

Dear Pastors/Leaders:

These past few months I've been in the process of writing a series of articles on the subject of church health/revitalization. We started out with *How does a church know if it needs revitalized?* I touched on eleven indicators of a church in need of an infusion of health/revitalization. In my second article I addressed the *Essential Qualities of a Revitalization Pastor*. I identified 10 qualities that need to be present in all pastors, but especially in those that want to be used of God to revitalize a church. In the last article, I addressed the fact that *Church Decline is a Spiritual Issue*. With this fourth article, I want to speak to one of the significant reasons why our SBC churches in NWI have faced decline – a lack of biblical contextualization. Therefore, this article will address *Contextualization without Compromise*.

One of my first observations upon coming to NWI is that many of our churches are not very well positioned (or contextualized) to reach the indigenous people of our region. Many of our churches are contextualized for the south - but not only for the south - but the south 20 to 30 years ago. This affects everything from how we do worship, ministry, preaching, and evangelism to the appearance and atmosphere of our buildings. A lack of contextualizing the gospel to 21st century NWI has led to decline of many of our churches. So solid biblical contextualization is a church health/revitalization issue...and a significant one for our unique circumstance.

Before we get to some principles, it's important that we understand what is meant by the term *contextualization*. Contextualization as it relates to the church involves an "attempt to present the Gospel in a culturally relevant way"(Ed Stetzer). It really is the principle behind Paul's exhortation in 1 Corinthians 9:22 to "become all things to all men." Contextualization is the work of attempting to translate the unchanging truth of God's word and the gospel into language and forms understood by our culture. Tim Keller expresses it well when he writes,

"Sound contextualization means translating and adapting the communication and ministry of the gospel to a particular culture without compromising the essence and particulars of the gospel itself."

You might be thinking this is a way too academic and impractical – that all we need to do is preach God's word and not worry about understanding the culture in which we're attempting to relay the message of the gospel. However, that is not only misguided, but it also violates what we observe in Scripture where men like Paul contextualized his message based upon the audience he was addressing. A lack of biblical contextualization has had a devastating affect upon our churches.

So in the remainder of this article, I'd like to give you some principles that hopefully will give greater clarity to this subject.

First, *everyone contextualizes to some degree*. Bible translators have been doing this for centuries. They take the unchanging truth of the Gospel and put it into language that fits

the context they are trying to reach. Therefore, on Sunday morning we don't deliver God's word in Hebrew and Greek (the original language), but in the language of the culture that we're attempting to impact. However the question is, are we rightly contextualizing the gospel to our culture? We will contextualize, but many are contextualizing to a culture that no longer exists or only exists with a narrow swath of people stuck in the past. We must make sure we're not unconsciously contextualizing to a niche subculture.

Second, *undercontextualization or minimal contextualization leads to inward focused and declining churches*. When we fail to contextualize the gospel properly (undercontextualize) then we'll reach only certain kinds of people and not advance the gospel into the community. That's why a lot of growth of NWIBA churches has been lateral, i.e., Baptists moving from one SBC church to another. In general, we've not been able to break away from reaching this small and declining niche of people in NWI, i.e., people of southern roots with Baptist heritage.

Third, *contextualization is not necessarily compromise*. Sometimes conservative Christians automatically equate contextualization to compromise. They feel that any change in how they preach, worship, evangelize, or minister is akin to compromising the gospel. Obviously, some do overcontextualize and surrender the authority of the Scriptures to the culture. However, overcontextualization has not been our problem in NWI. Our failure to properly relate the gospel to our communities has sometimes come from a misguided view that contextualization is compromising with the negative aspects of culture.

Fourth, *stubbornly refusing to properly contextualize the gospel to your unique culture is an idolatry issue*. When a pastor or church is not open to biblical contextualization they are in fact elevating a certain cultural approach of "doing church" that they have hallowed as the "right" way. In doing this they are doing what Jesus warned against in Mark 7:8 where they were raising the "traditions of men above the commandment of God." What some are doing in their unwillingness to do the hard work of connecting the unchanging gospel to "today's" culture is that they are committing "cultural preference idolatry", i.e., they elevated their traditions to the level of biblical truth.

Fifth, *solid biblical contextualization requires that we immerse ourselves in the culture* without allowing the culture to immerse itself in us. We are "not of this world" but we are certainly "in the world" and Jesus makes clear that we are not to be taken out of the world (John 15:19; 17:14-16). Again Keller comments:

So the first task of contextualization is to immerse yourself in the questions, hopes, and beliefs of the culture so you can give a biblical, gospel-centered response to its questions.
- Tim Keller

Therefore, we are to do good "exegesis" of culture...we are to love and seek to understand the people that live in our unique contexts. We don't demand that they cross

the contextual divide to come to us, but in this post-Christian 21st century we take on the mentality of a cross-cultural missionary – we build bridges into their cultural context.

Sixth, *contextualization of the gospel in this post-Christian era requires we are careful about fighting the “culture wars”*. In the late 20th century it was prevalent to have our favorite preachers blasting away at the evils of culture from the pulpit. In most cases we enthusiastically applauded them for their willingness “to tell it like it is”. I’m not saying that was necessarily wrong, but our days are different. We no longer live in the days of the “moral majority”, but true Christ followers are more the “marginalized minority.” If we approach the world as a fervent bombastic culture warrior, then we are unlikely to gain a hearing to those we seek to reach. Our message is not only for the social conservative, but it is for those who adamantly disagree with many of us socially and politically.

Seventh, *improper contextualization leads to inflexible expressions of the gospel*. In some of our Baptist churches, we can be as inflexible concerning our genres of music, evangelistic methods, or church structure, as we are the gospel itself. Although we would not normally say it, we can treat expressions of the gospel (music styles, ministry methods, worship times, etc.) as nonnegotiable to change as the Scripture. In this way we obscure the gospel because we hold to methodologies and structures, which can no longer effectively deliver the message.

Eighth, lastly, *improper contextualization tells our community that our message is irrelevant to their lives*. Like it or not, people will make a judgment about our message based upon the forms, methods, musical genres, building appearance, and ministry designs that our churches employ. If they are outdated and completely out of step to the people, then they will conclude that our message is not relevant to their lives. I’ve seen this with the physical appearance of some of our churches. When a visitor walks into a church structure that is dated and stale in appearance, then either consciously or subconsciously, they make the connection that this church has nothing to say that is relevant.

In the end sound contextualization is an act of love. If our listeners are going to be offended, let their offense come from the gospel - not from our cultural insensitivity. Jesus offended many (most of them religious folks) with His message of repentance and faith. However, He built relationships with people far from Him. He didn’t expect them to come to Him, He went to them (contextualization). He entered into their world to identify with their struggles, their likes and dislikes, their sorrows and hopes – He entered into their world to show how the gospel could transform their lives.

That is our task as Southern Baptist churches in Northwest Indiana. Sound contextualization is nothing less than obedience to the Great Commission...it is adherence to the second great commandment to *love our neighbor as ourselves*. To refuse to do the hard work of proper contextualization is to choose not to love the lost...it is an expression of selfishness. Let us instead choose to love deeply by presenting an uncompromised gospel in culturally relevant ways!

In His Service,

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