

Contextualizing the Messenger: Applying Charles Kraft's Theory of Communication to the Forming of Cross-Cultural Ministers¹.

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Introduction

Contextualization is a continual part of communication. Contextualization, forming a message so that the hearer understands, happens in large and small ways continuously throughout the world. Adults contextualize messages for children, one language group explains what they are saying as they interact with another, technicians explain the special terms they use in “layman’s language.” Failure to communicate is often caused by an inability to contextualize.

The process of contextualization applies to communication in any context but is perhaps most familiar to the Church in the process of biblical translation. The goal and process of contextualization include issues such as literal translation, dynamic equivalency, and changes in a peoples’ use of language that require continually updating translations already made. A final translation of the Bible in any language will not be achieved since languages and the ways people communicate verbally and in written form continually change.²

Although the process of making messages understandable has been in use for millennia, contextualization as a technical concept of cross-cultural ministry dates from the 1970s when first used in a paper published by the Theological Education Fund.³ In identifying contextualization David Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen note,

¹ In this paper “minister” is used in the broader sense of the work of the gospel rather than the narrower sense of “pastor.”

² Contextualization, whether specifically named or not, has characterized the communication of the gospel since biblical times whether considering the Septuagint or the process of going from Aramaic to Greek to Latin to the variety of languages of the peoples of the world today.

³ David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models*. Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA: Baker Book House, 1989. p. 28.

From this point of view Christian contextualization can be thought of as the attempt to communicate the message of the person, works, Word, and will of God in a way that is faithful to God's revelation, especially as it is put forth in the teachings of the Holy Scripture, and that is meaningful to respondents in their respective cultural and existential contexts.⁴

Three components of the contextualization process are the focus of consideration here: the message, the messenger, and the cultural context of each which must somehow be bridged. These three components may be considered separately, as is often done in seeking to understand components and their relationship to the working of the whole, dynamic, process. In all efforts of communicating the gospel, especially cross-culturally, these components may not be separated (and certainly none may be omitted) but form important aspects of the whole.

Communicating a message through language is very much the work of human beings. Conrad Phillip Kottak notes that although animals use a call system, a communication system, only humans are able to devise and use languages.⁵ Communicating the message clearly so that two people seem to at least understand what is being said is the beginning of dialogue. But is the process of contextualization only to be concerned with the message, with *what* is said? Christians would also insist that contextualizing the message of the Scripture must involve the work of God's Holy Spirit, emphasizing that it is not simply a mechanical process.

However, in all Christian communication, including cross-cultural ministry, one is concerned not only that the message be faithful to Scripture and appropriate to the culture of the hearers, but that the messenger, the one conveying the message, also be faithful to the message and appropriate in the culture of the hearer. Is living a moral life necessary to communicate a

⁴ Hesselgrave and Rommen, 200. The authors continue, "Contextualization is both verbal and nonverbal, and has to do with theologizing; Bible translation, interpretation, and application; incarnational lifestyle; evangelism; Christian instruction; church planting and growth; church organization; worship style—indeed with all of those activities involved in carrying out the Great Commission."

⁵ Conrad Phillip Kottak, *Cultural Anthropology*, 12e. New York, New York USA: McGraw-Hill, 2008. p. 124

message with moral implications? Not *necessarily*, at least not technically. However, even those who are not Christian expect that the Christian *message* will be accompanied by a Christian *messenger*. Is the extent of this relationship between message and messenger simply that of forming a proper platform for the message? Too often the reply is, “yes.” Is the essential message affected or changed to any extent by the messenger? Too often the response is, “no,” or, “not much.” The messenger *should be* in harmony with the message, but, thankfully, (some would insist) the message, especially the message of the gospel, will still retain its strength in spite of the devilish actions of the one giving the message.

Is the message so easily separated from the messenger?

Charles H. Kraft, Sun-Hee Kwak Professor of Anthropology and Intercultural Communication at Fuller Theological Seminary, points to the inseparable relationship between the message and the messenger in his book *Communication Theory for Christian Witness*.⁶ This paper reviews Kraft’s thesis and asks the question, “Must the principles of contextualization, usually described in terms of the contextualization of a message, also be applied to the communicator of a message?” The writer holds that the principles of contextualization must be applied to both the message and the messenger identified as they are, as noted by Kraft, and requires an approach that Kraft terms “receptor-oriented communication.”

Accepting Kraft’s point, then, that the messenger is an essential part of the message, and that a message must be contextualized in order for it to be not only scripturally faithful but culturally appropriate, I contend that the messenger must be contextualized as well. This then, in part, is the task of the forming of cross-cultural messengers of the gospel.

⁶ Charles H. Kraft, *Communication Theory for Christian Witness*, Maryknoll, New York USA: Orbis Books, 1991.

Kraft's Theory of Communication for Christian Witness

In *Communication Theory for Christian Witness*, Charles H. Kraft refers to the incarnation as the proper model for all Christian cross-cultural communication. Beginning with the gaps that exist between God and humans, and then between humans themselves, Kraft notes that God communicated by bridging the gap in a person, the person of Jesus Christ. These gaps always require a bridge if communication is to occur, and the bridge must of necessity be personal.

As Kraft describes the characteristics of God's communicational strategy, this aspect of the personal is particularly significant for this paper,

A second characteristic of God crucial to his communicational strategy is *his personalness*. He does not, as we often do, seek either to love or to communicate impersonally. Rather, God identifies personally with his receptors. As a person God interacts with and becomes vulnerable to his receptors. Finally, *God becomes the message*. When God sends, he sends persons. When God comes, he comes as a person. Incarnation—personal participation in the lives of his receptors—is his constant method. And as in all life-changing communication, the person (whether God himself in Christ or another person as God's representative) is the major component of the message conveyed. [author's italics throughout]⁷

In Kraft's understanding of God's method of communicating, and the model that he insists must be the Christian communication model, the message and messenger are inseparable.⁸ One may see that this is in distinction to understanding that a message may be properly formed, contextualized, and delivered apart from the human messenger. Kraft's point runs counter to assumptions arising out of current practices in Western societies considering the overwhelming number of messages that are sent continually in a multitude of ways including the Internet, cell phone, satellite, PDA to PDA, etc. The West is overwhelmed with data, with messages that are sought as well as those unsolicited. By contrast, the linking of message with messenger (as does

⁷ Kraft, *Communication Theory for Christian Witness*, 17

⁸ Not completely identified on the one hand, nor independent of each other on the other.

Kraft) seems ponderously slow and out of sync with the pace and possibilities of distributing large amounts of information virtually instantaneously.

Kraft's thesis may seem acceptable in the context of the first century but is it appropriate today when messages may be transmitted and received almost instantaneously from and to virtually any part of the world? The scope and impact of Jesus, including God's message in Jesus, seems incredible when considering that he traveled only within a small area of a few tens of kilometers and had no technology, other than what was written by disciples and observers, to preserve his message. Had Jesus had available to him the technology we have today, would he have employed a different strategy? Or, if Jesus were to have been incarnated in these times, would he use technology differently to communicate God's intention for the peoples of the world?⁹ Would there be a separation, or at least a lessening, of the essential relationship between message and messenger?

In line with his thesis, Kraft identifies several misunderstandings of communication. He refers to these as "Myths Concerning Communication."¹⁰ Particularly significant for this paper are the following:

*Myth: Words contain their meanings.*¹¹

Rather than containing meaning as a loaded truck contains goods, the meanings of words are not contained in the words themselves but are agreed upon by those who use them. Even words within a language can have different meanings depending on who is using them (as Peruvians and Argentineans discover when in the other's country).

⁹ Assuming that had the Incarnation not occurred when it did, in the fullness of time, civilization would be at the point of development where it is today.

¹⁰ Kraft, *Communication Theory for Christian Witness*, 24-37.

¹¹ Ibid. 33

*Myth: The key to effective communication is the precise formulation of the message.*¹²

Concern for the exact formulation of the message, especially if language of the hearer is not the focus, neglects the fact that the hearing of the message and its interpretation are in the hands of the hearer. Kraft notes that effective communicators “concern themselves with person factors more than with the impersonal, structural, and linguistic factors in message construction.”¹³ These “person factors” include aspects of how people in a specific context relate to each other and what these relationships mean for hearing messages.

*Myth: What people really need is more information.*¹⁴

Information is part of the message. However, many people have more than enough information to know about Christ but lack the motivation to go on to belief.

*Myth: The words of the Bible are so powerful that all people need to bring them to Christ is to be exposed to hearing or reading the Bible.*¹⁵

Certainly people have come to faith in Christ through reading the Bible in a hotel room or in some other venue, showing that the Holy Spirit works in ways beyond human understanding. However, God’s preferred way of communicating is through the sharing of his message by humans who already have established relationships on which a credible witness is based.

¹² Kraft, *Communication Theory for Christian Witness*, 32-33

¹³ Ibid. 33

¹⁴ Ibid. 35

¹⁵ Ibid 25

Receptor-Oriented Communication

Kraft further explains this communicational model by reference to “receptor-oriented communication.” He describes the concept:

“First of all, we recognize the loving nature of God in his communicational activity. To love is to seek the best for the recipient at whatever expense to the source. *To love communicationally is to put oneself to whatever inconvenience necessary to assure that the receptors understand.* We call this ‘receptor-oriented communication.’ This is God’s approach and should be ours.” [author’s italics]¹⁶

In the incarnation God entered the frame of reference of humanity in order to communicate his message. Kraft observes, “*God is receptor-oriented, seeking to reach his receptors by entering their frame of reference* and by participating in their life, in order to be maximally intelligible to them.” [author’s italics]¹⁷

In this Kraft focuses on the relationship between the one communicating a message and the hearer (communicator and receptor, or sender and receiver). Using the Incarnation as the model, Kraft stresses the responsibility of the communicator to do the difficult work of understanding the frame of reference of the hearer and putting the message in that hearer’s frame of reference rather than requiring the hearer to do the difficult work of learning the communicator’s frame of reference in order to understand the message.

Implications

I see the following as at least some of the implications of receptor-oriented communication as Charles Kraft describes it.

- 1) The communicator understands the message to be communicated.
- 2) The communicator understands his/her own context in which the message has been learned.
- 3) The communicator values the hearer (receptor).

¹⁶ Kraft, *Communication Theory for Christian Witness*, 15

¹⁷ Ibid. 16

- 4) The communicator is willing to learn the receptor's frame of reference in order to contextualize the message.
- 5) The communicator is willing to go to whatever inconvenience necessary to assure that the receptors understand the message within their frame of reference.
- 6) The communicator recognizes that she/he is part of the message communicated.

Applying these to the contextualizing of the messenger, the forming of cross-cultural ministers, I offer the following reflections on these implications.

- 1) The messenger understands the message to be communicated.

Cross-cultural ministers must understand the gospel and its implications. This is necessarily a theological endeavor and includes an understanding of a proper approach to and use of the Bible, particularly including how we, as Wesleyans, approach the Scriptures. It includes seeing cross-cultural ministry in the broader terms of the *missio Dei*, knowing something of the history of the development of the church (particularly the *missiones ecclesiae*¹⁸), and appreciation for the universal Church and our place within it. An essential part of the task of messenger contextualization is this theological/doctrinal preparation. If, as Thomas A. Noble properly insists, every Christian is necessarily a theologian,¹⁹ it is imperative then that all cross-cultural ministers have a grasp of the biblical and theological bases out of which our mission arises.

- 2) The communicator understands his/her own context in which the message has been learned.

The gospel is for all peoples and the message of the Scriptures is for all contexts. However, we always learn within a specific cultural context. One of the most crucial steps in messenger contextualization is the uncovering of one's own (especially cultural) assumptions as

¹⁸ Bosch summarizes the use of these two terms. "[Mission] *Missio Dei* enunciates the good news that God is a God-for-people. *Missions* (the *missiones ecclesiae*: the missionary ventures of the church), refer to particular forms, related to specific times, places, or needs, of participation in the *missio Dei*. David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. Maryknoll, New York USA: Orbis Books, 1991. p. 10

¹⁹ Thomas A Noble, "The Knowledge of the Glory of God." Address delivered March 25, 1997 upon induction as Professor of Theology at Nazarene Theological Seminary. *The Tower*, vol. I (1997), 9-23 (p. 16).

these greatly affect one's understanding of the gospel and the Church's mission. One's own cultural assumptions and the worldview out of which these arise are subtle and often not recognized without guidance and sincere probing. To fail to understand one's own assumptions that inform everything a person is and does creates barriers (though often unrecognized) leading to failure to enter the frame of reference of the hearer. The message is thus held hostage to a particular cultural reference.

3) The communicator values the hearer (receptor)

Cross-cultural ministers value the people they serve. Following the model of the Incarnation, we value (love) those with whom we communicate as indicated by the lengths we are willing to go to understand and communicate within their frame of reference. The enculturation one receives as a part of growing up in a particular cultural context includes ways of regarding "others." These pre-judgments (prejudices) carry over throughout life, often without our awareness, and must be consciously dealt with in the contextualizing of the messenger if the message is to have validity.

4) The communicator is willing to learn the receptor's frame of reference in order to contextualize the message

Understanding a receptor's frame of reference is long and painstaking work. It requires suspending valuing from our own frame of reference in order to see the world from the view of another. Messengers learn to withhold judgment regarding beliefs and practices until they can begin to understand these from the insider's (*emic*²⁰) viewpoint.

²⁰ *emic* – insider's perspective, *etic* – outsider's perspective For an example of the use of these terms see Paul G. Hiebert and Eloise Hiebert Meneses, *Incarnational Ministry: Planting Churches in Band, Tribal, Peasant, and Urban Societies*. Grand Rapids, Michigan USA: Baker Books, 1995. pp. 14-15

This is particularly difficult because we have learned specific ways that the gospel calls us to live within our own cultural context. Without understanding our own cultural assumptions we tend to automatically judge others from this self-centered viewpoint. Loving another requires seeking to understand the world from his/her view. A formative question for the contextualizing messenger to ask is, “Why does this belief/practice make sense to this person/people in this context?”

Learning to see the world from another perspective also involves learning to see categories that may not exist for the messenger. For example, those enculturated in the West, or who study in institutions developed with Western assumptions growing out of a modern/enlightenment perspective, may not see the importance of traditional religious beliefs and practices that inform daily life. Categories with which the messenger is unfamiliar may be easily considered unimportant to the mission at hand, but may actually be major influencers on how messages are received, interpreted, and applied.²¹

5) The communicator is willing to go to whatever inconvenience necessary to assure that the receptors understand the message within their frame of reference.

Contextualization is difficult and complex. Direct, word for word, translations (written, spoken, sung) may not communicate the intended message. Translating hymns or gospel songs valued in one cultural context may not elicit the same response in another.²² Again, the Incarnation serves as a model. God did not require humans to learn a special vocabulary in order to understand what God was saying. Jesus was enculturated into the culture in which he was born

²¹ The Christian message involves calling people to an all-encompassing allegiance to Jesus Christ. How important then for Christian messengers to understand the role already played by current allegiances, especially those of traditional, or folk, religions. This is an essential part of the contextualizing of cross-cultural messengers. Hiebert, Shaw, and Tiéno have produced a very valuable work in *Understanding Folk Religion: a Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices* that should be a part of every cross-cultural minister's toolbox library.

²² A considerable amount has been written describing the relationship between *form* and *meaning* and their implications in cross-cultural settings. See, for example, Charles H. Kraft, *Anthropology for Christian Witness*, Maryknoll, New York USA: Orbis Books, 1996. p 132ff.

to the extent that the response of some to his preaching and healing was, “Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him.” (Mark 6:33 NRSV)

Another difficulty arises because one must continually lay aside one’s own ways of valuing for the sake of another’s way of looking at the world. A cross-cultural minister continually lays aside her/his own context while learning to appreciate and take up that of another. Paul G. Hiebert, Daniel G. Shaw, and Tite Tiénou suggest a process termed “Critical Contextualization” to assist churches in receiving new believers from non-Christian backgrounds. This process seeks to deal fairly with the cultural context out of which the new believers come, neither rejecting out of hand, or simply accepting, all old ways uncritically.²³

6) The communicator recognizes that the messenger is part of the message communicated.

Kraft’s thesis, that the messenger and message cannot be separated, underlies receptor-oriented communication. The cross-cultural minister is a bridge over which God communicates God’s intentions for all the peoples of the world. The cross-cultural minister cannot be replaced nor taken out of the communication process for it is she/he who models the Incarnation, communicating in a person the very personal message of God.

Accepting the identity of the message also means accepting rejection and misunderstanding. Responding as did Jesus, our model of messenger, in love rather than hurtful response requires grace.

²³ Paul G. Hiebert, Daniel G. Shaw, and Tite Tiénou, *Understanding Folk Religions: a Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices*. Grand Rapids, Michigan USA: Baker Books, 1999. See chapter 1, “Split Level Christianity” pp 21-29. The four steps in the process of Critical Contextualization are 1) Phenomenological Analysis, 2) Ontological Critique, 3) Evaluative Response, and 4) Transformative Ministries.

Related Issues

Several related issues arise when accepting Kraft's model and applying it to contextualizing cross-cultural messengers.

1) Denominational distinctives.

What does Kraft's thesis mean for a denominational mission such as the Church of the Nazarene? Does recognizing one's own frame of reference, and then purposely laying it aside in order to enter into another's mean that no denominational distinctives carry over? I think not. This conference itself, and the theology conference that follows, show that our denominational distinctive of Wesleyan holiness does translate into a variety of cultural contexts.

One of the difficulties is determining how these distinctives have been learned and valued in one context and then doing the difficult work of not just stating the essential doctrine in the language of another, but going on to discover what this implies in the believer's life in the new context. This work is personal, requiring people who will walk together in the fellowship of disciples, discovering for both what the shared message involves.

It is most difficult to let go of those ways of understanding that are most dear to us, those ways that we express the glories of the various doctrines in prayer, song, and explication. Our self-centeredness is tempered when we consider what it would be like had these glories never become part of *our* frame of reference. Using only plainsong, Latin, or Psalmody would be a hard sell among English speakers in some areas of the church today.

2) Multi-cultural composition of Nazarene missionaries

Another issue is how shall cross-cultural ministers be formed when, to use the subtitle of Samuel Escobar's *The New Global Mission*, the gospel is now going *from everywhere to*

everyone.²⁴ Global missionaries in the Church of the Nazarene are increasingly assigned from a variety of countries and cultures. Regionally appointed missionaries represent all Regions of the Church. What should be the process of forming for any, or all, of these missionaries who are cross-cultural ministers serving as representatives of the Church of the Nazarene?

The increasingly varied cultural make-up of the missionary personnel of the Church requires that these understandings of Kraft's theses and their implications inform all of those appointed to serve. The questions, "what is the cultural context of this message" and "what are my cultural assumptions that inform my understandings" must be asked and answered if the Church of the Nazarene continues to move toward a global church rather than a global federation of churches.

3) What about support/volunteer workers?

A third issue arising is the level of training required for the various types of support missionaries sent out. Do volunteers need the same kinds of understanding as global and regional missionaries? This question is best answered by reference to what the Church sees as its mission and the role that support-volunteers and short-term personnel have in accomplishing that mission. David A. Livermore discovered that short-term volunteers were often very short on understanding the mission of the church and their role in that mission.²⁵ Understanding their role as cross-cultural ministers, even though for a short-time involvement, and understanding the theses Kraft suggests (can't separate the message and the messenger, and receptor-oriented communication) would enable short-term volunteers to contribute more to the mission of global missionaries rather than be a necessary but often intrusive exception to the task.

²⁴ cf. Samuel Escobar, *The New Global Mission: the Gospel from Everywhere to Everyone*. Downers Grove, Illinois USA: Intervarsity Press, 2003.

²⁵ cf. David A. Livermore, *Serving with Eyes wide Open: Doing Short-Term Missions with Cultural Intelligence*. Grand Rapids, Michigan USA: Baker Books, 2006.

4) The degree to which messengers need contextualizing.

The fourth, and to this writer the most significant, issue is that if the messenger and message cannot be separated, and if contextualizing the messenger is as vital as that of the message, then only contextualized messengers are qualified to be cross-cultural messengers. This includes not just global and regional missionaries, but to support-volunteers as well, at least to some degree. It extends to every aspect of communicating the message of the gospel.

The designation “cross-cultural” applies to any area where cultures meet. Throughout the world smaller towns as well as large cities are becoming increasingly multicultural as travel and relocation for education and business becomes a part of a globalizing world. Pastors and congregations in communities once considered monocultural need to understand contextualizing messengers as much as missionaries who move from one country to another. Cross-cultural ministry still requires going, but in today’s flat world it also means receiving those who are coming.

Is there any disciple of Jesus Christ who does not need to be contextualized just as much as the message she/he is longing to speak to another?

Conclusion

The message of the gospel cannot be separated from the messenger. Therefore, contextualizing of the messenger is as important as contextualizing the message. As a missiologist with a social science background, Charles Kraft gives us insight as to why this process must be undertaken, using the incarnation of Jesus Christ as the proper model for all Christian communication. With cross-cultural ministers being sent from every part of the Church

of the Nazarene to everyone throughout the world, this contextualizing is as crucial now as it has ever been.