

# **CONTEXTUALIZATION**

**By**

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## Introduction

This past summer, my five days in that particular Muslim country were almost over and I had one more appointment my host had arranged for me. I was to meet someone at nine in the morning and was flying on to India in the afternoon. My host—a former Muslim, now a Christian—had carefully told me that this appointment was at the request of the guest himself and that he was “probably not the most important person for you to meet.” I was willing to meet him and listen. Often people who ask to meet me have a request for a scholarship or questions about how to get to the States to study! This time I had a surprise. (The following names are not their real ones.)

Rafique wore a beard and the traditional attire of Moslems in his country. With him was a friend, a sociology professor, Mia, with similar mannerisms. Rafique works in health care and the professor teaches in a local college. They represent a highly indigenous and Muslim-sensitive group of “believers”—believers in Isa (Jesus) as the way to receive favor from Allah. The reason they do not use the name “Christian” is that doing so would remove them from the circle of family and friends they most want to reach with their faith.

As I listened to Rafique, I noted that these men were sensitive to their cultural context, just as I advocate in “Contextualized Theology” and “Evangelism in Context” classes in the seminary at ORU. They pray with their hands open and slightly lifted—just like they were taught to pray to Allah. They call Jesus the “Holy One” instead of using the offensive term “Son of God.” They don’t refer to the trinity, though they themselves believe in each member of the trinity. They don’t use the word “church” and they don’t use a cross. They meet and pray in homes and in every way appear to be Muslim.

They use strategies that are consistent with the Muslim worldview. Their children’s book about Isa has no pictures of humans because pictures of humans are offensive to Muslims I was told. They do not use the Jesus film for the same reason. Muslims will watch the Jesus film, but they would not respect or believe in one treated with such disrespect as to be portrayed in pictures or films. Mohammed and other Muslim prophets did not—would not—allow their pictures to be used.

The life of Jesus in Arabic has been written in the Quranic style. It has thirty chapters, just as the Quran. They don’t use “Matthew” or “Mark” as names of books because Muslims don’t use men’s names that way. Instead they use “Manger” and “New Life” as the names for those books. Each chapter begins with “in the name of the God” just as in the Quran.

As I mentioned, by profession Rafique works in health care and professor Mia is a teacher, but their secret task is to spread the news about Isa. They study every Tuesday afternoon at Rafique’s office and have communion with water and bread. They do not observe Christmas and Easter, but they do keep Friday’s Mosque prayer. Muslim women

are difficult to convert because of fear of their husbands, but men are more likely converts. The wives follow their husbands in conversion. Rafique's group, therefore, targets husbands!

Their request was that I give them permission to use the "New Testament Survey" course produced by International Educational Fellowship, a Christian leadership and pastor-training organization with which I work as a part of my off campus ministry. Within two hours of our conversation, we had installed the entire forty-five courses that make up the Foundations of Ministry and School of Ministry curriculums on Rafique's hard drive. Under Rafique's guidance, these materials will now be passed on secretly to appropriate persons for personal study providing these persons have shown significant interest in their way of serving Allah.

These believers are told by Christians in their country that they are not Christian because, of all things, they do not observe Christmas and Easter! Rafique and his friends just go on believing and serving even without the strength and support of brother and sister Christians in their own nation. Do you feel I did the right thing to encourage Rafique?

### God the Communicator

In the book God gave us He could have totally overwhelmed us with equations, formulas, astronomical, cosmological, chemical, molecular, geological and atomic information that would have caused even Albert Einstein to scratch his head and ask God to give it to us in a simpler form. Instead, God used shepherd Amos and fisherman Peter, as well as scholars Moses and Paul, to write a series of human stories in the common language of the day giving us a book that addresses human history and spiritual needs. This was done so perfectly that some say its *just* a human book. God contextualized his message so well that many do not realize that in those histories and discourses lay hidden, divine and supernatural truths. That is perfect contextualization.

There once was a man who so perfectly acted the part of a common man that even though miracles happened through him and divine wisdom came from his lips, still some people thought He was just a man—not recognizing that God also contextualized *himself* so perfectly that we didn't even realize *He* came from outside our earthly context. God appeared to man so perfectly in the human context that men failed to realize He had been anywhere else. That was perfect contextualization!

God is a perfect communicator and conditions his requirements, making allowance for the endowment and opportunities of the people with whom He is dealing. God takes not only humanity and human weakness but also human culture into

consideration. He is receptor-oriented.<sup>1</sup> He knows the grid through which his target audience is viewing reality and adjusts his medium of communication accordingly: angels to shepherds, a star to Eastern astrologers. Because he knows the answer, He does not need to ask, "How will *they* understand this?" But to follow His example *we* must ask that question.

We should learn from God and make our message fit the context wherever we serve whether it is a foreign country, academia or inner city. This is the central lesson of contextualization. To contextualize is to make the message fit the local situation, apply accurately to local issues and confront the right problems in a way consistent with local culture. If we do this well, others cannot tell that the message came from *outside* the local context. In other words, if the message is rejected it should be because they don't like the message, *not because it of its foreignness*.

### Local Expression of Meanings

Any time our ministries of communicating theological truth involve translation, we should translate *meanings* as opposed to *words*. Meanings are more important than words. We must become willing to sacrifice words in order to preserve meanings. God is primarily concerned with meaning, not the particular symbol used, and His model is worth trying to duplicate.<sup>2</sup> In translation vocabulary, this is called dynamic equivalent translation. Dynamic equivalent translations have the same impact on the new culture that the original translation had on the original culture. They may *say* something other than what was said in the original, but they will *mean* what the original meant.

As sensitive crosscultural Christian workers, whether serving in our increasingly pluralistic societies at home or serving abroad, we seek to make our message fit in the various contexts where we work. Whether we are working with translations, information, curriculum, theology, leadership and/or pastoral training, I recommend the use of local metaphors, illustrations, symbols, parables, proverbs, sayings and even jokes, all to our advantage as communicators. The message we have to share is so important that we must use the most appropriate and applicable communicative methods to convey it.<sup>3</sup>

One theologian refers to "vernacular architecture" to illustrate the natural need for buildings to be made of local materials and fit in with the local scenery.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Charles H. Kraft, Christianity in Culture (New York: Orbis Books, 1979). See p. 169 for a fuller treatment of receptor-oriented Revelation.

<sup>2</sup> Kraft discusses at length the difference between form and meaning and the superior importance of meaning. *Ibid.*, 64 – 68.

<sup>3</sup> In numerous experiences of sharing these ideas in Africa and Asia, the reaction I observe is one of relief and joy to be liberated to contextualize Christian ideas.

<sup>4</sup> William A. Dyrness, Invitation to Cross-Cultural Theology, Case Studies in Vernacular Theologies (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 15

For millennia people have taken whatever is at hand—rocks, mud, pieces of wood—to construct dwellings for themselves. On a world historical scale, of course, this has far and away been the most common kind of architecture, and even today produces structures of marvelous subtlety and beauty.<sup>5</sup>

Can theologians not demonstrate the same sensitivity? Should not our “building” fit just as well as theirs? “Let us think of this as *vernacular theology*: that theological framework constructed, often intuitively, by Christians seeking to respond faithfully to the challenges their lives present to them.”<sup>6</sup> If we do this correctly, we can avoid the problem referred to often by both missionaries and missiologists that “missions have all too frequently exported with the Gospel an alien culture, and churches have sometimes been in bondage to culture rather than to the scriptures.”<sup>7</sup>

### Find and Communicate the Meaning

We look for universal truth that applies to every person in every culture at all times—and then present it in ways understandable in the local culture.<sup>8</sup>

The Bible contains universal truth which is above culture.<sup>9</sup> In this paper, we will call it supracultural truth, but the communication issue becomes interestingly complex because the Bible writers also contextualized. They probably did this unconsciously since they were already a part of the cultural context which they were addressing.<sup>10</sup> The supracultural truth in the Bible is therefore hidden or contained in its contextualized form in the cultural contexts in which it was written. The supracultural truth in the Bible needs to be *de-coded* from its Hebraic, Aramaic and Grecian contexts, untainted by the cultural

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 15, 16.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>7</sup> J. D. Douglas in Let the Earth Hear His Voice (Minneapolis: World Wide Publishers, 1975), quoted by Harvie Conn in Eternal Word and Changing Worlds (Grand Rapids: Academie Books 1984), 184.

<sup>8</sup> Kraft, 141.

<sup>9</sup> Kraft adds to Niebuhr’s three basic tenets of God against, in and above culture. He includes two *God in* cultural positions: 1. God as a hero in culture 2. God as endorsing one particular culture. He, partially following Niebuhr, also discusses five *God above* culture positions: 1. God above culture and unconcerned. 2. Christians should be accountable to both God and culture, but each in its own place. 3. There is conflict between God and human beings, whether they are Christian or not. 4. God as more a redeemer than a law-giver, yet maintaining parts of positions 2 and 3. 5. God is above but works through culture as a “vehicle for interaction with human beings” (Ibid., 103 – 114).

<sup>10</sup> In “The Limits of Indigenization in Theology” by Charles R. Taber, included in Readings in Dynamic Indigeneity, ed. by Charles H. Kraft and Tom Wisely, Taber says, “The biblical texts themselves come to us from particular cultural contexts of any other society. In other words, as with any literal translation, a simple transposition of biblical concepts and images results not in understanding but in distortion and confusion.” (390), Furthermore, “it is precisely the appeal to the Scripture than can free indigenous theology from the bondage of western categories and methodologies.” Kraft & Wisely Readings in Dynamic Indigeneity (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1979), 391.

(mis)interpretation of the crosscultural communicator and then *encoded* in the cultural terms of the receptor culture so they understand its meaning in their context.

What supracultural truth was Paul addressing when he told women to wear their hair long? Was he not speaking of honoring one's head—one's husband? Wear your hair long *means* honor your husband, not that people in another context must wear their hair a certain length. Today we would say, "Wear your wedding ring." After washing the disciples' feet, Jesus said, "Do as I have done." This *means* serve each other in an attitude of humility, not necessarily, "wash each other's feet." Washing each other's feet is not our custom today in the West—though because of the story of Jesus washing His disciples' feet it could and does have the symbolic meaning of humility to some Christians. In that case, from a crosscultural perspective, Christians believing in "Foot Washings" have become a cultural subset and *to them* Jesus' words have taken on an originally unintended, yet nevertheless, allowable meaning. My point is, we should first discover and then teach the supracultural truth using whatever local symbols are necessary to convey the deeper spiritual or practical *meaning*. A question for further discussion could be: What is the criteria for deciding what parts of the Bible's commands fit this category at all?

One may say that the *plain* meaning is the true meaning. Then I must ask: Plain to whom? What or which meaning?<sup>11</sup> To miss the significance of these questions is to miss the heart of the value of contextualization.<sup>12</sup>

## The Need for Continual Reformation

In the reformation of Acts 15 and in Martin Luther's reformation we learn that each new geographical area may re-adapt the message to make it fit its own context better. As we progress through chronological time, new generations appear in the same geographical locations as previous generations. Do these new generations not also have the right to hear a contemporary gospel message and an applicable theology presented meaningfully in their contexts, too? In the early seventies, besides pastoring a "straight" church in rural Ontario, I also worked with a group of Canadian "Jesus People." I didn't realize then that what I was doing instinctively was contextualizing my message in a way

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<sup>11</sup> Kraft says "A cultural form does not have inherent meaning, only perceived meaning—and this is context-specific." Kraft, 137.

<sup>12</sup> Words do not have meanings within themselves so much as they have the meanings their users attach to them. "Words mean what their users say that they mean." David J. Hesselgrave, Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 135. Scholars discussing contextualization clearly thought it meant something new. "Conservative evangelicals who hold to the position that the Bible is the historically accurate and fully inspired authoritative Word of God have taken exception to this understanding. *But for the most part, they have not rejected the concept of contextualization itself.* Rather, they have infused it with a different meaning" such as merely making ideas relevant in a given situation. *Ibid.*, 136.

consistent with principles I now know how to explain. God is not threatened by the adapted approach. To be sensitive to the cultural, sociological and psychological situation of the receptor is not offensive to God. Rather, He is delighted that we are willing to incarnate the message in a new context—just as Jesus incarnated himself into the human context.

Notice these statements by a Chinese brother. Perhaps he represents many non-Westerners.

It is no secret that some of the most serious divisions in the Chinese church in recent years have arisen due to *outside teachers placing undue emphasis upon doctrines that would be seen by many as, at best, non-essential . . .* To a large extent overseas Chinese theological education has been *based on a Western model . . .* They need to be able to *put aside cultural biases and either omit or alter allusions and illustrations in their teaching that are not relevant to a mainland audience.* (italics mine)<sup>13</sup>

God *wants* to be understood. It is better to make the message clear than to waste our hearer's time with something unclear which may discredit the relevancy of our gospel.

## Range

In my appeal for sensitivity to context, I am not saying we should throw off all restraints. We should, in fact, recognize there is a limited range of acceptable variation. Yet there is some room to wiggle. Even Calvin noted that the New Testament writers used "freer language than the original" in the Old Testament. They were content if what they quoted applied to their subject. This is called the "Bible as tether" model.<sup>14</sup>

When one compares Mk. 2:26 and I Sam. 21:1-6, one notices a distinct freedom. Mark says "Abiathar," but according to First Samuel it was "Ahimelech" who gave David the consecrated bread.<sup>15</sup> Yet, God does not straighten out Mark. There is freedom allowed in the use or choice of words, but the integrity of the meaning is to be preserved. Therefore, in translating theological materials, feel free to incorporate helpful explanations or necessary additions naturally in the text of the translation. We want it to be clear at first reading, not a foreign statement that requires a footnote.

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<sup>13</sup> Wang Kong, "Closing the Leadership Gap," The Connection (Summer Issue 1998).

<sup>14</sup> This model is developed by Kraft in Christianity in Culture on p. 191. In ministry abroad I have used the ribbon bookmark attached to my Bible on numerous occasions to illustrate that some leeway is appropriate, but we always need to be attached to the Bible as the standard.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

## Revelation

A “revelation” is not revelatory until it has become *subjective*.<sup>16</sup> It has to mean something to me—to mean something to me. When attempting to assist in the birth of an indigenous church—a church of the local soil—we lead people and, in some cases, *release* people to discover applications of the Bible’s messages to their own particular or local situations. If we truly believe that the Holy Spirit will guide *those with whom we work* into all truth, just as He has guided *us* into all truth, we have a spiritual reason to release them as well as missiological reasons.

We train pastors usually by putting information in their heads, but they are often unable to comprehend or are unmotivated because it has not come to them with revelation which is different from relevance. Revelation is like one part of a two part epoxy and plastic steel combination.<sup>17</sup> One is base—the Bible—and the other is activator—the Holy Spirit. Both are needed. We need written truth, but we also need culturally sensitive Holy Spirit revelation by the Activator.

A contextualized theology is hammered out by missionaries and national church leaders working together. Neither can do it alone.<sup>18</sup> Foreign missionaries working alone would tend to pass on a foreign theology and the nationals by themselves may tend to produce a syncretistic theology.<sup>19</sup> What we are seeking in a contextualized theology is a Bible-based, relative and applicable revelation—that scratches just right (has impact), right where they itch (it fits).

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 216.

<sup>18</sup> In “The Birth of Theology” by Daniel von in Readings in Dynamic Indigeneity he says, “No true ‘indigenization or contextualization’ can take place because foreigners, the ‘missionaries,’ suggest it; on the contrary true indigenization takes place only because the ‘indigenous’ church has itself become truly missionary, with or without the blessing of the ‘missionary.’” Kraft & Wisely, 1979, 328 The Apostle Paul did have to make some corrections in the thinking of his converts and the danger of errors today does still exist. However, the importance of dialogue between missionary and national is made clear in the following: “All the same, we must not hold back because of the danger. If a dialogue remains open between the church which transmitted the Gospel and the church which once received it and is now re-expressing its faith in new categories, then it ought to be possible to avoid most of the pitfalls and to correct the errors to which both sides are still liable, without any major crises resulting. Ibid. 340

<sup>19</sup> Charles R. Taber in “The Limits of Indigenization in Theology” includes dialogue among the important conditions for developing a good contextualized theology. He says, “It should be produced in dialogue: dialogue within the community of believers, which we have already touched upon; dialogue with the world it is to be evolved—the culture, the religion, the politics, the economics, the social system—which is the thrust of my remarks about the use of worldview and about facing real-life issues; and dialogue with the Church in the broadest sense. I believe it is important to maintain in a proper balance both the autonomy of indigenous theologians in working out their indigenous theologies, and the interdependence of all parts of the Body for the enrichment of all. One of the tragedies of western theology is that it has become . . . provincial.” Ibid., 395.

## Freedom of Expression

The Bible is free of errors in what it teaches.<sup>20</sup> It is the truth of the message that is pure and free from error, and this we will preserve. In developing curriculums, writing theologies and doing translations, individual words can and should be chosen using the criteria: What words will best convey the meaning intended?

Our cultures are like magnets that draw us to certain sections of the scripture which seem most applicable in our cultures.<sup>21</sup> We and the national church leaders with whom we work should be free to let the magnet do its work—or we could miss what is most important or valuable in any given context. Do you get excited reading a genealogy? I don't, but some cultures keep genealogies only of important people. The genealogies in the gospels signal to them that *the man at the end of the list is an important person!*

In I Peter 3:19 does Jesus' "preaching to the spirits in prison" mean there is some hope for ancestors who died without hearing the gospel? In American culture we wouldn't even think of that question, but in many cultures that is an important one. What great new applicability the Bible might have if we learn to let the local culture ask the questions. What if we were to think of the Bible as a book of case-studies—not a theology textbook? There are many lessons there our culture does not allow us to learn because our culture is simply not asking all the questions.

If the church loses its sense of vitality, excitement and adventure we are less than the apostolic church. Not only our teaching and curriculum, but the church, worship, place, time, style, personnel choices all also ought to be dynamically equivalent; they should fit the local situation just as nicely as meeting at Solomon's porch seemed a likely place for the early believers in Jerusalem to meet.

From another angle, if we over-value each word in the Bible and miss the process of application of its truth we may be led into Bibleolatry—worship of the Bible—rather than worshipping God as a result of applying the Bible's truth to our lives. "I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the law until everything is accomplished" (Mt. 5:18). This verse does not make individual words and symbols sacred, rigid and inflexible; it emphasizes that what God says will happen, will happen. This is not a verse about how to translate the Bible; it is about the enduring quality of the truth in the Bible.

Application is a major component of contextualized theology, and that requires flexibility to change words to preserve meanings. Words are inspired incidentally—it is the thoughts that are important. Some people are too preoccupied with the gift-wrapping

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<sup>20</sup> Kraft, 208.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 233.

and miss the value of the gift—preoccupied with the words and miss the truth. The importance in the words is derived from the truth that the words convey.

I believe we can further build a case for freely using local indigenous expressions by reevaluating Psalm 29. Many of us have read this highly figurative poem and rejoiced in the strength of our God:

Ascribe to the Lord, O mighty ones, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.  
Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name; worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness.  
The voice of the Lord is over the waters; the God of glory thunders over the mighty waters.  
The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is majestic.  
The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars; the Lord breaks in pieces the cedars of Lebanon.  
He makes Lebanon skip like a calf, Sirion like a young wild ox.  
The voice of the Lord strikes with flashes of lightning.  
The voice of the Lord shakes the desert; the Lord shakes the Desert of Kadesh.  
The voice of the Lord twists the oaks and strips the forests bare.  
And in his temple all cry, 'Glory!'  
The Lord sits enthroned over the flood; the Lord is enthroned as King forever.  
The Lord gives strength to his people; the Lord blesses his people with peace.<sup>22</sup>

This is one of the oldest Psalms and in recent years it has been common to stress the similarities between it and the ancient northwest Semitic—Ugaritic—literature.<sup>23</sup> Evidently the Israelites were not hesitant to “convert” poetry—an ancient Canaanite hymn to Baal or at least patterns and metaphors—and use it to worship the true God Who for centuries has received and enjoyed precisely those words of praise originally ascribed to another god, every time believers use it to worship Him. Notice further,

The poet makes an exceptionally effective use of phrases as quick and sudden as lightning; he incorporates participles like breaking and flashing, which hit us with the massive, rolling sound of thunder. The whole world seems to be falling part. Cedars are split down the center, mountains are trembling, desert wadis become roaring torrents. By maintaining the Canaanite mythology, now transferred to Yahweh, the universe has become a tumultuous temple where ‘all cry “Glory!”’<sup>24</sup>

God does not seem to be bothered or threatened by contextualization, local metaphors and perhaps even converted idolatrous poetry. Furthermore, Psalms 29 probably made quite

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<sup>22</sup> Psalm 29 New International Version

<sup>23</sup> Senior, Donald and Stuhlmueller, Carroll, The Biblical Foundations for Missions, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1983), 114.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

an impact on its original hearers. Can you imagine their first impressions? Perhaps we can use similar liberties for the sake of helping our message fit its context and have impact on people today as well.

## Translation

We touched on translation above. Now let us think more fully about what a good translation should be like. Here are three possible tests: 1. It does not sound or read like a translation. 2. The translator was free to allow his own personality to express itself. 3. The effect on the reader is just as living and vivid as the original was on the original readers and hearers.<sup>25</sup>

Formal correspondence translations, however, obscure intended meanings.<sup>26</sup> This is because there is often no word in a language which means exactly the same as a particular word in another language. A translation should not need *outside* footnotes or additional outside explanations. The translator should write clearly what the original *means*, not what it says. Any necessary explanation should be incorporated naturally right in the text. Then it is clear without any explanation tacked on. *Word-faithful* translations are not necessarily, but could be, *meaning-faithless* translations.<sup>27</sup> The Bible writers wanted to be understood, not admired.<sup>28</sup> The greater the cultural and linguistic distance between the original and the new translation, the greater the liberties we should allow to preserve the integrity of the meaning.<sup>29</sup>

Abundant life. What does this mean? The Christian life has both qualitative and quantitative values—values eternal and everlasting, also abundant, real and meaningful. This can be stated two ways: We have life that extends forever and, incidentally, is meaningful here and now, *or* we have life that is meaningful here and now and, incidentally, extends forever. If our communication is to be receptor oriented, perhaps we should use whichever is more important to our audience! Even within any one country there may be some at the low end of the economic scale for whom abundant life would be “meaningful here and now” and others at the top end for whom “extends forever” would truly be “good news.”

In one culture of the world people do not lock their doors. Whenever a guest comes to visit he calls out to his friend who recognizes his voice and welcomes him in.

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<sup>25</sup> These three are based on concepts developed by Kraft. In “Dynamic-Equivalence Translation of the Casebook,” a chapter in his book, Kraft enumerates a number of principles, following Nida and Tabor, and making a case for what he calls “Hearer-Oriented Translation.” Later in that chapter he says, “The greater the linguistic and cultural distance between the source and the receptor languages, the greater the number and extent of the formal changes required to preserve the meaning.” Kraft, 273.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 264.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 270.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 271.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 273.

In that context, if a thief approaches a house, he does not want to reveal who he is by speaking so he says nothing and knocks on the door. If someone is home and asks who it is he silently slips away—undiscovered. In this culture friends call at the door and thieves knock. In such a context how would you translate Revelation 3:20? “Here I am! I stand at the door and ----.” If we said “knock” we would miscommunicate whereas if we said “call” we would communicate accurately.<sup>30</sup>

In parts of Papua New Guinea, sweet potatoes and pigs are the main diet and means of exchange. If there is a misunderstanding between persons, families or communities, a certain number of pigs can be used to buy release or forgiveness of the debt. In such a context they have immediate understanding when God is portrayed as purchasing a good relationship between mankind and Himself by offering “the Pig of God who takes away the sins of the world.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Even crossculturally and through an interpreter I have often “connected” by using this illustration.

<sup>31</sup> I have received violent reactions from some Westerners when I use this illustration, but in other parts of the world the reaction has been much more sympathetic.

## An Example in One American's Handicap

Travel costs money. Americans are, therefore, financially the best able but, *culturally*, perhaps less suitable to do the missionary task.<sup>32</sup> There are several reasons for this. Because the United States is economically, technologically and militarily strong Americans have unconsciously and unintentionally taken on an unhealthy combination of ethnocentrism and national pride. When we Americans travel abroad, our advantages are obvious to us but the strengths of others are not noticed. This is due partly because our value system has not trained us, nor does it allow us even to notice their strengths. We may not notice or fully appreciate the attitudes of a servant's heart, humility, yieldedness, simplicity, graciousness, hospitality and the honoring of others that their cultures emphasize and our hosts demonstrate. My point is not to argue so much that Americans are particular villains on this point as it is to demonstrate that any of us can be unknowingly ethnocentric.

For four days I recently stayed in the home of a carpenter in Kenya. I slept in the living-dining room area of their small house on the foam rubber mat they provided for me. By candlelight, we moved the coffee table and couches each evening to make room. In the next room roasted the chickens we were eating that week—one or two less of them each night! There were about twelve of us who ate together at this house, so we pretty much all lived in community. My prayer time in the morning was spent walking in the neighborhood; everything else was done in front of everyone else. My hostess graciously offered to do my laundry and I accepted the offer. I shaved by brail (without a mirror) in front of the house using a pan of warm water. The outhouse had two rooms—the toilet and a bath room in which I bathed each day. This latter room had a stone placed in the middle of the floor so as to minimize the effects of the wet dirt on the feet of the bather. This mud naturally developed because of the water splashed from the bucket. That was also the time and place for changing clothes. My training in intercultural studies and years of experience living and traveling abroad prepared me for most of this, and I did not think too much of it.

However, I mention it here because of what was *not* evident until near the end of my time in that home: every bit of water for laundry, drinking, cooking and bathing was *hand carried* by the hostess from the village well some distance from their home! When I learned that, I appreciated their hospitality all the more. I shudder to think of how rude or insensitive I might have been. My culture did not prepare me to be sensitive to how far water was carried for my bath and laundry. My culture did not prepare me even to think of this question or possibly offer to help carry water. I believe our gracious hosts and hostesses in other countries are willing to overlook that, but we certainly don't want to add arrogance to our cultural disadvantages. Because our culture does not place a high

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<sup>32</sup> Kraft says, "No culture, especially not ours can be regarded as superior in every way to every other culture." Kraft, 52.

value on quiet humility, patience, service and honor to others, we don't recognize it when we see it.

I have just referred to strengths of others. Who defines what courtesy is: the Western missionary or the local culture? What of their sins? Who defines what sin is: the Western missionary or the local culture?<sup>33</sup> Europeans, Africans, Latin Americans and Asians should be released to strive to live up to their *own* consciences—not to live up to the conscience of foreigners. Sin, in some cases, may be defined according to local application of the Bible to the local cultural context.

### Start Where People Are

God starts with us where we are and works with us to help us grow. Starting point and process is the name of the model that expresses this thought.<sup>34</sup> God is willing to accept us where we are. He is willing to bring us through the process of growth gradually toward ours and his ideals. Polygamy, slavery and smoking are all possible examples. The direction of our lives and our central allegiance must change at conversion but some changes will take several generations. God seems to be less concerned about pure doctrine and more concerned about pure hearts than we are.

When asked about polygamy, I usually suggest we accept the marriage vows of the generation now accepting Christ, multiple wives and all, and then teach the next generation the value of monogamy. On the plane from Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania to Arusha, Tanzania, a Tanzanian lady with whom I chatted told me many African men turn to Islam because Christianity doesn't accept polygamy. To force instant monogamy on an existing polygamous family system is to require numerous divorces and great social upheaval. When insisting on instant monogamy, what do we do with the anti-divorce teaching? Do we have to require divorce and social upheaval in order to become Christians?<sup>35</sup> Why don't we start where they are?

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<sup>33</sup> T. Wayne Dye, in "Towards a Cross-Cultural Definition of Sin," raises this important question. "Joe Missionary usually feels capable of sensing what is wrong for others by noting what is wrong for himself. This works fairly well among his own peers. He intuitively believes he can continue to do this on the field." Charles Kraft & Tom Wisely Readings in Dynamic Indigeneity, 439. "The missionary preaches about those things which seem worst to him. These may not be points which have bothered the consciences of his hearers. They soon learn what actions he disapproves of, but have no idea that he is talking about moral wrong (which they know about) and a sense of guilt (which they are experiencing). Ibid., 440

<sup>34</sup> It seems only fair that we should start with them where they are, but our ethnocentrism and subjectivity often hinder us from being as magnanimous as we might be on this point. Kraft says, "Humans differ not so much in the processes by means of which they reach their conclusions as in their starting points." Kraft, 57.

<sup>35</sup> A woman is actually more secure in a polygamous society than one who could be divorced at almost any time in a "monogamous" (perhaps "serial polygamous" would be more accurate) society. Polygamy would be more attractive than monogamy if security were a greater value than freedom. See Kraft 1979, 59, for

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further treatment of these ideas.

## The Role of the Holy Spirit

Paul could never have covered as much territory as quickly as he did if he had stayed in each place long enough to solve the kinds of problems that are generally associated with the establishment of new churches. He trusted the Holy Spirit in matters of finance, church discipline and administration and he moved on to other new areas. While he stayed in contact with the churches in which he had taught and ministered, it is clear that he was willing to trust much to the ministry of the Holy Spirit.<sup>36</sup> When we recognize how the Holy Spirit has worked in each of our lives to lead *us* into the truth, is it too much to expect Him to work in a similar way among our converts?

Tolerance is a mark of maturity. There is a great deal of healthy doctrinal diversity among us Christians. The position of Mary or questions of the trinity could divide us, but we don't let them. We feel that all those who call Jesus Lord and to whom God has given His Holy Spirit are our brothers and sisters and we ought to accept them. Is it not possible to think along similar lines when discussing different expressions of Christianity each appropriately fitting their different cultural contexts?

The more culturally specific a theology is, the more impact it has in its proper context, but the less it is able effectively to address the needs in other contexts. Most people's reaction to this is to try to produce a cover-all or universal theology. Generalizations abound and specific culture-related issues are not addressed. Could it not be true that the multi-cultural mosaic of the body of Christ in the World would be much more colorful and make a stronger impact in each context if we released the Holy Spirit to work in and through national church leaders to address issues of concern in their contexts? Should Christians bow before the graves of parents at anniversaries of their deaths?<sup>37</sup> Should Christians use the same herbs witchdoctors prescribe for certain sicknesses?<sup>38</sup> Should we lift and kiss the Bible to indicate it is a holy and revered book?<sup>39</sup> Do believers have to celebrate Christmas and Easter? Should Christian women wear veils? Western theologies largely ignore these non-Western culture-related questions, yet the Holy Spirit has been helping people decide these types of questions in a number of different contexts for centuries. He is to be trusted to help each people group develop a theology that addresses the right questions, confronts the right sins and offers the right biblical solutions to culturally specific and pertinent problems.

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<sup>36</sup> Roland Allen applies the efficacy of the Holy Spirit's ministry to a number of missiological issues in his book, *Missionary Methods: St Paul's or Ours?* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1962).

<sup>37</sup> This question has stimulated lengthy discussions in China and Korea with those two cultures generally coming down on opposite sides of this divisive issue.

<sup>38</sup> This question was asked of me in a question and answer session during a pastor's seminar in Kampala, Uganda. I answered that I felt it was permissible providing the *reason* was not because the witchdoctor had recommended it. The local translator took the liberty to give his opinion that it should *not* be taken because it would give some credence to the witchdoctor. I shared the question in Bangladesh and was told that demons are of no big consequence; the person should feel free to take any herbs he wanted.

<sup>39</sup> Some Muslim evangelists promote this idea.



## Conclusion

Now back to the question I asked you at the beginning. Remember Rafique? Did I do the right thing to encourage Rafique? Did I do the right thing to give him the curriculums? Did I do the right thing to tell him he could and should adjust them to fit his situation? Did I do the right thing to tell him to omit materials that did not fit his cultural context? Did I do the right thing to release Him to add to it whatever he and his colleagues feel necessary so it addresses important issues in *his* context? And would you have accepted Him as a brother even though he doesn't use the word "Christian" and prays to Allah in a Mosque? Are you offended in your Christology that he calls Jesus the "Holy One" and not the "Son of God?" Would *you* have given him the curriculums? Are you willing to let his countrymen find salvation through Isa and worship Allah as Rafique teaches them?

It is easier to require others to come to our conceptual and linguistic world, but those of us who believe in incarnational missions cannot escape the obligation to be the ones who go into another person's world. May the Holy Spirit help us to get there culturally as well as geographically. Then our message will fit and have impact—because it is contextualized.