

CONTEXTUALIZED MINISTRY

1. *Contextualization* is the process of **making the gospel accessible** within a particular cultural context in an understandable and culturally meaningful way without losing the truth and integrity of the message.
2. In order to achieve meaning and relevance in the communication of the message, *contextualization* takes into account **linguistic and cultural forms of the target group**. It refers to “any action that puts the gospel into a more understandable, culturally relevant form by including elements from a target culture’s customs, language, and traditions.” (David Racey, “How to Communicate in a Relational Culture,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 32, No. 3, July 1996, p.304-309.)
3. “... is the process by which we **remove the cultural (and sometimes literal) garb** in which the gospel initially arrives and allow it to be clothed in the most appropriate way for a given locality” (Dr. Sean M. McDonough, “Opening The Word: Acts 17:16-34.”)
4. *Contextualization* is an approach to the missionary task that **places significance on the cultural context** as a key to understanding how to effectively communicate the gospel and apply biblical truth within that cultural setting. **Examples of Contextualization**

Examples of contextualization in the body of Christ include “seeker churches” (such as Willow Creek) and churches reaching young people through “Youth Church.” There are also numerous churches targeting specific language populations.

Ministries like Campus Crusade for Christ, Youth for Christ, Young Life, InterVarsity, Navigators and others often target specific segments of the population, including prisoners, diplomats, executives, the poor, military personnel, athletes (AIA), etc. These ministries are contextualized, at least in some respects, for those audiences.

Other examples include special ministries that exist to reach Latino students; Asian-American students; and African-American students.

What Contextualization Does Not Mean:

- It is not a watering down or compromising of the gospel.

- It is not assimilating one culture into another.
- It is not segregation. It is not separate but equal. The goal of contextualization is communication. Contextualization may result in more separation but only to the degree that is necessary to produce truly indigenous leaders and movements.
- It does not mean lack of unity.
- It does not mean each culture only reaches its own (whites/whites; blacks/ blacks, etc.)
- It is not going after corporate 'diversity' as an end in itself.

Many ministries have applied these same principles in a context to reach international students.

Charles Gilmer, President of the Impact Movement gives **a clear case for “contextualized ministry”**:

“Contextualization is a missiological term for taking the gospel and expressing it within the context of a particular culture. It’s an approach that clarifies the goal of evangelism and discipleship for a cross-cultural mission or missionary. It involves going beyond simple translations from one culture to another, such as translating a hymn from English to Spanish. It seeks to see expressions of Christianity develop that are culturally relevant or authentic, thereby entering the world or culture of that people group. And this is essential if we want those in that culture to hear and be exposed to a clear, relevant presentation of the gospel.

The alternative is for a missionary to conduct him or herself in such a way that asks those of another culture to leave or diminish their culture in order to be discipled or recognized as a legitimate Christian leader. This has been part of the tendency of missionary efforts for millennia, dating all the way back to the Book of Acts. That was the drama of what was going on in the debate in the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15). Yes, it was about Jew and Gentile, but it was also about the Jewish culture being exported as a part of the gospel. The decision of the council at Jerusalem, which God obviously sanctioned, was that ‘we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.’

They chose not to add on Jewish expectations of what it meant to follow God to what it meant to be a disciple of Christ. They stuck to the simplicity of the gospel.”