

## REVIEW

### THE GOSPEL IN HUMAN CONTEXTS

PAUL G. HIEBERT

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Paul G. Hiebert, widely recognized as one of the finest missionary anthropologists in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> to the early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, focused the bulk of his writing labors on how to effectively communicate the gospel of Jesus Christ to all ethnic groups. Hiebert's experience as a missionary and pastor in India, along with his vast teaching experience at Fuller Theological Seminary and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School serve as solid qualifications for writing this book. In this review of his posthumous *The Gospel in Human Contexts*, my aspiration is to restate and recapitulate his legacy of biblical missiology and discerning use of the social sciences. Proclamation of the Gospel in human contexts is effectively one of the most difficult tasks facing every follower of Christ, especially pastors and missionaries. In this great ministry, there is always a danger of over-contextualization as well as non-contextualization. It is in this context that Hiebert argues for his well-received work on "Critical-Contextualization" in this book.

The best asset to Hiebert's book is that it tries to resolve those two dangers of contextualization previously mentioned. What then, is Hiebert's suggestion? Hiebert calls it as a third way of practicing theology, that is, missional theology (13, 44). From the very outset, Hiebert makes it crystal clear that "not only must missionaries and ministers learn how to exegete humans, they must also know how to put the gospel into human contexts so that it is understood properly but does not become captive to these contexts" (13). What he means by this is that he is seeking to avoid both non-contextualization and over-contextualization for the sake of mission.

The book is divided into three parts. As I have mentioned above, part one considers and expands Hiebert's work on "critical contextualization," and then presents "missional theology". Hiebert, in this part, emphasizes two things: 1) the importance of understanding social and cultural contexts for the sake of mission and yet 2) those contexts are not normative for Christianity around the world (18-19, 31). In other words, Hiebert claims that "the heart of the gospel must be kept by encoding it in forms that are understood by the people, without making the gospel captive to the contexts" (29). Then, he suggests missional theology as the model of critical-contextualization. According to Hiebert, missional theology is doing theology seeking "to build the bridge between revelation and human contexts" and removing the gap between orthodoxy and orthopraxy (45). Part one is particularly helpful for those who are very serious in seeking to understand the relationship between gospel and human contexts, as he provides theoretical foundations.

Part two is titled "Exegeting Humans." As the subtitle implies, this is a highly practical part that pastors, preachers and missionaries can adapt and utilize in their ministry. It has five chapters beginning with "Changing Images." This chapter deals with ethnic hostility and racism and introduces a biblical solution to these issues. Hiebert urges Christians to reaffirm the biblical teaching that "at the deepest level of identity all humans are one" and "church believers are members of one new people, ethnos" (72). We will never be able to tear down racism until we realize and reaffirm these truths. Thus, Hiebert wants Christians to see their primary identity as human beings and as Christians. This belonging to a new community is Christians' eternal identity which is "much deeper than the identities that divide us in earth such as ethnicity, class, and gender" (75). Then, chapters four and five chronologically explain early and recent anthropology, which is related to the modern and postmodern anthropology. In doing so, Hiebert does not overlook a number of new issues which has been raised by anthropologists and missionaries such as unity and diversity and humanness (102-105). In

chapter six, “A Systems Approach”, Hiebert introduces synchronic and diachronic analysis which are prerequisite and complementary elements for the understanding of humans. However, he is critical of the fact that “modernity has relegated the spirit world to the realm of fiction” (158). Thus, he insists that we must be aware of the spiritual system to understand humans rightly. However, it is particularly unfortunate that Hiebert did not explain further what he means by ‘spiritual system’. In chapter seven, “Research Methods”, he deals with several methodologies such as macro and micro research, ethnographic research, grounded theory, participatory research and action. All things considered, Hiebert’s provision and contributions on social science and anthropology in understanding human contexts are excellent and eminent. It has potential and actual implications to missiology and missions. If part one is theoretical foundations, part two is like a pillar of the house of anthropology containing immense practical values.

Finally, part three seeks to consider mission as ‘Intercultural Mediation’. In this section, Hiebert rightly underscores that “missions to people who have yet to hear the gospel must continue” and missionaries are mediators who stand between different worlds, seeking to build bridges of understanding” between different communities and cultures” (179). Thus, missionaries must be well incorporated into local social systems as the incarnated Jesus once was. As we are living in the age of globalization, what becomes more important is that missionaries must be global mediators. In doing so, Christians especially missionaries once again must remember our oneness with others as human beings and manifest this eternal reality to overcome such issues as ethnicity, class and gender (192).

*The Gospel in Human Contexts* is particularly timely and relevant in light of growing interest in the role of social science and anthropology in Christian missiology and missions. As a researcher, I stand in complete awe of what Hiebert has accomplished in this book. I would not only recommend it to all present missionaries and missionary candidates

but also to pastors, preachers of the gospel and researchers alike, who have aspirations to study and preach the gospel seriously and effectively.

Though Hiebert sometimes discusses highly sophisticated issues, *The Gospel in Human Contexts* is so readable, warmhearted and pastoral that even non-professional people can appreciate its contributions. It is fitting to close this review with Hiebert's final word as follows:

We can learn to see others as us, tear down walls that divide us, build relationships of mutual understanding and respect, and become transcultural people- but without Christian love these are incomplete. Christian love is to be unconditionally committed to those we meet, including our enemies. As mediators we must be other-centered and love those we serve.... Such Christian love is the central element in the work of missions. Without it, all of our best efforts are in vain. (199)