TOWARD A FAITHFUL CONTEXTUALIZATION

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Abstract

Toward a Faithful Contextualization. When gospel and culture meet, is the message biblically faithful and culturally appropriate? A theology that begins with culture and where culture is the determining factor will unavoidably end in syncretism. Adventist theology does not start with the cultural context but with the biblical text. A valid approach to contextualization demands a commitment to biblical authority. The message of the Bible must not be compromised. In examining the topic of contextualization, this article first reviews the concepts of culture, a definition of contextualization itself, and the issue of syncretism. Then, it considers different approaches to the balance of Scripture and cultural setting, followed with a focus on the important issues of contextualization and culture, and contextualization and doctrines. In the two final sections, the article deals with implications for missions, evangelism, and pastoral ministry, and considers a faithful approach to contextualization.

Keywords*: Gospel, culture, contextualization, Scripture.*

Resumen

Hacia una contextualizazión fiel. Cuando el evangelio y la cultura se encuentran, ¿es el mensaje bíblicamente fiel y culturalmente apropiado? Una teología que parte de la cultura y donde la cultura es el factor determinante, terminará indudablemente en sincretismo. La teología adventista no parte del contexto cultural sino del texto bíblico. Una aproximación válida para la contextualización demanda un compromiso con la autoridad bíblica. El mensaje de la Biblia no debe ser comprometido. Al examinar el tema de la contextualización, este artículo revisa primero el concepto de cultura, una definición de contextualización y el asunto del sincretismo. Entonces, se considera diferentes aproximaciones para el balance entre la Escritura y el contexto cultural, seguido por un foco sobre asuntos importantes de la contextualización y la cultura, y la contextualización y las doctrinas. En las dos secciones finales, el artículo trata sobre las implicancias para la misión, el evangelismo y el ministerio pastoral considerando un acercamiento fiel para la contextualización.

Palabras clave*: Evangelio, cultura, contextualización, Escritura.*

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1. Introduction

The universal nature of Christ's missionary mandate (Matt 28:18-20) and the global nature of the church bring with it the challenge of presenting the biblical message to people from different cultures who speak different languages. The church faces the challenging task of communicating the gospel across socio-cultural boundaries so that it becomes alive in the hearts of people in the receiving culture. This task involves not just the application of the biblical message to the context of new converts who must relate to their cultural roots, which includes food, dress, medicines, songs, dances, myths, rituals, and much more that is part of their lives. It also involves faithfulness to the gospel in a society where Christianity seems well established.

The decisive questions are: How can the gospel be preached effectively in a different culture without losing its essential message? How can divinely inspired principles be faithfully expressed in different cultural styles? The need for reasonable answers to these questions as well as new philosophical ideas led missionaries and theologians to develop approaches that have been called *contextualization*.

Shoki Coe coined the term *contextualization* as a result of his reflection on "text and context," which eventually led to a discussion on *contextuality* and *contextualization*.[1] The first use of this expression in a publication was

[1] F. Ross Kinsler "Mission and Context: The Current Debate about Contextualization," *Evangelical Mission Quarterly* 14, no. 1 (1978): 24.

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in *Ministry in Context*, published in 1972 with funds provided by the International Missionary Council of the World Council of Churches.[2] The fact that *contextualization* was coined in ecumenical circles led many evangelicals suspicious of the term,[3] but by the end of the decade *contextualization* was being used in ecumenical and evangelical thinking, though with different understandings. Charles Kraft and Paul Hiebert provided the theoretical bases for the evangelical views.

Different words have been used to describe the process of contextualization. One of this is *indigenization*, which comes from the word indigenous and means "native to a given area."[4] Another word used is *accommodation* which has consistently been preached as the official policy of the Roman Catholic Church.[5] *Translation* is another concept which is related to the dynamic-equivalence as part of a Bible translation theory, developed by Eugene A. Nida, a linguist who coined the term "dynamic equivalence translation."[6] Among the terms used, *transculturation* also appears and according

[2] David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2000), 28.

[3] See a list of perceived dangers of contextualization in Harvie M. Conn, *Eternal Word and Changing Worlds: Theology, Anthropology, and Mission in Trialogue* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 176-177.

[4] *Indigenizatio*n was widely used in Christian missions where it referred "to making the Gospel understood in the language and thought forms of the local people and to efforts to make the church autonomous in its organization." Adaptations were usually done under the paternalistic supervision of missionaries. Paul G. Hiebert, "Indigenization," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, 1989; https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Indigenization&oldid=92097.

[5] John Considine, *Fundamental Catholic Teaching on the Human Race* (Maryknoll, NY: Maryknoll, 1961), 59-71; Louis J. Luzbetack, *The Church and Cultures* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989), 68. However, many examples of faulty adjustments demonstrate that accommodation has been more a compromise of the faith than an adaptation to the culture. Donald A. McGavran, "The Biblical Base from Which Adjustments Are Made," in *Christopaganism or Indigenous Christianity?* ed. Tetsunao Yamamori and Charles R. Taber (South Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1975), 42-52.

[6] Dynamic equivalence is the "quality of a translation in which the message of the original text has been so transported into the receptor language that the *response* of the *receptor* is essentially like that of the original receptors." Eugene A. Nida and Charles R. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation, with Special Reference to Bible Translating* (Leiden: Brill, 1969), 200. Dynamic equivalence "is directed primarily toward equivalence of response rather than equivalence in form." Ibid., 166. In support for this approach, Charles H. Kraft states, "Dynamic-equivalence theologizing is the reproducing in contemporary cultural contexts of the theologizing process that Paul and the other scriptural authors exemplify." Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A*

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to Kraft and it aims "to represent the 'meanings' [the eternal truth of the Word of God] or past events as if they were clothed in contemporary events."[7] The term *inculturation* also is referred.[8]

Already in the 19th century, Seventh-day Adventists used the concept of *adaptation* to describe the attempt to reach the people in different cultures with the biblical message: "The people of every country have their own peculiar, distinctive characteristics, and it is necessary that men should be wise in order that they may know how to adapt themselves to the peculiar ideas of the people."[9] "We also must learn to adapt our labors to the condition of the people—to meet men where they are."[10] This adaptation to the peculiar ideas of the people for the early Adventists did not give precedence to culture over Scripture; it just stressed to Adventists the need to be sensitive as they worked in other cultures.

2. Culture

"Most definitions characterize culture as something that is widely shared by members of a social group and shared in virtue of belonging to that group."[11] The variety of perspectives presented here illustrate that definitions of culture are not final and, in fact, are matters of controversy.

The pioneer anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor stated in 1871 that culture is "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a

Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988), 291.

7 Kraft, *Christianity in Culture*, 280. In accomplishing this task, "theological truth must be re-created like a dynamic-equivalence translation or transculturation." Ibid., 297.

8 Dennis M. Doyle, "Concept of Inculturation in Roman Catholicism: A Theological Consideration," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 30, no. 1 (2012): 1-13. The word *inculturation* suggests the transfer of the faith from one culture to another but in a higher sense than mere acculturation since it presupposes a measure of reinterpretation. Peter Schineller, *A Handbook in Inculturation* (New York: Mahawah, 1990), 22. This approach sees "a dialectical interaction between the cultural situation, the Catholic faith, and the minister's experience." Ibid., 75.

9 Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1944), 213.

10 Ellen G. White, *Evangelism* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1946), 57.

11 Jesse Prinz, "Culture and Cognitive Science," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. *Edward* N. Zalta; https://stanford.library.sydney.edu.au/archives/win2019/entries/culture-cogsci/.

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member of society."[12] This definition became classical, but it has been criticized for lumping together external and internal elements. Bronislaw Malinowski's formulation separated them: "Culture is a well-organized unity divided into two fundamental aspects—a body of artifacts and a system of customs."[13]

On the external side, anthropologists have focused on both artifacts and behaviors. An even more radical break from internal options can be found in Marvin Harris' approach, called "cultural materialism," which includes factors such as the ecological conditions in which a group lives and the technologies available to it.[14] This view defines culture as "what human beings make of the world."[15]

Internal or psychological approaches to culture are also prevalent. For instance, Ruth Benedict maintained that cultures had a distinctive character very much like individuals. In her book *Patterns of Culture*, she admitted different degrees of psychological integration.[16] P. J. Richerson and R. Boyd define culture as "information capable of affecting individuals' behavior that they acquire from other members of their species through teaching, imitation, and other forms of social transmission."[17] This view is relevant for the study of contextualization.

According to Harvie Conn, the term *culture* refers to the "common ideas, feelings, and values that guide community and personal behavior, that organize and regulate what the group thinks, feels, and does about God, the world, and humanity."[18] At the same time, "Culture is defined as the shared patterns of behaviors and interactions, cognitive constructs, and affective understanding that are learned through a process of socialization.

12 Edward Burnett Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches in the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art and Custom* (London: John Murray, 1871), 1.

13 Bronislaw Malinowski, "Culture," in Edwin R. A. Seligman, ed. *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences (*New York: Macmillan, 1931), 4:623.

14 Marvin Harris, Cultural Materialism: The Struggle for a Science of Culture (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira, 2001).

15 Andy Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 37.

16 Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* (New York: Mentor, 1950).

17 P. J. Richerson and R. Boyd, *Not by Genes Alone: How Culture Transformed Human Evolution* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 5.

18 Harvie M. Conn, "Culture," *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, ed. A. Scott Moreau (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 252.

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These shared patterns identify the members of a culture group while also distinguishing those of another group."[19] Paul H. Hiebert defines *culture* as "systems of ideas, feelings, and values and their associated patterns of behaviors and products shared by a group of people who organize and regulate what they think, feel and do."[20] Charles Kraft sees culture (including worldview) as "a peoples' way of life, their design for living, their way of coping with their biological, physical and social environment. It consists of learned, patterned assumptions (worldview), concepts and behavior, plus the resulting artifacts (material culture)."[21]

One cannot discern adequate approaches for transcultural communication without understanding the role and function of worldview. According to Hiebert, *worldview* is a set of assumptions about the nature of reality which lies in the core of a culture. Groups and individuals in the same society may hold different assumptions, or personal worldviews, and in some societies, people share fundamental assumptions that are constantly reinforced by the group.[22] Since conversion is as change of assumptions, the agent of change must aim to see a change in the assumptions of a worldview.[23]

From a biblical perspective, as Creator of heavens and earth, God is above culture and prior to human culture. He is the originator of culture and created humans with the capability of creating cultural elements by themselves. There is not one culture superior to another. All cultures were contaminated by sin and the gospel calls for the transformation of each culture. "There are multicultural Christians but no culturally neutral Christians. Neither is there a 'Christian culture' that exists as such apart from regular human cultures."[24]

19 Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition, "What is Culture?" *University of Minnesota*, 2020; https://carla.umn.edu/culture/definitions.html.

20 Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 30.

21 Charles H. Kraft, "Culture, Worldview and Contextualization," in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, ed. Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne, 3rd. ed. (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2000), 385.

22 Hiebert, Anthropological Insights for Missionaries, 44, 45.

23 Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 10.

24 Gorden R. Doss, "Too Far or Not Far Enough: Reaching Out to Muslim People," *Ministry*, February 2005, 6.

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3. Contextualization

David Hesselgrave and Ed Rommen define *contextualization* 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 put forth in the teaching of Holy Scripture, and that is meaningful to respondents in their respective cultural and existential contexts."[25]

The objective of contextualization is to develop strategies to reach people with the Gospel in each culture in ways they can understand and that, at the same time, remain faithful to the divinely revealed truth of Scripture. Since the concept is used in completely different ways according to the philosophy of mission of the entity or individual using it, there is no single or universally accepted definition of contextualization. The goal of contextualization perhaps defines what it is. From a wider perspective, contextualization may be defined as an attempt to make the external truth of the Biblical text meaningful and applicable to people in culturally relevant ways.

It is important to remember that contextualization is a process. A. Scott Moreau describes it as "the process whereby Christians adapt the forms, content, and praxis of the Christian faith so as to communicate it to the minds and hearts of people with other cultural backgrounds" with the goal of making the Christian faith understandable.[26] This concept is applicable in a mission setting as well as within Christian communities. Harvie Conn insists that contextualization should not be confined to the effective communication of the gospel to people of other cultures; contextualization is the process of "conscientization of the whole people of God to the hermeneutical obligations of the gospel in their culture."[27] This process continues after conversion and the church is planted because "multi-generational Christians need to continually place their way of practicing the faith under

[25] Hesselgrave and Rommen, *Contextualization*, 200.

[26] A. Scott Moreau, Contextualization in World Missions: Mapping and Assessing Evangelical Models (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2012), 36.

[27] Harvie Conn, "Contextualization: A New Dimension for Cross-Cultural Hermeneutics," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 14 (1978): 44-45. "For some Evangelicals, Conn's *conscientization* definition borrowed too much from the TEF understanding." Hesselgrave and Rommen, *Contextualization*, 34. TEF stands for Theological Education Fund, now called Ecumenical Theological Education (ETE) and it is based at the World Council of Churches (WCC), with headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland.

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the scrutiny of the Bible."[28] Contextualization makes an impact on the people of God which "includes developing church life and ministry that are biblically faithful and culturally appropriate."[29]

Dean Flemming defines contextualization as "the dynamic and comprehensive process by which the gospel is incarnated within a concrete historical or cultural situation."[30] He continues, "This happens in such a way that the gospel both comes to authentic expression in the local context and at the same time prophetically transforms the context. Contextualization seeks to enable the people of God to live out the gospel in obedience to Christ within their own cultures and circumstances."[31] The incarnation of Christ is the perfect model of contextualization. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). Thus, the Incarnation is "the greatest model of someone adapting faithfully to a context with the aim of communicating unchanging truths in an understandable way."[32]

From an Evangelical perspective, "There is no acultural gospel message. There is no acultural expression of the church."[33] However, Adventists see the Church as a united body that must proclaim "the everlasting gospel" and as a global entity that includes people of all cultures. Their message transcends cultures but must be explained to "every nation, tribe, tongue, and people" (Rev 14:6) in relevant ways. African Adventists, Asian Adventists, European Adventists, American Adventists reflect their cultures in worship and lifestyle, but are members of the same church and preach the same message using different means and in various ways. It is in this way that it is impossible to have a "culturally generic" Christian or a "noncultural" Christian. "Just as Jesus, in His humanity, was a person of culture, so

28 Gorden R. Doss, *Introduction to Adventist Mission* (Silver Spring, MD: Institute of World Mission, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2018), 221.

29 A. Scott Moreau, Gary B. McGee, and Gary R. Corwin, *Introducing World Missions: A Biblical, Historical, and Practical Survey (Grand Rapids:* Baker Academic, 2004), 12.

30 Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 19.

31 Ibid.

32 John Rimmer, "Christ: The Perfect Model of Contextualization," *International Mission Board*; https://www.imb.org/2018/12/25/christ-perfect-model-contextualization/.

33 Keelan Cook, "Contextualization as Gospel Incarnation," *Send Institute*; https://www.sendinstitute.org/contextualization-as-gospel-incarnation/.

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His religion is always embedded in believers of specific cultures."[34] "Contextualization is at the 'mixing point' of gospel and culture."[35] The encounter in unavoidable. When gospel and culture meet, is the message biblically faithful and culturally appropriate? When the encounter of gospel and culture occurs, the resulting church community is to be "defined by Scripture but shaped by culture."[36]

Various authors coined terms that describe their approach to contextualization. Charles Kraft developed the ideal of *appropriate contextualization.* He believes that the "incarnational" approach is appropriate both to the culture and Scripture. Kraft explains, "Appropriateness to the Scriptures means appropriate scriptural meanings in the receptors' minds, with appropriate responses to those meanings."[37] According to Kraft, an insider movement shows appropriateness in contextualization because the result is "appropriate to the culture in which it is planted." The judgment whether insider movements appropriate "is to be made by insiders."[38]

Hiebert developed the concept of *critical contextualization*, by which he means an intentional and careful process to secure faithfulness to Scripture.[39] Hesselgrave and Rommen speak of *authentic contextualization*, that must be measured by its "faithfulness" to the meanings of the scripture and its "effectiveness" or "relevance" in communicating Christ within the recipient culture.[40] In his view of *faithful contextualization*, Gorden R. Doss affirms that it "builds on Hiebert's intention [in critical contextualization] that the Bible be primary and adapting to culture secondary, although essential,"[41] and agrees with Moreau that the message of the resulting church "is defined by Scripture but shaped by culture."[42]

[34] Gorden R. Doss, "Faithful Contextualization: Crossing Boundaries of Culture with the Eternal Gospel," *Ministry*, December 2015, 7-8. https://cdn.ministrymagazine.org/issues/2015/issues/MIN2015-12.pdf.

[35] Moreau, Contextualization in World Missions, 19.

[36] Ibid., 35.

[37] Charles H. Kraft, "Contextualization in Three Crucial Dimensions," in *Appropriate Christianity*, ed. Charles H. Kraft (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2005), 113.

[38] Charles H. Kraft, *Issues in Contextualization* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2016), 5.

[39] Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries,* 171-192.

[40] Hesselgrave and Rommen, *Contextualization*, 129.

[41] Doss, "Faithful Contextualization," 7.

[42] Moreau, Contextualization in World Missions, 35.

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4. Syncretism

The topic of syncretism must be considered because it is interrelated with contextualization, and often may be confused. Gailyn van Rheenen affirms that "what is considered authentic contextualization by some may be interpreted as syncretism by others."[43] Syncretism is the "blending of one idea, practice, or attitude with another. Traditionally among Christians it has been used of the replacement or dilution of the essential truths of the gospel through the incorporation of non-Christian elements."[44] Syncretism may happen in areas where Christianity is being established as well as in areas where Christianity has been established for a long time.

Recognizing syncretism in one's own culture is difficult. In the contexts of missions, syncretism occurs when a desire to contextualize moves a missionary to adapt a cultural form that still carries with it attached meanings from the former belief system. These old meanings can severely distort or obscure the intended Christian meaning.

In the area of theology, syncretism involves the merging or assimilation of differing religious ideas or even religions, although syncretism also occurs in diverse fields such as arts, culture, politics, architecture, and chemistry. Not until the modern age, syncretism was used to describe the blending of religious systems. In the Missionary Conference of 1938, Hendrik Kraemer used the term in an exclusive negative sense,[45] but some have assigned to syncretism a positive value.[46]

According to Theo Sundermeier, in Karl Rahner and Wolfhart Pannenberg's perspectives, syncretism is understood as "a redemptive-historical preparation for revelation, as the work of the Holy Spirit."[47] However, for

[43] Gailyn van Rheenen, "Syncretism and Contextualization: The Church on a Journey Defining Itself," in *Contextualization and Syncretism: Navigating Cultural Currents*, ed. Gailyn van Rheenen (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2006), 3.

[44] A. Scott Moreau, "Syncretism," *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, 924.

[45] Hendrik Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* (New York: Harpers & Brothers, 1938). See also Hendrik Kraemer, "Syncretism as a Religious and a Missionary Problem," *International Review of Mission* 43, no. 3 (1954): 253-273.

[46] H. Gunkel, R. Bultmann and others viewed Christianity itself as a syncretistic religion and saw here a strength rather than a weakness, for "syncretism denotes the inner dynamics of a religion" that enables it to incorporate important elements from other religions. Theo Sundermeier, "Syncretism," *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, ed. Erwin Fahlbusch (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 5:267.

[47] Ibid., 5:269.

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others, the adjustment is nothing short of "Christopaganism."[48] In major or lesser degree, "syncretism of some form has been seen everywhere the church has existed."[49]

Now, two basic models of syncretism have been differentiated: Symbiotic syncretism happens when primary cultures are ruled by a superior society; its high religion selectively integrates or reinterprets elements of the traditional religion. Synthetic syncretism refers to a horizontal encounter of transnational religions.[50]

Ron J. Bigalke explains that "syncretism occurs when the church accommodates, either consciously or unconsciously, to the cultural context. Syncretism is the conscious or unconscious merging of two different systems of belief to reflect the cultural context."[51] While some prefer to differentiate between "conscious" and "unconscious syncretism."

David Lindfield prefers the distinction between "syncretism from above" and "syncretism from below."[52] Syncretism "from above," or conscious syncretism, refers to decisions of religious authorities of a religion to incorporate native elements in their attempt to bring new adherents into the fold.[53] Syncretism "from below" refers to ways in which people incorporate elements from other religions more or less spontaneously, whether

48 Alan Richard Tippet, "Christopaganism or Indigenous Christianity?" in *Christopaganism or Indigenous Christianity?* ed. Tetsunao Yamamori and Charles R. Taber (South Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1975), 13-34. Tippet's use of the term should not be confused with the newly developed approach of some followers of neopaganism who, in a reversal mode, blend Christian elements into neopagan practice and call them Christopaganism.

49 Moreau, "Syncretism," 924.

50 Sundermeier, "Syncretism," 5:268.

51 Ron J. Bigalke, "Contextualization/Syncretism," in *The Encyclopedia of Christian Civilization*, ed. George Thomas Kirin (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 1:599.

52 David Lindenfeld, "Syncretism," *World History Connected* 4, no. 1 (2006). https://worldhistoryconnected.press.uillinois.edu/4.1/lindenfeld.html.

53 One example would be the policies of the Franciscan missionaries in sixteenth-century Mexico, who not only learned the Nahuatl language of the Aztecs, but deliberately imitated the style of Nahuatl religious writings in their sermons. Enrique Dussel, *A History of the Church in Latin America: Colonialism to Liberation (1492-1979)*, trans. and rev. Alan Neely (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 62-71.

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consciously or not[54]; this may appear as the natural result of interaction between religions and could also be considered an adaptation, amalgamation, or assimilation.[55]

A major challenge in dealing with syncretism is that it is used with both an objective and a subjective meaning. "The basic objective meaning refers neutrally and descriptively to the mixing of religions. The subjective meaning includes an evaluation of such intermingling from the point of view of one of the religions involved."[56]

Bigalke pointed out that there is conscious and unconscious syncretism. Conscious syncretism happened in the OT. The Israelites borrowed heavily, in practice, from idolatry (Judg 1:19), shrine prostitution (1 Kgs 14:24) and child sacrifices and witchcraft (2 Kgs 17:16-17) of the Canaanites. "Even while these people were worshiping the Lord, they were serving their idols" (2 Kgs 17:41; cf. Zeph 1:5). It also occurred in NT times. For example, Simon the magician and his followers were amazed by the powerful acts of the apostles and were baptized, but Simon's worldview never changed (Acts 8:4-25).

As it happened in the past, syncretism may also be found inside the church.[57] It is also evident in the indiscriminate adoption of folk practices, myths, and rituals made by Catholic missionaries in Latin America.[58] While most forms of syncretism are done with the intent of making the gospel more relevant, often pluralism (i.e., the belief that all religious beliefs and practices are valid) is the unintended outcome.[59]

54 Typically, this occurs when a less powerful group encounters the religion of a more powerful group; syncretism thus becomes a means of adaptation and self-preservation. The religions of the African slaves in the new world yield many examples, such as Candomblé in Brazil, Vodoun in Haiti, and Santería in Cuba.

55 Anita M. Leopold, "General Introduction," in *Syncretism and Religion: A Reader*, ed. Anita M. Leopold and Jeppe S. Jensen (New York: Routledge, 2005), 4.

56 Andre Droogers, "Syncretism: The Problem of Definition, the Definition of the Problem," in *Dialogue and Syncretism: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, ed, Jerald D. Gort, Hendrik M. Vroom, Rein Fernhout and Anton Wessels (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 7.

57 Harvie M. Conn, for instance, sees in certain features of suburbanized evangelical Christianity in the United States features that he describes as syncretism, including megachurches and a message that "understand persons, sin, the gospel, and redemption in individualistic terms." Harvie M. Conn, *The American City and the Evangelical Church: A Historical Overview* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 191-194.

58 Dussel, A History of the Church, 66-68.

59 Bigalke, "Contextualization/Syncretism," 1:600.

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5. Balance of Scripture and Cultural Setting

Definitions of contextualization differ depending on the emphasis placed upon Scripture and the cultural setting.[60] From a general perspective, a survey of the methodology of the various models which are proposed for contextualization[61] shows that there are basically two groups: those with a high view of Scripture and those with a low view.[62] This is not a matter of merely having two equally valid interpretations of the biblical text. There is a radical difference between both groups. Some have attempted to be somewhere in the middle by seeking a balance of influences between the gospel and culture.[63] Moreau and Rommen point to radically different theological orientations: "The more liberal theologians allow the greater concessions to

[60] A. Scott Moreau, "Contextualization: From an Adapted Message to an Adapted Life," in *The Changing Face of World Missions*, ed. Michael Pocock, Gailyn van Rheenen and Douglas McConnell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 335.

[61] Stephen B. Bevans has written a major work on contextual theology in which he proposes six models for doing contextualization. He offers five models to understand the way we do this: 1) *Translation Model*: This is the most conservative of the models. Essentially, we translate theology using the functional or dynamic equivalence method. 2) *Anthropological Model*: This is the most radical of the models. The highest value of this model is on seeing and explaining how God is at work within the other culture. 3) *Praxis Model*: This model places the highest value on social change. This is essentially the model of liberation theology. 4) *Synthetic Model*: This model attempts to take the middle road, using the strengths of each of the preceding models. 5) *Transcendental Model*: This model is based on existential philosophy. The goal is the transformation of the subject doing the theology. 6) *Countercultural Model*: Uses the symbols of the culture to challenge it. Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, rev. and expanded ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002). Gilliland, an Evangelical, did something like Bevans. Dean Gilliland, "Contextualization," *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, 227. Moreau constructed a typology of six approaches, perhaps the most comprehensive among evangelicals, based on the type of role that an initiator in the contextual process plays: facilitator, guide, herald, pathfinder, prophet, and restorer. Moreau, *Contextualization in World Missions,* 195, 196. Chigemezi-Nnadozie Wogu shows how Adventists synthetized various contextualizing models, including adaptation, translation, holistic, synthetic, and structural holism models. Chigemezi-Nnadozie Wogu, "Constructs in Contexts: Models of Contextualizing Adventist Theology," *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 43, no. 2 (2019): 146-158.

[62] Donald A. McGavran, *The Clash between Christianity and Cultures* (Washington, DC: Canon, 1974), 51-56.

[63] Larry Owens, "Syncretism and the Scriptures," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 43 (1973): 74-80.

https://doi.org/10.17162/recm.v20i1.1680

the contemporary context. The more conservative and orthodox theologies are more restrictive in this regard."[64]

One group adheres to the principle of *Sola Scriptura*, believes that the Scripture interprets itself, and makes the Word of God the sole authoritative source for theological content. Generally, they define contextualization as the translation of biblical meanings into contemporary cultural contexts.[65] They give Scripture precedence over cultural contexts. Christians with a high view of Scripture believe that faithfulness to the Word of God is the primary standard to evaluate the process of contextualization. Without violating any biblical doctrine, aspects of Christian life and ministry, such as worship patterns and music, should be free to take on the forms of each new culture which Christianity enters. However, those in this group who do not understand the role of culture in human life may promote syncretism unintentionally by stressing the values of their own culture and considering it normal.

The other group are those who allow the historical influences and social context to be a factor in determining the content of their message. They hold the view that culture and historical circumstances have priority over the gospel.[66] This group lets the historical influences and social and cultural contexts be the filtration system through which the content of their message is determined. When the cultural setting is prioritized, God's meaning is sought experientially within the culture using the Bible as a mere guide.[67] A low view of Scripture may lead to syncretism or other forms of distortion. There are ways that are not consistent with a high view of Scripture and there is the danger that theological orthodoxy is not preserved or contextualization obscures basic biblical teachings.

The fear of syncretism has been one of the reasons missionaries have not always been open to adapt cultural forms to the gospel. Hiebert pointed

64 Hesselgrave and Rommen, *Contextualization*, 148.

65 Fernando Canale. "Sola Scriptura and Hermeneutics: Are Adventist and Evangelical Theologies Compatible?" in *Meeting with God on the Mountains: Essays in Honor of Richard M. Davidson*, ed. Jiri Moskala (Berrien Springs, MI: Seventh-day Adventist Seminary, 2016), 617-643. Ellen G. White affirmed, "The Bible, and the Bible alone, is to be our creed…. Man is fallible, but God's Word is infallible…. The Bible [is] our rule of faith and discipline." Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1958), 1:416.

66 For instance, Luzbetak proposes that "the most important key to contextualization will always be the should of the local community." Luzbetack, *The Church and Cultures*, 81.

67 Van Rheenen, "Syncretism and Contextualization," 4.

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out to two extremes related to syncretism. On one hand, he noticed *uncritical contextualization*, where cultural practices are accepted wholesale with little concern that the result is gross syncretism. On the other hand, he saw *rejection of contextualization*, where there is wholesale denial of the validity of the old cultural practices and where everything in a culture is viewed as evil or pagan, thus unfit to be used to communicate the Christian message. He concluded there is syncretism on both ends.[68]

In a parallel concern, Hesselgrave says that syncretism also happens in two equal and opposed forms that he called *under-contextualization* and *over-contextualization*.[69] In both cases, the biblical worldview is ignored in favor of a culture: In the case of over-contextualization, the emphasis is on the receiving culture but in the case of under-contextualization, the emphasis is on the missionary's culture. Bruce L. Bauer thinks that missionaries are comfortable with under-contextualization because it often produces Christians who look, and act just like them.[70]

Phil Parshall also considered the relationship between contextualization and culture in terms of a *continuum*. At the end of his *continuum* Parshall placed "low contextualization" and on the other end he placed "high syncretism." On the side of low syncretism, the culture of the church is foreign to the surrounding community. On the side of high syncretism, the culture has a greater impact on the believing community than the Bible does.[71]

In all these models, there is a grey area without a sharp boundary between good and bad contextualization in which missionaries seek to find a health balance between Scripture and culture. No model will satisfy everyone. No model is perfect, but a model may contribute to the purpose of discovering and learning how divinely inspired principles can be faithfully expressed in different cultural styles. "Culture is unavoidably the medium of missions. Thus, the question is not whether or not we contextualize. The question is how well we contextualize."[72]

68 Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*, 184, 185.

69 David J. Hesselgrave, "Syncretism: Mission and Missionary Induced?" in *Contextualization and Syncretism: Navigating Cultural Currents*, ed, Gailyn van Rheenen (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2006), 71-98.

70 Bruce L. Bauer, "Avoiding Comfortable Syncretism by Doing Critical Contextualization," *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* 1, no. 2 (2005): 28.

71 Phil Parshall, "Danger! New Directions in Contextualization," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 34, No. 4 (1998): 405.

72 Cook, "Contextualization as Gospel Incarnation."

https://doi.org/10.17162/recm.v20i1.1680

6. Contextualization and Culture

Dynamic equivalence, a term that Eugene Nida created in connection with the translation of Scriptures, aimed that "the message of the original text has been so transported into the receptor language that the response of the receptor is essentially like that of the original receptors."[73] Kraft suggested that the Bible translators' ideal of dynamic equivalence be the model for the transculturation of the message.[74] According to Stephen B. Bevans, "the translation model is perhaps the most common, the one that people think the most when they think of attempts at contextualization."[75]

Early Protestant missionaries established churches that reflected the culture and heritage of the original sending church. "Transplanted churches are established by missionaries who are ill-prepared to learn local languages, discern the essence of the indigenous churches, and collaboratively theologize with maturing Christians to interpret God's eternal message and apply it to local cultural issues."[76] Adventists were not an exception.[77] While some missionaries worked hard to transplant Adventism in other lands, some missionaries unconsciously used translation and adaptation to proclaim the Adventist message in specific contexts,[78] first in Europe and other Western societies, and then in Africa and other countries outside North America.[79] Soon after the idea of translation as contextualization was

73 Nida and Taber, *Theory and Practice of Translation*, 200.

74 Kraft, *Christianity in Culture*, 261-312. However, "Kraft's functional view of Anthropology eventually leads to syncretism because God is understood as working within a modern, humanistic paradigm." Van Rheenen, "Syncretism and Contextualization," 7.

75 Stephen B. Bevans, "Models of Contextual Theology," *Missiology* 13, no. 2 (1985): 189.

76 Gailyn van Rheenen, "Transplanted and Contextualized Churches," *Missiology Blog*, 11 April 2002, http://www.missiology.org/blog/GVR-MR-17-Transplanted-and-Contextualized-Churches.

77 Ellen G. White wrote: "Too many of the methods and habits and fashions have been transported from America to Africa, and the result is not favorable." Ellen G. White to Brother and Sister [S. N.] Haskell, November 13, 1899, Letter 188, 1899.

78 Baldur Ed Pfeiffer, *The European Seventh-day Adventist Mission in the Middle East: 1879-1939* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1978), 19.

79 Erich W. Baumgartner, "Charisma and Contextualization: Leadership Lessons from the Emerging Adventist Church in Central Europe, 1864-1914," in *Parochialism, Pluralism, and Contextualization: Challenges to Adventist Mission in Europe (19th-21st Centuries)*, ed. David J. B. Trimm and Daniel Heinz (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2010), 63-82.

https://doi.org/10.17162/recm.v20i1.1680

launched in the early 1980s, this model became a tool for mission and academic reflection among Adventists.[80]

Adventists found that Kraft's ideas on the translation model were applicable to evangelism and missions, as in both Christian witnesses must convey the biblical messages in ways that people will understand. Ellen G. White advised, "Christ drew the hearts of His hearers to Him by the manifestation of His love, and then, little by little, as they were able to bear it, He unfolded to them the great truths of the kingdom. We also must learn to adapt our labors to the condition of the people—to meet men where they are"[81] In initial stages, the missionary or evangelist will carefully choose appropriate ways to make the message relevant to their age, cultural setting, or religious perspectives. The evangelist will gradually present the biblical message, as the receivers are able to bear it. The objective of contextualization, as defined by the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, "is to lead men and women into membership with those who confess Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, who embrace the Fundamental Beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church."[82]

The dynamic equivalence translation model, as presented by Kraft, raises serious theological concerns that have been carefully examined by Carl F. H. Henry.[83] Religious worldviews start with several assumptions, including the existence of God, what happens in death, origins, the nature of good and evil. Ultimately, conversion is a change of assumptions. However, Kraft maintains the relativistic perspective that worldviews and assumptions in other cultures may be "just as valid" as ours.[84] Kraft affirms that the various worldviews have "an *evaluational*—a judging and validating—function," among other functions.[85] Doss asserts that Kraft's approach "can imply that culture is privileged over the Bible."[86]

80 Wogu says that "a foremost model used by Adventists is the composite model of translation and/or adaptation." Wogu, "Constructs in Contexts," 150.

81 Ellen G. White, "Overcoming Prejudice," *Review and Herald*, June 13, 1912, 4; also in Ellen G. White, *Evangelism*, 484.

82 General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventists, *Working Policy of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 2019-2020* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2019), 63.

83 Carl F. H. Henry, "The Cultural Relativizing of Revelation," in *Biblical Authority and Conservative Perspectives*, ed. Douglas Moo (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1997), 166-177. Henry evaluates Charles H. Kraft's perspectives expressed in Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979).

84 Kraft, *Christianity in Culture*, 125.

85 Ibid., 55.

86 Doss, "Faithful Contextualization," 7.

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Kraft opens the door for subjectivism as an authority. According to Kraft, evaluation of cultural behavior is necessary, but the "meaning of that behavior is derived entirely from within the other's system, never from ours or from some 'cosmic pool' or universal meanings."[87] Based on this understanding, the Holy Spirit approves this diversity by "leading 'into all truth'" through divergent culture-bound perceptions.[88] He asks for a redefinition of heresy that does not preclude new approaches to truth and is not bound by the orthodoxy of the past.[89] "Kraft insists that most 'heresies' are really cultural adaptations[90] that we ought not to fear and that theological truth must be perpetually 'recreated like a dynamic-equivalence translation or transculturation.'[91]

Kraft rejects that it is possible to discern a textually given meaning for all readers of the Bible through hermeneutics; instead, all that the text teaches is viewed as context. To accommodate culture-relative meaning in the biblical texts, Kraft shifts from grammatic-historical interpretation to ethnolinguistic interpretation, or ethnohermeneutics.[92] "Even through inspired Scripture… it is highly unlikely that any… people will perceive exactly the same meaning from any give portion."[93] Therefore, he refers the Bible as "'revelation' only in a 'potential sense'"[94] and emphasizes "the culture-relativity of all revelational information."[95]

From an anthropological-theological perspective, and with "cultural relativism" in mind, Kraft indicates that no universal criteria are applicable to all cultures. Each culture is valid only for its own participants[96]; however, cultures are "not only relative to each other but are also relative… to the supercultural."[97] Based on Kraft's perspectives on cultural subjectivism and relativity, someone could arrive to the conclusion that it is not possible to have a global church united by a set of common doctrines.

87 Kraft, *Christianity in Culture*, 125.

88 Ibid., 128.

89 Ibid., 16.

90 Ibid., 296.

91 Ibid., 297.

92 Ibid., 134-135.

93 Ibid., 188.

94 Ibid.

95 Ibid.

96 Ibid., 49.

97 Ibid., 52.

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Kraft states that "in a truly contextualized church, even though the surface level… may look different, the essential message will be the same and the central doctrines of our faith will be in clear focus, since they are based on the same Bible."[98] Even though this may initially sound good to Adventists, who have a global perspective of the church, it is important to keep in mind that the Adventist concepts of *doctrine* and *church* are very different from Kraft's Evangelical perspectives.

According to Bevans, Kraft's dynamic equivalence translation model is concerned with the essential message of Christianity. In this model, experts speak of "a gospel as core," which is supra-cultural or supra-contextual.[99] According to Kraft, since the traditional methods of theologizing are "either static or applying only to some segment of Euro-American culture,"[100] it is necessary to create "new categories of thought and terminology" to traditional statements of faith.[101] In line with Kraft's suggestion, some Adventists have proposed the issue of *core vs. peripheral doctrines,*[102] adopting the concept of *core doctrines* in their vocabulary,[103] with others stressing that "the essential messages" need to be "transculturated."[104]

98 Kraft, "Culture, Worldview, and Contextualization," 389.

99 Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 38-39.

100 Ibid., 33.

101 Ibid., 36.

102 John Webster, "Towards a More Radically 'Adventist' Adventism," Presidential address at the Adventist Society for Religious Studies meetings, Boston, 20 November 2008, 16; https://lasierra.edu/fileadmin/documents/religion/asrs/ASRS-Papers-2008-01-Webster-Toward-a-More-Radically-Adventist-Adventism.pdf.

103 For instance, in seeking to contextualize doctrines, Dybdahl suggests "to organize, state, prioritize, and explicate core doctrines in a way that fits the specific setting." Jon L. Dybdahl, "Adventist Responses to Mission Challenges through Theology and Contextualization," *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* 5, no. 2 (2009): 30. See several alternatives to the organization and statements of doctrines in Jon L. Dybdahl, "Expanding Mission's Implication for Fundamental Beliefs and Church Unity," in *Adventist Responses to Cross-Cultural Mission*, ed. Bruce L. Bauer (Berrien Springs, MI: Department of World Mission, Andrews University, 2007), 2:81-91.

104 Schantz uses Kraft's idea that "the essential messages of God need to be 'transculturated' into the receptor's cultural setting." Kraft, *Christianity in Culture*, 276, cited in Borge F. Schantz, "The Development of Seventh-day Adventist Missionary Thought: Contemporary Appraisal" (PhD diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1983), 699. Schantz considers that Philip was removed miraculously after he baptized the Ethiopian (Acts 8:39) so that after "he communicated the essentials—the 'absolutes' of the gospel," he did not have "the opportunity to reorient the eunuch to his Jewish-Christian world view"—now the "new message should be adapted to his culture, so different from Philip's." Ibid., 697, 698.

https://doi.org/10.17162/recm.v20i1.1680

In the *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, Richard M. Davidson affirms that the "proper dependence upon the Holy Spirit with rigorous exegesis based upon sound hermeneutical procedures" will help to avoid subjectivism.[105] The guidance of the Spirit was promised to the church: "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you to all truth" (John 16:13). "It must be noted that the 'you' here is in plural; the Spirit directs interpreters together within the fellowship of the church body (Ps. 119:63; Acts 2:42, 4:32; Rom. 12:4-8; 1 Cor. 123; Eph. 4:3-6), where they may be benefited by exchange with and the correction of other believers."[106] In the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the fundamental doctrines are reviewed and adopted only by the General Conference in session.[107]

Gailyn van Reehnen explains that "Kraft's functional view of Anthropology eventually leads to syncretism because God is understood as working within a modern, humanistic paradigm."[108] Carl Henry concludes, "The normativity of biblical theology cannot survive alongside the normativity of humanistic anthropology. To exaggerate the role of the behavioral sciences, as Kraft does, constitutes a disservice to both biblical theology and anthropology."[109]

"Good contextualization seeks to be faithful to Scripture and meaningful to a given culture"[110] but in questionable views of contextualization, the religious, social, political, economic needs of the people will have priority over the biblical message. If a theology is not based on biblical exegesis, it eventually will compromise the integrity of the gospel.

7. Contextualization and Doctrines

Seventh-day Adventists believe that the biblical writings resulted from the direct agency of the Holy Spirit upon the mind of the writers so that their

105 Richard M. Davidson, "Biblical Interpretation," *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 2000), 67.

106 Ibid.

107 General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual 2015* (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2016), 28.

108 Van Rheenen, "Syncretism and Contextualization," 7.

109 Henry, "The Cultural Relativizing of Revelation," 177.

110 Jackson Wu, *One Gospel for All Nations: A Practical Approach to Biblical Contextualization* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2015), 8.

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ideas became the Word of God;[111] therefore, they are not relative nor historically constituted.[112] The Scripture are the "oracles of God" (Rom 3:2; Heb 5:12). "The Holy Scriptures are the infallible revelation of His will" and "the definitive revealer of doctrines."[113]

The Catholic Church and Protestant churches have varied doctrinal systems that are based on the principle of multiple sources for doctrine and theology.[114] However, the Seventh-day Adventist Church bases its doctrines on the Bible only and the Bible in its entirety. As Ellen G. White affirms, the Bible is the "standard for every doctrine and practice…. It is the word of the living God that is to decide all controversies…. God's Word is our foundation of all doctrine."[115]

Since "God is above culture and prior to human culture," since He is the God of all nations and of the whole earth, and since "the God of the Bible, as the Creator, is also the God of time," so His Word transcends culture and time.[116] Thus, God's written Word "remains binding upon all men at all

111 "Since God the Holy Spirit inspired the writers, God, then is its author." Ministerial Association of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *Seventh-day Adventists Believe… A Biblical Exposition of Fundamental Doctrines* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 2005), 145. "The divine mind and will is combined with the human mind and will; thus the utterances of the man are the word of God." White, *Selected Messages*, 1:21.

112 Frank M. Hasel, "Reflections on the Authority and Trustworthiness of Scripture," in *Issues in Revelation and Inspiration*, ed. Frank Holbrook and Leo Van Dolson (Berrien Springs, MI: Adventist Theological Society, 1992), 208, 209.

113 General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, "Holy Scriptures", *Seventh-day Adventist Church*; https://www.adventist.org/beliefs/fundamental-beliefs/god/holy-scriptures/.

114 In the Catholic Church there are three sources of authority: Scripture, Tradition, and the Magisterium. The Holy See, "The Transmission of Divine Revelation," *Catechism of the Catholic Church*; https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/__PN.HTM. Among Protestants, for instance, Methodists use four sources as the basis of theological and doctrinal development: scripture, tradition, reason, and Christian experience. The Methodist Church, "The Methodist Quadrilateral," *The Methodist Church*; https://www.methodist.org.uk/about-us/the-methodist-church/what-is-distinctive-about-methodism/the-methodist-quadrilateral/. Pentecostals stress Scripture but in practice they also stress personal experience. Daniel B. Wallace, "Charismata and the Authority of Personal Experience," *Bible.org*; https://bible.org/article/charismata-and-authority-personal-experience.

115 Ellen G. White, *The Ellen G. White 1888 Materials* (Washington DC: Ellen G. White Estate, 1987), 44-46.

116 Clinton Wahlen and Wagner Kuhn, "Culture, Hermeneutics, and Scripture: Discerning What is Universal," in *Biblical Hermeneutics: An Adventist Approach*, ed. Frank M. Hasel (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2021), 169-170. Fernando Canale

ages and in all places."[117] Biblical writings did not start in the human mind and intention but "in the direct agency of the Holy Spirit upon the mind of the writers (2 Pet 1:21), imbuing them with thoughts (revelation) so that the ideas expressed (through inspiration/inscripturization) become the Word of God."[118] In faithful contextualization the Scriptures are "the absolute, universal, normative Word of God."[119]

If a theologian considers doctrines as a collection of teachings without emphasizing that they are revealed truths found in the Scriptures, he or she may arrive to the conclusion that doctrines are negotiable, or that some doctrines are not relevant to some cultures, or that local churches and ministers may have their own ideas about what doctrines should be accepted before baptism. Following the doctrinal theological model of Evangelicalism, "some Adventists have attempted a rewriting of the Fundamental Beliefs in the context of Christ and the cross" while other want doctrinal changes "to increase the relevance of our beliefs to the religious experience of the present generation."[120]

The term *doctrine,* as used in the Bible, means "teachings." However, doctrines are more than simply a collection of teachings. Doctrines are truths revealed by God, teachings of the revealed Word—"revealed to us through His Spirit" (1 Cor 2:10; also 1 Pet 1:21, Eph 3:4-5). Ellen G. White affirms: "The divine mind and will is combined with the human mind and will; thus, the utterances of the man are the word of God."[121] As revealed truths, doctrines are universal and must penetrate every culture. Since doctrines are truths that originated in God, they are timeless and universal. Doctrines are biblical teachings that the church holds to be authoritative

also concludes, "When God is conceived to act within a timeless realm, the theological content of Scripture (which is brought into being by God) will also pertain to the timeless realm." Fernando Canale, "Revelation and Inspiration: The Ground for a New Approach," *AUSS* 31, no. 2 (1993): 98.

117 Hasel, "Reflections on the Authority," 209.

118 Wahlen and Khun, "Culture, Hermeneutics and Scripture," 134. Regarding the meaning of the terms "revelation," "inspiration," "inscripturization," and "illumination," see Fernando L. Canale, *Back to Revelation-Inspiration: Searching for the Cognitive Foundation of Christian Theology in a Postmodern World* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2001), 57-59.

119 Doss, *Introduction to Adventist Mission*, 221.

120 P. Gerard Damsteegt, "Seventh-day Adventist Doctrines and Progressive Revelation," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 2, No. 1 (1991): 77-92.

121 White, *Selected Messages*, 1:21.

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and are to be upheld by members of the community of faith.[122] When someone considers doctrines as a collection of teachings without emphasizing that they are revealed truths found in the Scriptures, a theologian may arrive to the conclusion that doctrines are negotiable, or that some doctrines are not relevant to some cultures.[123]

A difference in approaches to contextualization may be seen by observing the diverse understandings of the relationship between soteriology and ecclesiology. According to Timothy C. Tennent, the stronger the emphasis is placed on individualism and the individual's personal relationship with Christ (the individual is baptized "into Christ"), "the more likely a group will downplay the particulars of specific doctrinal formulations"; this group "would tend "to equate the doctrine of salvation with the doctrine of justification."[124] On the other hand, the stronger the church and its mission is emphasized (the individual is baptized "into the church"), the more likely a group will emphasize "the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3) and the importance of helping a new believer to realize "the 'faith' he or she is being united with."[125] For Adventists, *salvation* is not merely *doctrine no. 10* but they see all biblical doctrines as revealed truths related to salvation.

Some, for different reasons, want to emphasize that a personal relationship with Jesus Christ is all that matters, while others want to make sure that certain historic propositions are affirmed. The latter may be accused of placing too much emphasis on defending the written words of Scripture

[122] In the Seventh-day Adventist Church, "the form of governance is representative, which recognizes that authority rests in the membership and is expressed through duly elected representatives at each level of organization," including the General Conference. General Conference, *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, 26. Among other functions, "the General Conference in Session determines the stated fundamental beliefs of the Church." Ibid., 28.

[123] For instance, "I believe Adventist doctrine and its statements of belief would be much different if they had been birthed by people born and socialized in Sri Lanka or Thailand." Dybdahl, "Adventist Responses to Mission Challenges," 31. The Seventh-day Adventist Church is universal (global) not only because of its administrative system but fundamentally because of its unified set of doctrines. If truth is regional and culturally conditioned, visible Christian unity becomes impossible.

[124] Timothy C. Tennent, "Followers of Jesus (Isa) in Islamic Mosques: A Closer Examination of C-5 'High Spectrum' Contextualization," *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 23, no. 3 (2006): 111.

[125] Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.17162/recm.v20i1.1680

and certain doctrinal formulations rather than "Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (1 Cor 2:2).[126] This debate tends to slip into the modern trap of putting the personal faith in Christ and the propositional truths of the Scripture at odds with one another. Adventist evangelists invite people to accept Jesus and His teachings.[127]

The 28 Fundamental Doctrines are obviously expressed in different languages. Ways to explain doctrines to people in varied religious background, through different means such as personal Bible studies or public evangelism, may differ significantly. However, members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church are united by their common understanding and acceptance of the 28 fundamental beliefs.

8. Implications for Missions, Evangelism, and Pastoral Ministry

Since the Seventh-day Adventist Church has recognized 28 biblical doctrines, which are authoritative and a requirement to be a member of the community of faith; missionaries, pastors, evangelists, and preachers within their own sphere of influence, have the responsibility of explaining "the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27), "all things" Jesus commanded us (Matt 28:20). The *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* instructs, "Candidates must receive biblical instruction, either individually or in a baptismal class, in terms of beliefs mental case and the practices of the Church and on the responsibilities of the members."[128]

Pastors have the responsibility of securing proper doctrinal instruction to candidates before baptism and should make sure that prospects for baptism have sufficiently understood the biblical message and implemented it in their life.[129] "A pastor should satisfy the church by a public examination that candidates are well instructed, are committed to taking this important step, and by practice and conduct demonstrate a willing acceptance of

[126] Ibid.

[127] As part of an evangelistic sermon, Ellen G. White said: "None are forced to accept of Jesus and his truth, but all are invited to do so." Ellen G. White, "The Sabbath Reform," *The Present Truth*, November 3, 1885, 290.

[128] General Conference, *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, 34.

[129] "The work of the minister is not complete until it has fully instructed the candidates, and they have been familiar and committed to all the fundamental and practical beliefs related to the church and they are ready to assume the responsibilities of the membership of the Church." Ibid., 30-31.

https://doi.org/10.17162/recm.v20i1.1680

Church doctrines and the principles of conduct which are the outward expression of those doctrines, for 'by their fruits you will know them' (Matt. 7:20)."[130] Ellen G. White counsels, "The test of discipleship is not brought to bear as closely as it should be upon those who present themselves for baptism…. Before baptism there should be a thorough inquiry as to the experience of the candidates…. Bring the requirements of the gospel to bear upon the candidates for baptism."[131]

Missionaries and preachers must help their audiences understand the doctrines from a biblical perspective and to discern ways to apply the revealed truths in their daily life. At the same time, they must be sensitive as they interact with people who have different religious backgrounds. They are advised: "Agree with the people on every point where you can consistently do so. Let them see that you love their souls, and want to be in harmony with them so far as possible."[132] The key word here is *consistently*. There are ways that are not consistent with a high view of Scripture, such as when contextualization obscures basic biblical teachings or when cultural perspectives take priority over the biblical message.

As missionaries, pastors, evangelists, and preachers explain the Word of God, either in their native country or abroad, they are doing theology, contextualizing God's message in a given cultural setting in such a way that the recipients will understand it. Biblical teachings are divine truths that must be expressed in human terms. When a Bible worker gives a personal Bible study, an evangelist explains doctrines to large gatherings, and a preacher proclaims the Word of God in a local church, they are doing theology."[133]

In 2003, the General Conference, through the Global Mission Issues Committee, prepared guidelines to be used, as appropriate, by church leaders, educators, and other church members when proclaiming the gospel in non-Christian environments. These guidelines, entitled "Engaging in Global Mission," deal with five main topics:[134] 1) Use of the Bible in Mission

130 Ibid., 44.

131 Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948): 6:95-96.

132 Ellen. G. White, *Historical Sketches of the Foreign Missions of the Seventh-day Adventists* (Basle: Imprimerie Polyglotte, 1886), 122.

133 Dybdahl, "Adventist Responses to Mission Challenges," 28.

134 General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventists, "Engaging in Global Mission," *Seventh-day Adventist Church*; https://www.adventist.org/guidelines/engaging-in-global-mission/.

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Vis-a-vis "Sacred Writings";[135] 2) Transitional Organizational Structures; 3) Fundamental Beliefs and Preparation for Baptism (Fundamental Beliefs and Non-Christians, and Baptismal Guidelines); 4) Forms of Worship; and 5) Contextualization and Syncretism.

In 2009, the General Conference Executive Committee voted on a document entitled "Roadmap for Mission," that defines specific theological and biblical understandings on how the church must conduct its mission.[136] This document builds on the "Engaging in Global Mission" guidelines voted in 2003.[137] Among other matters, the 2009 document states that "the writings of other religions can be useful in building bridges by pointing to elements of truth that find their fullest and richest significance in the Bible…. However, the nurture and spiritual growth of new believers must be accomplished on the basis of the Bible and its exclusive authority."[138] It requires that "candidates for baptism… accept the message and mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church as summarized in the Fundamental Beliefs."[139] Then, the purpose of contextualization "is to lead men and women into membership with those who confess Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, who embrace the Fundamental Beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church…. They shall identify themselves with the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist Church in doctrine, life values, hope, and mission."[140]

9. Faithful Contextualization

Paul Hiebert has helpfully suggested that there are four levels of contextualization: no contextualization, minimal contextualization, uncritical contextualization, and critical contextualization. The no contextualization approach rejects the notion that culture shapes how one receives and practices

[135] It specifically states: "The Church should not use language that may give the impression that it recognizes or accepts the nature and authority assigned to the 'sacred writings' by the followers of specific non-Christian religions." Ibid.

[136] General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventists, *Working Policy*, 57-63. Find it also at General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventists, "General Conference Executive Committee" (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference, 1990), 48-54. https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Minutes/GCC/GCC2009-04SM.pdf.

[137] General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventists, "Engaging in Global Mission." Notice that the 2009 document cited above updates and expands these guidelines voted in 2003.

[138] Ibid., 60.

[139] Ibid., 62.

[140] Ibid., 63.

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Christianity. The minimal contextualization tries to limit cultural adaptation as much as possible. Uncritical contextualization minimizes the eternal truths found in Scripture to emphasize cultural convictions and practices. Hiebert recommends a critical contextualization that is sensitive to the cultural aspects and dynamic and is faithful to the biblical message.[141]

When believers meet a traditional practice, they have three options: 1) Repudiation of the traditional practice that is occasioning a perception of the gospel as foreign, leading to syncretism. 2) Uncritical acceptance of the old practice, also becoming syncretism. 3) Dealing critically with the traditional practice. Both the guidelines prepared by the Global Mission Issues Committee[142] and the process for *faithful contextualization* that Doss proposes,[143] with minor variations, follow Hiebert's process of critical contextualization: [144]

1) Gather cultural information about a traditional practice that raises questions in the mind of believers. The purpose here is to understand a cultural item or practices, not to judge them.

2) Study biblical teachings about the event or tradition. Here the missionary plays an important role to secure a proper exegesis of the Scriptures.

3) Evaluate the old practice in the light of biblical teachings. Leaders may share their personal convictions, but they must allow the people to make the final decision in evaluating the practices.

4) The congregation now critically evaluates their own customs in the light of their new biblical understandings and decides to maintain the old practice, or reject it, or create a new contextualized Christian practice. In many cases, it will result in "functional substitutes," or functional equivalents. They are culturally appropriate elements which take the place of rituals and practices which are incompatible with scriptural teaching.[145] For example, if it is clearly understood what the difference is and the reason for

141 Paul G. Hiebert, "The Gospel in Human Contexts: Changing Perceptions of Contextualization," in *MissionShift*, ed. David J. Hesselgrave and Ed Stetzer (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2010), 82-102.

142 General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, "Engaging in Global Mission."

143 Doss, "Faithful Contextualization," 8.

144 Hiebert developed the concept of "critical contextualization." Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*, 171-192.

145 Allan Tippet, "The Functional Substitute in Church Planting," in *Introduction to Missiology* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1987), 183-202. Bruce Bauer, "Biblically Appropriate Functional Substitutes: A Response to Dual Allegiance," presented at the Global Mission Issues Committee in Silver Springs, MD, on April 4, 2007.

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the new practice, ancestor worship may be replaced by a memorial service and a house blessing replaced by a house dedication.

10. Examples of Adventist Contextualization

Adventists have attempted to present the gospel in terms that will facilitate the acceptance of the gospel to specific audiences. Many examples could be provided from all around the world. What follows are just two cases from South America and Asia.

Until the 1940s, Adventist evangelism followed two approaches that did not fit well in the Latin American cultural milieu. One was the assumption that, parallel to what happened among Protestants, a prophetic exposition would attract the attention of the listener.[146]. Another was a Protestant apologetic approach, that was not well received by the predominantly Roman Catholic population.[147] These concerns led Walter Schubert to seek a South American approach to public evangelism among Catholics.[148] He replaced the traditional approach with a new method more sensitive to "the basic psychology of Catholic society."[149] His methodology to evangelize Roman Catholics[150] was fourfold: 1) To avoid the Protestant approach of American evangelists in Latin America, who used Daniel's prophecies as initial topics. 2) In initial stages, Schubert's presentations looked like cultural lectures. His series began with a classic and religious music concert, followed by a lecture series on world problems; then another on the solution to the difficulties people face, and another on human relations. Gradually, he moved to a full presentation of biblical doctrines.[151] 3) He avoided

146 "While that approach had functioned well for many years in a North American setting where evangelistic meetings resembled weekly Sunday worship services, it did not fit as well in a different cultural milieu such as Latin America." Floyd Greenleaf, *A Land of Hope: The Growth of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in South America* (Tatui, San Paulo, Brazil: Casa Publicadora Brasileira, 2011), 483.

147 Alberto R. Timm, "Building a Growing Church: The South American Experience," *Ministry*, October 2008, 20.

148 Malcolm Bull and Keith Lockhart, *Seeking a Sanctuary: Seventh-day Adventism and the American Dream* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007), 144.

149 James W. Zackrison, "Church Growth in InterAmerica," *Ministry*, September 1977, 14.

150 Walter Schubert, "A Public Effort Among Catholics: How to Present Subjects in Efforts Aimed at Catholics," *Ministry*, November 1949, 3-5.

151 Daniel Belvedere, "Schubert," *Revista Adventista*, May 1981.

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Protestant and denominational jargon and did not use hymns, opening prayers, and offerings. In his presentations, he used Catholic expressions such as "Blessed Virgin Mary," "the holy apostles," "Saint Peter" without compromising any biblical doctrine.[152] 4) He sought to establish confidence in the Holy Scriptures, by showing how the Bible addresses current human needs and personal concerns. Schubert marked the beginning of a new era in evangelization among Catholics in South America, Inter America, and beyond.[153]

For the atheistic and Buddhist context of Mongolia, Carlos Martin produced an evangelistic series that avoided Western thought patterns, illustrations, and pictures. Global Mission Pioneers prepared the ground for eight months. The 67 believers in the capital city participated in the choosing of topics for the series and shared valuable ideas. The two-week harvest series never attacked Buddhism but made a sympathetic comparison of beliefs with prayers that the Holy Spirit would produce a desire to accept a new worldview, one that would answer the ultimate questions of life in a better way that their traditions did. There was an intentional, gradual progression from Buddhist to Christian vocabulary and concepts. The five first presentations were:

Night 1: "Does God Exist?" A review of the "five irrefutable proofs of God's existence" and an introduction of His character.

Night 2: "Buddha and Jesus." A sympathetic comparison of both great teachers. Jesus was sent by God. A review of the sacred writings of their religions. Introduction to Jesus and to the Bible.

Night 3: "Nirvana." A focused attention on the differences between Buddhist belief of Nirvana and the "Nirvana of Jesus." A description of a place without suffering and eternal happiness—Heaven.

Night 4: "The Law of Karma." After a review of the Buddhist teaching on Karma (guilt is non-transferable), a presentation of the alternative offered by Jesus: He had the qualifications to carry the guilt of others' transgressions.

Night 5: "Buddha's Ten Precepts"—five for all Buddhists, and five just for monks. An introduction to the Ten Commandments of God.

After fifteen nights, the speaker was not using Buddhist concepts, and the audience had been exposed to the full plan of salvation, found in the 28

[152] "These seem to be small and insignificant details; however, they play a very important role among the Catholic public." Walter Schubert, "Evangelization of Roman Catholics," Addresses given at the S.D.A. Bible Conference, Takoma Park, Maryland, 11-12 September 1952, 4.

[153] Edgardo D. Iuorno, *Así se ganaron miles: Las enseñanzas del* pastor *Walter Schubert sobre evangelización pública adventista* (Paraná, Argentina: Descubra, 2019), 6-16, 97, 111-115.

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Fundamental Doctrines. The series facilitated the creation of the first Adventist church in the city, that was built in the shape of the typical, round, portable Mongolian house, galled *ger*.[154]

The approaches to evangelization, or the approaches of contextualization to explain doctrines to people in different cultural settings and of varied religious background may differ significantly. However, at the end of the process of faithful contextualization, baptized believers will hold a faith that is common for believers all around the world.

11. Conclusion

The use of *contextualization* raises many important questions that affect the Seventh-day Adventist message and mission. While many associate the term with unacceptable practices, the concept is valid, and contextualization is necessary.

A theology that begins with culture and where culture is the determining factor will unavoidably end in syncretism. Adventist theology does not start with the cultural context but with the biblical text. A valid approach to contextualization demands two commitments: First, a commitment to biblical authority. The message of the Bible must not be compromised. Acceptable contextualization demands faithfulness to the biblical truths. Second, there should be a sensitivity to cultural factors. The biblical message must be related to the cultural background of its recipients. This view of contextualization will facilitate the proclamation and acceptance of the biblical message of salvation.

[154] Charlotte McClure, "Mongolia Awakens to Christian Gospel After Seven Decades of Communism," *Adventist News Network*, 23 January 2001; https://adventist.news/es/news/ mongolia-awakens-to-christian-gospel-after-seven-decades-of-communism.

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