way we can truly understand the people we are reaching out to, taking into account their language and how they receive a message. Otherwise, the risk is that we will proclaim a message that is foreign and useless, one that lacks the potential to bring about change (Keller, 2012, pp. 89–90). One of the functions of contextualization is to facilitate the transmission of a biblical message that enables people to actually follow Christ within their own worldview, without forcing them to abandon their own culture in favor of another, promoted as superior or normative (Whiteman, 1997, p. 2).

This discussion of the functions of contextualization paves the way for a discussion of the models or forms of contextualization and, inevitably, the benefits they bring, an aspect that will be analyzed below.

The Justification and Utility of Contextualizing Theology

In his research on contextual theology, Pears introduces the theme of its importance and necessity, drawing on the models of contextualization proposed by Stephen Bevens, which are useful in capturing the theological diversity and complexity present in the act of transmitting the Gospel. As in any other branch of theology, models are used to stimulate theological reflection and to ensure the proper functioning of contextualization (Pears, 2010, pp. 23–24). From this, we will begin by highlighting the advantages of contextualization.

Adapting the message of the Gospel to any culture or context is the first advantage we identify, an aspect that is also among the three major functions of contextualization listed by Whiteman, when he states that the missionary, and by extension the evangelist, must set aside any conditioning from their own culture in order to win over the other and penetrate their culture (Whiteman, 1997, pp. 2–3). The first function mentioned is closely linked to the first model of contextualization presented by Bevens, the translation model. The author presents it as the most natural and the first model that Christians use when preaching the message of Scripture. His emphasis is on “translating” the central truths of the Bible and retaining only those elements absolutely necessary for the culture we are addressing. Rituals and customs become secondary elements that can be dispensed with, since the priority is the message of the Gospel. The central place is occupied by the unaltered message of the Bible. According to Bevens, the translation method is firmly grounded in Scripture. The apostle Paul himself uses it when he presents the good news of the Gospel to the people of Lystra and Athens in a way they can understand, that is, “translated” into their culture (Bevens, 2002, p. 37).

An important premise is that translation, as described in this model, does not refer to the traditional *word-for-word* rendering of a word or concept, but rather to conveying the truths of the Bible in a form and language that fully resonates with another culture, which may mean that the final message does not correspond exactly to that of the source culture. The proclamation of the Gospel does not follow a *peer-to-peer* model. The Gospel transcends culture and context; therefore, its proclamation is carried out by emphasizing the core of the Bible’s message and conveying it in a manner intelligible to the target audience (Bevens, 2002, pp. 39–40). By no means can we speak merely of “a word-for-word translation of the doctrinal language of one culture into the doctrinal language of another” (Bevens, 2002, p. 39). The transfer of faith in God takes place on an existential framework marked by differences rather than similarities (Carson, 2006, pp. 46–47), which would allow for a simple “cultural cloning” of faith. The perceptions, explanations, experiences, words, and concepts that accompany the sharing of the Gospel and which we consider universally valid and applicable can take on an entirely different meaning in a culture different from our own. For example, the words “justification” and “redemption” might mean something different in an Eastern cultural context, which is why they must be processed and filtered. The advantage of contextualization and thus of the translation model is precisely that of effectively overcoming cultural and contextual barriers (Ott, Strauss & Tennent, 2010, pp. 265–266).

The question that arises is: if cultural diversity and its manifestations are seen as an obstacle to the spread of the Gospel, are they evil or sinful? The answer is no. Among the benefits of applied theology – of missionary work– and of contextualization is a correct and coherent understanding of this issue. In the joint statement by evangelical missiologists published by Thomas Schirrmacher, which outlines biblical grounds for evangelical mission, the issue of cultural diversity is also addressed. The consensus is that cultural nuances are not a result of sin. On the contrary, human diversity is the result of God’s plan as set forth in the book of Genesis. Consequently, culture should neither be condemned nor tolerated in its

entirety, but rather addressed in such a way that anything not in accordance with Scripture is rejected (Schirmacher, 2006, pp. 8–9). Whether or not we accept this view, culture remains a point of reference for people everywhere. Failure to understand and disregard for it will lead to the proclamation of a Gospel that penetrates human life only superficially, leaving cultural aspects such as holidays, traditions, religious practices, etc., unaddressed. Contextualization aims to address such particularities so that any form of religious syncretism may be avoided. As long as the message of Scripture offers relevant solutions for all aspects of life, people will no longer seek refuge in sinful practices that expose them to a duplicitous lifestyle (Ott et al., 2010, pp. 266–267).

Promoting human equality and a biblical message that leads to repentance rather than outrage and discrimination are two further benefits of contextualization. As we delve deeper into the implications of this theological tool, we find that the concept of human dignity plays a central role. Whiteman suggestively states that “another function of contextualization in mission is to offend, but only for the right reasons, not the wrong ones” (Whiteman, 1997, p. 3). That is, the evangelist or missionary is justified in causing “offense” (discomfort and shame) only if it arises from an authentic presentation of the Gospel, which reveals human depravity and the filthiness of sin. When the balance established by contextualization is absent, missionary work can provoke offense. If the messengers of salvation remain firmly anchored in their own culture and worldview, they will be viewed with contempt by the recipients of the message, especially when the latter perceive that they are being treated with condescension and a lack of empathy. Consequently, instead of reaping the benefits of salvation that come from the “offense” produced by the discovery of sin, they stumble over the offense caused by another culture. The Gospel message ends up producing division rather than human equality (Whiteman, 1997, pp. 3–4).

The anthropological model is the one that aligns with the second function of contextualization presented by Whiteman and that justifies the advantages mentioned earlier. Bevans presents it as contrasting with the translation model, since it focuses on preserving a Christian’s cultural identity rather than on preserving Christian identity. The concern is to treat the person as a whole, not only from a spiritual perspective but also an existential one, taking into account their fulfillment within the culture to which they belong. Obviously, the goal of evangelism remains to bring about salvation, but the new Christian identity that is received is strongly culturally defined. The anthropological model seeks to promote human equality by discouraging the challenges the Gospel might pose to the culture in which it is proclaimed. The message proclaimed must specifically address the concepts of salvation and sin, not the values of another culture or continent. In fact, based on the biblical passages about the faith of the Canaanite woman and the Syro-Phoenician woman, proponents of this model assert that other peoples may also have values and truths worthy of consideration. From this, we conclude that such elements have the potential to be a source of inspiration for Christians and not an occasion for discrimination resulting from their outright rejection (Bevans, 2002, p. 54).

The purpose of contextual theology is to offer solutions – through its relevance – to specific problems within a given culture that are already sources of tension, rather than to provide an opportunity for tensions and divisions to intensify. Dion Forster recounts how, in South Africa, liberation theology and public theology (contextual theology) succeeded in achieving maximum relevance because they aimed to resolve the disagreements between blacks and whites, the issue of post-Apartheid forgiveness, and other major concerns of that society. Enjoying greater appreciation and support than public theology, liberation theology has demonstrated that the Gospel gains relevance when it shifts from a universal and general character to a particular and intentional one, through which it addresses issues such as feminism, the phenomenon of decolonization, etc. Underlying this are the concepts of human dignity and human equality, which only a contextual theology can revive and promote

(Forster, 2021, pp. 15–16). Engaging in contextual theology therefore sometimes involves employing the pedagogy of the oppressed. The Church that proclaims Christ is called to link the message of the Gospel to the life experiences of the wronged and those overwhelmed by real problems stemming from the context to which they belong. The two are organically connected, since contextual theology arises from or alongside liberation theology, and the latter is concerned with understanding people, addressing their problems, and treating them as human beings (Pears, 2010, p. 50). Since no Christian or theologian possesses God’s perspective on Scripture and the world, they must undertake a dual interpretive task to understand them. Life on earth is like a theater, in which people have specific roles defined by a particular context, history, and culture. For the Gospel to be effective, Kevin Vanhoozer advocates for a theology concerned with both Scripture and culture (Vanhoozer, 2006, pp. 13–14). In other words, only a contextualized theology will lead people to a correct and coherent understanding of the meaning of life on earth, which will prompt them to proclaim God’s will and righteousness within the culture to which they belong.

The close connection between theory and practice that results in a coherent life is the benefit and outcome of authentic contextualization, which is not necessarily confined to any theological model or limited by denominational constraints. Once again, Whiteman emphasizes the importance of contextualization by describing negative examples of Gospel proclamation by missionaries who, constrained by their own culture and Christian tradition, have widened the gap between the theory of the biblical message and the practice of life within a particular culture. The spread of the Gospel through contextualization and denominational expansion are often at odds with one another. The former is based on the model of the Savior’s incarnation, who adopted the language, traditions, and practices of the Jews to proclaim the message of the Kingdom to them, while the latter is grounded in an ultra-culturalized Gospel (Whiteman, 1997, pp. 4–5). The practical model is the one that best reflects the aforementioned advantage. Bevans portrays it as the model that strengthens the Christian identity received by converts who belong to dynamic, change-prone social contexts. Anchored in the tangible, historical realities of a context, this model aims to transition from the classic, theoretical, and rigid patterns of preaching to pragmatic ones, interwoven with people’s daily activities. Rooted in the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament, in the way Isaiah and Amos emphasized action, the practical model creates a connection between theory and Christian life (Bevans, 2002, pp. 70–71). The attempt to juxtapose theory and action is understood in terms of priority rather than balance or association. Proponents of the method argue that action takes priority because Christianity is understood and internalized through practice and implementation, rather than through a conceptual faith or the work of formulating relevant expressions of faith. Ultimately, Christianity is labeled as “a faith of action,” which calls for striving for social change, namely to neutralize the evil in the world and replace it with the good produced by the Gospel (Bevans, 2002, pp. 72–73).

The revolution in contextual theology is the result of a drastic paradigm shift.¹ The backdrop to our discussion is defined by the “break with classical epistemology” and the struggle between classical epistemology and emergent epistemology, upon which contextual theology is based. Contrary to the traditional paradigm, which was largely developed by elites with the aid of philosophy, contextual theology boasts that emergent epistemology is based, in addition to Scripture and other common sources, on the social sciences. Consequently, the theology it develops is not the product of intellectuals for the uneducated, but “grassroots” theology for the poor and uneducated. It thus becomes clear why the focus of contextual theology is the pragmatic realm. The new method abandons the mere interpretation of the

¹ Including information about emergent epistemology in the section on the advantages of contextual theology does not automatically imply its acceptance or endorsement. The appreciation is directed exclusively toward its high degree of applicability, which allows for a deeper dialogue between theory and practice.

world (an abstract vision and an external relationship to the world) and establishes that all Christians are part of this world and responsible for changing it (a concrete vision and an internal relationship to the world) (Bosch, 1991, pp. 423–424). The hermeneutical circle that animates contextual theology begins with orthopraxy and leads to orthodoxy. The “cry” for help from victims, the disadvantaged, and the poor is the source and motive for the theological reflection of emerging epistemology, and not the other way around (Bosch, 1991, pp. 424–425). The observations and advantages noted (see also Bevans, 2002, pp. 89–127) in this section are certainly, at this point in our research, evidence that contextual theology has a positive side that deserves consideration.

Criticisms of the contextualization of theology

Is contextualization useful and necessary in Christian evangelism and mission? The research conducted so far has shown us that it is. However, is the use of contextualization without risks? The answer cannot be as positive and categorical, despite the impression its proponents might give in this regard. We acknowledge that it is indisputable that the Gospel must be translated, adapted, etc., in order to be understood and assimilated by a people with a different culture, but we consider it plausible to assert that the Gospel remains unaltered when its message and the person of Jesus are adapted to any cultural context. Despite contextualization’s claims to resolve every theological and cultural problem, the countless debates surrounding this topic suggest the presence of several dangers or problems (Newbigin, 1989, pp. 141–142).

The first of these is the fallibility of the solutions that contextualization seeks to offer to every challenge, which paves the way for the danger of emphasizing solutions, cultural aspects, morality, etc., as means of achieving unity in the Church. The incongruity we observe, as Lesslie Newbigin states, is that the variety of solutions offered by contextualization has the potential to bring about discord rather than understanding. Scripture records that it was not these solutions that produced unity in the Church, but obedience to the central message of the Gospel, to apostolic teaching. As proof, from liberation theology, built on the method of contextualization, a multitude of theologies emerge, with different emphases (Newbigin, 1989, p. 148). The postulate that God has turned in a special way toward our world, formulated inferentially from the premise that there is a theological discontinuity with the past, has produced a conceptual shift in the Gospel, from the singularity of its message (originating from God) to its plurality as a result of adaptation to different cultures. The universality and certainty of theology are replaced by the notion of contingency. The promoted theology becomes experiential and uncertain, which corroborates the thesis of the coexistence of multiple theologies produced by specific contexts and needs. Because of these inclusive approaches, which lack sound theological criticism, isolationism, historicism, and theological relativism are favored, and these are set aside for the sake of the “unity” produced by contextualization (Bosch, 1991, pp. 426–427).

The subjectivism of contextual theology is a direct consequence of its adaptive and inclusivist approach, which Bevans highlights when he accuses the anthropological model of “cultural romanticism.” Proponents of contextualization often go so far as to unjustifiably accept a large portion of elements from other cultures, presenting an unrealistic picture of the relationship between Christianity and the new culture. The attempt to contextualize the Gospel at the risk of falling into subjectivism is a lack of theological balance, betraying an acute misunderstanding of the nature of culture, which is dynamic and subject to change through mere contact with other cultures (Bevans, 2002, p. 60). On the other hand, evangelism and Christian mission over the past half-century have had to face, in addition to the recurring challenges of diverse cultures, economies, traditions, etc., the dangers of globalism, which has sought to monopolize and redefine all the aforementioned human spheres. We infer from Donald Lewis’s account that, in one form or another, religion, and by extension the way the Gospel is proclaimed, has become subservient to the globalist agenda

of flattening and standardizing the entire world for the sake of international relations (Lewis, 2014, pp. 60–61). In fact, our view and concern are also confirmed by Steven Studebaker and Bradley Broadhead. They discuss a decline in Christianity and a dilution of the concept of evangelism. The power and balance of theology have been weakened by globalist trends, which have discouraged the condemnation of evil in other cultures. Missional activity has swung from the extreme of proclaiming the superiority of Western culture to the extreme of subjectivizing and relativizing values. The solution for a genuine Christian mission remains the balance between the local concerns of culture and the universal, non-negotiable truths of Scripture. Only in this way does theology have the potential to effectively transcend any barrier (Studebaker & Broadhead, 2014, pp. 7–8). Bosch recommends that the pragmatic emphases of contextual theology, which have created the impression of special knowledge from God and led Christians to sacralize historical and cultural elements and events, be tempered and guided by sound Christian theology (Bosch, 1991, pp. 429–431).

The *use of a biased and dysfunctional hermeneutic* is a danger we cannot ignore. Accepting that all theology is formulated within a specific historical and cultural framework and that it is contextual does not oblige us to embrace a hermeneutic of suspicion, which subtly promotes the near-normativity of a theology of the oppressed or a social theology, regardless of location. We can easily detect a certain theological favoritism toward the disadvantaged and a conflict of interest on the part of the proponents of this approach. A hermeneutic of suspicion predominantly focused on a specific target group, by its very nature, raises suspicions as to whether personal interests or political agendas might be motivating such efforts. The epistemological privilege accorded to the oppressed and the poor is a deduction formulated prior to and independently of Scripture. The process of correlating and grounding this in Scripture is carried out post factum, after human presumptions have been taken as a priori (Newbigin, 1989, pp. 149–150). A careful analysis of the Bible will reveal that the ministry of the Lord Jesus had no privileged class. The poor and the rich, the criminals and the righteous alike were included in the Savior's divine plan of salvation. All were guilty of sin and ultimately condemned by it, and all were in need of forgiveness. Jesus' work was not intended to incite the poor against the rich. His cross is not a tool for promoting human aspirations. Scripture firmly affirms that human concerns are often at odds with God's concerns. For this reason, priority must always be given to the central message of Scripture, a message that describes humanity's fundamental need for salvation, which is offered only by God (Newbigin, 1989, pp. 151–152). The Gospel is not a solution or one of the available solutions to humanity's problems, but God's solution to humanity's sin (Newbigin, 1989, p. 153).

Christian mission and evangelism will be effective when contextual theology incorporates a balanced approach to contextualization. Contextualization is indeed a bridge connecting two cultures – a two-way bridge – that allows for the transfer of information from sender to receiver and vice versa, so that the Gospel may be as objective as possible. But most importantly, the bridge of contextualization is supported by Holy Scripture, the supreme authority, which is never wrong. Therefore, contextualization has the mission of translating the principles and doctrines of the Bible into a form understandable to any culture, and not of correcting the Bible through invasive hermeneutical methods (Keller, 2012, p. 101). Undoubtedly, hermeneutics is an important and vital tool for theologians and Christians who wish to convey the message of the Gospel to the contemporary world in a relevant way. However, the question that arises is: how is the Bible treated through hermeneutics? Can the Bible be treated like any other book? The answer to these questions is that a balanced and healthy hermeneutics will treat the Bible as an infallible book, which, through the truths it records, exercises God's authority over the reader and the interpreter. The role of hermeneutics must remain that of facilitating the discovery of Scripture's truths, always respecting its authority and perfection (Marshall, 2004, pp. 12–13). To have a biblical

perspective on the mission of expanding the Kingdom of God means recognizing the duality of the work of proclaiming the Gospel, in that on the one hand God commands people to repent, and on the other hand entrusts to humanity the ministry of reconciliation. The Bible attests that both God and humanity are engaged in the mission of salvation (Packer, 2010, pp. 103–104). From this antinomy, in which God's sovereignty and human responsibility are joined in a paradoxical relationship, we extrapolate the principle for a sound hermeneutic. The tension between the two must not be resolved by exaggerating human responsibility or by attributing all responsibility to God's sovereignty, but by accepting the tension as it is. Contextual theology will remain biblical as long as, through its practices, it acknowledges that God is Lord over all human existence and that He is the One who grants salvation, being fully involved in the plan of salvation that He Himself has devised (Packer, 2010, p. 105).

Conclusions

Does contextual theology succeed in presenting the principles of the Bible as timeless truths and transforming them into principles relevant to contemporary society in any culture? Certainly, it does. Contextualization in its modern form emerged during a historical period marked by significant changes, which is why a tool was needed to help theology keep pace with these changes. This analytical journey has shown that the tool of contextualization offers advantages that cannot be overlooked and that qualify it as an indispensable tool for Christian mission and evangelism. On the other hand, changes in secular society should not justify altering Scripture or the meaning of certain truths for the sake of acceptance, a fault of which, as we have observed, contextualization is sometimes guilty. Of course, the principle of contextualization was not invented by humans. The Son of God Himself used it when He became incarnate and took on human nature to bring salvation. However, the fundamental difference is that He was perfect and applied it perfectly. Human beings are sinful beings and will never be able to use it with the same perfection. Jesus left us a model to follow, which proves effective only through obedience to Holy Scripture, when the balance between God's sovereignty and human responsibility is maintained, so that all principles flow from Scripture and are grounded in it.

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