

## Review: How Our Culture Has Shifted

### 1. Definition and Importance of ‘Contextualization’:

- Definition: “the faithful and relevant communication of the unchanging message into the language and cultural thought forms of those to whom it is communicated.”<sup>1</sup>
- Importance: If we want to communicate the gospel in a way that will *change* lives, we must have a clear understanding of the way our culture *thinks about* life!

### 2. How American cultural thinking has shifted:<sup>2</sup>

Cultural Phase	Cultural Hope
God (1600-1800)	<u>Jesus is the Redeemer</u> : <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ God-centered view of reality</li><li>▪ Religious (Christian) liberty the highest value</li><li>▪ Biblical Christianity flourishes</li></ul>
Nation (1800-1960)	<u>America is the “Redeemer Nation”</u> : <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ America-centered view of the world</li><li>▪ Civil liberty and patriotism the highest value</li><li>▪ Christianity privileged, but Modernism spreading</li></ul>
Self (1960-Today)	<u>I Am My Own ‘Redeemer’</u> : <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Self-centered view of life</li><li>▪ Self-definition and self-expression the highest value</li><li>▪ “Exclusive humanism” flourishes</li></ul>

### 3. The rise of the anti-supernatural worldview known as “exclusive humanism”:

- Two tenets: 1) nothing beyond the physical universe; *therefore*  
2) no final goal beyond personal happiness in this life.
- Implications: 1) nobody created us or cares for us,  
2) no fixed purpose or morality, *therefore*  
3) follow your heart (YOLO).

### 4. Western society is no longer ‘Christendom,’ but a “post-Christian” mission field.

- No longer assume “background knowledge” of Bible, nor expect respectful hearing.
- Christianity no longer valued as “social glue” of society, but a threat to social progress.

### 5. Though new for us, this situation is biblically, globally, and historically normal.

- This challenges us in how we: 1) *conduct* evangelism, 2) *communicate* the gospel.
- As situation looks increasingly like that of early church, can we learn from them?

<sup>1</sup> B.J. Nicholls, “Contextualization” in *New Dictionary of Theology*.

<sup>2</sup> As noted previously, this chart is based on the analysis of Andrew Delbanco, *The Real American Dream*, cited in Keller, *Counterfeit Gods* (Dutton, 2009), 129-130.

# Contextualization: How We Conduct Apologetics & Evangelism

## I. What We Expect

1. When imagine apologetics or evangelism, what do we typically see in our mind's eye?
  - a. **Special Event.** A defined activity, either conducted by an individual or a group:
    - Large-scale evangelistic rally (Billy Graham, Promise Keepers)
    - Public debates (Christian vs. Muslim, skeptic, etc.)
    - Open-air evangelism
    - Booth at a flea market / county fair
    - Table at a college orientation week
  - b. **Specific Task.** Our task is primarily *informational*:
    - Give them the information necessary to know Jesus,
    - Provide them with contact information for our church, *and hopefully*
    - Persuade them to attend worship.
    - Also: get their contact information so that we can follow-up with them.
2. What underlying assumptions are we making in this process?
  - a. **Faith comes through hearing the Word.**

This is an eminently biblical assumption:

    - “One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul.” (Acts 16:14)
    - “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.” (Rom. 10:17)
    - “The Spirit of God maketh the reading, but especially the preaching of the word, an effectual means of convincing and converting sinners, and of building them up in holiness and comfort, through faith, unto salvation.” (WSC 89)
  - b. **Pastors are the most effective missionaries, *and therefore* public worship services are where most hearts will be won for Christ.**

This is the assumption that we need to examine carefully...

    - Under ‘Christendom,’ this approach seems logical.

In a context where we could assume that people generally have a “background knowledge” of Christian knowledge and an inherited “social respect” for the value of Christian practice... we are really just trying to remind them of what they already know and get them where they already know they ought to be.
    - But does this assumption hold up in a pre- or post-Christian society?

Where, and by whom, were most hearts won for Christ in the early church?

## II. Apologetics/Evangelism in a Pre-Christian Society

### 3. The approach taken by the apostles in the New Testament:

- As Paul and his associates launched their missionary enterprise to the Gentiles, their first stop whenever possible was always the synagogue (Acts 13:5,14; 14:1; 17:1,10,17; 18:4,19; 19:8). This made sense for two reasons:
  - Synagogue-goers had the biblical “background knowledge” necessary, *and*
  - They could anticipate a respectful hearing (Acts 13:14-15):

“...they went on from Perga and came to Antioch in Pisidia. And on the Sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down. After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent a message to them, saying, ‘Brothers, if you have any word of encouragement for the people, say it.’”
  - Based on this data, J. Gresham Machen rightly notes:

“It is hard to exaggerate the service which was rendered to the Pauline mission by the Jewish synagogue. One of the most important problems for every missionary is the problem of gaining a hearing. The problem may be solved in various ways... But for Paul the problem was solved.”<sup>3</sup>
- In places where there was no synagogue, or other forums in addition to the synagogue, Paul and his associates also made use of these. So in Philippi they sought out the “place of prayer” along the riverside (Acts 16:13), and in Athens Paul – besides reasoning in the synagogue – also reasoned “in the marketplace” (17:17) until he was invited to address the Areopagus (17:19-20).
- Both approaches were socially acceptable, natural channels of communication:
  - In an age before radio, television, and the Internet, public speaking was not just considered informative; it was also entertainment:
    - “Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.” (Acts 17:21)
    - “Open-air preaching was no innovation in Judaism. It had long been carried on both in Palestine and elsewhere, in courtyards, open fields, river banks and market places... So there was nothing particularly novel in the open-air work of Christian missionaries. The ancient world was used to it, both in its Jewish form, and as practiced by the wondering Cynic missionaries.”<sup>4</sup>
- **Sum:** although the apostles knew that their *message* would be offensive (1 Cor. 1:22-24), they chose *venues* that were natural and acceptable in their context.

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<sup>3</sup> J. Gresham Machen, *The Origin of Paul's Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947), 10.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, revised ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

#### 4. Under persecution, the early church closed its worship services to outsiders:

“Most improbable of all, the churches did not use their worship services to attract new people. In the aftermath of the persecution of Nero in AD 68, churches around the empire – at varying speeds in varying places – closed their doors to outsiders... By the third century, some churches assigned deacons to stand at the doors, monitoring the people as they arrived. They admitted catechumens to the opening part of worship, the service of the word with its readings and sermon, but not pagans; and to the service of the Eucharist that followed they admitted neither pagans nor catechumens – only the baptized members of the community and believers from other churches with letters of recommendation.”<sup>5</sup>

- **Note: during the key period of Christianity’s expansion, from AD 64-313 (when Christianity was given legal protection by the Emperor Constantine), public worship was *not* the place where most hearts were won for Christ!**

#### 5. In the early church, the home – not a church building – was the center of witness:

This began in the New Testament – cf. Acts 12:12, 17:5, 18:7, 21:8-11.

Besides the security benefits, home-based witness in the early church had other benefits:

- **Relational:** “One of the most important methods of spreading the gospel in antiquity was by the use of homes. It had positive advantages: the comparatively small numbers involved made real interchange of views and informed discussion among the participants possible; there was no artificial isolation of a preacher from his hearers; there was no temptation for either the speaker or the heckler to ‘play to the gallery’ as there was in a public place or open-air meeting. The sheer informality and relaxed atmosphere of the home, not to mention the hospitality which must often have gone with it, all helped to make this form of evangelism particularly successful.”<sup>6</sup>
- **Geographical:** “As Christians went to gatherings in the small flat of a craftworker, or in the bigger apartment of a merchant, people observed their movements... The church’s meeting and social rooms sandwiched within the large apartment buildings, functioned as ‘inconspicuous community centers.’”<sup>7</sup>
- **Such was the impact of home-based witness that the well-known 2<sup>nd</sup> century skeptic, Celsus, complained “it was in private houses that the workers and cobblers, the laundry workers and the yokels... did their proselytizing. Even the children were taught that if they believed ‘they would become happy and make their home happy as well.’”**<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016), 11.

<sup>6</sup> Green, 318.

<sup>7</sup> Kreider, 80.

<sup>8</sup> Green, 318.

6. **In the early church, ordinary Christians – not just leaders – were the chief witnesses.**  
Like the use of homes, this began in the New Testament:

“But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison. Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.” (Acts 8:3-4)

- Note that Saul was attacking not just the apostles, but ordinary “men and women.”
- The Greek word here translated as ‘preaching’ is *euangelizō* – lit. ‘gospeling.’
- This same word shows up again in Acts 11:19-20:

“Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus.”

- Although formal ‘preaching’ as we understand it is biblically restricted to qualified and trained men, **all believers are capable of ‘gospeling’ the gospel (cf. 1 Pet. 3:15).**

What began in the New Testament continued in the early centuries of the church:

- “The rise of persecution and the absence of Christian buildings for worship all hindered formal proclamation of the gospel. It was not easy to gather a large assembly without inviting police action, and Latourette is undoubtedly right in his judgment that **‘the chief agents in the expansion of Christianity appear not to have been those who made it a profession or made it a major part of their occupation, but men and women who carried on their livelihood in some purely secular manner and spoke of their faith to those they met in this natural fashion.’**<sup>9</sup>
- **“It was anonymous Christians, not the officially constituted leaders of the Christian communities, who were primarily responsible for Christianity’s spread.** Lay Christians traveled to new areas and established churches. What caused ordinary Christians to get involved in this? Often it was work. Christians followed their business opportunities or the imperatives of their jobs... Taking their faith with them, in new places they founded Christian cells.”<sup>10</sup>

7. **In the early church, most souls were won not through events, but relationships:**

- Ordinary relationships in the home and in the workplace:

“Masters interacted with slaves; residents met neighbors; and above all believers networked with relatives and work colleagues. In all these relationships, ‘affective bonds’ were formed. The most reliable means of communicating the attractiveness of the faith to others and enticing them to investigate things further was the Christians’ character, bearing, and behavior.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Green, 311.

<sup>10</sup> Kreider, 75.

<sup>11</sup> Kreider, 81.

8. **The early church's most winsome feature was not its public preaching, but its lifestyle:** Green and Kreider point to several factors, of which here are a few:<sup>12</sup>

- Patience in business dealings
- Commitment to sexual purity
- Commitment to “covenant community” – men, women, children, elderly together
- Compassionate generosity to the needs even of non-Christians: “The practical application of charity was probably the most potent single cause of Christian success.”
- Mentoring “internationals”:
  - Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:25-29)
  - Gregory Thaumaturgus (future missionary bishop) lived/studied with Origen
  - Augustine of Hippo (from North Africa) was mentored by Ambrose (in Milan)

### III. Apologetics/Evangelism in a Post-Christian Society

9. **What lessons/principles can we glean from the early church that will help us now?**

1. Knowing that they carried an offensive message, the apostles chose *venues and opportunities* that were the most natural and least offensive.
2. During its most explosive period of growth, the church's approach to evangelism was not centered on special events (not even public worship) but flowed *through the home, the lives, and the relationships of ordinary Christians*.
3. The most effective evangelists in early church history were not famous bishops, but *anonymous men and women and children* whose lives shined with love for Jesus.
4. Early Christian witness was most visible not in public preaching, but in its counter-cultural love – especially toward those ignored or disregarded by society.

10. **How do we apply these lessons?**

- a. Public witness: Though we need not dismiss all event-based outreach, we should be “brutally honest” in evaluating effectiveness. We should also be pivoting decisively toward the most natural and least offensive opportunities available. OPC home missions HQ especially recommends increasing emphasis on online/video outreach.
- b. Paradigm shift: **apologetics/evangelism not *what we do*, but *who we are***. Our witness should not be focused on church-sponsored events, but flow through our homes, our lives, and our natural relationships – neighbors, coworkers, friends.
- c. Patterns of life: a paradigm shift from event- to lifestyle-based evangelism does not mean we cannot be intentional about evangelism. Rather, it means we should be intentional about our whole lives! Here are some examples:
  - Those near the shore who schedule time to walk the pier, get to know regulars.
  - OPC Pastor who baptized friends first met through board-gaming club.
  - Getting involved with upcoming ESL ministry at FSRF (remember Augustine!)

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<sup>12</sup> Kreider, 100-117; Green, 342-346.