

Editorial

The Ongoing Challenges of Contexts

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Published in *Global Missiology*, www.globalmissiology.org, July 2020

“Contextualization” has been taking place ever since long before the last half-century, when Protestants started using the term (all the while discussing what it meant). The Christian faith on this earth is inherently contextual. Jesus of Nazareth was literally God “enfleshed” and “embodied”: “contextualized.” The Old Covenant Patriarchs and Israel lived in their historical contexts, as have Christian communities for two millennia.

When thinking about “contextualization,” Evangelicals have focused their attention on the task of cross-cultural communicators (missionaries) of making the gospel understandable to culturally different people. That task is of course very important. However, just as important (if not more so) is the contextualizing task of gospel recipients to understand, live out, and in turn spread that gospel. That task entails biblical faithfulness and real-life relevance: “contextualization.” All Christian communities are gospel recipients, whether initially or across generations. The Holy Spirit continually works with all Christians to live faithfully to the Scriptures and relevant to their particular times, places, and surroundings, i.e., to their contexts. Along with cross-cultural communication, “contextualization” involves the ongoing challenges of understanding, living out, and spreading the Christian gospel in and across the ever-changing contexts in which God has us.

In our tasks of contextualization, we gospel recipients face the ongoing challenges of our changing, unredeemed contexts. One pull is towards irrelevance, usually through clinging to bygone contextualized practices and mindsets of our ancestors, e.g., insisting on using only organ music or “King James English.” Another pull is towards relevance at the expense of Scripture, e.g., mindlessly conforming to economic injustices or to contemporary sexual norms. Both pulls, whether toward “quarantine” or toward “syncretism,” lead to bad contextualizing. Biblical faithfulness and relevance cannot be pulled apart: one-sided coins have no currency value.

All of the articles in this July issue of *Global Missiology - English* explore one facet or perhaps several aspects of understanding, practicing, and communicating the gospel in relevant and biblically faithful ways. The articles take up the ongoing challenges of contexts that Jesus’s followers face every day. What frameworks best help Christians understand cultural contexts, both our own and others’, as well as the particular social challenges that Muslim converts to Christianity face? What is actually happening contextually when Muslim converts to Christianity revert to Islamic faith and practice? How can missionaries from contexts that are wealthier than where they serve best understand, practice, and convey the Christian gospel? Does the Bible convey different gospels to different types of cultural contexts? How can missionaries from different contexts work together? How can Christian communities know that they are bringing about holistic transformation in their own and in others’ societies? All of these acute questions are tackled by this issue’s studies.

People the world over have been dealing recently with challenges foisted upon us both by the COVID-19 pandemic and heightened awareness of racial injustice. These two matters are also contextualization challenges. There are concerns related to COVID-19 and racial injustice that are common to various contexts, but people (including Christians) must also understand, act, and speak in our own particular settings. Life on this earth faces the ongoing challenge of contexts, both for Christian mission and for all aspects of our daily existence. May God's Spirit grant us the wisdom, strength, humility, and courage to understand, live out, and convey to others the message of Jesus of Nazareth, both faithfully and in relevant fashion.