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# Contextualization in the Bible: A Theological-Hermeneutical Analysis of the Principles and Practice of Contextualization in the Old and New Testaments

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**ABSTRACT**

Christian contextualization is a systematic effort to communicate the message concerning the person, work, word, and will of God in a way that remains faithful to divine revelation as disclosed in Scripture, while also being meaningful to audiences within their cultural contexts. This study examines the theological foundations of contextualization in the Old and New Testaments through a hermeneutical-exegetical approach. The article analyzes how God's self-revelation in creation, the cultural mandate, and the covenant of blessing form the paradigm of contextualization in the Old Testament. Furthermore, the incarnation of Jesus Christ is explored as the climax of divine contextualization, serving as the model for contemporary Christian mission. Case studies from the ministry of Jesus and the Apostle Paul provide practical illustrations of how the principles of contextualization can be implemented in ways that preserve the integrity of the Gospel while responding to contextual needs. The findings indicate that authentic contextualization is theocentric, transformative, and grounded in the authority of Scripture as its ultimate standard. This article contributes to the discourse of missional theology by providing a theological-biblical framework for responsible contextualization practice.

**Keywords**: contextualization; incarnation; Old Testament; New Testament; missional theology; hermeneutics

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## INTRODUCTION

Contextualization is one of the central themes in contemporary missiological theology and has become the subject of intense debate among theologians, missiologists, and cross-cultural ministry practitioners (Bevans, 2002; Flemming, 2005; Hesselgrave & Rommen, 2000). In an era of globalization and cultural pluralism, the church faces the challenge of communicating the Gospel in ways that are relevant without compromising its theological essence (Netland, 2001). Contextualization is not merely a communication strategy but a theological imperative rooted in the nature of divine revelation, which consistently takes cultural form (Bosch, 1991).

Hiebert (1987) defines contextualization as the process of interpreting the Gospel in terms that are understandable within a particular culture and communicating it in ways that address the questions of that culture. This definition emphasizes the hermeneutical and communicative dimensions of contextualization. Meanwhile, Tomatala (2001) highlights that Christian contextualization is an effort to convey the message concerning the

person, work, word, and will of God in a manner that is faithful to divine revelation in Scripture while being meaningful within the cultural context of its audience.

The debate surrounding contextualization spans a broad spectrum, ranging from highly conservative approaches that stress the universality of the Gospel to highly liberal approaches that prioritize cultural relevance (Hesselgrave & Rommen, 2000). Nicholls (1979) distinguishes between authentic contextualization which preserves theological integrity and syncretism, which compromises the uniqueness of the Gospel. The tension between faithfulness to the biblical text and contextual relevance thus represents a fundamental methodological issue (Stott & Coote, 1979).

Although the literature on contextualization is abundant, a comprehensive understanding of its biblical foundations remains underdeveloped (Tennent, 2010). This article seeks to fill that gap by exploring how the Bible itself models contextualization, both in the Old and New Testaments. The research questions guiding this study are: How are the principles of contextualization revealed in the biblical narrative? How does the incarnation of Jesus Christ serve as the paradigm of contextualization? And what are the theological and practical implications of the biblical model of contextualization for contemporary Christian mission?

The methodology employed is a theological-hermeneutical analysis of relevant biblical texts, drawing upon exegetical and biblical-theological resources. This approach enables the identification of normative principles that can inform current practices of contextualization. The article is organized into four main sections: contextualization in the Old Testament, contextualization in the New Testament, case studies from the ministries of Jesus and Paul, and theological-practical reflections.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a hermeneutical-expositional approach, focusing on a theological-biblical analysis of the theme of contextualization as revealed in both the Old and New Testaments. The approach is qualitative and theological, viewing the biblical text not merely as a historical document but as divine revelation possessing normative authority for Christian faith and practice. The research integrates the historical-grammatical method to discern the meaning of the text within its linguistic and historical context, alongside a theological-narrative approach to trace the unity of God's revelation from creation to the incarnation of Christ as the climax of divine contextualization.

The primary sources for this study are the canonical texts of Scripture that reveal the pattern of God's self-disclosure within human contexts such as creation (Genesis 1–2), the cultural mandate (Genesis 1:26–28), and the covenant of blessing (Genesis 12:1–3) which culminate in the incarnation of Jesus Christ (John 1:14; Philippians 2:5–11). In addition, this research draws on theological and missiological literature from scholars such as David Bosch, Stephen Bevans, Harvie Conn, and Charles Kraft, as well as relevant Indonesian theologians who engage with the issue of biblical contextualization. The analysis proceeds through the exposition of texts to uncover their theological meaning, followed by conceptual synthesis to construct a framework for contextual theology that remains faithful to biblical revelation, and concludes with the application of these principles to case studies from the ministries of Jesus and the Apostle Paul as models of authentic contextual praxis.

The validity of the analysis is maintained through a firm commitment to the principle of the authority of Scripture (*sola Scriptura*) as the ultimate standard for all interpretation and contextualization. Each conclusion is tested against the coherence of the entire biblical narrative and the theological consensus of the church throughout

history. Thus, the methodology ensures not only theological accuracy but also a balanced integration of fidelity to divine revelation and relevance to cultural context, resulting in a framework of contextualization that is theocentric, transformative, and deeply rooted in the authority of Scripture.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Contextualization in the Old Testament

#### *God's Self-Revelation in Creation as the Foundation of Contextualization*

Contextualization in the Old Testament provides the theological foundation for the entire biblical discussion of contextualization. The creation narrative in Genesis 1–2 reveals that God is the initiator of communication with His creation (Tomatala, 2001). Von Rad (1972) emphasizes that in Genesis 1, God is not the object of philosophical speculation but the active subject who reveals Himself through His creative word. The use of the verb *bara'* ("to create"), applied exclusively to divine activity, underscores that revelation is God's initiative rather than a human achievement (Westermann, 1984).

The contextual dimension of divine revelation is evident in how God uses creation itself as the medium through which He communicates His existence and attributes. Psalm 19:1–4 declares that "the heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of His hands." Kaiser (2008) explains that this general revelation is contextual, in that it is accessible to all people across diverse cultural settings. Thus, creation functions as God's "universal language," transcending linguistic and cultural boundaries (Grudem, 1994).

However, general revelation has soteriological limitations. Paul in Romans 1:18–20 acknowledges that although God's existence can be known through creation, humanity suppresses this truth in unrighteousness (Moo, 1996). Therefore, special revelation through the written Word of God becomes necessary. Erickson (2013) argues that special revelation contextualizes divine truth in a clearer and more propositional manner, enabling accurate knowledge of God's will.

### The Cultural Mandate as the Embodiment of Contextualization

Genesis 1:28–30 contains what Reformed theologians refer to as the "cultural mandate," which grants humanity the authority to "fill the earth and subdue it" and to "rule over" other living creatures (Wolters, 2005). Van Til (1971) interprets this mandate as the call to develop all the potentialities God embedded in creation—social, economic, artistic, and intellectual. Contextualization, in this sense, is an integral aspect of humanity's calling to represent God (*imago Dei*) on earth (Middleton, 2005).

Tomatala (2001) rightly observes that the cultural mandate assumes human creativity in responding to contextual realities. Humanity was not created as an automaton mechanically executing divine commands but as a moral agent capable of responsible decision-making (Hoekema, 1986). In the pre-fall context, these decisions were in perfect harmony with God's will. However, Genesis 3 reveals that the fall distorted human moral discernment (Blocher, 1984).

The theological implication of the fall narrative is that authentic contextualization is only possible within a redemptive relationship with God. Wright (2006) stresses that the mission of God (*missio Dei*) is the restoration of fallen creation, and the church participates in this mission through the contextualized proclamation of the Gospel. In other words, contextualization is not merely a communication method but an expression of God's ongoing redemptive work (Bosch, 1991).

**The Covenant of Blessing as the Dynamic of Contextualization**

The concept of *covenant* is key to understanding how God relates to His people within specific historical contexts (Robertson, 1980). God established covenants with Noah (Genesis 9), Abraham (Genesis 12, 15, 17), Moses (Exodus 19–24), and David (2 Samuel 7), each reflecting unique contextual characteristics (Dumbrell, 1984). These covenants demonstrate God's flexibility in contextualizing His will without altering the essence of His promise.

Genesis 3:15, often called the *Protevangelium*, is an early example of divine revelation contextualized within the cultural language and imagination of the ancient Near East (Sailhamer, 1992). The promise of the "seed of the woman" crushing the serpent's head employs metaphors familiar in Mesopotamian agrarian culture, yet carries theological implications that transcend its original context (Hamilton, 1990).

The Abrahamic Covenant (Genesis 12:1–3) manifests the missional dimension of contextualization. God calls Abraham out of his cultural setting (Ur of the Chaldeans) to become a channel of blessing to "all families of the earth" (Kaiser, 2000). Wenham (1987) notes that the phrase "all families" (*kol mišpəḥōṯ*) signifies the universality of God's mission expressed through Israel's particularity. This anticipates the tension between the universality of the Gospel and the particularity of cultural context a central theme in contextualization debates (Newbigin, 1989).The Sinai Covenant illustrates how God's law was contextualized for Israel's post-Exodus community (Wright, 2004). The *casuistic* laws in Exodus 21–23 respond to specific socio-economic situations, while the Decalogue (Exodus 20:1–17) expresses transcendent moral principles (Childs, 1974). Durham (1987) argues that the dialectic between principle and application serves as a model for Christian ethical contextualization.

**Principles of Contextualization in the Old Testament**

Based on the analysis above, several contextualization principles can be drawn from the Old Testament (Tomatala, 2001; Flemming, 2005):

1. Divine Initiative Principle: Contextualization begins with God, who incarnates His Word within human contexts. It affirms that contextualization is a theological, not anthropological, activity—God is the subject, not the object, of contextualization (Barth, 1956).
2. Cultural Totality Principle: God's revelation occurs within the total cultural reality of a people. Culture is not merely a neutral "container" but a complex system shaping human perception of reality (Niebuhr, 1951; Geertz, 1973).
3. Theological Reflection Principle: Theological understanding is always mediated through cultural categories. Contextual hermeneutics acknowledges that there is no "pure" reading of Scripture devoid of cultural presuppositions (Gadamer, 1975; Thiselton, 1992).
4. Cultural Selectivity Principle: Not all cultural elements can be used to express the Gospel. The church must discern which cultural forms are compatible, which require transformation, and which must be rejected (Kraft, 1979; Hiebert, 1985).
5. Contemporaneity Principle: Contextualization employs contemporary cultural forms, meanings, and functions. Effective communication requires the use of symbols familiar to the audience (Nida, 1960; Loewen, 1975).

6. Transformation Principle: True contextualization produces transformation in individuals and communities. The Gospel is not merely received but becomes a transformative agent within culture (Newbigin, 1986; Samuel & Sugden, 1999).
7. Covenantal Continuity Principle: The consistent elements in contextualization are divine self-revelation, transformation, and the lived experience of God's covenantal blessings. This highlights theological continuity amid diverse cultural expressions (Greidanus, 1999).

**Contextualization in the New Testament**

***The Incarnation of Jesus Christ as the Paradigm of Contextualization***

The incarnation of Jesus Christ serves as the *locus classicus* for the theology of contextualization (Bevans, 2002; Schreiter, 1985). John 1:14 declares, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (*ho logos sarx egeneto kai eskēnōsen en hēmin*). The verb *eskēnōsen* ("dwelt," "tabernacled") evokes the Old Testament concept of *shekinah* the divine presence dwelling in Israel's tabernacle thereby highlighting the continuity between God's self-revelation in the Old Testament and the incarnation of Christ (Carson, 1991; Köstenberger, 2004). Budiman (2002) rightly identifies the incarnation as the climax of God's self-revelation to humanity. In the incarnation, God not only communicates the truth about Himself but becomes that truth in human form (Morris, 1995).

The Chalcedonian Christology of A.D. 451 affirms that Christ is one person with two natures divine and humanunited *without confusion, change, division, or separation* (*asugchuōs, atreptōs, adiairetōs, achōristōs*) (Kelly, 1960). This formula becomes a paradigm for contextualization: the gospel must be expressed within cultural forms (incarnation) without losing its theological essence (without confusion) or becoming alien to culture (without separation). Philippians 2:5–11, the well-known Christological hymn, illustrates the dynamics of the incarnation through the concept of *kenosis* (self-emptying). Paul writes that Christ "did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but emptied Himself" (*heauton ekenōsen*). O'Brien (1991) explains that *kenosis* does not imply the relinquishing of divine attributes but the voluntary surrender of divine privileges in order to assume the condition of a servant. Martin (1997) interprets *kenosis* as a model for missionary posture willingness to relinquish status and privilege for the sake of the gospel. Hebrews 2:14–18 emphasizes Christ's solidarity with humanity. The author notes that Christ "shared" (*meteschen*) in human flesh and blood so that He might become "a merciful and faithful high priest" (Heb. 2:17). Lane (1991) observes that Christ's experience of temptation and suffering enables Him to "help those who are tempted" (Heb. 2:18). The implication for contextualization is clear: gospel messengers must enter into the existential experiences of their audiences with authentic empathy (Conn, 1984).

**The Purpose and Limits of Contextualization in an Incarnational Perspective**

The purpose of contextualization parallels the purpose of the incarnation to make God accessible within human contexts without compromising His holiness and transcendence (Tennent, 2010). Budiman (2002) explains that just as God revealed Himself to humanity through the Jewish culture, so too the Church is called to reveal God to unreached peoples through their own cultural forms. Yet the incarnation also establishes boundaries for contextualization. Christ adopted first-century Jewish culture but simultaneously critiqued and transformed elements of that culture that contradicted God's will (Yoder, 1972). For example, Jesus challenged the ritual purity system that marginalized the unclean (Mark 7:1–23), rebuked Pharisaic religious pride (Matt. 23), and redefined the concept of Messiahship in terms of the suffering servant rather than a political ruler (Mark 10:45; Wright, 1996).

This demonstrates that contextualization is not an uncritical accommodation to culture but a dialectical encounter between gospel and culture (Niebuhr, 1951). Kraemer (1938) described this relationship as a "dialectical discontinuity," in which the gospel affirms aspects of culture consistent with God's will while rejecting and transforming those that are not. Newbigin (1986) called this "subversive contextualization"—the gospel enters culture only to transform it from within.

**The Apostle Paul as a Model Practitioner of Contextualization**

The Apostle Paul stands as one of the most contextual figures in the New Testament (Witherington, 1998). In 1 Corinthians 9:19–23, Paul articulates his ministry philosophy: "I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some" (1 Cor. 9:22). This passage has become foundational for the theology of contextualization (Budiman, 2002; Schnabel, 2008). Witherington (1995) identifies three key components in Paul's contextual strategy based on this text:

1. Soteriological Purpose: Paul explicitly states that his goal is "to win as many as possible" (v. 19). Contextualization is not an end in itself but a means toward evangelistic ends (Fee, 1987).
2. Methodological Flexibility: Paul adapts his approach to different audiences becoming "as a Jew" to the Jews and "as without the law" to the Gentiles (vv. 20–21). This reflects missionary pragmatism guided by pastoral wisdom (Thiselton, 2000).
3. Theological Integrity: Despite his methodological flexibility, Paul insists that he remains "under the law of Christ" (v. 21), serving as a safeguard against moral relativism or doctrinal compromise (Barrett, 1968). Hays (1997) calls this "bounded flexibility" flexible in *adiaphora* (morally neutral matters) yet steadfast in the fundamentals of faith.

**Principles of Contextualization in the New Testament**

From the analysis of Christ's incarnation and Paul's ministry, several New Testament principles of contextualization can be formulated (Tomatala, 2001; Flemming, 2005):

1. The Principle of Full Incarnation: Jesus' incarnation within the full Hebrew context demonstrates that the gospel must enter culture wholly without losing its identity. The dualism separating "spiritual essence" from "cultural form" is foreign to the incarnation (Bevans, 2002).
2. The Principle of Cultural Transformation: The incarnation of the gospel must bring transformation, not mere translation. Authentic contextualization produces both personal and communal change (Bosch, 1991; Walls, 1996).
3. The Principle of Missionary Kenosis: The *kenosis* of Philippians 2:5–11 provides the ethical foundation for missionaries to empty themselves of cultural privilege and enter another culture with the posture of a servant (Shenk, 1993). This stands in contrast to the cultural imperialism that has marred Christian mission history (Bosch, 1991).
4. The Principle of People Orientation: Biblical contextualization is people-oriented, focusing on the needs, questions, and aspirations of the audience (Hesselgrave, 1991). Both Jesus and Paul began where people were, not where they wanted them to be (Hunter, 1987).

5. The Principle of Contextual Determination: Deep understanding of the context its language, worldview, and social structure is prerequisite to effective communication (Hiebert, 1985; Kraft, 1991). Paul demonstrated remarkable ability to "read" his cultural settings (Acts 17).
6. The Principle of Scriptural Authority: The Word of God is the *norma ultima* by which all contextual efforts are evaluated. Culture must be critiqued and transformed by the gospel, not the other way around (Carson, 1984; Stott, 1992).

**Case Study: The Contextual Ministries of Jesus and Paul**

***The Ministry of Jesus: Incarnation in Practice***

The ministry of Jesus provides concrete examples of how incarnational principles are translated into practice. The following analysis explores how Jesus adopted, critiqued, and transformed elements of Jewish culture.

**Adoption of Culturally Neutral Practices**

Jesus consistently participated in cultural practices that were not in conflict with the will of God. Luke 4:16 records that "as was His custom, He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day." France (2007) notes that Jesus' participation in synagogue worship validated the institution while simultaneously providing a platform for teaching. Likewise, Jesus observed purification rituals in certain contexts (Luke 5:14) and adopted conventional postures of prayer (Matt. 26:39).

**Critique of Cultural Distortions.**

Jesus did not hesitate to challenge corrupted cultural expressions. In Matthew 23, He denounced the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, who emphasized external aspects of the Law while neglecting "justice, mercy, and faithfulness" (Matt. 23:23). Snodgrass (2008) observes that Jesus drew a clear distinction between human tradition (*paradosis tōn anthrōpōn*) and the commandment of God (*entolē tou theou*) (Mark 7:8). This is a crucial distinction for contextualization: not everything cultural is biblical.

**Radical Transformation of Cultural Categories.**

Certain actions of Jesus fundamentally redefined cultural categories. His act of touching a leper (Luke 5:13) which, according to Jewish purity laws (Lev. 13–14), rendered a person unclean was a subversive action that redefined the concept of purity itself (Borg, 1984). Wright (1996) argues that Jesus replaced an exclusive purity system with an inclusive vision of community grounded in forgiveness and love.

Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman (John 4) provides another dramatic example. In this single act, Jesus crossed three social boundaries ethnicity (Jew–Samaritan), gender (male female), and morality (rabbi–sinful woman) (Köstenberger, 2004). Keohane (2010) describes this as "subversive contextualization": Jesus entered a context but then transformed its social conventions from within. The Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) represents a pivotal moment in early church history that illustrates how the early Christian community wrestled with the issue of contextualization (Bruce, 1988; Witherington, 1998). The central question concerned whether Gentile believers in Christ must be circumcised and obey the Mosaic Law.

**Theological Background.**

Jewish Christians believed that salvation came through the Jewish Messiah and therefore assumed that Gentiles must first become Jews to become Christians (Acts 15:1, 5). Dunn (1990) explains that for them, circumcision was not merely an ethnic ritual but the indispensable sign of the Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 17:9–14).

The council reached a revolutionary decision based on three key arguments. First, Peter's testimony concerning the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon Gentiles (Acts 15:7–11) demonstrated that God Himself had accepted them without circumcision. Second, Paul and Barnabas' report of signs and wonders among the Gentiles (v. 12) confirmed divine activity outside the Jewish community. Third, James cited Amos 9:11–12 to show that the inclusion of the Gentiles fulfilled prophecy (vv. 13–18).

The final decision (vv. 19–29) declared that Gentiles need not be circumcised but should "abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from sexual immorality, from meat of strangled animals, and from blood" (v. 29). Witherington (1998) interprets these restrictions not as soteriological requirements but as practical concessions to facilitate fellowship between Jewish and Gentile Christians. Barrett (1998) notes that these prohibitions align with the Noahic laws (Gen. 9), which were regarded as binding on all humanity, not just Israel. The Jerusalem Council established crucial principles: (1) salvation is *sola gratia* by grace alone not through cultural conformity (Acts 15:11); (2) the gospel is trans-cultural it can be expressed within diverse cultural contexts without losing its essence (Schnabel, 2004); (3) flexibility in *adiaphora* (non-essential matters) is essential for church unity (Bruce, 1988); and (4) contextualization decisions should be made communally, not individualistically (Witherington, 1998).

**The Case of Circumcision: Timothy versus Titus**

Paul's differing approaches to the circumcision of Timothy (Acts 16:3) and Titus (Gal. 2:3) offer valuable lessons in contextual flexibility within the framework of theological integrity. Paul circumcised Timothy "because of the Jews who lived in that area." Witherington (1998) explains that since Timothy's mother was Jewish, he was considered Jewish by law and thus should be circumcised. Bruce (1990) argues that Paul's decision was not theological but strategic to remove unnecessary obstacles to ministry in synagogues. This reflects the principle in 1 Corinthians 9:20: "to the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win the Jews."

In contrast, Paul refused to circumcise Titus, a Greek, despite pressure from "false brothers" (Gal. 2:4). Longenecker (1990) notes that the context was entirely different: in Titus's case, circumcision was demanded as a *soteriological* necessity, not a missionary strategy. According to Dunn (1993), Paul refused because circumcising Titus would have implied that salvation required obedience to the Mosaic Law, contradicting the gospel of grace.

The comparison of these cases teaches the principle of contextual discernment: when a cultural issue is theologically neutral (*adiaphora*), flexibility is wisdom; but when the issue touches the essence of the gospel, compromise becomes betrayal (Witherington, 1995). Carson (1984) calls this "bounded flexibility"—flexible in secondary matters but steadfast in doctrinal fundamentals.

Paul's sermon at the Areopagus (Acts 17:16–34) stands as one of the most celebrated examples of missionary contextualization in the New Testament (Elefson, 2003; Schnabel, 2004). First-century Athens was the intellectual hub of the Greco-Roman world, home to philosophical traditions such as Stoicism and Epicureanism (Winter, 2002).

Paul begins by acknowledging the Athenians' religiosity: "I see that in every way you are very religious" (v. 22). Witherington (1998) notes that this represents *captatio benevolentiae* a classical rhetorical technique for gaining the audience's goodwill through praise. Paul does not begin with condemnation but with appreciation for their spiritual search (Stott, 1990).

Paul identifies an "altar to an unknown god" as a point of contact with his audience (v. 23). Bruce (1990) explains that such altars were erected as precautionary measures against neglecting an unknown deity. Paul uses this as a "bridge" to proclaim the true God whom they worshiped without knowing (Barrett, 1998). In verse 28, Paul cites two Greek poets: "For in Him we live and move and have our being" (from Epimenides) and "For we are indeed His offspring" (from Aratus). Bruce (1988) observes that Paul employs culturally authoritative sources to build his argument a brilliant contextual strategy. Rather than quoting the Old Testament, which would have been unfamiliar to his Greek audience, he draws from their own intellectual tradition.

Yet, as Bauckham (1995) points out, Paul transforms the meaning of these quotations. In their original contexts, they referred to Zeus, but Paul redirects them to the Creator God of Scripture. This illustrates a key principle: contextualization may use cultural forms but must fill them with biblical content (Hiebert, 1985). Although Paul begins within cultural categories, he does not compromise the core of the gospel message. He proclaims the doctrines of creation (vv. 24–25), divine providence (vv. 26–27), and especially eschatological judgment through the resurrection of Christ (vv. 30–31). Winter (2002) notes that this message directly challenged the Greek worldview, which rejected bodily resurrection.

The audience's responses were diverse: some mocked, some wanted to hear more, and some believed (vv. 32–34). Stott (1990) rejects the notion that Paul's sermon failed because it was "too philosophical." On the contrary, Paul succeeded in communicating the gospel within categories intelligible to his audience, resulting in genuine conversions including Dionysius and Damaris.

**Principles of Contextualization from the Areopagus.**

1. Appreciation before Critique: Recognize authentic spiritual searching before confronting idolatry (Hesselgrave, 1991).
2. Identification of Contact Points: Seek *common ground* as a bridge for communication (Richardson, 1981).
3. Use of Cultural Sources: Employ local cultural wisdom as a vehicle for truth (Hiebert, 1985).
4. Transformation of Meaning: Use cultural forms but infuse them with biblical content (Kraft, 1979).
5. Bold Proclamation: Despite contextual sensitivity, never compromise the essential truths of the gospel (Stott, 1990).
6. Call to Response: The message concludes with a summons to repentance and a warning of coming judgment (vv. 30–31).

**Theological Reflection and Practical Implications**

***The Tension Between Faithfulness and Relevance***

Biblically grounded contextualization must navigate the creative tension between faithfulness to divine revelation and relevance to cultural contexts (Hesselgrave & Rommen, 2000). Nicholls (1979) cautions that an excessive emphasis on relevance may lead to syncretism the uncritical blending of the Gospel with cultur while overemphasis on faithfulness may result in a form of communication that feels foreign and meaningless to its

audience Hesselgrave and Rommen (2000) identify a spectrum of contextualization approaches ranging from conservative to liberal. At one end lies the translation model, which seeks to transfer theological content with minimal alteration to its cultural form. At the other end stands the anthropological model, which prioritizes local cultural categories in formulating theology. Bevans (2002) adds intermediate models, such as synthesis and praxis, emphasizing dialogue between text and context as a reciprocal process.

To avoid dangerous extremes, Hiebert (1987) proposes four evaluative criteria for responsible contextualization: (1) the biblical criterion faithfulness to Scripture; (2) the theological criterion—consistency with historical and orthodox theological traditions; (3) the missional criterion—effectiveness in communicating the Gospel within a given context; and (4) the phenomenological criterion—meaningfulness for the recipient community within their own cultural framework.

**The Role of the Community in Contextualization**

Biblical contextualization is not an individualistic task but a communal one (Whiteman, 1997). The Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) serves as a paradigmatic example of how contextual decisions should emerge through collective discussion and discernment under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In this perspective, the universal church functions as a system of checks and balances against both syncretism and reductionism (Walls, 1996).

Schreiter (1985) proposes a dialogical model of contextualization in which local theologians and external missionaries collaborate in the processes of interpretation and theological formulation. Kraft (1979) describes this as *dynamic equivalence*, an effort to create faith expressions that possess the same transformative power as the original Gospel message without merely replicating Western forms. Thus, authentic contextualization arises from the encounter between inherited faith and lived culture.

**Contextualization and the Mission of the Contemporary Church**

Biblical principles of contextualization carry profound implications for the church's mission today (Bosch, 1991; Tennent, 2010) In the context of the Global Majority, churches in Asia, Africa, and Latin America are experiencing rapid growth and developing contextual theologies that enrich the universal church's understanding (Jenkins, 2002). Sanneh (1989) asserts that Christianity is inherently translatable—possessing the capacity to incarnate itself in diverse cultures without losing its identity.

In the context of religious pluralism, the church is called to communicate the Gospel dialogically and apologetically, responding to the religious and philosophical questions of non-Christian traditions (Netland, 2001). Paul's example at the Areopagus (Acts 17) remains instructive: identifying points of contact within local culture without obscuring the uniqueness of Christ. In the Western secular context, the church faces new missional challenges. Regions once considered centers of Christianity now require re-evangelization. Newbigin (1986) emphasizes that contextualization in the West demands the deconstruction of secular assumptions and the reconstruction of the plausibility of Christian faith in the public sphere.

In the digital era, paradigm shifts in communication have generated new cultural contexts that call for fresh and creative forms of contextualization (Campbell & Garner, 2016). Social media, visual culture, and interactive communication are shaping modern patterns of thought, relationship, and faith (Horsfield et al., 2004). The church is therefore called to be theologically reflective and missionally adaptive within the digital space.

**Dangers and Pitfalls in Contextualization**

Although contextualization is a biblical imperative, various dangers accompany the process (Hiebert et al., 1999). First, *syncretism* the blending of the Gospel with incompatible religious or philosophical elements can result in "another gospel" (Gal. 1:6–9; Tennent, 2010). Second, *reductionism* simplifying the Gospel to only those aspects acceptable to the culture can strip it of its confrontational dimension (Newbigin, 1986). Third, *cultural imperialism* imposing particular cultural forms (often Western) as universal standards for all contexts (Bosch, 1991). Fourth, *relativism* the loss of conviction in the universal truth of the Gospel in favor of cultural tolerance (Carson, 1996). Fifth, *superficiality* external adaptation without deep worldview transformation (Hiebert, 1985).

Contextualization is not a one-time event but an ongoing process of renewal (Whiteman, 1997). Because culture is dynamic and constantly changing, expressions of Christian faith must continually be reinterpreted in light of the eternal revelation (Kraft, 1979). Walls (1996) describes this dynamic through two principles: the *indigenizing principle* and the *pilgrim principle*. The church must be *indigenous* rooted in local culture yet also *pilgrim* never fully at home in any culture. In the tension between these two poles, the church is called to bear witness to Christ with both faithfulness and relevance in every generation and cultural context.

**CONCLUSION**

This study has demonstrated that contextualization possesses a solid theological foundation in Scripture, encompassing both the Old and New Testaments. God's self-revelation in creation, the cultural mandate, and the covenantal blessings of the Old Testament form the fundamental paradigm for understanding how God communicates His will within the framework of human culture. The incarnation of Jesus Christ represents the climax and *model par excellence* of contextualization the transcendent God taking on human form within a specific cultural setting without relinquishing His divinity.

The biblical narrative yields several key principles of contextualization: divine initiative as the point of origin, the totality of culture as the medium of revelation, cultural selectivity in employing existing forms, contemporaneity in communication, and transformation as the ultimate goal. The ministries of Jesus and Paul provide concrete illustrations of how these principles were applied with both wisdom and courage. The tension between faithfulness to divine revelation and relevance to cultural context is inherent within the very nature of contextualization and must be navigated carefully. Scripture itself offers no mechanical formula but provides paradigmatic principles that must be applied with discernment in each specific situation. The evaluative criteria encompassing biblical, theological, missional, and phenomenological dimensions serve as safeguards against potential extremes and distortions.

For the contemporary church operating within increasingly complex and plural contexts, biblical contextualization is not an optional strategy but a missionary imperative. The incarnational model of Christ and the apostolic approach of Paul together provide a blueprint for a mission that is both faithful and effective. True contextualization affirms cultural diversity as a reflection of divine creativity while upholding the universal scope of the Gospel, which transforms every culture it encounters. This study also highlights the need for further research in several areas: (1) how biblical principles of contextualization may be applied to specific contexts such as Western secularism, Asian religious pluralism, or African animism; (2) how digital technologies are reshaping the paradigms of contextualization; (3) how local churches can develop authentic contextual theologies while maintaining communion with the universal church; and (4) how to avoid the dangers of syncretism without falling into cultural

legalism. Ultimately, biblical contextualization invites us to view cultural diversity not as a hindrance but as an opportunity an opportunity to behold the multifaceted glory of God reflected in “every nation, tribe, people, and language” (Revelation 7:9) united in worship before the Lamb.

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