

Hesselgrave, David J., and Edward Rommen. *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1989.

David Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen have respected voices in the field of missiology. They have collaborated together to produce *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods and Models*. Before retiring professor emeritus from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Hesselgrave's doctoral work concentrated on rhetoric, specifically cross-cultural communication. He has penned other titles, including *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally* (Zondervan, 1978) and *Planting Churches Cross-Culturally* (Baker, 1980). Rommen earned doctorates from the University of Munich and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. He is also an Orthodox priest in Raleigh, North Carolina.

In *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods and Models*, they offer an integrated introduction to contextualization. Hesselgrave and Rommen survey the biblical, historical, and contemporary understandings of contextualization, then move to describe various attempts at contextualization. Their aim is to provide a holistic framework by which to understand the work on contextualization. One's missiological reflections and practice are influenced by one's perspective. In Part III, they show how utilizing philosophy, theology, anthropology, hermeneutics, and communication theory offer diverse contributions. Of course, each sphere of study has inherent limitations. Equipped with many perspectives and aware of the factors involved, readers can avoid common pitfalls of contextualization. Indeed, the authors conclude their book by sampling various attempts to creatively contextualize the gospel. Henry Rowold, for example, is fair when he asserts that their "description often slips into evaluation and criticism, [yet] this overview certainly highlights the bewildering variety of contextualizations."¹ *Contextualization* is not primarily theological in orientation; that is, it does not propose a theology of contextualization. Instead, it makes observations, analyzing them, and raising questions. The authors attempt to discuss these approaches from an evangelical perspective.²

The book opens by examining the Old and New Testaments, from which the authors derive some initial impressions and clues as to how to proceed in developing an evangelical method of contextualization. They rightly note that contextualization centers around a particular message. Israel's ability to contextualize "was hindered by the lack of a clearly defined message," since the mystery of the gospel had not become clearly manifest. This changed with the coming of Christ.³ The authors' analysis infers that a theology of contextualization arises from a theology of mission. That is, whereas Israel lacked a clear understanding of their divine calling to be a light to the nations, in the New Testament, by contrast, the early church was a people on mission.⁴ The authors conclude that the goal of contextualization is not merely to communicate information, but is in fact to put the gospel into effect, as when the early church sought to reconcile Gentiles and Jews.⁵

¹ Henry Rowold, review of *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models*, *International Review of Mission* 82, no. 327 (July–October 1993): 413–415.

² David Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2000), xi.

³ *Ibid.*, 6–7.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

Historically, the term “contextualization” is new, yet the book points out that Christians have always used diverse methods to share the gospel.⁶ Chapter 2 mentions personal evangelism, moral example, sermons, apologetics, as well as institutions like monasteries and schools. One should note that the focus of contextualization here is *applied* contextualization, not *theological* contextualization. The former refers to methods; the latter to theory and intellectual cohesion to Scripture. The authors remind us that people understand the concept differently, which leads to confusion and debate about *how* to contextualize.

In chapters 4-9, we are introduced to a variety of global perspectives on contextualization. Common to each approach is the aim of showing how the gospel relates to a particular context. According to the examples given, the authors suggest that European and Latin American contextualization have been fueled by politics and economic conditions. Therefore, those like Jurgen Moltmann or Gustavo Gutierrez try to show how the gospel addresses the present suffering of modern society. Anglo-Americans have not surprisingly gravitated to methods based more on social science, such as Kraft’s Dynamic-Equivalence model. Linguistics and anthropology have been very influential on American missiologists, thus raising questions about the theological integrity of these ideas.⁷ Theologians from older civilizations, like Asia and Africa, tend to use a different starting point—their own history and culture. For example, India’s religious pluralism leads some Indian missiologists to reject monism and the exclusivism of traditional Christianity.⁸

African theologians like John Mbiti react against “Westernized Christianity” arguing, “Contextualization of the concept of God in Africa must be based on the reinterpretation of African ontology.”⁹ Similarly, Kosuke Koyama’s Waterbuffalo Theology and some in the Middle East have responded to the influence of western missionaries and make an effort to root contextualization in local thought forms and “felt needs.”¹⁰ As a result, people like Kenneth Bailey and Tim Matheny focus on Middle Eastern forms of communication, like parables (Bailey), or on honor-shame, hospitality, and the welfare of the group (Matheny). The authors’ refrain from a lot of theological critique; instead, they try to be descriptive. This is in keeping with the generally descriptive bent of the authors. Few prescriptions are made, though issues relevant to evangelical Christianity are raised.¹¹

Hesselgrave and Rommen show how the social sciences each speak to the task of contextualization.¹² In applying different frameworks to contextualization, they demonstrate the difficulty of using just one approach. A philosophical perspective on contextualization keeps missions at the level of metadiscourse and does not touch on the practical problems in missions.

⁶ To recount the origin of the term, see p. 28–30. Chapter 2 speaks towards historical methods for communicating the gospel.

⁷ The authors specifically mention Bruce Nicholls as someone trying to ground contextualization in a biblically based theology, contra current events, culture, and the social sciences. See chapter 5, pp. 51–59.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 73–74.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 103, 101.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 119–126 discuss Tim Matheny’s “felt need approach”.

¹¹ This is typically done through contrasting missiological views, as on pp. 107–110.

¹² See chapters 10–14, where philosophy, theology, anthropology, hermeneutics, and communication theory are posited as “frameworks” for contextualizing.

Their chapter, “A Theological Perspective”, is especially helpful for showing the effect of one’s theological convictions on contextualization. In short, they illustrate how theologians typically choose whether cultural context or Biblical text will have priority. Finally, it is questionable whether the authors *evaluate* the anthropological, hermeneutical, and communication perspectives from an evangelical stance because they hardly bring up the Bible.¹³

In the final section of the book (chapters 15-20), we see a few proposals for contextualization. Chapter 15 offers helpful advice in critiquing and constructing contextualizations. They assert, “the contextualizer’s initial task is an interpretive one: to determine not only *what* the [Bible] says but also the *meaning* of what has been said.”¹⁴ Here, the authors show their evangelical mores by reminding us that contextualization is limited by the small range of interpretations afforded by the original biblical culture.¹⁵ Their model interacts biblical culture, modern Christian culture, and the target culture.¹⁶ The latter inevitably filters how one reads the Bible. Unfortunately, although the authors go to great length in showing how the various social sciences speak to our ways or thinking, acting, and expression, they do not address the theological questions that ground their model. If biblical “authenticity” is essential for “relevance”, why so little talk on this point?¹⁷

Though generally descriptive in nature, the final chapters offer a few insights. For example, since knowledge is “intimately related to life”, our contextualizations must address worldview and utilize Biblical Theology.¹⁸ Chapter 17 is helpful in exposing a tendency to fall back on our own culture in devising contextual strategies. The contextualizations for Muslims and nominal Christians seem a bit piecemeal, largely ignoring what has already been said.¹⁹

Hesselgrave and Rommen’s work is valuable because it describes a range of views and attempts at contextualization; however, the book lacks thoroughgoing theological argumentation. Instead, the reader is left with the impression that contextualization is primary about the social sciences. The authors suggest that Scripture should inform the missionary’s message and that Biblical Theology should shape our worldviews. In addition, book aims to evaluate the different models from an evangelical perspective. Yet, they give little attention to making this perspective explicit. The reader is not advised how to biblically assess culture. In contrast, Bruce Ashford applies their admonition when he rightly asserts that a “unified biblical narrative. . . will enable us to understand this notion of culture.”²⁰ All contextualizations connect to local context in one way or another, via politics, economics, traditions, religion, etc. Yet, the authors give no advice for prioritizing the needs of the context, that is, in showing the Scripture’s relevance. Theologically, how are we to judge the most important aspects of a culture? Is it appropriate that

¹³ This goal is stated in the preface (xi), but here, the authors merely “explain”.

¹⁴ Ibid., 201.

¹⁵ Ibid., 201–202.

¹⁶ Ibid., 200.

¹⁷ Authenticity and relevance are the dual aims of the authors (p. 199). However, the lion’s share of the book fixates on the goal of relevance.

¹⁸ Ibid., 220. This section offers exceptional starting place for doing *theological* contextualization.

¹⁹ For example, if western culture is prone to analytical dichotomies, why not offer a more unified narrative? In addition, why do they primarily appeal to the law motif if they recognize the need to speak about honor–shame in Muslim cultures?

²⁰ Bruce Riley Ashford, “The Gospel and Culture”, Unpublished paper, 5.

Latin-American theologians start with economics where as Middle Easterners might start with honor and shame? How are we to evaluate one starting point from another?

Ashford suggests that contextualization should be “faithful”, “meaningful”, and “dialogical”. *Contextualization* excels at showing those “points of contact” whereby gospel meets culture.²¹ Yet, in the end, they do not have a true dialogue with Scripture. They show the diversity in questions posed by the world’s cultures. As David Clark astutely remarks, “Questions framed in terms of non-Western cultures can help illuminate blind spots. So the categories of Scripture should challenge the conceptual framework of all cultures.”²² This conversation is absent in Hesselgrave and Rommen’s work. We do not hear the ways that these models challenge evangelical theology nor how theology might adequately respond to these questions. We are told of the many perspectives of social science. However, we cannot assume these perspectives are equally relevant. Clark warns us against simply answering the culture’s concerns rather than “transforming” them.²³ As Ashford adds, “we must also allow the gospel to critique the culture in which it is embodied and proclaimed.”²⁴ Hesselgrave and Rommen are silent in this regard, instead allowing the social sciences to speak nearly uninterrupted. As theological conversations “reshape the concerns that arise” in a given context, we will be able to discern the value of each social science and the categories of thought posed by individual cultures.²⁵

²¹ Ibid., 16–17.

²² David K. Clark, *To Know and Love God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2003), 118.

²³ Ibid., 115.

²⁴ Ashford, 21.

²⁵ Clark, 122.