

Contextualization/Syncretism

Adapted from a book edited by Gailyn Van Rheenen, entitled
Contextualization and Syncretism: Navigating Cultural Currents

- ◇ Contextualization can vary depending upon the emphasis that is placed on the Scriptures as well as the cultural setting. Those definitions of contextualization that place a greater emphasis on Scripture usually use the words, practices, and modes of the culture to make the message of the text more applicable and impacting. On the other hand, when the cultural setting is the guide, we allow the context of our surroundings to dictate the meaning of Scripture. The question, then, should be asked – where does your priority lie?
- ◇ We, as Christians, must continue to affirm that God’s eternal Word, plan of redemption and gospel message transcends culture, language, and social/economic class, and is meant to be preached in any and every context.
- ◇ The second definition of contextualization, listed above, should really be seen in our eyes, for those of us who uphold the authority of Scripture, as syncretism. The meaning of Scripture remains the same, no matter what country or culture you may find yourself. The implications of that text, though, may and probably will vary from people to people.
- ◇ Enoch Wan has defined contextualization as “the efforts of formulating, presenting, and practicing the Christian faith in such a way that it is relevant to the cultural context of the target group in terms of conceptualization, expression and application; yet maintaining theological coherence, biblical integrity and theoretical consistency.”
- ◇ David Hesselgrave has defined contextualization as “the attempt to communicate the message of the person, works, Word, and will of God in a way that is faithful to God’s revelation, especially as put forth in the teaching of Holy Scripture, and that is meaningful to respondents in their respective cultural and existential contexts.” This definition touches on both the authority of Scripture and the effectiveness of its application.
- ◇ Syncretism can be defined as taking the structures, beliefs, and practices of Christianity and accommodating them so that they fit the host culture, or blending the tenets of Christianity with the dominant cultures, so that Christianity loses its distinctiveness.
- ◇ The Bible and the meaning of the message must guide our context and fight off syncretism.