



iinsight

A journal for international student ministry in the UK



The Challenge of **CONTEXTUALISATION**

The Gospel in Translation

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Minding the Pitfalls

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Cross-Cultural Preaching: Why and How

Dick Dowsett

A typhoon had stranded a monkey on an island. From the safety of his tree, waiting for the raging waters to recede, he spotted a fish swimming against the current. It seemed obvious to the monkey that the fish was struggling and in need of assistance. Leaving the safety of his tree, the monkey climbed over to another tree hanging precariously over the water and moved far out along the limb until he was over the fish. At great risk to himself, he reached down, snatched the fish out of the threatening waters, and hurried back to the safety of his shelter. Once there, he carefully laid the fish on dry ground. For a few moments the fish showed excitement, but then settled into a peaceful rest. Joy and pride swelled up inside the monkey. He had successfully helped another creature.

This light-hearted tale, while extreme in its conclusion, highlights the need to recognise the different contexts from which others come, in order to serve them appropriately. The same motivation has led us to focus this issue of *Insight* entirely on Contextualisation, the challenge in cross-cultural ministry of understanding others' frames of reference, and aligning our own perspectives with theirs.

Duane Elmer, telling this story in his book, *Cross Cultural Connections* (IVP, 2002), acknowledges the monkey's kindness and courage but notes that because the monkey is unable to look beyond his limited frame of reference, his actions, borne out of noble intentions, do harm rather than good. The assumption that what is good for monkeys is also good for fish, ends up being disastrous for the fish!

At our international student events, cafés and Bible studies, we encounter cultures, worldviews and beliefs which are unlike our own. As we bid farewell to students returning home, we have tried to prepare them for Christian life in countries we may never have visited, attempting to equip them for lifestyles we have never experienced ourselves.

In order to avoid 'monkey mentality', there is much more we should be doing to ensure that the Gospel we share is 'good news' to the non-British listener. We should be seeking to disciple students so that they can see that biblical teaching has relevance for them even when life in Britain is a dim and distant memory. We should find ways to communicate Christ and demonstrate the Christ-life so that international students can see that the God we worship has indeed come to seek and save people from all nations.

Effective contextualisation begins by broadening our own frames of reference. We don't need to learn another language, necessarily, or live overseas, in order to contextualise effectively. But we do need to make sure we are thoroughly grounded in Scripture so that we don't inadvertently dilute its power and truth. And we need to develop skills in listening to and understanding those of other cultures, so that our ministry to international students isn't merely borne of noble intentions, but genuinely speaks, preaches, teaches and serves in the best interests of the ones God has called us to. I hope this issue of *Insight* will encourage and inspire us to do just that.

In Christ,

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Lynette Teagle



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The importance of translating the Bible into the languages of those we want to reach with the Gospel is self-evident. If people are to truly understand the Word of God, we all appreciate that they will understand it best if it is in their mother tongue, the language of their heart. I will never forget the student from a Central Asian country who had attended Bible studies in English for several weeks without seeing any necessity to take it seriously. Once he had received a Bible in his mother tongue everything changed. He was gripped, reading it from cover to cover in two weeks before exclaiming: "God speaks my language!" It was only a matter of days before he trusted Christ.

In this article I want to suggest that for a life of meaningful and fruitful discipleship people need a translation of the Gospel not only into their mother tongue but into their culture as well. True stories from two continents well illustrate this need.

1. Taking culture seriously

In an article entitled "A Cross-cultural Bible?"¹ Australian missionary Andrew Buchanan describes a conversation with an Indonesian Christian man in Bandung whose girlfriend had broken off their relationship because her parents didn't like him. Although in most places in Indonesia young people do choose their own partner he learned that "having the blessing of one's parents on a proposed union is so important that few will proceed without it." Buchanan then talks about using Bible study material written by Indonesian staff of *Perkantas* (the IFES affiliate in Indonesia). In a study on choosing a suitable marriage partner, "it said lots of useful things about looking for godliness in a prospective husband or wife rather than looks or wealth. But it said nothing about the role of parents – even though for Indonesian Christians there can be a real tension between honouring one's parents and loving Jesus more than family. This tension becomes acute in instances when a godly prospective spouse is rejected by the parents of their suitor for reasons unrelated to faith, such as ethnic group or wealth."

Buchanan asks how this tension could be ignored and concluded that those who had written the Bible study material had studied in a western Bible college and used western Bible study materials as their model.

David Harley, former General Director of OMF, tells² of an occasion he was asked to preach on the call of Abraham to a church in Tanzania. With many years of cross-cultural experience behind him Harley had worked hard to understand the text properly and apply it appropriately for the Tanzanian congregation. After the service he was rebuked by the local church leader for having missed out the most important section of the passage (Genesis 12:1-3). "What was that?" Harley asked. The reply came back: "You said nothing about the curse. God promises to curse everyone who cursed Abraham. In Africa curses are very important." Harley has since realised the leader was right. Commenting on this incident later, he writes:

"In many cultures curses are treated very seriously and the Bible talks a great deal about curses. In fact there are over 200 references to curses in Scripture but I have never heard a sermon on the curses of the Bible! Yet here is an important

facet of biblical teaching. Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (Galatians 3:13). Jesus also delivers us from all those who would harm us with their curses, for he has triumphed over all the forces of evil (Colossians 2:15)"³

Culture can be defined as "a system of meanings and values that shapes one's behaviour". The factors which make up a culture are numerous but include things like history, customs, manners, social interactions, institutions and many more. All of us have a culture and ours is not necessarily any better than the other person's. Culture is neither wholly good nor wholly bad: some aspects of our culture may be closer to biblical values than another's but some may be further away and we need to take great care not to assume our culture is the right way.

Lingenfelter and Mayers write: "People often attribute moral force to their priorities for personal behaviour and judge those who differ from them as flawed, rebellious or immoral"⁴. This attitude is well illustrated by Richard Jenkyns: "It's a funny thing; the French call it a *couteau*, the Germans call it a *messer*, but we call it a knife, which is after all what it really is."⁵ If we are to be humble servants of the word of God we must beware defining either reality or value systems with reference to our own culture. We must beware also the danger of confusing the Gospel with our enculturated expression of that Gospel.

2. Taking the Bible seriously

"You can examine culture...if you like. As for me I'll just preach the Bible"⁶ Regrettably it is not as easy as that, for two reasons: The Bible itself is enculturated. It is a contextual document. What the authors of each book wrote was shaped by the cultural context in which they found themselves.

Chris Wright illustrates the contextual nature of all of the Old Testament with a comment on the Song of Moses in Exodus 15. He says this "needs to be seen as a deeply polemical song – that is conflicting with the world view and the claims of divinity which had been made by Pharaoh...the whole story...is the conflict of the claims of the living God, Yahweh, the God of Israel, as over against the claims of this "tin-pot" god, Pharaoh." Contrary to the claim of Egypt's imperial religion, Yahweh alone is God, Yahweh alone is King.⁷

In his masterly overview of contextualisation in the New Testament, Dean Flemming looks at how all the New Testament writers shaped their message for the culture of their readers. For example he shows how Acts 10:34-43 "is a sermon that is carefully crafted to persuade an audience of Gentiles living on the fringes of Judaism to embrace the call to faith in Jesus Christ."⁸

Every book of the Bible was originally written into a specific context and many of the hermeneutical tools we use today are designed to help us understand that context. The Scriptures were written "to them...for us" (1 Corinthians

¹ Buchanan, A. "A Cross-cultural Bible?", an article in Landscape – Issue 2, a publication of CMS Australia.

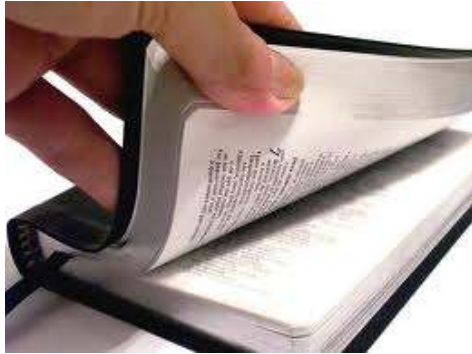
² In a personal conversation with the author

10:11). We must understand first their context and what the message was for them, before we apply it to ourselves.

The Bible teaches us to contextualise. In 1 Corinthians 8-10 the Apostle Paul makes it quite clear that adapting our way of life and our formulation of the Gospel is essential if we are to reach different groups of people. His argument that he has become all things to all men (9:19-23) is not straightforward⁹ but in essence he seems to be saying that we need to think very carefully about what is truly the Gospel (and therefore binding), and what is culture, which we can embrace or reject depending on whom we are with.

Don Carson writes: "...it is important to grow in your grasp of Scripture and in your exposure to other cultures, so that you do not tie your cultural preferences to the Gospel and invest the former with the authority of the latter."¹⁰

Contextualisation can be defined as "the dynamic and comprehensive process by which the Gospel is incarnated within a concrete historical or cultural situation. This happens in such a way that the Gospel both comes to authentic expression in the



local context and at the same time prophetically transforms the context."¹¹ It therefore not only adapts to culture, it also sometimes clearly rejects culture. The apostle Paul argues that according to Scripture, he is entitled to make a living from the Gospel: "Those who preach the Gospel should receive their living from the Gospel" (1 Cor 9:14). However in Corinthian culture, where followers of a particular philosopher showered gifts on their "guru" so that they too could look good by being identified with him, Paul did not want anyone to embrace him and his message so that they could look good or that he could get rich. He therefore declined to adapt to their cultural norm, lest the wrong message be communicated.

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3. Taking Gospel ministry seriously

Paul's driving force comes from his passionate desire to see people saved. As we've seen, he will not compromise Gospel values. He is not "two-faced" becoming "all things to all men" for his own comfort - his flexibility is driven by a desire that nothing of his own culture gets in the way of people being saved. Being true to the Gospel means learning to be culturally flexible and not writing off any attempt to use means or language outside our comfort zone as being a compromise of the Gospel.

Many of our best evangelists and preachers demonstrate that flexibility already. At midweek services in business districts we use the language of profit and loss, of spiritual bankruptcy, of investment for life; at sportsmen's dinners we root the Gospel in the language and culture of sport. We find that acceptable because we are often part of those cultures or at least understand enough about them to make sense of what is being said. The difficulty comes when the culture is very different from our own and suddenly the contextualisation either seems "wrong" to us or simply alien.

What we have to realise is that for some international students in the UK, our lack of contextualisation may be entirely unhelpful. For example, a student from Asia may never have made an "individual" decision of any importance before. To think of

changing one's religion without consultation or involvement of parents or a spouse would be unthinkable. Encouragement from us to make a purely independent decision (as we would do with students from a more individualistic western background) may simply confirm a view that this is a western religion, not suitable for Asians. It may even create barriers to the Gospel when students return home to parents presenting a *fait-accomplis*.

Conversely, appropriate contextualisation can transform our communication of the Gospel. Experienced Chinese evangelists will sometimes make good use of the possible translation of John 1:1 as "In the beginning was the *Dao*...", drawing parallels with the Chinese philosophical belief that *Dao* is the pre-existent source of the Universe and many Daoist (Taoist) rules and practices are designed to bring harmony with the *Dao*.

We are often warned of the dangers of contextualisation becoming syncretism. However, David Harley reminds us that "there is of course the opposite danger of being so conservative about what we say that we remain faithful to the word but communicate nothing to our hearers". I want to suggest it is worse than that. Failure to contextualise can actually lead us to communicate falsehood.

Michael Frost gives an example of preaching the Gospel to the Zanaki people of Zimbabwe using Revelation 3:20 as the text.¹² He explains that when we visit someone in British culture, their door will be closed and probably locked and the inhabitants safely and privately inside. You therefore have to ring the bell or knock loudly to gain entry. In Zanaki homes, however, there are no doors. If you visit a friend you simply call out loudly at the doorway. Your voice would be recognised and you'd be welcomed in. In that culture the only people who knock are thieves because they do not want to be identified! If, having knocked, they heard noises inside they'd disappear rapidly. Revelation 3:20 speaks of knocking and calling out, so a message contextualised to Zanaki culture might emphasise the calling out. Sadly the Victorian missionaries who first sought to evangelise this tribe emphasised the knocking and by doing so made Jesus out to be a thief!

4. Taking international students seriously

The implications for those of us involved in international student ministry are essentially twofold: both our evangelism and our discipleship of



international students need careful thought.

Evangelism: Not long ago I had the opportunity to present the meaning of Easter informally to a group of Japanese students. It happened quite unexpectedly, and I rushed in with a typical explanation of the cross dealing

³ Harley, C.D. "Critical Issues In Contextual Discipleship: A Response To Song Minho's Paper On Contextualisation And Discipleship".

⁴ Lingenfelter, S.G., & Mayers, M.K. (1986). *Ministering Cross-culturally: An Incarnational Model for Personal Relationships*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic. p14.

⁵ Jenkyns, R. "The Victorians and Ancient Greece", quoted by Storti, C. (1990). *The Art Of Crossing Cultures*. London: Intercultural Press. p85.

⁶ Michael Frost quoting an evangelical leader in "Translating the gospel" www.thejerichoroad.com/download.../Translating%20the%20Gospel.pdf

⁷ Wright, Christopher J.H. "Interpreting The Bible Among The World Religions", Henry Martyn Lecture of 1998.

⁸ Flemming, D. (2005). *Contextualisation in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission*. Leicester: InterVarsity Press.



with our sin and guilt. Our guests looked perplexed, but when my wife Catherine explained things with reference to Jesus bringing healing of a broken relationship with our heavenly Father we began to see a few nods of comprehension. A Chinese friend confirmed recently that in her experience, Chinese students respond much better when the Gospel is presented in terms of restoring a broken relationship. China's president, Hu Jintao, has recently spoken much of "He Xie" (harmony) as he encourages China's vast population to work towards a harmonious society¹³ and so provides a good backdrop for this way of looking at the Gospel.

Katie Rawson emphasises the need of the Chinese to be connected within a network of relationships and believes that a helpful challenge to accept Christ comes in the form of "Come join the family!"¹⁴ That thought is not far away from the central theme of Christopher Ash's new Bible overview in which he describes God's restoration of all things in four chapter headings: "Gathered to Jesus; gathered by the Spirit; gathered worldwide; gathered forever."¹⁵

When we seek to share the Gospel with students who come from a very different culture or worldview we also need to give careful consideration to the materials we use. Many of us champion evangelistic courses written for western culture, but do these engage with the questions our international friends are asking? Or are they so firmly set within the western context (concepts, language, modes of communication, illustrations) that they reinforce the idea that the Gospel is a message only for westerners? Is it appropriate to have international students from non-western backgrounds joining in with a predominantly British group? Is it possible to adequately share the Gospel with a very mixed group of international students?

After 25 years of ISM experience I have concluded that taking an international student to an event aimed at British people is not usually very effective. Almost all my evangelism has been conducted in one-to-one or small group Bible studies where students can more easily be encouraged to think through what the Gospel looks like in their own cultural context.

Discipleship: If, while they are still in the UK, we don't help students who've recently come to Christ to think through what it will mean to live as growing disciples in their own country we are setting them up for a fall. If they see Christianity as just something which relates to western culture, they may eventually conclude that it was an important part of the experience of their sojourn in the west, but now no longer relevant.

Many of us in *Friends International* have known students who've abandoned Christ on their return home either because

- (i) 'church' is so different, that is, it is 15-20 people meeting in secret in a home with no musical instruments rather than 300 in a large building with almost professional levels of musical accompaniment; or
- (ii) their understanding of the Gospel doesn't impact the ethical issues they face in the workplace or family life: bribery expected by government officials; pressure from family to marry an unbeliever or to be dissatisfied with anything except the best paid jobs.

Unless we address these issues before they get home, the Gospel no longer appears to have any relevance when they get there. Of course we cannot always know what the issues are but we must help them think about it and in applying the Bible to always ask how this applies in Japan, India, Egypt or elsewhere. Mature believers from their own culture are of course usually better equipped to do that. One seasoned international student worker in US recently wrote:

"One thing that has become apparent to me over the years... is that cultural differences are so different from one country to the next, and so complex

(even within a given culture), that some of the best and most relevant discipling of Christian internationals (especially new-born-again ones) takes place with other more mature Christians from their own home culture."¹⁶

Of course not every believer from the same nationality will make a good discipler and in any event there may not be one. For those of us left with the role of discipling we need to look to identify suitable resources that can help us.¹⁷

Conclusion

All of us contextualise all of the time: the clothes we wear; the books we read; the language we use; but many of us do so without realising this is what we are doing. We contextualise the Gospel too, also without awareness that we are doing so. But when we meet international students we must start consciously engaging with the cultures of those we want to reach if they are to become well rooted and fruitful Christians in their own countries when they return.

DISCUSSION GUIDE:

1. *How can you help yourself and others to rightly discern between what is biblical and what is cultural in your church's teaching and practice?*
2. *From where do most of the illustrations come which you and your colleagues use in evangelism and Bible teaching? From where else might you use illustrations which would be more comprehensible to a student from a different culture?*
3. *How do you currently evangelise and disciple those from different cultural or religious backgrounds? What materials do you use? What might you now do differently?*

⁹ For a most helpful explanation see Carson, D.A. (1993). *The Cross & Christian Ministry*. Baker. pp117-122.

¹⁰ Ibid, p122.

¹¹ Flemming, op cit, p19.

¹² Frost, op cit.

¹³ China Daily, September 29, 2007.

¹⁴ Ling, S. & Bieler, S. (Eds.) (1999). *Chinese Intellectuals and the Gospel*. Vancouver: Horizon Ministries. Pp158ff.

¹⁵ Ash, Christopher (2010). *Remaking a Broken World*. London: Authentic Media.

¹⁶ Ned Hale, in email conversation with colleagues on ACMI network

¹⁷ See www.friendsinternationalresources.org.uk or contact OMF Diaspora team and other mission agencies

Minding the Pitfalls – some cautionary tales about contextualisation

by Rose Dowsett

Truth is truth is truth...except when it isn't.

Jesus went up a mountain to pray; so prayer is more blessed and effective at a thousand feet above sea level. True or false?

Eskimos, most Japanese, and many poor inner-city British children, have never seen a sheep. So we can just leave out all the bits of the Bible which use sheep, shepherd, Lamb of God imagery. True or false?

People can't be saved until they understand penal substitutionary atonement, and can explain those words (and evangelism is not evangelism unless we use those words). True or false?

Salvation is about an individual and his beliefs. True or false?

Authentic Christian discipleship will look different depending on where in the world you live. True or false?

No, those aren't trick questions – but nor are they quite as simple as they look at first reading. Behind each of them are issues relating to how we understand the authority and right interpretation of the Bible, and issues relating to the very different cultures of today's world, and the sheer distance between many of them (including our own British culture) and the cultures of the Old and New Testament worlds.

6 We rightly want to affirm that God's truth is truth for all people, everywhere, and in every generation. It is universal in its scope. God's revelation of truth, both through the written Word and supremely in the person of Jesus Christ, and in some measure through the created world despite its fallenness and ours, is crucial for all humanity. God is a communicating God. Yet, how do we 'get the message', accurately and without distortion? Is that possible? How much are we shaped by our personal and corporate history and culture, so that subconsciously we bend God's truth as we read it, hear it, apply it, live it? And then, as we engage in cross-cultural discipling, how much of that 'bent-ness' skews our ministry, and is imposed on others? Were it not for the grace of the Holy Spirit, our clumsy attempts at communication would be doomed before they even began.

Truth is truth is truth. God's truth is not just a concept, a proposition, nor even only words on a page. It is embodied in His Being. He is truth. How do we align our minds and lives in every dimension with both proposition and Person – and mediate both proposition and Person to others, so that in their turn, in whatever culture God calls them to live, they are visual aids for the Kingdom of God?

Contextualisation is more than literal translation

God's people have been practising 'contextualisation' for millennia, but the term as such only came into usage during the 1970s. Initially used within the Theological Education Fund of the World Council of Churches, with the implicit understanding that context determines the message and is more important than the message, it was redefined by Byang Kato at the first Lausanne Congress in 1974. Kato insisted that Scripture was more authoritative than culture, not the other way around, but that we also needed to express biblical

truth and apply it in ways that communicated accurately and transformatively within different cultures. Since the late 1970s, there have been many books and consultations grappling with how to engage in effective contextualisation while staying absolutely faithful to Scripture.

Today we take it for granted that people need to hear the Scriptures in their own language, and as the church has spread all over the world Bible translation has been a high priority. This is one part of our instinctive and absolutely right belief that contextualisation matters, breaking down unnecessary barriers to response to the Gospel. While there are still many mostly smaller language groups who do not yet have the Bible or sometimes even significant portions in their own tongue, most larger language groups can indeed now hear and/or read God's Word in familiar speech.

Translations vary between the literal, seeking to translate absolutely literally from Hebrew and Greek into the target language, and those that try to capture the meaning behind a text and then put it into terms, idioms, and examples that are familiar in the culture. In both cases there is a dependence not only on linguistic proficiency, but also on accurate understanding of the original text, not just actual words and terms (that's hard enough!) but beyond that the meaning and significance that those words carry (harder still!). The same is true of deep understanding of the language and culture into which the translation is being made. The point is that making sure that what is communicated is what God intended, is actually much more complicated than simply exchanging one word for another.

Fundamental though Bible translation is, contextualisation is much more complex than that alone. Even when we have the text in our hands, how do we explain it and apply it so that what is heard and learned and understood is truly God's message, engaging with that person or community's real life, in that specific context, leading to the deep-level conversion that is God's intention? And when the Spirit brings about the transformation of mind and heart and life that is His lovely intention to accomplish, will the outcome look exactly the same in every place and in every culture?

Cookie-cutter clones or messy diversity?

I am of the opinion that we evangelicals are not often very good at doing diversity with grace and humility. We prefer people to dot our i's and cross our t's, and to conform to our own patterns of worship, organisation and structure, theological formulations, and the rest of it. We are suspicious of diversity, and find it unnerving. We can laugh in a rather superior way at the folly of nineteenth century forebears building neo-gothic church buildings plonked down in China or India or Africa, or shipping pipe organs to some pioneering church-planting situation, or expecting 'native Christians' to adopt western dress and top hats. Even as we laugh, though, we can be as blind to our cultural baggage as those past believers were.



We can laugh – but do we learn? Perhaps we are as easily seduced into wanting to be in control, and impose our ways, as those of bygone years. It is all too easy to assume that the way we read Scripture, and the way we live it out, is beyond question absolutely accurate and the whole story. Perhaps if we grasped more fully that God invites us to share in His mission, rather than expecting Him to join in ours, we would find diversity more a matter of wonder and praise than of threat. After all, this is the God who delighted in creating thousands of different varieties of butterflies and birds and flowers, not just one of each.

Further, we need to recognise that the Scriptures themselves reflect great diversity of cultural contexts out of which different texts were recorded, and interact with many different backgrounds. The internal pattern within Scripture is in fact one of contextualisation. So we have four gospels, each written to different audiences and thus complementary rather than identical. The Lord Jesus relates His teaching and parables to fit the person or group he is addressing: His message to Nicodemus is different, for example, from his message to the woman at the well. The Epistles relate to specific contexts: Peter writes to persecuted, scattered believers; Colossians interacts with local philosophy; Romans is cast in the legal framework of the heart of the Roman Empire; Hebrews addresses the mindset and culture and religious background of Jews as the writer rehearses Old Testament history, and dismantles the former sacrificial system.

However that may be, the fact is that the worldwide church today is truly global in a way that has never been the case in all of human history up till this point. We are a privileged generation to live in such marvellous days. However, the reality is that along with that glorious globalisation of the church has come increasing diversity, even among those united in their love for the Lord and their desire to be shaped by Scripture. This is not just the tension between, say, Pentecostals and Reformed, or Baptist and paedo-baptist, and differences of conviction that have been around for a long time now.

We now need to add into the mix the fact that all our familiar formulations, birthed within the cradle of Christendom, simply do not resonate adequately with many of those in the global south. They will often have different learning styles, and organise and process information, belief and life in ways far different from our own. They may wonder why the historic creeds and confessions say nothing about transformed lives as evidence of true faith, or why so little is said about community, or about justice. If you live in the context of abject poverty, or overwhelming corruption, or dominant other religions, or acute persecution, or rampant disease, these will lead you to see themes in the Scripture that have often been missing in western discourse for generations. For them, keeping evangelism and social action together is obvious: if the Gospel is to have authenticity, then of course it has to be lived out in loving care and striving for social justice and the rest of it, and words alone are hollow. They may have different priorities from ours, and they may express worship and discipleship differently. But we should not jump at once to the conclusion that because much of what they are saying and doing is different from what we are used to, they are being unfaithful to Scripture, or drifting into heresy (they could be, of course. And so could we...).

I am not advocating that we sink into a morass of ethno-theologies, with no recognisable continuity between them - far from it. But I believe we do need to listen carefully to, and be enriched by, the insights our brothers and sisters from other parts of the world church are bringing to us. This may often seem to look messy, and that may make us nervous. At the very least we need to recognise humbly that we have a lot to learn, rather than assuming that others need to look like us.

Home will look different

Many of those reading this will be engaged in discipling cross-culturally, and often seeing these friends return home after a period of studying or working in

another country. For those who come as believers, the culture shock they experience will usually be quite severe as they struggle to adapt to churches here, even as they adjust to the wider culture of Britain. Worship styles, prayer styles, preaching styles, church community life – all these and more will be unfamiliar. So will the particular theological arguments, and the cultural blindspots.

It is easy to see why often such brothers and sisters retreat to an ethnic church or fellowship, where they feel more comfortable. In general terms, that is a pity, as fragmenting along ethnic lines is a denial of the profound reconciliation of the Gospel. A multi-ethnic church is not only wonderfully enriching (and very challenging!), but is also one of the most powerful Gospel signs in our divided world. However, a true multi-cultural, multi-ethnic church is not one where everyone is absorbed into the dominant culture, but one where the whole body is able to bring distinctive contributions and the whole community learn deeply from one another.

For those coming to faith here, or moving towards it, going home may be hugely difficult. Not only will they see their own culture differently, and feel not quite at home any more, they will also find that Christians worship and express their faith in unfamiliar ways from what they have experienced here. That is deeply unsettling, but especially so if they have been taught that 'the way we do it is right'. They will often be like Third Culture Kids¹, who are confused by not seeming to belong easily anywhere except with those of similar experience, challenging their identity and security. It may help if they can be deliberately



encouraged to experience different forms of church life here, so that they understand that not all churches are the same. It may help if they are introduced to Christian writing generated within their home country, if possible within their own language. It will be especially helpful if they can be linked with former returnees who have 'cracked' the problems after their own return. It will also be helpful if before their return they can spend time with someone familiar with their home culture and who can help them think through issues specific to it which generally don't appear on our own radar screens. This balance between addressing the specifics of a person's culture, within which they must live out their new discipleship life, and the biblical reality of belonging to a global family that ultimately transcends all ethnic distinctives, is an important one.

Some will return to particularly difficult circumstances, where it is dangerous to be known as a Christian. This will be especially the case in the face of dominant other religions, deeply hostile to the Christian faith. The 'insider movement' debate at the present time illustrates how evangelicals can struggle to reach agreement when it comes to contextualisation: how far and in what ways can a believer express his new faith in Jesus within the cultural – and even religious – forms of the dominant non-Christian religion? On the one hand, the argument runs that if the Christian rejects all former cultural and religious forms – how you pray, food rules, even attending the place of worship be in mosque or temple, observing rituals relating to birth, death and ancestors, for instance – not only might he be inviting death from the outraged community, but also, if he survives, he will be so much an outcast that he cannot possibly bear a credible witness to anybody else. So there are some communities where, for instance, Muslims remain Muslims, attend the mosque, and so on, but regard Jesus Christ as the Saviour and Messiah, and as the Son of God. On the other

hand, there are those who believe that this so compromises the Christian's faith, that the believer needs to make a sharp break with his past and live quite differently in every way.

Of course, there are many gradations between these two poles. However, it highlights some of the genuine difficulties as we wrestle with contextualisation: when do we accommodate with culture so that the Gospel is genuinely incarnated in that community in terms that can be understood? And when do we stress the distinctiveness of discipleship, and seek to develop ways of expressing belief and practice in a new way that is bound to be deeply counter-cultural? Where we have friends who will return to such a complex situation, we need to help them understand these different views and practices, and to begin to evaluate for themselves how they are going to live out their faith.



Keeping grace and truth together

John's wonderful prologue of his gospel speaks of the Lord coming 'full of grace and truth'. That, too, needs to be our goal. May our discipleship, and our discipling of others, be genuinely incarnational, and thus contextualised, but also deeply shaped by both grace and truth. That will be for God's glory and our good.

DISCUSSION GUIDE:

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1. Give some examples you have encountered where you believe people have misunderstood Scripture. Why do you think that has happened? What guidelines would you try to teach and model to help people get at 'real meanings'?
 2. Which Bible translation do you most commonly use with international students? Why? What are the advantages and pitfalls of using a simplified language version, the NIV or similar, King James version? How do you help your friends become familiar with reading Scripture in their own language?
 3. Gather all the different descriptions of the work of Christ on the cross you can find in the New Testament (e.g. reconciliation, defeating spiritual powers, atonement, etc). Do the same for all the descriptions about becoming a disciple (e.g. new birth, following Christ, a living stone, etc). Which do you most commonly use? Why? How might different terms and pictures create a bridge into different cultures?
 4. Read or listen to (e.g. via internet) Christian teaching by those of church traditions other than your own, or preferably from another nationality. What surprises you? Why? What do you disagree with? Why? What new insights do you gain? How does this demonstrate the issues around contextualisation?

¹Third Culture Kids: a term coined by Dr. Ruth Hill Useem in 1973 to describe "children who accompany their parents into another culture [usually for a parent's career choice.]".



I had preached in a district of Tokyo with a Japanese colleague, the pastor, translating for me. A week later we met again. "As you preached," he said, "you described one member of the congregation after another. Let me tell you what they have done this week because of that sermon." My response was one of amazement and awe that the Lord should have worked in such a way through a preacher largely ignorant of Japanese realities. Our God really is willing to use clay pots!

Those of us who work amongst internationals long for such a divine touch on all our cross-cultural ministry - that our preaching should make sense to foreigners and be seen to be relevant to them in their situation. While good sermon preparation is no guarantee of success, it is nonetheless our responsibility to prepare well while praying that the Spirit would make it catch fire (2 Timothy 2:15).

The meaning of the text

Preaching topically is valid, but there are advantages in expounding passages of Scripture when addressing those of other cultures. The preacher should not be a cultural imperialist, seeking to impose his will on those from another part of the world. Listeners should be able to see it in the Scriptures for themselves, weighing the interpretation which is inevitably somewhat slanted by the preacher's own cultural mindset. Expounding Amos provoked Filipino intellectuals to radically revise their once Marxist worldview. They naturally tended to reject the ideas of westerners: but could not escape the analysis of human problems in the text of God's word through Amos. In exposition, the preacher can hide behind the text: "Don't blame me, it is what the Bible says, isn't it?"

A sermon may be wonderfully in tune with the culture, but disastrously unbiblical. Therefore, careful exegesis is indispensable groundwork. The meaning of the text is what it meant when it was written. That is the same for all people everywhere. Of course it is wrapped in the language and culture of a particular time - and that all needs translating into language and thought-forms that our listeners can grasp. But the fundamental work of exegesis cannot be bypassed. We must do it to the best of our ability, acquiring the tools (like good commentaries) and training needed to do it well.

Preaching, however, is much more than simply saying what the text meant. It needs that prophetic element which relates the timeless word of God to the specific situations of those we are addressing. Prophetic insight should be urgently prayed for and then carefully worked at.

The need to dialogue with culture

Having filled our mind with what the text means, we should seek to stand in the shoes of those in our audience. The text may then sound very different, not in meaning, but in implication. Because those of every culture are both made in the image of God and fallen human beings, there is that which is beautiful and that which is ugly in every culture. And there is that which is just different, neither especially good nor bad.

Identifying with our listeners means asking questions, engaging in dialogue with the text. What is the grid of worldview and experience through which

they read the text? Seek to enter into their mindset. What would they naturally affirm, modify or reject? Paul quoted Athenian poets whose perspective affirmed what he was teaching (Acts 17:28). In contrast, one Egyptian man sought to open himself to Jesus, but it was a modified Jesus who "did not die on the cross". A Hong Kong Chinese once called out in a sermon on Genesis 2:24: "Excuse me, but that is not the Chinese way." It was not the British way either, but it was God's way!

At those points where a culture affirms biblical truth we shall draw attention to the fact, as this will make listeners realise that the message is not totally alien, for biblical truth does fit with the way we are made. Of course this requires a willingness on our part to read their books and learn their values.

When there is cultural pressure to modify what the Bible teaches, we shall expose that gently and politely. People from other religious heritages will often want to modify Christological statements to make them conform to the



doctrines of their dominant religion. And most cultures, including our own, tend to dilute the moral demands of Scripture to make discipleship easier. Most Christians are not aware of their particular kind of syncretism. It is the job of the preacher to highlight the dangers and encourage a real commitment to biblical truth.

Where it is normal in a culture to reject outright a biblical statement, we need to enter into dialogue, as Paul does again and again in the teaching of the epistle to the Romans. That does not mean that we will go to war over every issue. The Lord Jesus was remarkably selective in using a confrontational approach. We also need to recognise which are the important issues for response to any given sermon and which can be left for another day in the long process of disciple-making. Jesus did not deliver a diatribe against Samaritan sexual ethics with the woman at the well. On the other hand, He did confront Samaritan belief about the right place to do business with God. He did not want her to make a trip to Mount Gerizim, instead of responding to the Son of God standing there before her.

It is at points where we desire people to put off old ideas and lifestyles learnt from parents that we need to be careful about how we say it. British secular culture is also alarmingly anti-Christian, and some of our international friends well know that. So, when we are applying the Word to a foreign culture, it is wise to indicate that the same truths are urgently needed here too. If we do not show that we are humbly longing that we, and our culture, will obey the word we are preaching, we shall sound arrogant, even racist.

Speaking the truth, with love

Many of the world's cultures communicate in indirect ways, almost never saying that a way of thinking is wrong or foolish. And many post-modern British people are the same, except when they are talking about the convictions

of evangelical Christians! The Scripture does, however, talk in terms of light and darkness, truth and error, sin and righteousness, and this can raise difficulties for us. How do we tell the truth without making it too hard for people to listen to it?

Paul told the Ephesians that the church would be built up when people spoke "the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15), rather as Jesus Himself was a wonderful combination of "grace and truth" (John 1:14,17). When we worked in the Philippines, a culture of indirect communication, students told us that they liked it when we spoke to them in a direct manner. When we asked them how it was they could cope with such direct challenges, they replied that they knew that we loved them. Now when I preach, I try to identify with the people and hope that in different ways they will feel loved. Then, when I have to say something that I know they will find hard to accept, I pray: "Lord, let them feel loved." What we preach cannot be separated from who we are and how we say it. All interactive preaching needs to be done with deep pastoral sensitivity.

It is never easy to be counter-cultural, and in some parts of the world it is extremely costly. We need to think through the costs and challenges of obedience to God's Word. What we teach can destroy family harmony, lose people their jobs and even put their lives at risk. At a preaching workshop in Korea, a group of pastors told me there were parts of the Bible that they could not teach because they raised too many problems for Christians in their culture. Their pastoral concern was excellent, but I believe their decision was mistaken. However, through them, I came to appreciate that we cannot preach without also facing up to the problems our teaching raises and seeking to help people carry the load. Biblical truth is not meant to be lived as an individual struggle but in community where Christians help one another through tough challenges and call down the power of God in prayer.

The application of Scripture varies from culture to culture and depends also upon the life situation of people. Meat offered to idols is rarely encountered in Britain but the principle of where and when Christians should compromise is a hot issue. However, some of my Malaysian friends are served meat offered to idols in their family homes and are sometimes asked to attend demonic festivals in honour of different gods. So it is not enough for the preacher to simply ask: "What does this mean for me and my life?" The implications vary from culture to culture, not because the Word can mean anything you want it to, but because different cultures have different blind spots and different ways of challenging or rejecting biblical principles. The more we dialogue with internationals, listening to their questions and problems, the more we shall be able to see this.

10 Aids to understanding

In the Scottish Presbyterian tradition, some speak against preachers applying Scripture, believing that to be exclusively the task of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the individual believer. Certainly, the preacher should beware of acting as though he is the one with all the answers. But the epistles give us powerful examples of what it means to apply the teaching of Jesus to the lives of churches struggling in a variety of different cultures. And the four gospels show how an evangelist can select appropriate stories and teaching of Jesus to help those of different cultures reach a point of commitment. Jesus regularly told stories, selecting different aspects of Jewish life in 1st century Palestine as vehicles for teaching God's truth. The apostles borrowed words from the cultures in which they were communicating to help people understand, words like logos, adoption and mystery. They were not Jewish terms, but imports that gave light, especially to Gentiles of that area.

We too should look for stories from those parts of the world whose people we are trying to reach. Sometimes a counselling situation will give huge insights which may later be shared, provided you are not breaking confidences or causing someone to lose face. Trips to other countries can give you lots of material, and if you cannot manage that, there are always books, the writings of target cultures, and television documentaries.

And there are word pictures that help understanding. For Filipino farmers it is helpful to see falling into sin as being like sliding off a muddy path into a rice field, leaving you filthy, but keen to get out and get clean. It is a water buffalo who prefers to wallow in the mud! But such an example is unlikely to work well with a Filipino professional from a city, studying for a PhD - it is simply not his world. Similarly, to compare Old Testament sacrifices with buying what you need with credit cards, with the price still to be paid (on the cross), might work with debt-ridden British students, but would not work in a cash culture.

There are also some very simple principles of contextualisation, like using the language of the people. Most student ministry in Britain may be conducted in English, but it needs to be the English of international students. Use basic English and shorter sentences. Beginning by reading a passage of Scripture not only sets God's truth before everyone, it also gives opportunity to adjust to the speaker's accent. A PowerPoint presentation of main points helps international listeners to keep up with understanding.

Careful preparation is crucial, but it is not enough. God must work - or it is all just talk. In the grace of God, even a man like Jonah can be used so that foreigners believe God (Jonah 3:3-5). So there is hope for us preachers too!



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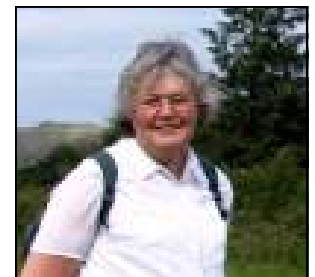
1. Take a passage of Scripture and imagine how three of your international friends might read it. What emphases and implications might they see that are different from yours? What would they naturally affirm, modify or reject?
2. What practical steps could you take now to better understand the culture(s) of your target people(s)?
3. In what ways is your local church syncretistic? What are the different temptations to syncretism for Christians in other cultures?
4. What were the key ingredients when your Bible teaching "worked" for internationals?





Richard Weston is the former National Director of Friends International. Along with his wife Catherine, he continues a ministry among international students both in Oxford, where they are based, and internationally as he seeks to develop international student ministry across the globe.

Rose Dowsett along with her husband Dick, was an OMF missionary in the Philippines for eight years among students, also planting two churches, establishing staff training for IFES staff from all Asia, and an evening class Bible School. Based in Scotland, she is a conference speaker, Bible teacher, and serves as a missiological adviser to EA-UK and Lausanne, as Vice-Chairman of the World Evangelical Fellowship's Mission Commission.



Dick Dowsett is an experienced teacher and evangelist. Apart from living in the Philippines, working for OMF, he has travelled across the globe and has taught students from other cultures for many years. This year he was the plenary speaker at the international student track of New Word Alive.

the Insight team

Sue Burt
Head of Returnee Ministry
Friends International

Patty McCulloch
Head of Training
Friends International

Lynette Teagle
Friends International Oxford

Lizi Ross
Communications Coordinator
Friends International

Peter Teagle
Friends International Oxford



is produced by Friends International

Please email insight@friendsinternational.org.uk for comments, queries and submission details or to request to be added to the regular Insight mailing list.



The Rowan Centre
All Nations Christian College
Easney
Ware, Herts
SG12 8LX

T: 01920 460006
E: info@friendsinternational.org.uk
W: www.friendsinternational.org.uk

