

BIBLICAL CONTEXTUALIZATION

The Bible has much to say about human culture and how the gospel frames our relationship to it. I'll begin by looking at three key passages that have proved helpful to me in developing a biblical view of contextualization. The first, Romans 1 and 2, provides the *basis* for contextualization, namely, that the Bible takes a mixed view of culture, and while many elements of a culture can be affirmed, we must avoid uncritically accepting aspects of culture without first examining them in light of the gospel. The second passage, 1 Corinthians 9, speaks to our *motive* for contextualization, reminding us that we need to be flexible toward culture, ready to adapt what we can to communicate the gospel message. Third, in 1 Corinthians 1, the Bible gives us a basic *formula* for contextualization and shows us how to keep a balance between affirming and confronting culture.

RESTRAINING THE POWER OF SIN

An interesting example of common grace can be seen in Isaiah 45:1, where we read about Cyrus, a pagan king whom God anoints with his Spirit and chooses for world leadership. God's use of Cyrus is an example of why common grace is often seen in a culture as a nonsaving, restraining force in the world. By giving people, regardless of what they believe about God, a measure of wisdom, courage, insight, and goodness, the Spirit works to check the power and influence of sin in the world and keeps it from being as bad a place to live as it could be.

ROMANS 1 – 2 AND THE MIXED NATURE OF CULTURE

Every culture is a mixed bag of good and bad elements, and we should avoid rejecting certain aspects of a culture simply because they differ from our own. While this idea seems true at a common-sense level, does the Bible actually give a warrant for it? A study of Romans 1 and 2 suggests it does.

Every culture assumes a set of answers to the big questions: Why are we here? What are therefore the most important things in life? What is wrong with the world? What will put things right? And every society considers something of supreme worth; accordingly, they seek to bring their environment into service to it. No culture is neutral on these matters, and in this sense all cultural work can be said to be “covenantal” — we are all committed to something, even when those presuppositions and assumptions aren’t consciously identified. Romans 1 and 2 get this point across by telling us that all have sinned and fall short of God’s glory — that both Jews and Gentiles alike are lost. The pagan Gentiles may make sensuality an idol, but the Jews make moral righteousness an idol — like every culture, they look to something else to justify and save them rather than God.

Yet at the same time we see in Romans 1 and 2 that all human beings possess a primordial knowledge of God. In Romans 2:14–15, Paul states that God’s law is written on the heart of every human being. All people have an innate sense of the rightness of honesty, justice, love, and the Golden Rule.¹ Because we are made in the image of God (Gen 1:26 – 28), all people know at some deep level that

there is a God, that we are his creatures, and that we should serve him and are accountable to him. There is “general revelation” or “common grace” — a nonsaving knowledge and likeness of God that he grants to all those who bear his image — present in some way in every culture. This is not saving knowledge. It does not tell us about Jesus or what he has done for us, for that can only be known through the “special revelation” of the Bible. But a general understanding of God exists, for God reveals a measure of his truth and wisdom to all.

This is why Isaiah 28:23 – 29 can state that anyone who is skillful in agriculture, who brings forth an advancement in farming science, has been “instructed by God.” One commentator writes about this text: “What appears as a discovery (the proper season and conditions for sowing, farm management, rotation of crops, etc.) is actually the Creator opening his book of creation and revealing his truth.”² And farming is just one aspect of human culture. The development of new music, new technologies that advance our ability to travel by air or communicate with others, wise political leadership — all of these things are the result of God’s opening his book of creation and teaching us (cf. Exod 31:2–11; Jas 1:17).

Romans 1:18–25 gives a dynamic and balanced picture of how general revelation (or common grace) actually works in people’s lives. We read that the truth is being suppressed (v. 18), but it continues to bear down on us. The NIV translates verse 20 as “Since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities... have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so men are without excuse.” But the verbs *nooumena* (“are being understood”) and *kathoratai* (“are being seen”) are in the form of present passive participles. In other words, the reality of God’s nature and our obligations to him are *continuously* present to us. General revelation is not just a set of innate ideas or static principles. It is the continuous and insistent pressure of God’s truth on the consciousness of every human being.

Every human culture is an extremely complex mixture of brilliant truth, marred half-truths, and overt resistance to the truth. Every culture will have some idolatrous discourse within it. And yet every culture will have some witness to God’s truth in it. God gives out good gifts of wisdom, talent, beauty, and skill completely without regard for merit. He casts them across a culture like seed, in order to enrich, brighten, and preserve the world. With-

out this understanding of culture, Christians will tend to think that they can live self-sufficiently, isolated from and unblessed by the contributions of those in the world. Without an appreciation for God’s gracious display of his wisdom in the broader culture, Christians may struggle to understand why non-Christians often exceed Christians in moral practice, wisdom, and skill. The doctrine of sin means that as believers we are never as good as our right worldview should make us. At the same time, the doctrine of our creation in the image of God, and an understanding of common grace, remind us that nonbelievers are never as flawed as their false worldview should make them.

This suggests that our stance toward every human culture should be one of critical enjoyment and an appropriate wariness. Yes, we should enjoy the insights and the creativity of other peoples and cultures. We should recognize and celebrate expressions of justice, wisdom, truth, and beauty in every culture. But we approach every culture with awareness that it has been distorted by sin and in particular, the sin of idolatry. All cultures contain elements of darkness and light. We can’t simplistically conclude that traditional, conservative cultures are biblical and that liberal, secular cultures are immoral

and evil. Traditional cultures have their own idols, often elevating the family or ethnicity to an absolute value — leading to the evils of racism, tribalism, patriarchy and other forms of moralism and oppression. Liberal cultures elevate the individual and the principle of human freedom to an absolute value — leading to the erosion of family, community, of integrity in both business and sexual practices. Yet both the importance of the family *and* the worth and freedom of the individual are to be found at the center of a biblical worldview. A coherent and biblical understanding of the gospel (Christians are saved but sinners); of the image of God (people are lost but indelibly reflect the nature of God); and of common grace (all people suppress the truth about God but they nonetheless “hear” and “know” it) — provides us with a nuanced understanding of culture. This gives us the basis for contextualization.

WHAT IS CULTURE?

A river is nature, a canal culture; a raw quartz is nature, an arrowhead culture; a moan is natural, a word cultural.

H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*

Culture is... a normative order by which we comprehend ourselves, others, and the larger world and through which we order our experience. At the heart of culture is a system of norms and values... but these norms and values are better understood as commanding truths so deeply embedded in our consciousness and in the habits of our lives that to question them is to question reality itself.

James D. Hunter, *Before the Shooting Begins*

Culture... is any and all human effort and labor expended on the cosmos, to unearth its treasures and riches and bring them into... service... to something.

Henry Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture*

FIRST CORINTHIANS 9 AND FLEXIBILITY TOWARD CULTURE

First Corinthians 9 is very likely the first Bible passage many people think of when the topic of contextualization is considered, and it is an important one to consider:

Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.

1 Corinthians 9:19 – 23

Prior to this part of his letter, Paul speaks about the *skandalon* — stumbling block — and provides as a case study a conflict in the Corinthian church. Jewish Christians occasionally purchased meat after it had been used in idol ceremonies. Jews knew that idols were nonentities and therefore believed there was nothing wrong with eating the meat. Gentile Christians, however, “stumbled” at this. As former pagans, they could not eat such meat without feeling spiritually defiled (1 Cor 8:7), and to see Jewish brothers doing this distressed them and tempted some of them to do what they weren’t able to do

with a clear conscience.

Paul responds by saying that the Jews were right theologically — indeed the meat was harmless, and thus the Gentile believers with “weak” consciences were being controlled by a strictly cultural taboo (1 Cor 8:4 – 5). Nevertheless, Paul says that the Jewish believers (whom he called the “strong”) should not exercise their cultural freedom in this situation. They should refrain from eating the meat to remove the merely cultural offense, the stumbling block (1 Cor 8:9–12), from their Gentile brothers and sisters. Cultural adaptation here is seen as an expression of love. Later, in 1 Corinthians 10:32–11:1, Paul lays this out in the form of a principle: “Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God — even as I try to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved. Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.”

In areas where the Bible has left us free, when we carry out Christian ministry, we should be constantly engaged in cultural adaptation — refraining from certain attitudes or behaviors to remove unnecessary stumbling blocks from the paths of people with culturally framed perceptions. For

example, we may need to refrain from particular music, clothing, foods, and other nonessential practices and concepts that could distract or repulse people from clearly perceiving the gospel. Similarly, where the Bible has not spoken, we must not elevate relative human cultural norms to make them absolutes. For example, we should not absolutize styles of dress or insist that rhythmic music is less pleasing to God than melodic music and must be excluded from worship.

D. A. Carson makes this observation about this section of 1 Corinthians:

When in the last century Hudson Taylor, the founder of the China Inland Mission (now the Overseas Missionary Fellowship), started to wear his hair long and braided like Chinese men of the time and to put on their clothes and to eat their food, many of his fellow missionaries derided him. But Hudson Taylor had thought through what was essential to the gospel (and was therefore nonnegotiable) and what was a cultural form that was neither here nor there, and might in fact be an unnecessary barrier to the effective proclamation of the gospel...

This is not to say that all cultural elements are morally neutral. Far from it. Every culture has good and bad elements in it... Yet in every culture it is

important for the evangelist, church planter, and witnessing Christian to flex as far as possible, so that the gospel will not be made to appear unnecessarily alien at the merely cultural level.³

“Every culture has good and bad elements in it,” writes Carson. If some aspect of a new culture does not compromise the gospel itself and makes you more accessible to others, there is no reason not to adapt to that element out of courtesy and love — even if it is not your preference. Otherwise, the gospel may, because of you, appear “unnecessarily alien.” We must avoid turning off listeners because we are culturally offensive rather than the gospel. Seen in this way, sound contextualization is an expression of unselfishness. It is choosing in love not to privilege yourself or to exercise your full freedom as a Christian so people can hear and follow Christ’s call.

On the other hand, our message and teaching must not eliminate the offense, the *skandalon*, of the cross (1 Cor 1:23). What the Bible has clearly and absolutely taught we cannot soft-pedal or discard. If we do, we have not adapted to the culture; we have capitulated to it. If we never speak to our relatively wealthy congregation about social justice — an implication of the gospel (Jas 1–2)—we eliminate a

biblical *skandalon*. Proper contextualization means causing the *right* scandal — the one the gospel poses to all sinners — and removing all unnecessary ones. This is the motive for contextualization.

FIRST CORINTHIANS 1 AND THE BIBLICAL BALANCE

Though Romans 1–2 and 1 Corinthians 9 establish the basis and motive for contextualization, no single biblical text is more helpful on the subject of contextualization than 1 Corinthians 1:22 – 25, which provides the basic formula for doing contextualization:

Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.

Here Paul assumes the mixed nature of culture. He tells us that when he spoke to Greeks, he confronted their culture's idol of wisdom. The Greek culture put a high value on philosophy, intellectual attainment, and the arts. To the Greeks, a salvation

that came not through teaching or reflection but through a crucified savior was pure foolishness. Jewish culture, on the other hand, put its highest value on something entirely different, which Paul describes with three synonyms — miraculous signs, power, and strength. Unlike the Greek culture, Jewish culture was highly practical, valuing actions and results. Rather than discursive thought, the Jewish culture valued getting things done through power and skill. To the Jews, a salvation that came through a crucifixion was weak and ineffective. A messiah should overthrow the Romans; he should *do* something. A suffering, weak savior made no sense at all to the Jews.

Notice, however, that while the gospel offended each culture in somewhat different ways, it also drew people to see Christ and his work in different ways. Greeks who were saved came to see that the cross was the ultimate *wisdom* — making it possible for God to be both just and the justifier of those who believe. And Jews who had been saved came to see that the cross was true *power*. It meant that our most powerful enemies — sin, guilt, and death itself — have been defeated.

It is striking, then, to see how Paul applies the gospel to confront and complete each society's

baseline cultural narrative. He does this both negatively and positively. He confronts each culture for its idols, yet he positively highlights their aspirations and ultimate values. He uses the cross to challenge the intellectual hubris of the Greeks and the works-righteousness of the Jews. But he also affirms their most basic collective longings, showing that Christ alone is the true wisdom the Greeks have looked for and is the true righteousness that the Jews have sought. Paul's approach to culture, then, is neither completely confrontational *nor* totally affirming. He does not simply rail against Greek pride in intellect and Jewish pride in power; instead he shows them that the *ways* they are pursuing these good things are ultimately self-defeating. He reveals the fatal contradictions and underlying idolatry within their cultures and then points them to the resolution that can only be found in Christ. This is the basic formula for contextualization. We will now examine how this formula is fleshed out in Paul's actual ministry practice.

PAUL'S SPEECHES IN ACTS

We have looked at the need to approach contextualization with an awareness of our own cultural pre-

suppositions, those assumptions we make about the Bible and its message that we are unable to see until we are exposed to the questions another culture is asking of the Scriptures. We have also sought to establish some necessary biblical foundations, recognizing the mixed nature of every culture — that there are good and bad elements in every culture — while still affirming the need to adapt the message of the Bible to a specific cultural context. Paul gives a basis for contextualization in Romans 1–2, a motive for contextualizing in 1 Corinthians 9, and a basic formula for contextualization in 1 Corinthians 1. Yet it is in his speeches in the book of Acts that we actually see him engaged in the *work* of contextualization, communicating the gospel to different people groups.

We immediately notice that Paul is able to adapt his message to communicate with a variety of people from very different backgrounds. In Acts 13:13–43, while in Antioch, Paul speaks to an audience of **Bible believers** — Jews, Gentile proselytes, and “God-fearers” (Gentiles who believed the Bible and met in synagogues but who had not been circumcised). Then, at Lystra, in Acts 14:6–16, Paul addresses a crowd of **peasant polytheists**, uneducated folk who still believed in the old gods. Next,

while visiting Athens, in Acts 17:16–34, Paul speaks to **sophisticated pagans** who had largely abandoned belief in literal gods, instead holding to a variety of philosophical views (such as Stoicism and Epicureanism). In Acts 20:16–38, at Miletus, we see Paul delivering a farewell sermon to **Christian elders**, while in Acts 21:27 – 22:22, in Jerusalem, he speaks to a **hostile Jewish mob**. Finally in Acts 24–26, in Caesarea, Paul addresses Felix, Festus, and Herod Agrippa — **governing elites** with mixed cultural backgrounds and knowledge of both Judaism and paganism.

When reading these addresses, we are immediately struck by how Paul’s gospel presentations differ markedly, depending on the culture of the listeners. What can we learn from them? Our conclusions must be drawn with great care. In every case, we must keep in mind that the biblical accounts of the speeches are fragmentary. In Acts 17, for example, Paul is interrupted before he finishes his message. Nevertheless, with these cautions in mind, we can still detect some patterns in his public communication in Acts.⁴

First, let’s take a look at the *differences* among the speeches. Paul’s citation of authority varies with changing audiences. With Bible believers, he quotes

Scripture and John the Baptist; with pagans he argues from general revelation and the greatness of creation. The biblical content in his presentation varies as well, depending on the audience. He changes the order in which various truths are introduced, as well as the emphasis he gives to different points of theology. With Jews and God-fearers, Paul spends little time on the doctrine of God and gets right to Christ. But with pagans, he concentrates most of his time on developing the concept of God. With Greeks and Romans, Paul goes to Christ’s resurrection first — not the cross.

When it comes to speaking about sin, Paul is clear in his message to the Jews that the law cannot justify them, that moral effort cannot save them (Acts 13:39). In effect, Paul is saying to Bible believers, “You think you are good, but you *aren’t* good enough!” However, his approach with a pagan audience is to urge them to turn from “worthless things” — idols — “to the living God,” who is the true source of “joy” (Acts 14:15–17). In effect, Paul says, “You think you are free, but you are enslaved to dead idols.” Paul varies his use of emotion and reason, his vocabulary, his introductions and conclusions, his figures of speech and illustrations, his identification of the audience’s concerns, hopes,

and needs. In every case, he adapts his gospel presentation to his hearers.⁵

Despite all these profound differences, the speeches show several important commonalities as well. David Peterson observes that while there is no standard “gospel presentation,” it is assumed through the book of Acts that there is only one gospel for all peoples.⁶ It is called “the good news about the Lord Jesus” (11:20), “the good news” (14:7, 21), “the message of salvation” (13:26), “the message of his grace” (14:3), “the message of the gospel” (15:7), “the gospel” (16:10), “the gospel of God’s grace” (20:24), and “the word of his grace” (20:32). What do all the presentations have in common? What is the common core that Paul shares in his preaching?

In every gospel presentation, there is an *epistemological challenge*. People are being told that their understanding of God and ultimate reality is wrong. Jews are told that though they think they understand the God of the Bible, they have seriously misunderstood the Scriptures. Gentiles are told that though they think they understand the world, they have seriously misread creation and their instincts. There is only one true God who has created all things. Both audiences are told about a God who is

powerful, yet good (Acts 13:16 – 22; 14:17).

There is also a *personal challenge* regarding sin and a depiction of the listeners’ fallen condition. Jews are trying to obey the law (Acts 13:39) and pagans are giving themselves to idols and gods that cannot satisfy (14:15). One group is trapped by works-righteousness, the other by a more conventional idolatry. Both audiences are trying to save themselves, and both are failing.

Then there is a *proclamation of Christ* as the answer and solution to their sin. As David Peterson states, “The messianic kingship of Jesus and its implications remains the core of the message to pagan audiences, though the terminology and approach are very different from the preaching to Jews or Gentiles who were familiar with the Jewish Scriptures.”⁷ With pagans, Paul emphasizes the resurrection to prove that Jesus is the divine Savior come into the world, the only true King. With Jews, Paul demonstrates that the covenant promises are actually fulfilled in a suffering Messiah (cf. Luke 24:25 – 26). So both Jew and Gentile are told to turn from their schemes of performance because God has broken into history to accomplish our salvation.

In summary, there is truth about God (“you think you know who God is, but you do not”), truth

about sin and our need for salvation (“you are trying to save yourself, but you cannot”), truth about Jesus (“he is the messianic King who comes to accomplish your salvation for you”), and a call to respond to these truths by repenting and believing in him.⁸ These speeches of Paul give us a strong biblical case for engaging in careful contextualization. They remind us that there is no universal, culture-free formulation of the gospel for everyone. The Scriptures show numerous instances when gospel truths are brought out in different orders, argued for using different premises, and applied to hearts in distinctive ways. It is clear that Paul does not feel an obligation to give the whole gospel picture to his audience in one sitting. He puts the pagan Gentiles on a very gradual ramp and works to establish foundational principles without necessarily getting to the work of Christ right away. And yet, while these gospel truths are never expressed in the same way to all, it is clear they have the same content — the nature of God as just and loving, the state of our sin and lostness, the reality of Christ’s accomplishment of salvation on our behalf, and the necessity of receiving that salvation by faith and through grace.

THE APPEALS OF THE BIBLE

Some years ago, I read a book based on Jesus’ encounter with the rich young ruler. The book concluded that when we evangelize, we must always spend time “preaching the law for conviction,” because Jesus in this passage takes pains to bring about a sense of guilt and need in this self-righteous, self-satisfied young man. The problem with the book’s thesis is, of course, that this is not the only example of how Jesus evangelized someone. In John 4, with the woman at the well, Jesus spends very little time trying to bring her to a place of guilt and conviction of sin. He is considerably gentler and focuses not on the law but on his ability to satisfy spiritual thirst. (Jesus’ behavior in John 4 can also be contrasted with his much more confrontational approach to Nicodemus in John 3.) To make any of these forms of persuasion *the* paradigm for gospel communication will lead to fruitlessness in ministry. We all tend to be blind to how much our own culture and temperament shape how we do gospel ministry, but careful attention to the remarkable diversity of gospel ministry in the Bible can broaden us.

People of a conservative temperament may want to stress judgment even more than the Bible itself

does, while people of a liberal temperament may want to stress unconditional love more than the Bible does. Those of a rational bent need to see the importance of narrative, while those who love stories need to appreciate the extremely closely reasoned arguments of, say, Paul's letters. D. A. Carson has written an article that is a valuable resource for understanding the work of contextualization.⁹ He argues that the biblical authors use a range of motivations when appealing to their readers to believe and obey the truth. They do not seek to persuade in just one way. As missiologists have pointed out, people of different temperaments and from different cultures reason differently. Some people are highly logical, others more intuitive, and others simply practical. In order to persuade people, you must adapt to these differences. Carson lists eight motivations to use when appealing to non-Christians to believe the gospel. I have combined and simplified his categories down to six:

1. **Sometimes the appeal is to come to God out of fear of judgment and death.** Hebrews 2:14–18 speaks about Christ delivering us from the bondage of the fear of death. In Hebrews 10:31, we are told it is a terrible thing to fall under the judgment of the living

God.

2. **Sometimes the appeal is to come to God out of a desire for release from the burdens of guilt and shame.** Galatians 3:10–12 tells us we are under the curse of the law. Guilt is not only objective; it can also be a subjective inner burden on our consciences (Ps 51). If we feel we have failed others or even our own standards, we can feel a general sense of shame and low self-worth. The Bible offers relief from these weights.
3. **Sometimes the appeal is to come to God out of appreciation for the “attractiveness of truth.”** Carson writes: “The truth can appear wonderful... [they can] see its beauty and its compelling nature.” In 1 Corinthians 1:18, Paul states that the gospel is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to those who are being saved it is the power of God. Yet, immediately after this statement, Paul argues that the wisdom of the cross is the consummate wisdom. Paul is reasoning here, appealing to the mind. He is showing people the inconsistencies in their thinking (e.g., “your culture’s wisdom is not wisdom by its own definition”). He holds up the truth for people

to see its beauty and value, like a person holding up a diamond and calling for people to admire it.

4. **Sometimes the appeal is to come to God to satisfy unfulfilled existential longings.** To the woman at the well Jesus promised “living water” (John 4). This was obviously more than just eternal life — he was referring to an inner joy and satisfaction to be experienced now, something the woman had been seeking in men.
5. **Sometimes the appeal is to come to God for help with a problem.** There are many forms of what Carson calls “a despairing sense of need.” He points to the woman with the hemorrhage (Matt 9:20 – 21), the two men with blindness (Matt 9:27), and many others who go to Jesus first for help with practical, immediate needs. Their heart language is, “I’m stuck; I’m out of solutions for my problems. I need help for this!” The Bible shows that Jesus does not hesitate to give that help, but he also helps them see their sin and their need for rescue from eternal judgment as well (see Mark 2:1–12; Luke 17:11–19).
6. **Lastly, the appeal is to come to God sim-**

ply out of a desire to be loved. The person of Christ as depicted in the Gospels is a compellingly attractive person. His humility, tenderness, wisdom, and especially his love and grace draw people like a magnet. Dick Lucas, longtime pastor at St Helen’s Bishopsgate in London, has said that in the Bible God does not give us a watertight argument so much as a watertight *person* against whom, in the end, there can be no argument. There is an instinctive desire in all human beings to be loved. A clear depiction of Christ’s love can attract people to want a relationship with him.

These are six ways that the biblical authors use to persuade people, and notice what a motley assortment they are. Some are what we might call “sticks,” while others are “carrots.” One is essentially logical (“attractiveness of the truth”), relying on thinking things out. Some are intuitive (the “attractiveness of Jesus” and “fulfillment of longings”), relying on narratives and stories that compel. Sometimes the need is short term (“a despairing sense of need”), while others want to escape judgment and hell in the long term — an equally practical concern!

In conclusion, Carson argues, “We do not have the right to choose only one of these motivations in people and to appeal to it restrictively.” This addresses one of the greatest dangers for us as preachers and evangelists. Most of us come to Christ through one of these motivations, or we are part of a community of people who find one of these motivations to be persuasive. It is natural for us to exclusively use this motivation in our appeals to others. When expounding a particular text, we tend to use our “pet” motivation, even though the biblical author may not. This is a failure to be fully biblical in our preaching. And yet, Carson states, “On the other hand, we may have the right to emphasize one motivation more than others.” Why? “In the same way that the structure and emphases of Paul’s evangelistic addresses could change, depending on whether he was addressing biblically literate Jews and proselytes (Acts 13) or completely biblically illiterate pagans (Acts 17), so the particular motivations to which we appeal may vary according to our knowledge of our audience.”¹⁰ Here we see a strong biblical pattern of contextualization. In the long run, we must expose people to all that the Bible says. But, as Carson argues, it is right to lead with the passages and

approaches that will be most effective in opening our audience to the message of the gospel.

THE GOSPEL AND CONTEXTUALIZATION

I believe that faithful contextualization is a direct implication of the gospel of salvation by grace alone through faith alone. Paul used the gospel of justification on Peter in Galatians 2:14 when he criticized Peter’s failure to be culturally open to Gentile believers. As we have seen, the gospel gives two impulses that lead us toward balanced, biblical contextualization. Religion (“I obey — therefore I am accepted”) leads to pride if we are living up to standards, or to inferiority if we are failing to live up to standards. But the gospel (“I am accepted through Christ — therefore I obey”) makes us both humble and confident at once. And these two attitudes are critical for doing faithful and sound contextualization. If we need the approval of the receiving culture too much (not enough gospel confidence), we will compromise in order to be liked. If we are too proudly rooted in any one culture (not enough gospel humility), we will be rigid and unable to adapt. Only the gospel gives us the balance we need.

A major reason the gospel is necessary for us to

do contextualization is that in our default mode of self-justification we tend to turn neutral cultural traits into moral virtues. Some years ago, I performed a wedding in which the groom was from an Anglo culture and the bride from a Hispanic culture. At the hour the wedding was to begin, not only had the bride not arrived at the church; almost none of her family or friends of the family had arrived either. Not until forty-five minutes after the stated hour of the service did the bride and her family arrive at the church. The Anglo guests were filled with indignation about how rude, undisciplined, and insensitive this late arrival was. I heard some mutter, “No wonder those people can’t...” The Hispanic folks thought the Anglos were, as usual, rigid, uptight, and more oriented to goals and schedules than to relationships. What was happening? Each side was moralizing the time orientation of their particular culture.¹¹

The gospel brings about great humility. A heart reoriented by a grasp of the gospel of grace does not have the same need to get a leg up on everyone. Richard Lovelace writes the following:

[Those] who are not secure in Christ cast about for spiritual life preservers with which to support their confidence, and in their frantic search they not only

cling to the shreds of ability and righteousness they find in themselves, but they fix upon their race, their membership in a party, their familiar social and ecclesiastical patterns, and their culture as means of self-recommendation. The culture is put on as though it were armor against self-doubt, but it becomes a mental straitjacket which cleaves to the flesh and can never be removed except through comprehensive faith in the saving work of Christ. Once faith is exercised, a Christian is free to be enculturated, to wear his culture like a comfortable suit of clothes. He can shift to other cultural clothing temporarily if he wishes to do so, as Paul suggests in 1 Corinthians 9:19 – 23, and he is released to admire and appreciate the differing expressions of Christ shining out through other cultures.¹²

But it is not *only* the gospel that calls us to contextualization; a high view of the Bible does so as well. Why? If we believe in *sola scriptura*, that only the Bible has unquestioned authority over our lives, then at any place where the Bible leaves our consciences free we should be culturally flexible. Since the Bible never prescribes details on how to dress or on what kind of music to listen to, there is freedom to shape dress and music in such a way that both honors the biblical boundaries and themes

and yet fits a culture.¹³ To deny that much of our Christianity is culturally relative is to elevate human culture and tradition to a divine level and to dishonor Scripture.

Francis Schaeffer often spoke about the difference between biblically prescribed “form” and cultural “freedom”: “Anything the New Testament does not command in regard to church form is a freedom to be under the leadership of the Holy Spirit for that particular time and place.”¹⁴ In the next chapter, we’ll look at practical steps for engaging in active contextualization of the gospel message in a way that uses this freedom wisely. This involves a three-part process: *entering* the culture, *challenging* the culture, and *appealing* to the culture.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

1. According to Romans 1 and 2, what is the basis for contextualization?
2. Keller writes, “Christians may struggle to understand why non-Christians often exceed Christians in moral practice, wisdom, and skill. The doctrine of sin means

that as believers we are never as good as our right worldview should make us. At the same time the doctrine of our creation in the image of God, and an understanding of common grace, remind us that non-believers are never as flawed as their false worldview should make them.” What does this understanding of common grace suggest about our stance toward the culture? How does this awareness provide balance to your engagement with the culture? What types of relationships, spiritual disciplines, readings, and exercises help you employ a balance of “critical enjoyment and an appropriate wariness”?

3. The formula for contextualization, as derived from 1 Corinthians 1, is defined as applying the gospel “to confront and complete each society’s baseline cultural narrative.” This must be done both negatively and positively, confronting each culture for its idols, while positively highlighting its aspirations and ultimate values. Name an idol in your own culture. How might Paul have exposed the futility of that idol while also affirming the God-given desires

that led people to pursue it in the first place? How might he have persuaded his listeners that the true answer to their deepest desires can be found in Jesus?

4. This chapter summarizes six ways of making a biblical appeal to people to come to God:

- out of fear of judgment and death
- out of a desire for a release from the burdens of guilt and shame
- out of appreciation for the “attractiveness” of truth
- to satisfy unfulfilled existential longings
- for help with a problem
- simply out of a desire to be loved

Which of the six ways of making appeals are most comfortable and natural for you? Which are most difficult? Why? What resources can help you become more adept at using all these appeals?

CHAPTER 9 — BIBLICAL CONTEXTUALIZATION

1. Francis Hutcheson, an eighteenth-century moral philosopher, uses a famous illustration to demonstrate this. He asks us to imagine that we hear of a man who discovers buried treasure in his backyard worth millions of dollars. But then we hear that he gives it all away to the poor. Even if we would never do so ourselves, and even if we swagger publicly that such an act is stupid, we cannot help but admire what was done. There is an indelible sense of the moral beauty of the act itself.
2. J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1993), 235.
3. D. A. Carson, *The Cross and Christian Ministry: Leadership Lessons from 1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 122. We have said we cannot choose between essentials and nonessentials in Scripture. However, in a culture there are things that do not directly contradict Scripture and therefore are neither forbidden nor commanded by the Bible. Carson is saying that, in general, the Christian in mission should adopt such cultural features to avoid making gospel communication unnecessarily strange.
4. See David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Pillar Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 40; see also Jay E. Adams, *Audience Adaptations in the Sermons and Speeches of Paul* (Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1976), esp. 61 – 64.

5. See Adams, *Audience Adaptations*, esp. 61 – 64.
6. Peterson, *Acts of the Apostles*, 44.
7. Ibid.
8. Another helpful survey of the gospel presentations in Acts is found in John Stott, *The Message of Acts* (Bible Speaks Today; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1994), 79 – 81. Stott seems to be looking more at the speeches of Peter early in the book. Peter does not address pagan audiences; nevertheless, Stott (p. 81) comes up with a gospel outline similar to the one we discern in Paul: “Here, then, is a fourfold message. Two events (Christ’s death and resurrection), as attested by two witnesses (the Bible and historical witnesses to resurrection), on the basis of which God makes two promises (forgiveness and the Spirit), on two conditions (repentance and faith)... We have no liberty to amputate this apostolic gospel.”
9. D. A. Carson, “Pastoral Pensées: Motivations to Appeal to in Our Hearers When We Preach for Conversion,” *Themelios* 35.2 (July 2010): 258 – 64, www.thegospelcoalition.org/publications/35-2/ (accessed January 19, 2012).
10. Carson’s final point is important: “All of the biblically sanctioned motivations for pursuing God, for pursuing Christ, say complementary things about God himself, such that failure to cover the sweep of motivations ultimately results in diminishing God.” As we have seen in this chapter, contextualization must roll out biblical truths in an order that

is adapted to culture, but faithful gospel ministry must not hide from people any part of the whole counsel of God, lest the picture of God we give people be less than true and full.

11. See Sherwood G. Lingenfelter and Marvin K. Mayers, *Ministering Cross-Culturally* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 37–50.
12. Richard F. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1979), 198 – 99.
13. Biblical principles about thrift and modesty must be applied here, but we must also recognize that terms such as *modesty* and *respectful*, while not infinitely elastic, will look different in different cultures.
14. Francis Schaeffer, *The Church at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1970), 67.