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Contextualization of the Gospel: Interpreting the Message of the Gospel in Igbo Peoples' Cultural Context

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Abstract:

Many scholars and missionaries have written extensively on various aspects of contextualization in the past few years. This study examines contextualization of Biblical message as prerequisite for a meaningful impact of the gospel on the people in contemporary Christianity and missionary enterprise. This study proposes a contextualization model that interprets the message of God in peoples' cultural context. This study is not majorly historical but an analysis of how Christians and missionaries deal with the awareness of other cultures during their early involvement in the work of the ministry. The study looks at challenges early Christian missionaries faced with traditional beliefs and practices of new convert - in other words, to the 'old' culture. The study suggests how modern Christian pastors or missionaries in Igbo society of South-east Nigeria should contextualize the gospel message to facilitate its proper understanding by their respondents. The study recommends, however, that the model apply to other Christians and missionary areas of the world.

Keywords: Culture, cultural contextualization, biblical message, message of god, cultural context

1. Introduction

Christians and missionaries do not enter cultural vacuums; the people to whom they go are members of already existing established societies and cultures. Igbo people of South east Nigeria organise themselves and their environment to meet their needs. They arrange marriage for the young ones and bury their dead. They pray to their gods and propitiate the spirits.¹ How did and how should Christians or Christian missionaries who bring a new gospel respond to the peoples' existing cultural practises? This is one of the major challenges Christian missions faced in most communities in Nigeria especially in Igbo land of South east Nigeria. Most of the missionaries did not understand the cultural meaning of most of the social, religious and customary rites of the people they were evangelizing. Early Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Evangelicals and Pentecostals missionaries faced this problem. During the missionary endeavours of the nineteenth and the early twentieth century, a whole range of native customs and traditions were demonized and condemned. For instance, the Anglican, 1914 and the Roman Catholic, 1915 in Onitsha condemned 'Ozo' title as wrong and oppose to Christianity.² It took political exigencies in the 1950s to relax this standing order'. It was the Eastern Nigeria Catholic Council who saw how impossible it was for a non- Ozo title holder to win election then in Onitsha area. This council contributed to convince the church leadership to relax that standing order,³ this has shown that it is a well-known sociological truth that while culture and religion may be distinguished, they may never be separated. Many Igbo and African eminent scholars have expressed this view in various words⁴

Interpreting the gospel in peoples' cultural context produces genuine and committed indigenous Christians. Contextualization is truly not the same as indigenization but a well contextualized message of the gospel produces a reliable indigenous Christianity⁵. This is the thesis of this study. Contextualization of the gospel involves an attempt to present the Gospel in a culturally relevant way. The study acknowledges the fact that many writers have applied either the denotative or connotative meanings of the word indigenization in their writings. For instance, the generation of Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson saw indigenization as 'three-self' church—one that is self-supporting, self- governing, and self-propagating. This idea has been an important feature of many Pentecostal missions and especially of the largest and most international Pentecostal denomination, the Assemblies of God (AG).⁶ Other evangelical mission administrators and scholars like the American Methodist Episcopal Bishop William Taylor⁷, and the Presbyterian missionary to China John Nevius⁸ have promoted 'indigenization'

1. Paul G. Hiebert *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, (Grand Rapid: Baker Books, 1999), 76.

2. Nicholas I. Omenka, 'Religious Encounter: Mission and Conversion in Igbo land Reappraised', *Bigard Theological Studies*, vol. 29, (January-June 2009), 62.

3. Nicholas I. Omenka, 'The Christian Mission and the Training for Political Leadership in Eastern Nigeria'. in *International Review of Mission*, vol. 92, (2003), 362.

4. Omenka, 'Religious encounter', 66.

These men had all advocated that missions must create three-self churches, but Allen went further than they did in advocating a truly indigenous church completely independent of foreign influences. In the case of Jesuit missionaries in the Roman Catholic Church, 'enculturation' (the adaptation of the Christian message to a given culture) was advocated for almost three centuries before the indigenization issue. However, the theory has usually not become the practice, as Darrell Whiteman points out⁹, 'There still remains an enormous gulf between the models of contextualization... and the practice of contextualized mission by North American and European missionaries.' Discussions about cultural contextualization of the gospel message are about the nature of human culture and interpretation of the gospel in the context of people's culture. Pope Paul VI says, 'Evangelization loses much of its force and effectiveness if it does not take into consideration the actual people to whom it is addressed... But on the other hand, evangelization risks losing its power and disappearing altogether if one empties or adulterates its content under the pretext of translating it'¹⁰ One of the primary functions of the Holy Spirit is to enable the missionaries contextualize the Gospel Message in the people's cultural context which empowers and motivates ordinary believers to propagate the Christian message in his/her cultural environment.

The uniqueness of apostolic missionary model is its dependence and focus on mission as being primarily the work of the Spirit. They focused on local rather than foreign talent Paul said to Timothy in his second to him, 2:2, 'And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others' (NIV). Apostle Paul did not only challenge his contemporaries to contextualize the message he also directed Timothy and Titus to appoint local leaders. Allen, like the apostles, constantly emphasized that the Holy Spirit empowered and motivated ordinary believers to propagate the Christian message. Allen opposed the mission-station model because it perpetuated the missionaries' foreign culture and their permanence.¹¹ Apostles of Christ demonstrated in their missionary work that true 'indigenous' local churches exist as the spontaneous expression of a proper understanding of the gospel which is the role of the Holy Spirit and that of the missionary – contextualization of the gospel in the indigenous cultural context. Interpreting the message of the Gospel in peoples' cultural context helps to build strong Christians and strong indigenous Christianity. Apostle Paul in his second epistle to Timothy says, 'All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching ... and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work (3:16-17 NIV). The church becomes indigenized when the message of the gospel is contextualized in people's cultural context. Apostle Peter like Paul in his second epistle emphasized the importance of the scripture in contextualization, 'Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit' (1:20-21). Melvin Hodges and Roland Allen unique emphasis of the role of the Holy Spirit for church indigenization, which proved they had an understanding of the missing point in the early missionary work of their time.¹² The emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit in missions is a clear indication that they believe missionaries do not indigenize the church but contextualize the gospel message through the Holy Spirit for indigenous people to understand it in their cultural context which enable them to build indigenous churches. 'Contextualization' is more comprehensive than indigenization and assumes that every theology and form of Christianity is shaped by its particular context, and that they must be so to be relevant and meaningful. It relates the Christian message to all social contexts and cultures, especially including those undergoing rapid change. Contextualization is dynamic and not static, because it allows for constant change. Melvin Hodges (1909-88) tested this mission's strategy in different countries and continents, social, religious and political environments. He wrote:

There is no place on earth where, if the gospel seed be properly planted, it will not produce an indigenous church. The Holy Spirit can work in one country as well as in another. To proceed on the assumption that the infant church in any land must always be cared for and provided for by the mother mission is an unconscious insult to the people that we endeavour to serve, and is evidence of a lack of faith in God and in the power of the gospel.¹³

Hodges had remarkable insights, when he said, 'if the gospel seed be properly planted,' to properly plant the gospel seed is to contextualize the gospel in the cultural context of the people. According to Hodges, missionaries did everything for the people except to acknowledge any equality. 'We have done everything for them, but very little with them. We have done everything for them except give place to them. We have treated them as 'dear children' but not as 'brethren.'¹⁴ As Hodges rightly observed, 'There is no place on earth where, if the gospel seed be properly planted, it will not produce an indigenous church'.

Paul, the model missionary, was always glad when his converts could progress without his aid. He welcomed their liberty. He withheld no gift from them which might enable them to dispense with his presence. ... He gave as a right to the Spirit-bearing body the powers which duly belong to a Spirit-bearing body. He gave freely, and then he retired from them that they might learn to exercise the powers which they possessed in Christ¹⁵

This research study examines the period missionaries were not adequately contextualizing the gospel in Igbo society of South east Nigeria, the effect of it to the message, what contextualization of the gospel means and its benefit to gospel expansion. The study also looks at the dangers of contextualization and some critical areas that are involved.

5. Allan Heaton Anderson, 'Contextualization in Pentecostalism: A Multicultural Perspective' *International Bulletin of Mission Research*, vol. 41(1), (2017), 29-40.

6. Anderson, 'Contextualization in Pentecostalism', 31-33.

7. William Taylor, *Pauline Methods of Missionary Work* (Philadelphia: National Association for the Promotion of Holiness, 1879).

8. John L. Nevius, *The Planting and Development of Missionary Churches* (New York: Foreign Mission Library, 1899).

9. Darrell L. Whiteman, 'Contextualization: The Theory, the Gap, the Challenge,' *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, vol. 21, Issue. 1 (1997), 5.

2. The Period of Low Emphases on Contextualization

The period of low emphasis on contextualization represents, the time early Christian missionaries did not understand the cultural meaning of most of the social, religious and customary rites of the people they were evangelizing. Early Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Evangelicals and Pentecostals faced this problem. During the missionary endeavours of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, a whole range of native customs and traditions were demonized and condemned. This period represents the time of early missionary movement in Igbo societies of South east Nigeria. Christian missionaries assumed that the Gospel message and Christian theology was the same for all cultures and contexts, and so they tried to relate this 'constant' Christian message to indigenous cultures. Hodges termed it the 'universal' Gospel, which was 'adaptable to every climate and race, and to every social and economic level.' On the one hand, it is easy to confuse the Gospel message with the particular form it reached in Europe and North America; on the other hand, indigenization often assumes that cultures do not change.¹⁶

The process of contextualization involves presenting the unchanging truths of the gospel within the unique and changing contexts of cultures; such a tool is necessary because while the human condition and the gospel remain the same, people have different worldviews which in turn impact how they interpret themselves, the world and the things people say.¹⁷ Jesus' ministry therefore, displays a strong identification with those He came to redeem; he not only took on human flesh to be like them, he also accepted a specific cultural context – the Jewish culture. This stands to show that pastors or missionaries like Christ should identify with the people they have come to evangelize by making genuine effort to understand their culture in order to present the gospel adequately in the context of the people. Paul in his epistle to Philippians (2:5-8) presented Jesus Christ as a model missionary. 'Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus who being in very nature God ... being made in human likeness and being found in appearance as a man.' Like Christ Jesus who took the form of man, missionaries should accept (to acculturate) in the culture of the people.¹⁸ Anderson says, contextualization is important to questions of culture, because missionaries sometimes think that their culture's way of practicing Christianity is the *only* way to do it. The result can be disastrous, for once they arrive in a different culture; these missionaries may share not only the Gospel but also their own cultural traditions as being the 'right' way to practice Christianity or model the church.¹⁹

Paul's ministry also reveals the need for contextualization, perhaps most notably in his sermons recorded in Acts. Paul intentionally addressed his Jewish listeners one way but addressed the religious philosophers differently. When he addressed Jews, Paul began with Scripture. When he addressed Gentiles, he began with general revelation. The focus of Paul's sermons remained the same - the Gospel.²⁰ However, Paul shifted his presentation of the Gospel to fit the worldviews of his listeners. Contextualization, then, is simply about sharing the Gospel well. 'If a missionary's work in a culture other than his own is to be effective, he must learn to appreciate the culture of the people whom he wishes to evangelize.'

This learning, Pentecostal and Charismatic theology describe as 'the experience of the fullness of the Spirit' (theological praxis) and it is in this focus on practical experience that contextualization occurs. He must learn their language and appreciate their art, music, dance, architecture, religious rituals and all other aspects of that culture.

He must identify himself with the community of those whom he is introducing to Jesus Christ. Then he must go further to translate Christian faith into the cultural forms familiar and traditional to his prospective converts. He must be willing to be changed. This is a very difficult task, but effective Christian mission demands nothing less.²¹

Early Christian missionaries fought to eradicate traditional music and songs, drama and dances which they totally denounced as bad and immoral. They encouraged the destruction of statues, images, and emblems of remarkable artistic work of aesthetic merit by some of their overzealous converts as idols and works of the devil. These missionaries were not prepared to face traditional religion²². These acts set the stage for conflicts, which soon ensued between missionaries and their prospective converts in Aboh, Aguleri, Asaba, Atani, Igbariam, Ikem, Obosi, Onitsha, Ozubulu and Osomari. The Igbo of this area, like the rest of the Africans, rejected the first intrusions of the missionaries into their society. The Africans were able to sustain the resistance because they were, during this period, sovereign masters of their own societies. Thus, social outcasts and misfits, people in need of a new dawn, were the principle subjects available to the missionaries for proselytization during this initial period.²³

There is no doubt that the appeal of the Christian faith among many African converts was genuine and profound. In Jesus Christ they found new hope and clung to that hope in the face of great challenges which would, otherwise, have broken their lives, especially in situations of extreme oppression, exploitation and dehumanization during the colonial period.²⁴

It was the Edinburgh 1910 world mission conference, which has put missionary training and theological education firmly on the agenda of the ecumenical movement. Already Edinburgh 1910 highlighted:

The strategic importance of (theological) education as an indispensable element of any Christian mission both in the past and in the future; Called for a massive quality improvement in training of missionaries, which should be drastically upgraded in academic level and enlarged in terms of the disciplines covered; The call for intentionally moving beyond denominational lines in theological education and promoting the establishment of centralized mission colleges jointly supported by different denominations and mission agencies; and the need to deliberately move towards theological and Christian education in vernacular languages.

10. Paul vi, 'Enculturation, the Catholic Church and the Cultures of the world' *Evangelii Nuntiandi*:

Encyclical Letter on the Evangelization of the world, (1975), 63, accessed June23, 2015;

http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.pdf

11. Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or ours?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 149.

Andrew F. Walls writes that in African Christianity the Bible, immediate personal experience, and the communal meal took a central place on 'the transmission of the Christian faith'. The two main methods of transmitting the Gospel has been the 'indigenizing' principle (the Christian is at home in a unique cultural context) and the 'pilgrim' principle (concerned with universalizing Christianity) he sees both methods as rooted in Scripture.²⁵ The result from Edinburgh 1910 International Missionary Council is unprecedented. Report from the Centre for the Study of Global Christianity, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary shows that Africa Christian population in 1910 was only 9% of African peoples but the Centenary Conference in South Africa revealed that in 2010, one hundred years after the Edinburgh conference, Christian population had gone up to 48.3%.²⁶ The report from the centenary conference has reassured the world that there is a great future for the church of Jesus Christ in Africa. This study stands in solidarity with the International Missionary Council in her effort to promote contextualization of theological education²⁷ that will increase and raise brand new missionaries for a new dawn in world missions and evangelism. Christian missionaries made enormous contributions in bringing social development to Igbo land. They came at a time Igbo people's quest for innovative thinking and creativity was at its peak. The people were exposed to so many challenging issues because of the exploitations of slavery, opportunity for western commerce and civilization. The emergence of colonialism with its belief in the superiority of western culture and civilization, the people's system of government was seen as feudalistic and had to be replaced with direct and indirect rules in which the British sought to replace all local leadership governmental structures. For Christian missionaries the parallel was the superiority of the Gospel. The religion of the people was seen as paganism, which must be rooted out.²⁸ Many missionaries, like David Livingstone who did little traditional missionary work in Nigeria when he arrived in Calabar in 1875 and in Mabotsa Northern Nigeria in 1844 equated Christianity, civilization, and commerce as working hand in hand.²⁹ Western civilization was spreading around the world, while the people's cultures were on the way out. The Igbo expressed their resistance to the missionaries' program by refusing to attend or send their children to the chapel school where they would mix with pupils of slave and outcast ancestry. As a result, the first Catholic Mission school established at Onitsha in 1893 for converting the freeborn and training mission aides was virtually shunned by the people in spite of their budding desire to 'learn book' as a means of gaining reception to the civilized person's thought. Since the scope and enrolment of the school was limited, the converted ex-slaves had little salutary effect on Igbo Society.³⁰ Those who graduated from the chapel school became catechists and missionary aides and they, in the words of Fr. Lejeune, were 'steeped in superstition and corrupted the true faith'. Most missionaries attributed the reason for this lack of progress to the evil influence of the ex-slave converts because of their poor exemplary Christian living.³¹ This is one of the examples of wrong judgment early missionaries of most Christian church denominations that came to Eastern Nigeria especially Igbo land gave about early converts to Christianity. Okwu gave numerous examples of similar incidences and summarizes thus:

The impact of the early Roman Catholic missionary enterprise among the Igbo was as minimal as that of the Church Missionary Society, since the majority of the Christian Adherents were members of the social fringe. The weakness of missionary evangelization was exacerbated since the more the Spiritans concerned themselves with the deprived class, the more they alienated the freeborn Igbo - the principal force and majority in the land - and the more the missionaries presented the Christian faith as a religion for slaves, outcasts and aliens. Most of the liberated slaves were from places as far away as Benue, Brass, Lake Chad and 'Nupe country' and brought to Onitsha where they had no cultural or identifiable genealogical connection with the people. Clearly, such 'converts' could not exert any beneficial influence for the mission on a community that loathed a person with no recognized ancestry. The fathers' continued association with the slaves and social outcasts vitiated the friendly relations...and their nascent social programs. Thus, uncharacteristic of their missionary experience, the Spiritans had to close Nsugbe - one of their four stations - for lack of Igbo support in 1901. According to a Holy Ghost father, the closure of the station was unprecedented, for 'wherever we have planted the standard of the Cross we will never take it down.'³²

These incidents are evidences that these sincere converts to Christianity did not understand the message of the gospel from these godly men of God who because of lack of adequate training to handle cross cultural evangelism were not able to properly or adequately contextualize the Gospel taking note of cultural, social and religious similarities and differences. The mission may have been hindered because these missionaries did not understand the cultural implication of slavery in Igbo society at the time. In Igbo society, at the time of these missionaries, social status and classification influenced almost every aspect of the peoples' relationship. The people were classified as 'osu', 'ohu', and 'amadi'. This classification meant so much culturally, socially and religiously to Igbo society at time of these missionaries. The New Testament models the importance of healthy contextualization, and the history of Christian missions displays the need for contextualization. Saint Paul, one of the greatest missionaries in the history of Christianity, appreciated this demand, and lived up to it. To the Corinthians he says, 1 Cor. 9:19-23.

12. Melvin L. Hodges, *The Indigenous Church*. (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1953), 10-12, 22; Allan H. Anderson, *Spreading Fires: The Missionary Nature of Early Pentecostalism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007), 90.

13. Hodges, *The Indigenous Church*, 14.

14. Hodges, *The Indigenous Church*, 142-43.

15. Allen, *Spreading Fires*, 149.

16. Hodges, *The Indigenous Church*, 10-12, 22

17. Anderson, 'Contextualization in Pentecostalism' 34

... For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more. To the Jews I became a Jew, in order to win Jews; to those under the law I became as one under the law-though not being myself under the law-that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became one outside the law-not being without the law toward God but under the law of Christ-that I might win those outside the law. To the weak, I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men that I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the Gospel, that I may share in its blessing.

It is a thing of joy to note major land mark areas and innovative effort of the World Ecumenical Council to save Christianity from theological and missiological shipwreck in this time of global religious confusion. It has become a common conviction, therefore that the concern for binding obligation to deepen mutual solidarity and collaboration for strengthening theological education and ministerial formation in the churches has brought together more than 100 mission partners all around the world for joint action in building up and strengthening capacities for theological education in the churches and promoting contextualization of theological education. This has been and still remains a priority area of joint witness and cooperation within the global missionary movement.³³

Church denominations, this time, should not see themselves as beautiful bride rather collaborative synergy as proposed by the WCC in the area of theological education should be maintained to enable the church contend adequately for the 'faith'. Church leaders should heed the advice of the Central Committee of the WCC:

A church without proper and qualified theological education systems tends to diminish itself or ends in Christian religious fundamentalism. A church with properly developed theological education qualifies itself for greater degrees of interaction and outreach to the different levels and challenges in its society as well as to a deeper commitment to holistic Christian mission. Churches should have a clear sense of ownership of their institutions of theological education without falling into the trap of dominating or curbing them.³⁴

Technologically, the world has become a 'global village'; Christianity at this point must be innovative, creative, spiritual and relevant. The time of colonial lords has past. People are jealous of their cultural identity. The time Missionaries describe or label the culture of the people as 'primitive,' 'animistic' and 'uncivilized' has past.³⁵ This time, missionaries must be prepared to present sound exegetical, hermeneutical, theologically contextualized Gospel to build Christians that can sustain the faith in their cultural environment for generations. The WCC acknowledges that the task for providing accessible and contextually relevant forms of theological education for each part of the worldwide fellowship of Christian churches is far from being accomplished. On the contrary, at the beginning of 21st century we are facing a new urgency and increasing demand to cope with the huge challenges, crisis symptoms and fundamental changes of theological education which are caused by the dramatic changes in the landscape of world Christianity.³⁶

3. Intellectual Consequences of Low Emphases on Contextualization

Western missionaries as a result of poor applications and low emphases on contextualization made western civilization and Christianity superior to other local cultures and religions. The missionary's culture was seen to be good, advanced, and normative. Other cultures were believed to be bad, uncivilized, backward, and distorted.

Christianity was true; other religions were false. The consequences of this brought: first, a great barrier to the spread of the gospel. Second, old beliefs and customs did not die out because they were not consciously dealt with rather they went underground. The result was syncretistic lifestyles among the converts to Christianity. The Protestant mission stations in the riverside areas of Igbo land prior to 1900, lacked loyal members. The missionaries referred to the few Igbo converts as bread-and-butter Christians who as Bishop Crowther reported in 1886, had nearly all relapsed into polygamy and idolatry without any disturbance either outwardly or inwardly in their consciences and those who accepted baptism did so as a means of improving their social image without any spiritual commitment to the new faith.³⁷

Bishop Crowther therefore had reason to conclude toward the end of the century that, we must not depend upon the outward appearance only in the profession of Christianity, but on a real conversion through the operations of God's Holy Spirit in the heart and conscience. Such spiritual or cultural transformation was not possible without a considerable degree of confidence established between the evangelizers and the mission people. Circumstantially such trust did not exist between the Igbo and the Protestant missionaries. 'The grown up [Igbo] people did not trust us' rather expressed their resistance to the missionaries' program by refusing to attend or send their children to the chapel school where they would mix with pupils of slave and outcast ancestry.³⁸ The effect of this has provoked creative and innovative approach in modern missions which led to a renewed commitment in missionary training, education, and development

Missionaries can be given adequate training and preparation for the work of the ministry now to compliment these deficiencies because theological education is the seedbed for the renewal of churches, their ministries, missions and commitment to church evangelism, expansion and unity in today's world. Neglect by church leaders to prioritize theological education systems result in poor theological reflection and funding, consequences might not be visible immediately, but quite certainly will become manifest after one or two decades in terms of theological competence of church leadership, holistic nature of the churches mission, capacities for interfaith dialogue and for dialogue between churches and society.³⁹

18. Dean S. Gilliland. 'Contextual theology as incarnational mission', in the Word among us, ed Dean S.

Gilliland, (Dallas: Word Publishing, 2000) 10-11.

19. Anderson, 'Contextualization in Pentecostalism' 35

20. Ed. Stetzer, 'Calling for contextualization part 4' Untangling cultural engagement. Accessed August 11, 2010 <http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2010/August11/cultural-engagement-loserlook.html>

21. J.N.K. Mugambi, 'Christianity and African cultural heritage' in *Christianity and Africanculture*.

ed. J.N.K. Mugambi (Nairobi: Acton, 2002), 519

The effect of poor contextualization which is the aftermath of inadequate theological education and preparation of missionaries is very evident today in most African, Nigerian or Igbo societies. It is common to see two ceremonies take place in the same occasion – the church and the tradition. The church conducts ceremonies according to the missionary or church tradition while church members including some pastors and elders conduct another ceremony for the same occasion according to the customs and cultural traditions of the community to pacify the angry villagers. Burials, marriages, title giving or receiving, land acquisitions, age grade, and many such others ceremonies have continued to engender great wrangles, squabbles, and unnecessary quarrels among Christians and their relations in most Igbo and other traditional societies in Nigeria because of this.

One can contextualize the message of the Gospel well or poorly, and it is important to know not only the need for contextualization but also how to engage in the process appropriately. It is not surprising that missionaries and missiologists placed a great deal of emphasis on contextualization, not only of the church in local social structures, but also of the gospel and theology in local cultural forms. 'Contextualization' is more comprehensive and assumes that every theology and form of Christianity is shaped by its particular context, and that they must be so to be relevant and meaningful. It relates the Christian message to all social contexts and cultures, especially including those undergoing rapid change. In other words, contextualization is dynamic and not static, because it allows for constant change.⁴⁰ This approach avoided the foreignness of the gospel. The gospel message had to be communicated in ways the people will understand it by avoiding all forms of ethnocentrism by embracing critical contextualization where the Christian claims of the truth of the gospel and the uniqueness are not denied. These are the checks against Biblical and theological distortion. Separation between form and meaning inherent in western theories blinds people to the fact that form and meaning are inextricably linked among people of other cultures. This is one of the errors that affect contextualization.⁴¹ Another problem is the emphasis that contextualization places on the accurate communication of meaning ignoring the emotive and volitional dimensions of the gospel which is a healthy reminder that in the Bible 'to believe' is not simply to give mental assent to something; it is to act upon it in life.⁴²

Another area of concern is the neglect of the historical context of the Church during discussions on contextualization. Proper exegesis and hermeneutics respect diachronic and synchronic paradigms of Christian truth. It is also of serious concern the uncritical contextualization because it provides no basis for unity among churches in different cultures.⁴³

Paul G. Hiebert made these four helpfully suggestions on how to apply what he called the four levels of contextualization which according to him include: no contextualization, minimal contextualization, uncritical contextualization, and critical contextualization⁴⁴

The no contextualization approach understands the Christian faith as something that is not a part of human culture; it rejects the notion that culture shapes how one receives and practices Christianity.

The minimal contextualization approach acknowledges that differences exist between cultures, but it tries to limit cultural adaptation as much as possible. Under this model, missionaries might translate the Bible into a foreign language but will likely arrange new church plants in a fashion similar to the churches in their home country.

Uncritical contextualization tends to prioritize culture over the Gospel. It minimizes the eternal truths found in Scripture in order to emphasize cultural convictions and practices. Critical contextualization seeks a balanced approach. Critical contextualization preserves Biblical truth as it is encoded in forms that are understood by the people, without making the gospel captive to the contexts.⁴⁵

This is an ongoing process of embodying the gospel in an ever-changing world. Here cultures are seen as both good and evil, not simply as neutral vehicles for understanding the world. No culture is absolute or privileged. People are all involved in relativism by the gospel. Out of all of these approaches, contemporary Christians should prefer critical contextualization. This approach preserves the truths found in the Gospel while also taking into account cultural differences. Several missiologists and theologians have offered suggestions as to how Christians can practice a critical approach to contextualization. Thorn lists six steps to contextualization which he said includes; be present, practice discernment, develop your theology, find courage, speak clearly, and love.⁴⁶ This study explains that when examining a culture, Christians must decide what parts to accept, what parts to reject, and what parts to redeem for Christ. This study is convinced that this assessment tool will allow Christians to contend for the faith as they contextualize the Gospel message.

4. Contextualization of the Gospel

The goal of contextualization is to create indigenous expressions of gospel-centred, mission-shaped churches. Describing what an indigenous church might look like, Allen Tippet writes that when the indigenous people of a community think of the Lord as their own, not a foreign Christ; when they do things as unto the Lord, meeting the cultural needs around them, worshipping in patterns they understand; when their congregations function in participation in a body which is structurally indigenous; then you have an indigenous church.⁴⁷ One of the primary functions of the missionary is to contextualize the Gospel Message in the people's cultural context which empowers and motivates ordinary believers to propagate the Christian message in his/her cultural environment.

22. Augustine S.O. Okwu, 'Evangelization in Pre-colonial Africa: The Case of the Igbo of South-Eastern Nigeria 1857-1900 in Missiology', *An International Review*, Vol. VIII, I, (1980), 4623. Chukwuma O. Okeke, Christopher N. Ibenwa & Gloria T. Okeke, *Conflicts between African Traditional Religion and Christianity in Eastern Nigeria: The Igbo example*, Retrieved June 3, 2007, from <http://journalssagepub.com/doi/full/10>

The uniqueness of the Apostolic missionary model is their absolute dependence on the Holy Spirit for the work of the ministry, Philip see Acts 8:5-13, 28-40; Peter see Acts 9:26-39; Paul and Barnabas see Acts 13:2 to 14:1-28; Paul and Silas see Acts 15:40: 16:7. Apostle Paul contextualized the gospel message so well that within a short time he raised local leaders. To Timothy he said, 'And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others' (NIV). Roland Allen seems to copy from the apostles the principle of contextualization that advocated the Christianity and mission methods that focused on local rather than foreign talent.⁴⁸

Apostles constantly emphasized that the Holy Spirit who came at Pentecost both empowered and motivated ordinary believers to propagate the Christian message. In the apostolic context; true 'indigenous' local churches exist as the spontaneous expression of a proper understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit and that of the missionary – contextualization of the gospel in the indigenous context. Interpreting the message of the Gospel in peoples' cultural context helps to build strong Christians and strong indigenous Christianity.

The gospel message communicated in ways the people will understand it. It avoided the ethnocentrism of a monocultural approach by taking cultural differences seriously and by affirming the good in all cultures. The gospel in Africa is adequately contextualized when the meaning of the message is carefully preserved as it is communicated in native forms. This, in some cases, may involve introducing a new symbolic form, or it may involve reinterpreting a native symbol. It is very necessary for Christian church messengers to distinguish between the scriptures and their theology or understanding of them. The scripture is the record of God's revelation of Himself to humanity while theology is the peoples' understanding of that revelation.⁵⁰

It has become very necessary for Christian church leaders from different cultural settings to reason together, this will drastically reduce cultural blind spots and the tendency of cultural prejudgments. It is obvious that cultural differences are important to a missionary who must go through culture shock, learn to overcome misunderstanding and ethnocentric feelings, and translate this message so that it is understood in the local language and culture. Onwuka commenting on the relationship that should exist between the gospel and culture opined as follows, 'There is a need to distinguish between the Gospel and culture. If we do not, we will be in danger of making our culture the message. One of the primary hindrances to communication is the foreignness of the message, and largely the foreignness of Christian message has been the cultural load we have placed on it. We cannot think without conceptual categories and symbols to express them. As Christian messengers, we should be careful not to add to the biblical message our own'.⁵¹

In each culture, Christians face new questions for which they must find biblical answers. Nevertheless, in many areas, and particularly in biblical and systematic theologies, the example and answers developed in the past can be vastly helpful and a check against error. All Christians must develop theologies, either implicitly or explicitly, as diachronic and synchronic paradigms of Christian truth.⁵² Apostle Paul in his second epistle to Timothy says, 'All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching ... and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work (3:16-17 NIV). Apostle Peter like Paul in his second epistle emphasized the importance of the use of scripture in contextualization (1:20-21 NIV) 'Above all, you must understand that no prophesy of scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit'. This study emphasizes the danger Christianity may face if church leaders fail to examine again the training or preparation their missionaries are given before sending them out. Jesus trained His disciples; ascended to the Father with His mission report and the Holy Spirit was given to the disciples before releasing them to go into 'the world with the Gospel'. The current global survey on theological education project with its empirical research has shown, that 33% of all respondents have stated that there are not enough or even far too few theological schools and theological education programs in their region.⁵³

The Edinburgh 2010 report also had stated as follows:

The integrity and authenticity of all the diverse streams of world Christianity in the 21st century can be maintained and deepened only if we move beyond a situation in which Christianity seems to flourish where theological education does not and vice versa. However, where instead, innovative forms of theological education are emerging which life are giving, renewing, participatory and relevant for the growing charismatic renewal movements in the South and for the renewing churches in the North. What we need for the future is an intentional cooperation and strengthened instruments from both churches and ecumenical agencies to contribute to the advancement of theological education and ecumenical formation in the 21st century.⁵⁴

This is a clarion call at the right time. Every true disciple of Christ who desires to see the Gospel triumph in the face of many challenging oppositions joins any innovative forms of theological education that upgrades Christian evangelism and missionary work in this generation.

5. The Benefit of Contextualization to the Church in Africa

The world is rapidly becoming one world. Peace, prosperity, and survival depend on thinking together as different cultures, peoples, and nations. In cultural anthropology, the move is away from relativism and purely emic approaches to complementary theories and meta-cultural grids.

24. Desmond Tutu, *Crying in the wilderness*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982); Allan Boesak. *Farewell to Innocence*, (New York: Orbis Books, 1977).

25. Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History - Studies in the Transmission of Faith*, (New York & Edinburgh: Orbis and T & T Clark, 1996), 7-9, 100, 115.

26. Todd M. Johnson, Centre for the Study of Global Christianity Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. The full report online is from www.globalchristianity.org/globalcontext.

For example, emic (the people's view of their customs and culture) and etic (an outsider's view of people's customs and culture) models are seen as complementing each other. There appears also to be a growing affirmation that cultural anthropologist can provide meta-cultural grids by which individuals can compare and translate between cultures. Nevertheless, in its analysis of, and dialogue with, other cultures it has begun to free itself of some of its theoretical ethnocentrism. Critical Contextualization here requires developing a method of contextualization among African people that is applicable in other cultural contexts.

6. Exegesis of the Culture Aids Understanding of Gospel

The first step in critical contextualization is to study the local culture phenomenologically; local church leaders and the missionary lead the congregation.

For example, in asking how Christians bury their dead, the people begin by analyzing their traditional rites: first by describing each song, dance, recitation, and rite that makes up their old ceremony, and then by discussing its meaning and function within the funeral rituals. The purpose here is for the missionary or pastor to learn and to understand the old ways to enable him/her contextualize the message of God on Christian funeral for the people to understand the way. If at this point, the missionary shows any criticism of the customary beliefs and practices, the people will not talk about them for fear of being condemned. This shall only drive the old ways underground⁵⁵

7. Exegesis of Scripture and the Hermeneutical Bridge Promote Gospel Contextualization

At this point, the pastor or missionary leads the church in a study of the Scripture related to the question at hand. In the example of funeral practices, the leader must also have a meta-cultural framework that enables him or her to translate the biblical message into the cognitive, affective, and evaluative dimensions of another culture. This step is crucial, for if the people do not clearly grasp the Bible or Christian teaching about death and burial, they will have a distorted view of Biblical teaching on this. This is where proper training of pastors or missionaries is inevitable need for which International Missionary Council (IMC) of World Council of Churches (WCC) beautifully proposed reshaping and strengthening theological education and missionary training for World Christianity for 21st century is a welcomed development.⁵⁶

While the people must be involved in the study of Scripture so that they grow in their abilities to discern the truth, the leader must have the meta-cultural grids that enable him or her to move between cultures. Without this, biblical meanings will often be forced to fit local cultural categories, distorting the message. When theological education and missionary training are reshaped and strengthened as proposed by World Christian Council, missionary work will take a new dimension of efficiency and impact all over the world. Proper exegesis and hermeneutics facilitate gospel contextualization; this encourages proper response to the gospel by the people. When people critically evaluate their past customs in the light of their new biblical understanding, they make more lasting decisions regarding this newfound truth. The gospel is not simply information to be communicated but a message to which people must respond. Leaders may share their personal convictions and point out the consequences of various decisions, but they must allow the people to make the final decision as they evaluate their past customs and traditions.

Involving people in evaluating their own culture help develop them spiritually through learning discernment and applying scriptural teachings to their own lives.⁵⁷

Having led the people to analyze their old customs in the light of biblical teaching, the pastor or missionary must help them to arrange the practices they have chosen into a new ritual that expresses the Christian meaning of the event. Such a ritual will be Christian, for it explicitly seeks to express biblical teaching. It will also be contextual, for the church has created it, using forms the people understand within their own culture. What checks assure people that critical contextualization will not lead them astray? People must recognize that contextualization itself is an ongoing process. The world in which people live is constantly changing raising new questions that require new answers.⁵⁸ Moreover, hermeneutics and exegesis of scripture and its application are partial. Through continued study and spiritual growth, People attain higher level of maturity and come to a greater understanding of the truth.

8. Principles of Critical Contextualization⁵⁹

Principles of critical contextualization take the Bible seriously as the rule of faith and life. People must constantly remind themselves that Biblical revelation is the standard against which all practices are measured.

The following Biblical truth should remain the standard principles of Contextualization.

- Christians affirm that the Bible is the infallible text that exists. It is appropriate to evaluate all other books by the Bible. Christians should be encouraged to search the Scriptures daily to see whether the principles presented by any text or teacher are true (Acts 17:11). Content that is in accord with biblical truth should be embraced. What is contrary to sound doctrine should be rejected.

27. World Council of Churches, 'Public Statement of ETE Accompaniment group' in *Leadership formation in the changing landscapes of world Christianity* Retrieved from <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/news/news-management/eng/a/article/1634/promoting-theological-edu.html>

28. Hiebert. *Anthropological reflections*, 76 -77.

29. Yusufu Turaki. *Theory and practice of Christian missions in Africa: A century of SIM/ECWA history and legacy in Nigeria 1893-1993. Vol.1*, (Nairobi, Kenya: Bible Society Africa, 1999), 482; <https://www.encyclopedia.com>; <https://suninternational.com>

30. Okwu, 'Evangelization in pre-colonial Africa', 46

31. Okwu, 'Evangelization ...', 46

- Christians affirm that there is a biblical precedent for using 'bridges' to reach out to others with the Gospel (Acts 17:22-23). The fact that Paul mentioned an aspect of the Athenians' idolatrous worship was not a tacit approval of their entire religious system. He was merely utilizing a religious element of their setting (an altar to an unknown god) to connect with his hearers and bridge to the truth. Similarly, Christians may use elements of their host culture's worldview to bridge to the Gospel. This need not be construed as an embracing of that worldview. It should be noted that Paul not only used their system to connect, he also contrasted elements of it with the truth. The church evangelism must go beyond bridges to present the whole undistorted truth of the Gospel (1 Corinthians 15:1-4).
- Christians affirm an incarnational approach to missions that is bound by biblical parameters. Following the example of Him who became flesh (John 1:14), it is appropriate that Christians continue to tailor their ministry to their setting. The apostle Paul likewise embraced this approach, 'I am made all things to all men that I might by all means save some' (1 Corinthians 9:22b). Christians advocate the learning and appropriate utilization of language and culture. Constant vigilance is required lest contextualization degenerate into syncretism. Where linguistic categories and cultural mores are deficient, these must be challenged and corrected with biblical truth.
- Christians affirm both the sufficiency and unique nature of biblical revelation (2 Timothy 3:14-17). Christians deny that any other purported sacred writing is on a par with the Bible. While reference to a target people group's religious writing can be made as a part of bridge building, care should be exercised not to imply a wholesale acceptance of such.
- Christians affirm the need to be ethically sound in the church evangelistic methodology (2 Corinthians 4:2). Becoming all things to all men in an incarnational approach does not necessitate an ethical breach. Jesus instructed His disciples to be as 'wise as serpents, and harmless as doves' (Matthew 10:16). Christians are to be wise in their bridge building and to be harmless in their integrity as they hold forth the truth.

9. Conclusion

Contextualization is good and unavoidable. The gospel can—and should—be at home in every culture even in Igbo society. Christians must identify with those the church tries to reach and adapt to their culture, no matter what discomfort it causes them. However, the gospel also challenges and condemns every culture at some points (including the missionaries' own). Where the Bible draws a line, Christians and missionaries must draw a line.

The goal of contextualization is not comfort, but clarity. The gospel will never be comfortable to any fallen society or to any sinful human being in any part of the world. Christians' goal is to make sure that they do not put any obstacles in the way of the gospel themselves, that the only stumbling block is the stumbling block of the cross, and that the meaning of that cross is clear to all people in every place including Igbo society of Southeast Nigeria.

Contextualization as an important component of effective Gospel ministry should be eternal, cross cultural reality, but it comes to people within the context of a human culture. Contemporary Christians and missionaries even in Africa should carefully seek to discern the difference between Gospel truth and cultural tradition.

They should then present the Gospel in a manner that is culturally relevant, taking care to practice the cautions outline here. By doing so, Christians and missionaries can create effective Christian witness in any community of Igbo society in Nigeria, Africa and any other part of the world.

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