

Contextualization Challenges: Three Major Issues Facing the Church Planter

Contextualization has been a concern for church planters for at least the last two decades, though the debate over whether it is a legitimate approach for evangelicals goes back even further. The consensus today among writers in the area of church planting seems to be that contextualization is an essential consideration for anyone crossing cultures. Sometimes on the North American scene there is a failure to see that we are as much a “crazy quilt” of differing cultures as any other place on earth. Whatever the research, it seems that church planters often reduce contextualization to communication theory focused on preaching. In actual fact, there are at least three major issues a planter faces which together make up the bulk of the contextualization challenge.

1. Reading the Culture

When a church planter enters an unfamiliar context somewhere in North America, he faces the challenge of “reading” that culture for clues that will help him communicate the gospel with clarity as the Holy Spirit applies the Word with power. Today, the fault line seems to be communicating a timeless message of God’s grace to a culture that grows increasingly skeptical of the notion that there is truth that is binding upon every individual. Their corollary belief is that there is no such thing as sin, only preference. Whether this is a deeply held philosophy of life or a convenient rationalization to misbehave, it creates significant barriers to the communication of the gospel. In this instance, the task of clarifying our message includes defining terms whose biblical meaning has been obscured by popular culture: sin, repentance, faith, and salvation to name just four. In some cases, it means reframing the gospel from propositions to stories and talking about the faith journey, in which a person’s commitment to Christ is a high point, but only a milestone along the way to eternity.

2. Creating a Bridging Culture

The church planter also faces the challenge of creating a bridging culture that connects the hopes, needs, and behaviors of the community with the content of Scripture as it describes transformed lives and kingdom values. This bridging culture must be recognizably familiar to seekers without compromising the Scriptural values and truth that are used by the Holy Spirit to transform lives.

3. Creating a System for Discipleship

When converts are then gathered into a new community of faith, the planter faces the third challenge of contextualization. He must create systems for discipleship that, over

time, change the disciple's worldview. He must do this without destroying the evangelistic common ground that gives entry into the local community.

Let me illustrate with a story. A couple who had little church background began to attend our church and were struggling to break free from drug use. They liked the church and were befriended. In a few weeks, they had responded to the gospel and made commitments to Christ. It is now four years later. They are joyful, their marriage is solid, he has cleared up outstanding warrants in other states, and they are serving at the church. They still exhibit many of the cultural trappings of their prior life—clothes, musical style (though different content), and other preferences. The difference is that more and more, they think biblically. They consistently make choices that affirm biblical values, even when it's hard. Life is still not easy, but they are experiencing God's blessing. The discipling system seems to be culturally relevant, and it is creating a biblical worldview in those it affects; exactly the effect we desire.

Where planters often go astray is in the third arena—creating discipling systems that preserve aspects of the culture while developing saints who think biblically. There are a variety of reasons that could be posed to explain this failure to fully develop a contextualized, disciple-making church, but the result of such a failure is a cohort of Christians who may be loyal to church but who live selfish lives that conform to the values of the society at large, not the values of Scripture. Without that change of worldview, it is futile to try to raise up leaders who can extend the kingdom through multiplication.

This article doesn't allow all aspects of contextualization to be addressed in depth, but we can look quickly at some approaches that have proven fruitful in each of the three arenas mentioned above.

Clarifying the Gospel Message

Entering a new culture and grasping its core values are tasks that involve both research and listening. For North America, at least, there is no lack of cultural data and marketing research. The planter should pay the price to get a hold of research and comprehend it. This is a good foundation, but it is still no substitute for time spent in the community. It is tempting to spend the first weeks in the field focused on evangelism, assuming people will respond just like the people at "home". A better approach, however, is to take the time to become part of the community. A starting point is for the planter to enter the world of those he seeks to reach.

Identification in dress, musical style, food, and time management will all lower barriers and foster acceptance. Two behaviors, however, are essential. The first is to begin to ask questions and listen intently. The planter listens until he can view the world through the eyes of the lost and can see their path to genuine faith. The answers to the planter's questions clarify community values, assumptions, needs, and aspirations. This clarity helps the planter shape his presentation of the gospel so as to connect with the life situations of the community he was sent to reach.

The second important behavior is to serve the needs of people in the name of Christ. In most areas of North America today, the church has little credibility due to the images from the media which saturate communication. Serving like Jesus builds credibility and opens doors to share the gospel. It also begins the process of transforming the planter into someone whose life communicates the gospel as clearly as his words and gives those words added weight.

Together, listening and serving act to immerse the planter in the target culture and provide a pool of open relationships with people who will become the converted core of the new community of faith.

The Missionary Model

Shifting focus to the culture of the initial community of faith, one thing seems obvious from studies on long-lasting change. The planter serves in a role of outside advocate while the early converts serve the role of inside change agents. In this missionary model, the initial culture of the church is determined through dialogue, not by unilateral decision from the planter.

There are two arenas where initial culture emerges. One is as the planter projects ministry into the community with service projects and events like block parties, the way the planter interacts with neighbors and his skill at exhibiting cultural cues that identify with the community culture determines their perception of this new church: insider or outsider. The planter should dress like they dress; offer foods they would offer if they were hosts; foster games and other ways of interacting that make sense to them. Everything is designed to lower barriers, put them at ease, initiate conversations, and identify the spiritually hungry.

The other arena is attracting seekers to the church and its events and activities. One of these “events” is the worship service that usually launches the public face of the church. Planters tend to focus on issues of worship style. In a dialogue about the elements of corporate worship, the planter should be focused on the theological message communicated by the symbols and activities, but the symbols themselves and the way worship is carried out should be chosen in consultation with the indigenous converts and emerging leaders of the new church.

Using one particular issue as an example, the planter should consider how the level of literacy and approach to decision-making influences the look and feel of church life.

Producing True Followers of Christ

The third process of contextualization is often the hardest: creating a transforming culture that produces true followers of Christ. The essential content of the discipling process is not rituals, nor liturgy from a time when people may have been more dedicated to an obedient life. The essential content is the collective values, imbedded from the first days of the church, that can easily be clothed with culturally appropriate behaviors. One church network builds church life around “heart attitudes” that express a commitment to treat each other biblically and follow

leadership according to biblical patterns. These values at the core of the discipling process need to be stated specifically, so they can be related to behaviors. For example, look at the biblical purposes for a church. Linked to behaviors, they might be stated as God-centered worship, not just worship; obedience-based discipleship, not knowledge-based discipleship. Looking at the kind of people we want to raise up, we want servant-leaders, not leaders who lord it over others. More could be said about this point. Each of these statements doesn't presuppose a particular cultural expression, but will move people towards a biblical worldview as they embrace them.

The systems themselves build off of this behavioral model of inculcating values by challenging behavior. Leaders model what they teach. The focus is grace and biblical thinking, not rules and outward conformity. The cultural trappings are as neutral as possible, not an artificial identification with the culture of some former "golden age" of the church. New believers are expected to "mess up" more frequently, but the core of correction is their heart to obey and follow Christ.

Fleshing out this discipling system depends on continuing the dialogue about indigenous faith. Developing a thoroughly indigenous church with a thoroughly biblical, yet thoroughly contextual faith, challenges the planter to continually "deconstruct" the cultural trappings of his faith. From this humble position, he must continue the dialogue with his emerging leaders about how particular Scriptural truths will look lived out in this community.

The three tasks outlined above form a somewhat sequential but overlapping set of processes. The leader has a distinct role in each process: preacher communicating truth with clarity, planter creating culture to facilitate evangelism, and pastor developing systems to disciple into a Christian worldview. All the processes above involve contextualization and depend on a clear reading of the target culture. The cultural insights gained from the earliest days of the plant can be applied at each phase to the new challenge.

A couple of behaviors aide each phase; they continue throughout the task of planting. The first is to be a lifelong student of people and their culture. It begins with reading and research before the planter arrives on the field, but it continues in the habit of asking insightful questions and then listening carefully to the answers. Everyone has a story to tell, and it is in those stories that the planter hears clues as to how to make the gospel clear to them and how to apply the gospel to their deepest needs and aspirations. It continues to help the planter "deconstruct" his own cultural blind spots and truly become one with the people of that place. It is a skill that is put to good use in the dialogue with early converts, early disciples, and emerging leaders to develop a thriving church that can easily be multiplied throughout that geographic area.

The second common behavior is participatory decision-making. The primary assumption of the effective contextualizer is that he doesn't understand the depth of his cultural bias. It is a constant challenge to understand the gospel from another person's point of view. The planter works hard to make choices that aid the spread of the gospel and the multiplication of converts,

disciples, and leaders—not choices that make life easier and more comfortable for the planter and his family.

Contextualization is larger than just communication theory. The quality of the planter's work is only seen over years as the quality of disciples and their continuing connectedness to the surrounding culture is seen. The fruit is worth it. Biblically faithful contextualization results in churches that can more easily multiply and saturate a sub-culture with the saving gospel of Christ and transforming communities of faith.

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