BIBLICALLY FAITHFUL *AND* CULTURALLY MEANINGFUL CONTEXTUALIZATION?
MOVING BEYOND THE ETHNOHERMENEUTICS DEBATE

by Jackson Wu
Theologian-in-Residence
Mission ONE, Phoenix, AZ

I. Introduction

In Scripture, God speaks. Contextualization therefore begins with listening, well before we venture to speak or do anything. However, our efforts to contextualize flounder for a similar reason that other attempts at communication fail. We make assumptions. And when we assume, we don't listen. What then are the implications for contextualization?

To answer this question, this paper first considers briefly a few challenges that hinder the work of contextualization.[1] Next, I explain why contextualization necessarily begins with interpretation and is not simply a task involving how to communicate or apply biblical ideas. In so doing, we can build on and so move beyond past debates about ethno-hermeneutics. Finally, I will suggest a constructive model for relating biblical and contemporary cultures. This model equips us to utilize the inherent limitations of our worldview lenses for the sake of biblically faithful and culturally meaningful contextualization. The paper concludes by addressing a few concerns that people might have when hearing the ideas mentioned above.

II. Challenges

The same fundamental question confronts any evangelical who wishes to do contextualization. What is the relationship between the Bible and culture? Everyone would agree that both are critical. Still, affirming their importance doesn't tell us what to do when it comes time to contextualize the gospel. Evangelicals affirm the authority of Scripture over culture. Yet what does this practically mean for engaging culture?

Under the name "ethno-hermeneutics," some scholars have proposed various ways to address the tension between the Bible and culture. A few such scholars include Larry Caldwell, Enoch Wan, among others. Caldwell has written the most on the subject and his views probably cause more concern among evangelicals than other writers on the topic. He says, "Ethnohermeneutics is simply Bible interpretation done in multi-generational, multi-cultural and cross-cultural contexts that, as far as possible, uses dynamic hermeneutical methods which already resides in the culture" (Caldwell 2012, 119). Because God works through cultures, especially "the cognitive environments inherent in each culture," Caldwell suggests that missionaries should use indigenous hermeneutical methods (Brooks 2012, 116).

[1] This paper draws liberally from Wu 2013 and Wu 2015 while interacting with other material, especially that concerning ethnohermeneutics.

This paper will not offer a detailed critique of Caldwell's views; others have sufficiently highlighted the weaknesses of Caldwell's model. For example, Will Brooks argues that Caldwell "blurs the distinction between meaning and significance" (Brooks 2012, 116). Caldwell's proposal veers towards reader-response and eisegesis rather than exegesis. Therefore, Brooks counters that evangelicals should adopt a grammatical-historical approach to interpreting the Bible (Brooks 2019). While Brooks' basic proposition is correct, he does not resolve the underlying tension between the Bible, culture, and contextualization.

Most often, evangelicals attempt to draw timeless principles or universal truths from Scripture and then apply them within culture. This seemingly benign effort masks at least two problems.

First, when it comes to contextualization, evangelicals routinely argue for the priority of Scripture over culture. While this seem sufficiently self-evident, this claim might hinge on an order fallacy. To ask whether the Bible or culture has "priority" is unclear. The word "priority" can refer either to temporal sequence (i.e., what comes first) or to authoritative rank (i.e., what has authority). According to the fallacy, it is supposed that whatever comes first temporally has greater authority. However, sequence is not always supreme.

For example, in the apologetic debates, one easily sees how reason *initially* has epistemological authority (over revelation) in its defense of *sola scriptura*. In missiology and theology, a similar relationship exists between general revelation and special revelation. General revelation grounds and makes possible special revelation. It primes or readies the mind for what is to come. General revelation builds a framework upon which special revelation fits and flourishes. General revelation is like scaffolding; special revelation is like bricks. That which is temporally prior simply prepares the way for what has primary authority. In evangelical theology, special revelation has ultimate authority. General revelation is a broad pointer. Its relative authority is in its function to direct attention to special revelation. Accordingly, there is no reason to conclude that one *must start* with the Bible in the contextualization process. *It is possible to begin with culture without compromising the authority of the Bible* (Clark 1998).

There is a second problem with saying that contextualization a process that *follows* biblical interpretation in which we merely apply and communicate biblical truth. In short, people assume the gospel. This claim is counter-intuitive and provocative and so needs further explanation.

For example, we "can assume the gospel" when we assume that Western theology is the primary or fundamental way to teach doctrine. We then press non-Western people to conform their basic categories of thinking to those found in the traditional Western culture. Likewise, when we assume the gospel, we prioritize certain cultural expressions of the gospel message as though they were equally prioritized by the biblical writers. Western culture and evangelical subcultures create a fixed framework for understanding the gospel. Missionaries sometimes assume that what they learned in their home culture has equal

meaning within the cultures they serve. Consequently, "assuming the gospel" is a form of "begging the question," a logical fallacy in which one assumes a certain conclusion within one's premises.

Even if Western theology is true and good, it remains a contextualization. Western theology is still contextualized theology. By assuming the primacy of Western theological categories, we undermine biblically faithful and culturally meaningful contextualization. If we don't take these ideas seriously, we are left only with the possibility of contextualizing a contextualization; that is, trying to contextualize Western theology. In this case, we will share biblical truth but in a way that lacks meaning for non-Western cultures.

III. Contextualization: A Firm and Flexible Approach

Contextualization should reflect the dynamic relationship between the Bible and culture. Our method of contextualization should be both firm and flexible. The gospel does not change. At the same time, biblical writers clearly present the gospel in contrasting ways. Even within the Bible, there is no single prescribed way of preaching the gospel. So, where do we go from here?

We start with a basic point that evangelicals increasingly acknowledge as true but remain perplexed when it comes to applying it. David Clark says is succinctly, "All interpretation begins with the assumptions, values, beliefs, and experiences that a reader brings to the text" (Clark 2003, 107). He adds, "The idea that one can achieve an acultural theology [is a] 'fundamentalist fallacy'" (Clark 2003, 50).

What does this mean for contextualization? In short, we must recognize that contextualization essentially begins when we interpret the Bible. The contextualization process has already started even before we try to communicate or apply the gospel. We all live within particular social contexts. We interpret Scripture in one context rather than another (Neumann 1998). All interpretations use contextual vantage points. No one perspective can be absolutized so as to void other interpretations that use different worldview lenses. One's methodology should assist him to see the world *as the Scripture interprets the world*. When a Christian reads the Bible in other people's cultural language (i.e., their categories of thought), he gains a new capacity to hear the meaning of Scripture. Contextualization then is both inevitable and essential. Therefore, Christians need to intentionally consider the influence of culture on their theology.

This conception of contextualization reflects the basic instinct that spurred ethnohermeneutics. However, it seeks to avoid the traps of some older versions of ethnohermeneutics. As I define it, "contextualization" is the process wherein people interpret, communicate, and apply the Bible within a particular cultural context (Wu 2015, 12). Contextualization begins whenever we read the Bible from the perspective of a given context. Contextualization is not primarily something we *do to* the gospel. Broadly stated, it is the mind's perception of and response to the gospel. In actual fact, contextualization further subdivides into two types. The first is *exegetical* contextualization; the second is *cultural* contextualization.

Exegetical contextualization refers to one's interpretation of Scripture from a cultural perspective. It means locating the cultural context within the biblical text. Accordingly, someone with an East Asian worldview will more naturally see a number of concepts within the Bible that reflect the distinctives of his or her culture (e.g., honor, shame, and collective identity). This contextualization means seeing what is true of our cultural context within the Bible itself. This is not eisegesis, whereby one forces foreign ideas into Scripture. In exegetical contextualization, one sees what actually is in the text already. In short, we interpret Scripture using a cultural lens, regardless of whether one knows it or not (Ruth 2010).

Cultural contextualization refers to the interpretation of culture using a scriptural perspective. It nestles the biblical text within a contemporary cultural context. Hence, one looks at a culture and identifies various concepts that already exist in the Bible. When examining a culture like China, the contextualizer might notice how well the Chinese understand the family motif.

(I develop this process more fully in *One Gospel for All Nations* and demonstrate its potential fruits in *Saving God's Face* and *Reading Romans with Eastern Eyes*.)

An advantage of this perspective of contextualization is that it enables us to preserve a historical-grammatical approach to biblical interpretation. At the same time, it takes seriously the influence of our cultural lens and the potential contribution of non-Western contexts. Furthermore, it corrects our tendency to conflate our theology with the Bible's meaning. While we hope our theology reflects the meaning of the biblical authors, humility demands we acknowledge our limitations and blind spots.

IV. Culture

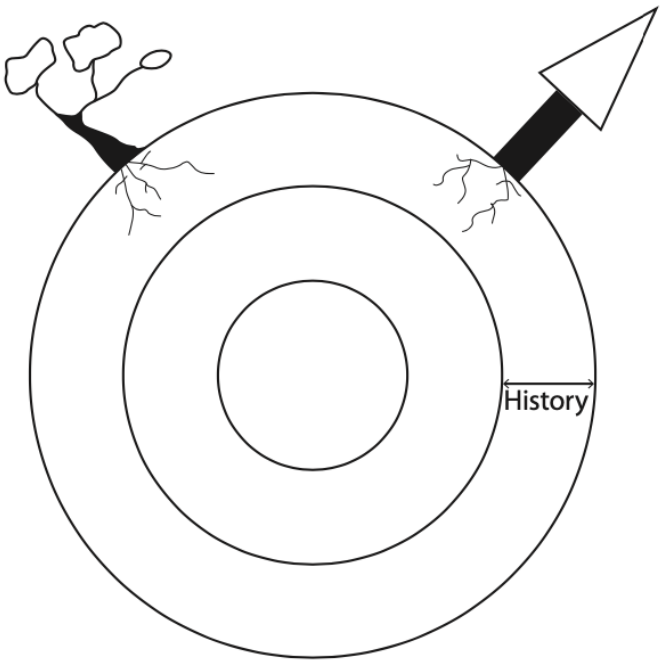
We are not omniscient. Our own cultural lens limits what we see. It directs our attention to certain things and away from other things. This is why we don't need to exchange a Western lens for some other lens, whether Indian, Chinese, etc. Rather, we want to broaden or thicken our lens to include cultural perspectives from around the world. The conjoining of these cultural lenses enables us to ask better questions, challenge cultural assumptions, and simply be more observant of both the text and the world. As one writer rightly explains "A cross-cultural reading is more objective than a monocultural reading of the biblical text" (Yeo 1998, 5).

If our culture limits our ability to understand biblical texts, then our capacity to grasp the culture of the ancient biblical authors is even more limited. After all, we are separated by over 2000-plus years. All biblical interpreters face this challenge. It is not sufficient to simply say that the Holy Spirit leads us to traverse this time and culture gap. After all, millions of Christians have disagreed about countless points of doctrine and method, yet we are not willing to say the Holy Spirit these contradictory views are all inspired by the Holy Spirit. We mustn't use the Holy Spirit to justify our individualistic, mono-cultural readings that do not take seriously the way culture shapes the Bible and influences us as readers.

So, how do we begin to address these two obstacles (i.e., the limits of a mono-cultural perspective and our limited access to ancient biblical worldviews)? The following model proposes a way to use contemporary cultures as a way of better approximating the perspective of ancient biblical writers. In other words, we can use contemporary cultures *as a means* of interpreting the ancient biblical text.

Although no contemporary culture is identical to the ancient cultures depicted in the Bible, there are certainly differing degrees of overlap (Wu 2015, 185-90). In some respect, East Asian cultures today resemble the Ancient Near East better than would those of Chicago and a Los Angeles suburb. In other instances, one may hear the echoes of Scripture most clearly when reading from a traditional African perspective. Those same themes may be less pronounced to someone in London or Paris. Inasmuch as similarities exist between modern and ancient cultures, contemporary readers from different parts of the world will have certain advantages and disadvantages when interpreting the Bible. Of course, these advantages are not absolute. They are relative to the topic and theme. Human cultures complement one another.

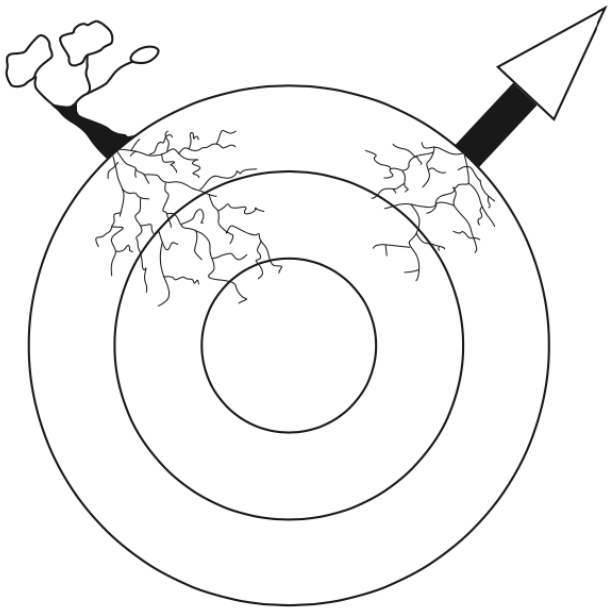
The following diagram illustrates a step of interpretation whereby one can better grasp the biblical context by reaching across the world's contemporary cultures. The world's cultural history can be mapped as a globe. We want to think in two directions. The earth's surface represents modern-day societies. The earliest human communities are located at the earth's core. Moving from the center through the earth's crust, we see the evolution and interweaving of human cultures. There are no neatly defined lines to demarcate one culture from another across successive periods. Yet one can still speak in broad categories, trends, and characteristics. There is both continuity and discontinuity.



More recent civilizations (nearer to the earth's crust in the diagram) are born from the cultures that came before them. Otherwise said, contemporary cultures are amalgamations. They fuse together cultures from history in ways that are incomprehensible. Vast differences aside, the younger societies have many aspects in common with the world's ancient civilizations. Therefore, China can be described as an "honor" culture, rather than a law-guilt based culture, even though law-related concepts (e.g., judges, order, politics, etc.) exist in China.

In some respect, the world's earliest cultures typify what is most basic to *human culture*. The generations that follow are simply creative adaptations and expressions of essential humanness. We could make the point from a more theological perspective. Every culture distinctly manifests the same image of God, according to which humanity is created.

Contemporary cultures are represented as trees. They are living, varied, and rooted in the ground of history. Naturally, some trees have shallow roots; others go much deeper. They all spring from the earth below, from which they get nutrients. In the picture presented here, the roots represent the ways in which modern cultures emerge from previous civilizations. The process is natural but complex, mysterious but reasonably comprehended at the risk of abstraction.



People can understand a culture's influences if they are willing to dig into its past. People are accustomed to researching recent historical events and figures. It is not so difficult to understand the influence of the civil rights movement on twenty-first-century America. It is more challenging to see how sixth-century Egyptian society precisely weaved its way through medieval Europe to eventually shape present-day American culture. Although it is difficult to make conclusive judgments about the ancient world, scholars can unearth a range of useful insights with collaboration and effort. Of course, historical and cultural research takes place around the world. As people trace their roots back in time, they find increased interaction among the mother civilizations to the modern world. For example, the Silk Road famously spanned Asia. As a result, countless cultural exchanges no doubt spawned new communities and ways of thinking that continue to influence us today.

Simply put, present-day cultures, at one level or another, share common ancient histories. Inasmuch as the world's people share common backgrounds, various themes will reappear again and again in cultures both across time and geography. For example, ancient cultures are often depicted as being collectivistic and honor-shame oriented. Such descriptions do not deny that ancient cultures also have individualistic or law-oriented features. Not surprisingly, wherever one looks in history or around the world, humans still continue to be concerned with things like group identity, reputation, and related matters. Learning about contemporary cultures equips us to better interpret Scripture; however, this does not mean that culture provides authoritative "revelation."

This paper brings the world and revelation together in a manner similar to Albert Wolters' proposal. He writes,

> Because [Christians] believe that creational structure underlies all of reality, they seek and find evidence of lawful constancy in the flux of experience, and of invariant principles amidst a variety of historical events and institutions. . . . In every situation, they explicitly look for and recognize the presence of creational structure, distinguishing this sharply from the human abuse to which it is subject. (Wolters 2005, 88)

Of course, there are no guarantees that people with a multicultural perspective will actually be better theologians; after all, "the everyday components of our lives—our family, our sexuality, our thinking, our emotions, our work—are the structural things that are *involved* and *at stake* in the pull of sin and grace" (Wolters 2005, 87).

The point is simply this: all things being equal, a multicultural approach is advantageous for seeing things in the text that are actually there in the Bible. Much will be missed with only a monocultural view. Therefore, when it comes to interpreting the Bible, there should be a less clear distinction between missiology and theology. Missionaries and missiologists should be among the world's finest theologians. Likewise, theologians would be helped not only by reading books about the Ancient Near East but also by visiting or living in the modern-day Middle East and Far East.

In the model presented here, moving horizontally across cultures gives people varying degrees of access to see past civilizations and worldviews. Thus, Americans who travel to China can quickly realize the importance of collective identity, "face," and hierarchy to the Chinese people. Such priorities echo those of ancient biblical cultures. As one better understands these values and the internal logic of this kind of worldview, Christians will "have eyes to see" key themes and motifs within passages that previously seemed so familiar. Suddenly their new awareness and appreciation for the way people think around the world become key tools to digging deeper into the biblical authors' original meaning.

V. Concerns

There are certainly objections that could be raised. They serve as needed warnings. First, we should not equate any modern culture with an ancient biblical culture. Chinese culture differs from those of Abraham, David, Jesus, or Paul. The point being made is that these cultures have *overlapping themes of emphasis* or "creation structures" (to use Wolters' phrase). Even if particular details differ between them, readers are at least made aware that these values and categories of thought should be considered.

A second concern is eisegesis, whereby the reader's own assumptions (not shared by the original author) force an interpretation into the text. Frankly stated, this is a danger for every interpreter, *even more so* for the person who only uses a monocultural perspective. In fact, one can counter that a multicultural perspective actually helps to minimize eisegesis, because he or she is more aware of a broader range of issues that have concerned humans throughout history.

Finally, a third concern is that of relativism. Does this model collapse into relativistic interpretations and water down the absolute authority of God's revelation? No, not at all.

Interpreters should always seek the meaning of the text as intended by the biblical writers in their contexts. All *biblical* interpretations are bound by this common locus.

Reconsider the proverbial analogy of the blind men who all touch different parts of the elephant. Lesslie Newbigin rightly points out that the word picture is self-defeating because the narrator, rather than proving relativism, actually presumes an absolute perspective and a common object of study (Newbigin 1989, 9-10). There are only so many parts of the elephant that can be touched. If the blind men talked with each other, they would in fact get a very sound understanding of what they were all touching. Everyone has his or her own blind spots. Yet collaboration opens one's eyes to see far more than would ever be possible alone.

I will briefly highlight a few implications.

First, this model presented in this paper makes a case for prioritizing the work of long-term missionaries. Short-term work does not afford the kind of reflection and internalization needed to grasp the way locals see the world. In fact, brief exposures to another culture can easily reinforce pride in one's own culture. This can fuel prejudice and narrow-mindedness. An overemphasis on short-term missions must not become a detriment of long-term funding, training, and placement. It is the long-term worker who will typically have deeper relationships with locals. Thus, they have the greater opportunity to develop contextualized theologies.

Second, it is imperative that we encourage and develop global theologies, not being content with only Western (i.e., *traditional*) theological formulations. Doing this requires tremendous humility, cooperation, intentional training, and a shift in priorities.

Third, any particular cultural perspective by itself is insufficient to holistically interpret Scripture. This point should not be controversial as it does not claim that one is entirely unable to understand truth. Humility demands that we merely recognize our limits given our situational vantage point.

Fourth, it follows that we should purposefully use other cultural perspectives to interpret Scripture. At the very least, this step involves being in dialogue with people from other cultural contexts.

Fifth, the model illustrates the importance of the doctrine of humanity and of general revelation. After all, in every culture, one would expect its people through philosophy, tradition, and art, for example, to discern some glimpse about the about the nature God and of humanity's vocation. To be sure, culture itself should not be confused with general revelation itself, though it can be a conduit through which we see God working through humanity in the world.

Sixth, second-culture people (including second-generation children) could potentially be key people to assist the contextualization process. Throughout their lives, such people have learned to relate and interpret multiple contexts at once.

Seventh, we humans are more alike than we think. This observation ought to both humble and comfort us. It should also make us more open to the insights of others around the world. With this understanding, people with differing ideologies and traditions are urged to reflect on the ways they can learn from others.

VI. Conclusion

It is not enough to say that Bible and culture are both important. Our understanding of contextualization must recognize the complex dynamics at play, beginning with interpreting the message of the biblical writers. God has spoken through ancient cultures to people who live in countless, diverse cultures spanning centuries and continents. While some advocates of ethnohermeneutics seek to inject humility into our process of biblical interpretation, they mistakenly cast aside historical-grammatical approach as though it were mere "Western" method. A historical-grammatical method of interpretation helps us to respect the cultural context of the biblical authors.

This paper has offered a way to overcome various obstacles to contextualization, which begins with interpretation. By discerning the relationship between the Bible and culture, we gain insight for doing contextualization in a way that is both biblically faithful and culturally meaningful.

Bibliography

Brooks, Will. "Critiquing Ethnohermeneutical Theories: A Call for an Author-Oriented Approach to Cross-Cultural Biblical Interpretation." PhD Dissertation; SBTS, Louisville, KY, 2012.

––––––––. "Grammatical-Historical Exegesis and World Mission." Pages 239-267 in *World Mission: Theology, Strategy, and Current Issues*. Edited by Scott Callaham and Will Brooks. Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2019.

Caldwell, Larry. "Third Horizon Ethnohermeneutics: Re-Evaluating New Testament Hermeneutical Methods for Intercultural Bible Interpreters Today." *Asian Journal of Theology* 1 (1987): 314-33.

––––––––. "Towards the New Discipline of Ethnohermeneutics: Questioning the Relevancy of Western Hermeneutical Methods in the Asian Context," *Journal of Asian Mission* 1 (1999): 21-43.

––––––––. "Towards an Ethnohermeneutical Model for a Lowland Filipino Context." *Journal of Asian Mission* 7 (2005): 169-93.

––––––––. "Part II: Reconsidering Our Biblical Roots: Bible Interpretation, the Apostle Paul and Mission Today." *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 29, no. 3 (Fall 2012).

Clark, David. *To Know and Love God: Method for Theology.* Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003.

Clark, Gordon H. "Classical Apologetics." *The Trinity Review* 45 (Oct 1998): 1–5.

Neumann, Mikel. "Contextualization: Application or Interpretation." Presented at the 50th National Conference of the Evangelical Theological Society, Orlando, FL, Nov 19–21, 1998.

Newbigin, Lesslie. *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society.* Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989.

Ruth, Julian. "Ground Level Contextualization." Pages 57–89 in Cook, Matthew, Haskell, Rob, Julian, Ruth, Tanchanpongs, Natee, eds. *Local Theology for the Global Church: Principles for an Evangelical Approach to Contextualization*. Pasadena, CA: WCL, 2010.

Wan, Enoch. "Ethnohermeneutics: Its Necessity and Difficulty for All Christians of All Times." Paper delivered at the 1995 ETS Annual Conference.

Wolters, Al. *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005.

Wu, Jackson. *One Gospel for All Nations: A Practical Approach to Biblical Contextualization* Pasadena, CA: WCL, 2015.

Wu, Jackson. *Saving God's Face: A Chinese Contextualization of Salvation through Honor and Shame*. Pasadena, CA: WCIUP, 2013.

Yeo, K. K. *What Has Jerusalem to Do with Beijing: Biblical Interpretation from a Chinese Perspective*. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 1998.