Contextualization for Social Change

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Assignment

### *Developmental Readings*

Review Assignment #3, the course essential elements, assigned readings, and recommended readings to identify selections of books and scholarly articles to identify and select developmental reading sources and entries.

* Refer to the “[Student Guide to Developmental Readings](https://drive.google.com/file/d/161V_FaYR2BnNGCSFUlWPjUSIQzcH04Hq/view?usp=share_link)” for updated information on sample comments, rubrics, and key definitions related to developmental readings.

**Source One:**

Hiebert, P. (2010). Essay 2: The Gospel in human contexts changing perceptions of contextualization. In D. Hesselgrave & E. Stetzer (Eds.), *Mission Shift*. B&H Academic. <https://www.perlego.com/book/2694182>

**Comment 1:**

**Quote/Paraphrase:**

The author discusses a threefold approach to contextualization.

Three Key Principles: Ontology, Phenomenology, Missiology

Ontology

The gospel is divine revelation, not a human quest for truth; it reveals God’s universal message across all historical and local contexts. (Hiebert, 2010, p. 94)

The question to consider is not what humans think about God, but rather, "What does God think about us?" (p. 94)

The gospel transcends human theologies, which are limited attempts to interpret Scripture within specific contexts. (p. 95)

Phenomenology

The gospel must be understood within specific sociocultural contexts, requiring a bridge between Scripture and human experience—this process is called missional theology. (p. 95)

Church leaders should study the contexts of the people they serve, using human sciences (e.g., anthropology, sociology, psychology) while testing them against biblical teachings. (p. 95)

Leaders should also examine their own contexts to recognize biases that shape their understanding of both humans and Scripture. Insights from other cultural perspectives can reveal these biases. (p. 96)

After studying human contexts phenomenologically, Scripture should be examined to identify ontological criteria for addressing social issues (e.g., polygamy, war) within their cultural settings. (p. 96)

The gospel has three dimensions:

* Cognitive: about truth
* Affective: about beauty and love
* Moral: about holiness and justice

Contextualization aims to communicate these universal dimensions in diverse human contexts. (p. 96)

The church, as a "hermeneutical community," should collectively study Scripture, recognizing biases from their own contexts and seeking input from other cultures to gain a fuller understanding of the gospel. (p. 97)

To avoid syncretism, Christian life and understanding should embrace humility and church unity, acknowledging the potential for the gospel's message to be distorted when placed in human contexts. (p. 97)

Advocacy for Metatheology (pp. 97–98)

Key Components of Metatheology:

1. Take the Bible seriously as the rule of faith and life.

2. Recognize the Holy Spirit's work in believers, addressing mysteries beyond human reason.

3. Understand the church as a hermeneutical community that interprets God’s Word in specific contexts.

Through community hermeneutics, the church seeks a growing understanding of theological issues, constantly engaging in discerning the implications of Christ’s lordship and the kingdom of God on earth. (p. 98)

**Essential Element:** This section applies to the essential elements of Approaches to Contextualization, Culture and Contextualization, and Contextualization for Social change.

**Additive/Variant Analysis:** This comment is additive to my understanding of contextualization. Building on previous material from previous courses on hermeneutics and interpretive frameworks, this material helps to bridge the gap between the reality of an ontological truth existing independent of human appropriation of it, and the fact that we do apprehend it through our finite and corrupted mental processes of interpretation.

**Contextualization:**

I recognize significant value in his approach to mission and theology, but would also raise cautions, particularly regarding the careful balance between faithfulness to divine revelation and sensitivity to human context. His principles provide a framework that could benefit the church’s engagement by fostering a robust understanding of the gospel as divine revelation with a practical focus on cultural awareness, and an appreciation for the role of the church as a communal interpreter of Scripture. However, Lutheran insights would suggest caution in areas where the emphasis on contextualization and human study might unintentionally overshadow the purity and authority of the gospel message.

I particularly appreciate his emphasis on ontology. He emphasizes the gospel as divine revelation rather than a human creation, and this aligns well with Lutheran teaching on Scripture as God’s inspired and inerrant Word. Lutheran theology affirms that the gospel is a message from God to humanity, revealing salvation in Christ rather than a truth discovered through human effort or speculation. This focus on the gospel as God-centered rather than anthropocentric is essential to orthodox Lutheran theology, which prioritizes what God has revealed about Himself and His will over human opinion. Lutheran teaching holds that divine revelation must always remain the basis of our faith and doctrine, ensuring that theology is founded on God’s unchanging Word rather than influenced by transient human thoughts or cultural perspectives. Thus, the ontological principle’s assertion that theology should begin with “what God thinks about us” rather than “what humans think about God” reinforces a stance that aligns with Lutheran convictions about the primacy of God’s Word.

The material’s second principle, phenomenology, also provides a useful perspective, advocating for cultural sensitivity and a contextual approach to missions. Recognizing that the gospel must be understood within specific sociocultural contexts, this principle acknowledges that effective mission work requires awareness of the cultural, social, and historical backgrounds of the people we serve. Lutheran tradition upholds the value of making the gospel accessible and understandable across diverse contexts, following the Apostle Paul’s example of cultural engagement in Acts 17. This approach can help clarify the message of the gospel by addressing potential cultural barriers, enabling the gospel to resonate within various cultural frameworks without altering its core truths. In Lutheran missions, and even in general pastoral ministry, this sensitivity to context is often seen as a vital way to express love and respect toward others not just in radically different cultures but recognizes the diversity in understanding and experience in our own near communities, while faithfully sharing the truth of God’s Word.

Furthermore, the principle emphasizing the church as a hermeneutical community resonates with Lutheran ecclesiology. Lutheran theology affirms the role of the church in interpreting Scripture under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and upholds the concept of the “priesthood of all believers,” wherein every Christian is called to engage with God’s Word. Through communal study and dialogue, the church can gain a fuller understanding of theological truths, as demonstrated historically in the Lutheran Confessions. This process of shared interpretation provides a safeguard against theological error, promoting accountability within the church and encouraging the collective discernment of God’s will. In this sense, the material’s emphasis on community-based hermeneutics aligns with the Lutheran view that theological study and application should involve the whole church rather than be isolated to a few individuals. Lutheran theologians such as Jim Voelz and Charles Arand have long explored and taught this community aspect to interpretation. But where Lutherans would have a distinctiveness would be in rejection the idea that the only “information” that exists is our interpretation, even interpretations that are shaped, balanced, and corrected by the community. By this I mean while we recognize all human interpretation to be limited and potentially flawed, we emphasize that it is possible for interpretation and confession (public proclamation of belief) to be true or false because we do not subscribe to the postmodern idea that the understanding of truth is beyond us. Rather we confess the clarity and sufficiency of God’s revelation in His Word and hold to the promise of Jesus that the Spirit will guide us into all truth.

Thus, despite these positive aspects, orthodox Lutheran theology, and I would argue Biblical theology, would also urge caution regarding certain elements in the framework, particularly the potential overemphasis on contextual or human perspectives in theology. While cultural sensitivity is crucial in mission work, Lutheran doctrine would caution against letting cultural or social sciences improperly shape or redefine the gospel message. Lutheran theology holds that while insights from anthropology, sociology, and psychology can aid in understanding human behavior, these fields must be subordinated to Scripture, as human culture and human knowledge are affected by sin and cannot serve as an ultimate standard for truth. Luther had much to say about the ministerial vs. magisterial use of reason. As Paul writes in Romans 12:2, Christians are called not to conform to the world but to be transformed by the renewing of the mind. The gospel must retain its divine authority and purity, even as it engages with diverse human contexts. Lutheran theology insists that the gospel is unchanging, even though the methods of sharing it may vary across cultures.

While I would argue that any communication of the Gospel involves contextualization within human contexts raises a valid concern exists about the risk of syncretism or blending the gospel message with human ideologies to the point where its core is compromised. Although the author rightly acknowledges this risk, Lutheran theology would advocate a heightened vigilance in ensuring that cultural accommodation never alters the essence of the gospel. By emphasizing the importance of remaining anchored in Scripture, Lutheranism seeks to maintain a clear boundary between the timeless truths of the gospel and any cultural or interpretive lenses that humans may bring to it. This emphasis on doctrinal purity guards against the possibility that the gospel’s transformative power might be diluted when adapted to fit specific cultural or social perspectives.

**Source Two:**

Hesselgrave, D. (2010). Conclusion: A scientific postscript for the missiological mills of the future. In D. Hesselgrave & E. Stetzer (Eds.), *Mission Shift*. B&H Academic. https://www.perlego.com/book/2684182

**Comment 2:**

**Quote/Paraphrase**

From pages 256-262 the author discusses his life journey in integrating ideas of Biblical truth and contextualization into his own personal confession of faith and comes to the point of advocating for a lighter hold on “subjectivism, existentialism, and experientialism” and a firm embrace of “objectivity, revelation, and intelligibility”. (Hesselgrave, 2010, pp. 256-262)

**Essential Element:** This comment applies to the essential elements of Approaches to Contextualization, Culture and Contextualization, and Contextualization for Social change.

**Additive/Variant Analysis:**

This comment is additive to my understanding of contextualizing the Gospel into the world. From my reading and listening it appears to me that the dominant narrative for meaning, and interpretation is in the camp of subjectivism and anti-objectivity. Many would argue that not only is objectivity not possible, but it is also not desirable. I appreciate the author’s approach here of not drawing a clear either/or but rather a both/and but being clear where the emphasis must lie.

**Contextualization:**

The issue of objectivity is something I have been cognizant of since my early college days some 40 years ago. I had an excellent professor, mentor and friend, Dr. Wiley K. Rogers, who introduced me to the area of existentialism and what he called in his own personal evolution with it, ecological philosophy (which does not mean care of the environment as the term would be understood today) with an emphasis on the limitations of a purely objective approach to understanding through the lens of classical philosophers such as Aristotle and Plato and even modernist philosophers. Essentially, it boiled down to appreciating a view that is summed up by Ortega Y. Gasset “I am myself and my circumstances…” (Gasset, 1961, p. 45)[[1]](#footnote-1) Meaning as Dr. Rogers describes it becomes a dance with all that is around us recognizing that we live in mutually influencing relationships with others, our world, and God, within the freedom/potential and limitations of our existence as we interactively interpret for ourself our life, but recognizing how our interpretations are dependent upon and influenced by others and forces outside ourselves. But like the author, from the standpoint of Scripture which I see playing out in personal experience, our personal interpretive machinery, our subjectivity is subject to significant limitations just from our being a finite temporal not omnipresent but localized and situated, but beyond this corrupted by our fallen sinful nature. We cannot disregard that we are indeed in relationship with others and the world around us, and certainly God, so we are not autonomous and free as many may think in the west, but we cannot be overly optimistic about the human exercise of meaning making even if we do it in community that can serve a function of guiding, inspiring and even correcting, for the human community is no more redeemed or closer to God and truth than the fallen individual. So, I appreciate his balanced “both/and” approach. We are subjects, we are situated, we are in relationship, meaning is a personal but cooperative endeavor, and we cannot simply pretend this is not a true aspect of our human life, yet we cannot put that much faith in this but rather we must hear and turn our ears to the voice of God that comes through Scripture, the objective Word of God that peals back layers of mystery, proclaims light in darkness, gives sight to the blinded will and intellect, show us what God wants for us not just what God wants from us, a Gospel that has little value sitting unused on a shelf, but has great power when it is communicated and proclaimed to the world around us.

**Source Three:**

Moreau, A. (2018). Contextualizing the faith: A holistic approach (p. null). Baker Academic.

**Comment 3:**

**Quote/Paraphrase**

“…the dimensional thinking of Ninian Smart (1996), including (in Smart’s order) (1) the doctrinal or philosophical, (2) the ritual, (3) the mythic or narrative, (4) the experiential and emotional, (5) the ethical and legal, (6) the social, and (7) the material dimensions.” (Moreau, 2018, p.4) “The danger, of course, is that of syncretism: intermingling inappropriate elements of other religions into our Christian faith. This drives some of the criticism of contextualization, namely, that it leads to syncretism. However, the reality is that all expressions of the Christian faith are local, embedded in contexts. Our heritage is one of religious encounters and, in some cases, assimilation (such as the Christmas tree). Using Smart’s dimensional analysis no more opens us to syncretism than any other approach might. Rather, it provides a very helpful paradigm of areas to consider for contextualizing our faith.” (p. 4)

**Essential Element:** This comment applies to the essential elements of Approaches to Contextualization and Culture and Contextualization.

**Additive/Variant Analysis:**

This comment is additive to my understanding of contextualization. These seven categories are fairly comprehensive and provide an interesting set of lenses with which to as Hiebert describes critical contextualize the embedded meanings operative both in the community communicating the message of the Gospel and the community receiving the message of the Gospel.

**Contextualization:**

While Lutherans hold to the idea of *sola scriptura* as the basis of faith and practice, we recognize a ministerial or serving function for the use of intellect, reason, experience, and the dimensions of human processing that are normally associated with contextualization. Smart’s dimensions offer a broad view not just of religion but culture in general as an experiential system. The key here is to, as the author notes, avoid syncretism. Lutherans recognize that Scripture as the revelation of God is not just a dimension of human life, but the central means through which God connects us and anchors us to Jesus Christ around whom all elements of the Christian faith orbits. So, while the Christian faith often finds expression in particular cultural forms that are not essential elements necessarily of the Christian faith, this does not lead to the idea that such elements are neutrally acceptable without crit. l examination. From a sociological point of view Smart’s categories (and other approaches that recognize the nested interplay of human life) might indicate that all dimensions are equally authentic to human life, whereas from a viewpoint informed by Scripture, while all these dimensions are operative, they are not necessarily congruent with nor authentic to the truth of God’s revelation. So as an orthodox Lutheran who appreciates the potential of this dimensional framework for isolating points to consider and to serve as a vehicle for communicating findings, I would use this carefully, only to the extent that it remains subordinate to the Scriptural authority and the Christological core of the Christian faith.

**Source Four:**

Barnes, P. (2023). Paul G. Heibert and critical contextualization. *Great Commission Baptist Journal of Missions*, *2*(2). <https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&opi=89978449&url=https://serials.atla.com/gcbjm/article/view/3296/4501&ved=2ahUKEwiN2eHNpaCJAxXzD0QIHTEDLC8QFnoECBUQAQ&usg=AOvVaw3B3a_4FAGtRkyKoH_Voain>

**Comment 4:**

**Quote/Paraphrase**

“A full explanation of critical realism is beyond the scope of this article. In brief, critical realism is the approach to epistemology that contends that while objective reality actually exists, our understanding of that reality is always limited and, consequently, should be open to adjustment. Critical realism developed within the philosophical discipline of epistemology. The concept can be traced to Wilfrid Sellers and his father Roy Wood Sellers. These two philosophers developed the concept of critical realism in order to explain the relationship between phenomenological perceptions of physical objects and the objects themselves.” (Barnes, 2023, p. 3) “Hiebert recognized that this process of translation is not limited to an issue of language, but also applies to “thought forms, symbols, and customs of a new culture.”11” (p. 5)

“Critical contextualization is a four-step process that presupposes that there is an indigenous church with which the missionary can dialogue.” (p. 9)

“The first step in the process is “exegesis of culture.” In this step,” (Barnes, 2023, p. 9) “the missionary and the local Christians study a particular aspect or custom within the local culture for the purpose of understanding it. At this point in the process, they do not judge the custom being investigated but instead only seek to understand it from the perspective of the culture under investigation. Putting it into anthropological language, an emic, or an insider’s, perspective of the given custom is sought.” (p. 10) “The second step in critical contextualization is an exegesis of Scripture and what Hiebert labeled the Hermeneutical Bridge. Once again, both the missionary and the local Christians work together. In this step, instead of studying culture, they study the relevant biblical passages to understand how the Bible speaks to the custom being examined.” (p. 10) “The third step of critical contextualization called the critical response involves the people evaluating their own practices based on the understanding they received from Scripture. This evaluation might lead to an acceptance of the old practice as it has always been practiced, an outright rejection of the old practice as irredeemably non-Christian, or, finally, an adaptation of the old practice. When the final option is chosen, the final step in the process of critical contextualization is put into practice. A new contextualized practice is developed by the people.” (pp.10-11)

**Essential Element:** This comment applies to the essential elements of Approaches to Contextualization and Culture and Contextualization.

**Additive/Variant Analysis:** These selections are additive and variant to my understanding of contextualization and specifically in understanding Hiebert’s approach to critical contextualization.

**Contextualization:**

As a Lutheran theologian and ministerial practitioner, an examination of contextualization must always be framed within the interpretive authority of *sola scriptura.* Within that framework, the use of critical realism and contextualism has potential benefits for understanding the people one is communicated to, and for communicating the Gospel leading to transformation of people’s faith and life. I appreciate that critical realism recognizes that objective reality exists, but its roots in modernist epistemology perhaps foreshadowing more contemporary critical theory, raises some concerns that the practitioner must take into account to avoid losing the distinctive and transcendent nature of spiritual truth. Roy Sellers and his son tried to bridge the gap between the idea that we can fully know reality as it is (Scripture itself says we know partially 1 Cor 13:12) and the idea that reality as we know is just a construct of interpretations. The main problem I have with Sellers is that adopting modernist ideas places too much emphasis on the modernist idea that no knowledge exists *apriori.* The modernist era in many areas often utilized a naturalistic materialistic view of the world discounting divine intervention and miracles. So, in the end I find Sellers to not be as useful for Scripture itself is quite clear that indeed we know things partially and the natural mind of humanity cannot understand the mind of God, (1 Cor 2:14). But the Holy Spirit operating through the Word (Rom 10:17) certainly can penetrate this veil, which is why Lutherans like to stress not only the infallibility of Scripture, but its clarity as well as its sufficiency. Sellers tries to have his cake and eat it too so to speak, but in my opinion winds up diminishing confidence in the clarity and authority of Scripture even if this may have been what he was seeking to avoid.

So, on the surface I appreciate the framework presented by Hiebert of critical realism, in its suggestion that reality exists, and we can use that reality to critically examine or exegete both the culture we are speaking to with the Gospel and the culture we are speaking from. But the approaches roots in modernist epistemology may underplay the role of the Spirit in this process. Scripture itself remains the unchanged and final authority, not subject to cultural reinterpretation.

That said, I do see value in the process that he lays out. The first step in critical contextualization, “exegesis of culture,” entails understanding a local cultural practice from an insider’s (emic) perspective without judgment. Orthodox Lutheran theology emphasizes that all cultures are under the curse of sin and, therefore, are not neutral; every cultural aspect must be critically examined against the clear teaching of Scripture. In this view, cultural practices are seen not only as neutral expressions of human experience but as potentially influenced by sin, thus requiring a scriptural lens from the outset. Thus, while learning about a culture is valuable for effective communication, Lutherans would see an approach as problematic if it brackets moral and theological judgments in the name of cultural sensitivity, as this may obscure sin and impede the clarity of the Gospel message.

The second step, which involves “exegesis of Scripture” and the creation of a “Hermeneutical Bridge” to evaluate cultural practices, aligns to some degree with Lutheran theological methods. Lutherans recognize that Scripture must be the sole standard for judging all teachings and practices, making this step essential. However, orthodox Lutheranism would approach this process with nuance. The notion of a “Hermeneutical Bridge” often is interpreted and applied to mean a back-and-forth negotiation between Scripture and culture, which could inadvertently relativize Scripture to cultural sensibilities. Lutheran exegesis seeks to interpret Scripture with Scripture itself, without subordinating it to human customs or external philosophical frameworks. Thus, while the goal of critical contextualization, to root cultural practices in biblical truth is valuable, we must be wary of a methodology that risks allowing culture to reinterpret biblical doctrines rather than faithfully transmitting them.

The third and fourth steps, evaluating cultural practices and, if necessary, adapting them to align with biblical teaching, is, in principle, compatible with Lutheran practice provided there is stringent theological oversight, which is the approach remains in a ministerial position not a magisterial position. Lutherans would agree with evaluating cultural practices according to Scripture, either adapting, retaining, or rejecting them. However, the risk lies in adaptation itself. Adaptations of cultural practices may become syncretistic if they blend non-Christian elements with Christian worship or life in a way that compromises the clarity of the Gospel. Lutheran theology recognizes the doctrine of *adiaphora*, (things God has neither commanded nor forbidden) which allows for flexibility in non-essential practices (such as language or worship styles) as long as they do not contradict Scripture or distort the doctrine of justification. But this flexibility has strict boundaries, and adaptations must be scrutinized carefully to avoid diluting Lutheran doctrine or introducing elements that might lead to confusion or doctrinal compromise. I have taught for many years the following. Where Scripture speaks: conservation. Where Scripture is silent: freedom with responsibility to the Gospel.

**Source Five:**

Berdame, J., Pinontoan, D. H. R., & Rumbay, C. A. (2024). Contextual Christology in the phrase ‘apo isa elmaseh’ and the word ‘opo.’ *Verbum et Ecclesia*, *45*(1). <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v45i1.2882>

**Comment 5:**

**Quote/Paraphrase**

“Theology of Christ is not only a doctrine but also part of the way Christian communities with certain cultural backgrounds express their faith in Jesus Christ. The ‘Good News’ about Jesus as God and saviour of the world should be communicated and translated because of various histories, cultures, and languages. According to David J. Bosch (2006), the Christian faith never exists except as something ‘translated’ into a culture.” (Berdame et al., 2024, p. 1)

“Words or phrases in the language system reveal all kinds of emotional and cultural connotations (Bevans 2002). Therefore, based on this understanding, the activity of translating the Bible or Christian books into a particular language is also a process of broad cultural encounter and dialogue, which is a theological attempt. According to Bevans (2002), translation is the first contextual theology model related to efforts to adapt or accommodate a content or message into a culture.” (Berdame et al., 2024, p. 1)

**Essential Element:** These selections apply to the essential elements of Approaches to Contextualization and Culture and Contextualization.

**Additive/Variant Analysis:** The material is both additive and variant to my understanding of contextualization or here perhaps the word embeddedness is more precise. I hear this as a yes, but… a both/and.

**Contextualization:** It would be naive to argue against the idea that our understanding and expression of the Gospel does not involve a cultural form that we inherit, adopt, and modify as we utilize it. The operation of language itself manifests this. But it is not sufficient for Christian practices to limit ourselves to this and I find the author’s statement “…the Christian faith never exists except as something ‘translated’ into a culture…” not necessarily wrong but not entirely telling of the whole story. Secular consideration of understanding and communication with the powerful influence of the modernist and postmodernist era focuses on experience from a materialistic dominant perspective, though I acknowledge that latest postmodernist though has become critical even of materialistic perspective, but that is a topic for another day. The point is that the supernatural is not often considered a topic worth even addressing in contemporary secular exploration of meaning making and communication. The focus is completely on what is here, on the immanency not of God but humanity, with the assumption dominating the social sciences and philosophical disciplines that religion is a human created manifestation. This is not adequate for Christian purposes. For Christianity acknowledges the transcendent God and the operation of the Holy Spirit in ways that are not discernable by natural means. True we shout from the rooftops that the transcendent God has manifest Himself in our midst and makes Himself present, immanent, through the person of Jesus Christ and in these last days through Word and Sacrament.

So while the scholars among us recognize the embeddedness of our understanding and message within cultural forms, a network of mutually interactive forces , sometimes interfacing, sometimes interfering, sometimes enabling and sometimes disabling, we recognize through the revelation of Scripture that the Gospel exists as a universal truth, an objective reality that transcends our cultural expressions but applies to all people of all places and times. While the Gospel encounters and must be communicated within specific cultures, Lutheran thought underscores that the message of salvation remains unaltered despite translation. The Lutheran principle of *sola Scriptura* holds that God’s Word is both clear (perspicuous) and sufficient on its own terms, without requiring cultural alterations for its truth to be effective. Thus, while adaptability is essential for understanding, the substance of the Gospel does not shift with cultural expression. We certainly translate the Gospel into the culture so we may communicate effectively, but we must be observant we do not translate the culture into the Gospel so that it becomes no Gospel at all. When translating the Gospel, Lutherans would emphasize that the essential message is the proclamation of Christ’s atoning death and resurrection, as this is central to God’s redemptive action for all people. Scripture’s emphasis on justification by faith alone (sola fide) through Christ alone (solus Christus) affirms that this doctrine must remain intact, regardless of cultural context. Translating the Gospel must therefore communicate the unchanging truth of salvation, guarding against any cultural accommodation that might obscure the central role of Christ’s work on the cross.

Honest scholarship and confession acknowledge the embeddedness of the message and fits with the Christian theme of self-examination, repentance, even the prophetic voice of the church as we critique and examine the cultures we encounter. But before we critique the pond next door, we need to recognize and examine the water we swim in ourselves, and critique that, our appropriations from it, if these are congruent with the objective transcendent truth of God’s Word, and most importantly look to our own thoughts, beliefs and values and examine the same before we go poking around and fishing in the pond next door.

**Source Six:**

de Vries, B. A. (2016). Towards a global theology: Theological method and contextualisation. *Verbum et Ecclesia*, *37*(1), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v37i1.1536>

**Comment 6:**

**Quote/Paraphrase**

The Western Protestant missionary movement, which amplified awareness of non-Christians religions and contributed to the increase of religious and cultural pluralism, has experienced large-scale changes in the post-colonial world; the epistemological revolution and the pressures of globalization are two of the major changes.” (de Vries, 2016, p. 1) The author goes on to say the following. Some argue that theology is unaffected by cultural context, rooted solely in God’s revelation and guided by *sola Scriptura*, aiming to reflect God’s thoughts purely through Scripture. This view holds that while some cultural elements may appear in non-essential areas (adiaphora), fundamental doctrines remain untouched by culture. However, evangelical theologians challenge this assumption, asserting that all theology is inevitably influenced by culture. As D.A. Carson points out, every divine truth reaches us within a cultural framework, shaped by the language, symbols, and perspectives of the time, making it impossible for any human expression to be entirely culture-free. (p. 2) The Ecumenical Institute of the World Council of Churches, in 1970, advocated for a "contextual" or "experiential" theology that emerges from contemporary historical realities, contrasting with systematic or dogmatic theologies rooted in biblical tradition and confessional statements. This approach draws on Schleiermacher’s influence, emphasizing that theology is shaped by personal and communal experiences within the faith community, which in turn affects individual conduct and belief. (p. 2) The debate on contextualization in evangelical theology revolves around hermeneutics and the influence of culture on interpreting Scripture. Richard Lints describes two main approaches: one views revelation as moving strictly from Scripture to culture, while the other sees it as a two-way exchange, where contemporary context influences the interpretation of biblical messages. Although there is no consensus on a precise definition, contextualization generally aims to adapt the gospel to resonate with various cultures, tailoring its message and expression to each group’s worldview, questions, and cultural strengths.

Stanley Grenz and John Franke, advocating for an "interactive" approach, suggest a continuous dialogue between gospel and culture, blending evangelical and liberal methods. Critics argue that this model risks aligning too closely with liberal theology, eroding foundational biblical truths. They contend that true faith rests in the unchanging nature of God and His Word, which stands above and judges all cultures, rather than reshaping the gospel based on cultural demands. (p. 3)

**Essential Element:** These selections apply to the essential elements of Approaches to Contextualization and Culture and Contextualization.

**Additive/Variant Analysis:**

This material is additive to my understanding of contextualization and builds on the previous selection and comments.

**Contextualization:**

I am reminded of the garden of Eden, when the enemy of humanity approached Eve with essentially the question did you hear that right, did you understand that right, did God speak true or is there more, an agenda, something hidden that you can discover if you only go seek the experience for yourself. Can you really trust that what God said is the whole story, even the right story?

The Word of God stands as unchanging truth (VDMA) transcending cultural shifts, stands above human philosophies and interpretive frameworks. It is spoken in and through these frameworks, but transcends them, indeed must transform them. The Word of God is not accommodated to culture, culture is transformed by the truths revealed by God through His Holy Scripture, the core and essential being our salvation through Christ. From a Lutheran perspective the primary role of theological communication is to communicate the truth of the Gospel as clearly and faithfully as possible grounded in *sola Scritpura.* As said above, we are not naive in that we ignore and do not acknowledge that Scripture is not received, interpreted, and communicated through human culture and within our interactive human community. This insight lead to one of the most substantial impacts of the Reformation, the translation of the Bible into the vernacular the placing of the Scripture into the hands of all people with faith in the sufficiency and clarity of the Scripture and the power of the Holy Spirit to open minds to matters invisible to the natural mind but received through the Spirit speaking through this Word.

So, the interactive approach of Grenze and Franke must be approached cautiously. This model, though well-meaning in its attempt to contextualize, may risk undermining Scripture's authority by blurring the line between human context and divine revelation. Lutheran orthodoxy maintains that God’s Word does not require reinterpretation based on cultural preferences but rather calls for faithful proclamation regardless of cultural or societal pressures. For Lutherans, true faith does not adapt to cultural demands but instead trusts in the immovable Word of God, which remains constant and true across all cultures and times. Carson is not exactly wrong in his idea that “every truth from God comes to us in cultural guise” but he is not very right either, for the truth of God which enters culture transcends and transforms it. One can argue, and many do, that our western cultural heritage has been massively shaped by God’s working on it and through it with the revealed truths of His Word.

There is a large flag of caution when we consider the influence of Schleiermacher and his view that theology is a subjective enterprise “…mediated in and through a community of beliefs, and that structures of belief in and through the life of the corporate community of faith modify individual’s conduct.” (p.2) Again this is not entirely incorrect. It would be naive to claim so. The theologians of my own church body who uphold *sola scriptura* also recognize and advocate for a confessional community using the writings found in the Book of Concord as a normative framework not in addition to Scripture but as a correct exposition of Scripture. These writings were constructed some 500 years ago as theologians and scholars wrestled with the potential and errors of the culture of their day. But within these writings and confession are expressed true transcendent truths from Holy Scripture which is why we recognize this as normative. Returning to Schleiermacher, who is often called the father of modern liberal theology, and who was influenced by Lutheran thought as well as Reformed and Pietistic influences that were shifting the currents of culture in his day, does stress along with much of modernity and postmodernity “subjectivism.” I have long expressed to others that key thinkers and philosophers do not generate their ideas in a vacuum. A historical examination of the influence of any key historical figure involves appreciation of to what degree are the capturing, interpreting, and synthesizing an explanation of phenomena they are observing and to what degree are they shaping that formation or even to what degree are the generative source and inspiration for that re-formation. I believe that Schleiermacher was synthesizing what he was observing in the modernist era around him and trying to make sense of it for his Christian faith, a meaning matrix that with its communication reinforced the preexisting trends and magnified them. But the result was as deVries observes the rejection of essential elements of the faith that was delivered for all the saints (Jude 3) in too many areas of Christendom. (p. 2) Schleiermacher’s stress on subjectivism and communal interpretation, which recognize truly operative mechanisms in understanding and interpretation, goes too far in relativizing doctrine making it dependent or merely an expression of personal or communal feelings. This is a clear departure from the authority of Scripture. Faith is wildly inaccurate when rooted in personal feeling and experience with is impacted by our finite limitations compounded by human sinful corruption. Faith needs the solid ground of being informed, being birthed, formed, and raised up upon the solid ground of the truth of Jesus Christ. There is even a risk in the idea that faith is mediated through the interpretive community, even if that community is one framed by the Confessions of the Lutheran Church. It is good for us to remember the interpretations of the community are good wise and salutary only in so far as they are grounded in the objective teachings of Holy Scripture. I personally subscribe to the Lutheran Confessions as a faithful and true exposition of the Scripture. I recognize they were formed within an interpretive community. And I examined them because my community said these have value. But I subscribe to them not because a community says trust us, but because upon their examination in comparison to the clear revelation of Scripture, one discovers congruence, the same message.

There is in my opinion in too much of contemporary scholarship within the Christian community too much emphasis on human experience, culture and subjectivity. It would be wise for us to continue to recognize these operative forces, but to pull back toward the center and the solid ground of the objective transcendent nature of God’s Holy Word and embrace *sola scritpura.* I absolutely agree with de Vries. “The answer for Bible scholars who desire to be righteous does not lie in further destroying the crumbling foundations or even in rebuilding the foundations that have been destroyed. The answer is always to take refuge in the immovable YHWH who sits supremely above culture and whose Word upholds and judges the world (Psalm 11).” (p. 3) It is not an either/or but a both/and but the sides of the equation are not equal. Scripture and truth sit in the magisterial seat. Experience, reason, tradition, subjectivity, emotionality, all of it sit in the ministerial seat and we recognize the ministers are limited, imperfect and corruptible. The Word of God stands forever.

**Source Seven:**

du Plessis, A. L. (2020). Making theology practical: The inclusion of experiencia fide in the contextualisation of practical theological training. *In Die Skriflig*, *54*(2). <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v54i2.2542>

**Comment 7:**

**Quote/Paraphrase**

Tim Keller (2012) defines sound contextualization as adapting the gospel to a culture without compromising its essence. He emphasizes the importance of presenting the gospel in a way that resonates with cultural contexts while preserving its offense and scandal. Keller draws on Romans 1 and 2, illustrating that the gospel applies equally to all cultures and is not in conflict with culture.

Contextualization involves paradox, balancing cultural sensitivity with fidelity to biblical truth. It also requires an understanding of the cultural context, as well as personal and communal experience of God's revelation, as emphasized by Calvin's view of true religion as fellowship with God. The balance between theory (cognitio) and practice (experiencia) is crucial, and the Holy Spirit's role is essential in this process. Pastoral care also involves using symbols, metaphors, and rituals tailored to cultural contexts. Understanding these elements helps to effectively engage with people in a way that honors both the gospel and their cultural experiences. (du Plessis, 2020, pp. 2-4)

**Essential Element:** These selections apply to the essential elements of Approaches to Contextualization and Culture and Contextualization.

**Additive/Variant Analysis:** This material is additive to my understanding of contextualization. The previous entries have focused on the potential problems of contextualization, a process that cannot be ignored as it is constantly operative. This material helps us to recognize the value of acknowledging and using insights from the discipline of contextualization for the faithful proclamation of the Gospel.

**Contextualization:** There is value here in the polar tensions of the objectivity of Scripture (and I would argue the existence of truth) and the subjectivity of the hearers of Scripture. The comfort is in the promise and revelation of Romans 10:17 that faith indeed comes from hearing of the Scripture. du Plessis talks of Keller’s emphasis on the objectivity of and even supremacy of Scripture while being “receptor-sensitive.” This leads him to define contextualization in the following way, “Sound contextualisation means translating and adapting the communication and ministry of the gospel to a particular culture without compromising the essence and particulars of the gospel itself.” (p. 2) This is spot on. Leading to the very accurate observation that du Plessis makes. “Identifying appropriate symbols, metaphors and images requires a basic knowledge and understanding of the context and culture in which pastoral care is conducted.” (p. 4)

There is a degree to which pastoral ministry and all Christian ministry including scholarship is always contextual. It involves language and culture which involves symbols and metaphors, images, and frameworks, which involves a shared understanding receive from, taught by, modified in interactive dialogue with community. When I engage a person and their needs I engage a plethora of voices, the thoughts and feelings, their history, my history, their frameworks for making sense of reality informed not just by cognitive facts, beliefs and values, but by expectations from memory (accurate and fuzzy) pushed upwards into consciousness through emotional processing, all embedded in a multilayer cake of community from family, friends, to our shared subcultures and metaculture. It is a cacophony of voices calling for our attention and gaining our hearing even we may not be aware the voice was whispering or shouting to us the entire time. Sometimes it is only in the silence or the absence that we notice the voices of our contextual lives, but I digress. Ministry is contextual. It is embeddedness. Contextualism teaches us this. Helps us to be cognizant of and selective of symbols and images, frameworks, and vehicles and to do so in ways that align with the message of Scripture. And this is good for us to acknowledge, for it is not just about preaching from the pulpit or connecting with the life struggle of the rape victim, or equipping a missionary to preach to Gospel to people in a far way land or even to equip the social researcher for transformation change to help our people in our world. Contextualization is just a formal and fancy way of recognizing that we are all embedded into a complicated tapestry of cultural influences, some bad, some good, some terrible and harmful. Contextual awareness is not just about cultural awareness but is about self-awareness. And as I stated above should begin with self-awareness.

**Source Eight:**

Nel, M., & Kgatle, M. S. (2024). Introduction to syncretism and Pentecostalism in the global south. *Religions*, *15*(6), 636. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15060636>

**Comment 8:**

**Quote/Paraphrase**

Neo-Pentecostalism is influenced by prosperity theology, emphasizing material wealth as a sign of God's favor, while creating consumerism and exploiting vulnerable individuals. It features hierarchical leadership, often resulting in abuse, and selectively interprets Scripture to support its teachings, ignoring broader context. Socioculturally, it promotes traditional gender roles and discriminates against LGBTQ+ individuals, while exploiting people by promising miraculous solutions to poverty. (p. 1)

In contrast, traditional Western missionaries in the Global South often imposed a Western worldview, rejecting local cultural practices and leadership structures. Over time, converts adapted the gospel to local cultures, blending traditional beliefs with Christianity, leading to the rise of African-Initiated Churches and neo-Pentecostalism, which sometimes reinterprets the Bible to support these practices. Some practices, like using anointed objects for blessings, reflect the "Christianization" of indigenous beliefs. (p.2)

Cultural hybridity, where elements of different cultures blend, is a significant aspect of neo-Pentecostal practices. While hybridity can enhance adaptability, it may compromise traditional worship, theology, and governance. Contextualization of the gospel is often seen as insufficient, as it may erode Christian identity and discipline. Some scholars argue that all preaching is an incarnation of culture, and while culture influences theology, it should not dictate theological content. Cases of prophecy in neo-Pentecostalism are seen as examples of syncretism, where uncritical blending of culture and theology can distort the gospel message. (p. 3)

**Essential Element:** This material is connected to all four essential elements: 1. History of Contextualization 2. Approaches to Contextualization 3. Culture & Contextualization 4. Contextualization for Constructive Social Change

**Additive/Variant Analysis:** This material is additive to my understanding of contextualization and the dangers of syncretism. I appreciate the author’s specific examination of a specific tradition in a specific location and find the same trending operative within our own transmodern western culture. (Note: I see evidence, and much so in the recent election of Donald Trump to his second term as president, that western civilization is reacting to and moving through and beyond postmodernism to an antithesis/synthesis I term transmodernism.)

**Contextualization:** Neo-Pentecostalism, especially if it is combined with neo-liberal criticism, is about as far from orthodox Lutheranism that one can travel on the spectrum of theological frameworks within Chistendom, so I am not here going to focus on bashing what I would consider is a very bashable theological orientation. The key point of value here is the author’s observation of how in the blending of a religious message with existing cultural elements that were interpreted as being congruent with that message, lead to a form of “uncritical and unbiblical syncretism” which began to “prescribe” what the church taught and how it functioned. The author argues that although the incarnation of Christ was contextual, this does not imply that the church must approve all forms of contextual application of the gospel message. (p. 3) This is in contrast to folks like Sepulveda who reject the existence of a pure gospel arguing that all theological formation is an incarnation of sorts leading him to argue that culture is foundational for theology and that in the spirit of freedom or justice of respect for diversity that the culture should not be made theological. Sepulveda argues this is built on the recognition of the human person as the “meaning maker.” This strictly anthropological approach simply fails here as is it rises and occupies the magisterial seat in theological formation, expression, and practice. The church simply cannot affirm all forms of contextual application of the Gospel for the Gospel transcends culture. It must transform not be transformed. Neo-liberals would argue likely this view is an expression of imperialistic colonialism. Christians must recognize that much of what was imposed was not so much about the Gospel as it was about self-serving interests and blind hubris, but the proper response to this is not the discarding of a transcendent truth but rather it application as the Word of God sharply dividing bone from marrow to all, ourselves and others included.

The same sort of operative forces are seen in liberation theology and contemporary critical theology, particularly in its Marxist-influenced forms, can be seen as an uncritical blending of theology and culture by adopting Marxist principles of class struggle, economic liberation, and social justice without sufficient scrutiny of their compatibility with biblical teachings. By focusing primarily on material liberation and viewing social oppression through a Marxist lens, liberation theology risks prioritizing political and economic ideologies over the gospel's spiritual and redemptive message. This fusion of Marxist thought with Christian doctrine distorts the essence of the Christian faith, shifting the focus from spiritual salvation and eternal truths to temporal, political concerns, potentially compromising the gospel's broader and transcendent purpose.

The temptation here is the same as it has always been, to look for solid ground in ourselves on which to stand, a solid nail we have placed in the wall upon which to hang our hat, something more than the clear proclamation of God’s Word to rely upon, something we can be certain of because we have had a hand in it. From the old problem of works righteousness of the middle ages and the Reformation period to the contemporary drive to proclaim human beings as the masters of meaning making, as the arbitrators of a diverse plethora of narratives and truths, as the force that will transform the world into a better place, certainly with God’s help within our theological circles, and despite God’s presence as an idea in more secular progressive circles, the idea is the same: it is about our works and efforts.

The reality is that Scripture paints a very dire picture of human works. And it paints a dire picture about the future of human efforts to change this world. There is no salvation in it. There is no hope in it. Noone, not influencer, not even the Christian community, stands any chance of significantly changing the fallen corrupted nature of this world. We can stand here pointing a finger at the obvious abuse of the prosperity preacher selling his message on mass media like the 21st century version of the snake oil salesman, and not recognize the log in our own eye, that in our desire to be a force for change, is our desire to be the force for change, and a degree of doubt that without us there is the possibility for any change. It is true that God works in and through the church for his Gospel ministry, but there is a growing confusion about what that ministry is. Certainly, it involves the love of neighbor. Luther himself said that God may not need our good works (as we are saved by grace through faith), but our neighbor does. Many in my hometown community need the help of others, their generosity and hospitality, to overcome the recent floods and devastation from the storm season. But these approaches to contextualized ministry being shaped so strongly by this world desires and human demands and expectations, runs the serious risk of losing the Gospel that in the end salvation is not found in this world, is not going to change this world, but is found in Christ who enters this world and will return to make all things new, and it will not be new until He does that. In a way, we have in the back of our minds that if we can somehow transform this world into a better place, deal with sin, deal with injustice, make it better that our problems will go away. We will have overcome sin. The approach is not particularly different from the ground of Aristotle’s ethic that people do the wrong things because they do not know better and if people were wise and informed and understood what was in our best interest they would naturally choose the right. That is a wonderful pipedream, but for too long the forces for social improvement have lived in a fantasy land of their own creation, our creation, that places its hope in our works and efforts and it overly optimistic about our abilities disregarding significant Scriptural teaching regarding the depravity and corruption of humanity and that hope, the only hope lies in Jesus Christ. Does that mean we sit back and do nothing? “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it.” (Romans 6:1-2) So while we are indeed saved by, can only be saved by grace alone, and that will only be fully enjoyed in the world to come, James is quite right that a living faith produces living fruit. "If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled,' without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also, faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead." (James 2: 14-17) But Christians need to get back into the real. We are not going to save ourselves by transforming the world and we are not going to save humanity and its culture and civilization by transformative social change. But we might in the sharing and living out of our faith give the good news that Christ saves, and we might in our works of compassion make this life a little better at least for some people. We do what we can. But we cannot confuse that for what Christ accomplishes. We cannot think more highly of ourselves than we ought. (Romans 12:3)

**Source Nine:**

Scheuermann, R. (2018). Paul G. Hiebert’s anthropological insights for missionaries [1985]—Thirty-three years later. *Missio Dei Journal*, *9*(1). [**https://missiodeijournal.com/issues/md-9-1/authors/md-9-1-cathcart-scheuermann**](https://missiodeijournal.com/issues/md-9-1/authors/md-9-1-cathcart-scheuermann)

**Comment 9:**

**Quote/Paraphrase**

The author critiques Hiebert's work on culture highlights the challenges of addressing a constantly changing global landscape and whether Heibert’s insights have lost their relevancy in the changing cultural climate. Written before the fall of the Berlin Wall, the dissolution of the USSR, and the rise of the internet, his book's analogies became outdated quickly. Globalization and the advent of the digital age transformed how cultures interact, with postmodernism emerging as a significant influence. Postmodern anthropology challenges the idea of an objective observer and fixed cultural boundaries, instead seeing culture as fluid, hybrid, and relational. This shift has impacted how cultural identity is understood, as people now experience a blending of cultural elements. The critique suggests that there is a lack of updated postmodern works in missiology, yet it also acknowledges Hiebert's lasting influence in mission work, emphasizing his ability to engage with culture in a way that continues to resonate with missiologists today. (Scheuermann, 2018)

**Essential Element:** This article speaks to the essential elements history of and approaches to contextualization.

**Additive/Variant Analysis:** This article is variant to my understanding of contextualization is it uncritically adopts the postmodern position of epistemology and hermeneutics emphasizing change and variation.

**Contextualization:** Recognizing that cultures change and meaning frameworks and narratives have and will continue to change through human history, perhaps the reason that author is observing that Hiebert remains a world leading voice in missiological anthropology is perhaps change that appears to be so great and different from our limited perspective is not so different when one steps back to examine the forest of history to realize that pretty much one tree is somewhat similar to another. Perhaps in our perceived diversity there is more that we share in common than we do or desire to recognize. Perhaps there is a lot more same in the midst of change than we want to acknowledge. Perhaps the issue is not so much the traditional messages of the past, including the traditional orthodox proclamations of the Gospel, have ceased to be relevant to our changing culture. Perhaps the issue is people simply do not want to hear a message of accountability to something beyond ourselves and a message that hope is only found in a source outside ourselves. And this is in the end nothing new.

**Source Ten:**

McGrath, A. E. (2022). *Historical theology* (3rd ed., p. 252). Wiley-Blackwell.

**Comment 10:**

**Quote/Paraphrase**

“The growth of Christianity in recent centuries, chiefly through missionary work, has raised the issue of contextualization. How should the vocabulary and conceptual framework of the Christian tradition be adapted or refined to meet the new situations into which the Christian faith has expanded? The American missiologist and theologian Harvie M. Conn (1933–1939) argues that salvation is to be particularized in terms of the situation addressed by the gospel at any given moment. Historically, this has meant that notions of salvation have varied from one cultural context to another – a point that lends added weight to Wolfhart Pannenberg’s plea that Christologies should not be constructed solely on soteriological foundations, but should engage with and be grounded in the history of Jesus of Nazareth. A brief survey will indicate the considerable diversity of concepts of salvation that have gained influence since 1700.” (McGrath, 2022, p. 252)

McGrath says the expansion of Christianity through missionary work has raised the issue of contextualizing salvation to diverse cultural settings. Since 1700, several interpretations of salvation have emerged: *Deification*, central in early Eastern Orthodox thought, focuses on humans becoming united with God; *Righteousness before God* emphasizes justification and moral holiness, influenced by Lutheranism and Calvinism; *Union with Christ* highlights believers’ spiritual unity with Christ, a core Calvinist idea; *Moral perfection*, inspired by Enlightenment and Kantian thought, views Jesus as a model of ethical ideals; *Consciousness of God*, from Schleiermacher, relates salvation to an awareness of God’s presence; *Human authenticity*, shaped by existentialism, emphasizes rediscovering genuine humanity; and *Political liberation*, as in Latin American liberation theology, links salvation to social justice. These diverse views illustrate the ongoing task of adapting soteriology responsibly across contexts. (pp. 252-253)

**Essential Element:** This material relates to the essential element the history of contextualization.

**Additive/Variant Analysis:** This material is both additive and variant to my understanding of contextualization. It is helpful in providing a big picture view of the interaction of doctrinal confession and cultural forces, less so as an advocate for such processes.

**Contextualization:** I recognize the impact that the questions that arise in particular times and places by unique needs that arise and assume the driving seat in a particular time and place give rise to a unique emphasis on the answers provided. But like the old Sesame Street slogan, not all of these things are the same. The central tenant of Reformation era theology which was clarified due to the needs, questions, and confusions from the melding of Christian theology and classical philosophy into medieval Roman theology, was not just the product of the day. Not all soteriology’s are equally valid nor necessarily valid. Any framework for understanding what God is doing with humanity what God wants from humanity, and I would argue more importantly what God is doing for humanity and wants for humanity, must have its value determined by its alignment with Scripture. I am in full agreement with this Reformation era statement. The following may be a historical statement that arises from the specific needs of the day, but it confesses a transcendent truth that is and remains relevant for all people.

“ That Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, died for our sins, and was raised again for our justification, Rom. 4:25. And He alone is the Lamb of God which taketh away the sins of the world, John 1:29; and God has laid upon Him the iniquities of us all, Is. 53:6. 3 Likewise: All have sinned and are justified without merit [ freely, and without their own works or merits] by His grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, in His blood, Rom. 3:23f Now, since it is necessary to believe this, and it cannot be otherwise acquired or apprehended by any work, law, or merit, it is clear and certain that this faith alone justifies us as St. Paul says, Rom. 3:28: For we conclude that a man is justified by faith, without the deeds of the Law. Likewise, 3:26: That He might be just, and the Justifier of him which believeth in Christ. 5 Of this article nothing can be yielded or surrendered [nor can anything be granted or permitted contrary to the same], even though heaven and earth, and whatever will not abide, should sink to ruin. For there is none other name under heaven, given among men whereby we must be saved, says Peter, Acts 4:12. And with His stripes we are healed, Is. 53:5. And upon this article all things depend which we teach and practice in opposition to the Pope, the devil, and the [whole] world. Therefore, we must be sure concerning this doctrine, and not doubt; for otherwise all is lost, and the Pope and devil and all things gain the victory and suit over us. (“The Smalcald Articles,” 2005, p. 391)

There is certainly validity in examining answers such as these in light of pressing needs within the circumstances that gave rise to their formation. And it may be that human culture and even a significant portion of the visible Christian church moves away from feeling the need for the forgiveness of sins and the traditional framework of redemption expressed above into this world dominated concerns. But truth is not contingent on feeling and a need not felt does not necessarily mean the lack of presence of that need. The focus for orthodox Christianity as it seeks to provide timely answers in ways that will be understood is not to just be driven by felt needs, but to also hear, even emphasize what Scripture reveals is our need and to provide the answer that Scripture provides for that need. In this way, the doctrine of justification remains central and universal for all times and places, for all peoples.

**Source Eleven:**

Chun, E., & Evans, A. (2018). *Leading a diversity culture shift in higher education: Comprehensive organizational learning strategies* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://www.perlego.com/book/1573888/leading-a-diversity-culture-shift-in-higher-education-comprehensive-organizational-learning-strategies?queryID=1cfbea85a2f2d574f79676775ab7fca5&index=prod_BOOKS&gridPosition=5&searchType=title>

**Comment 11:**

**Quote/Paraphrase**

“On campuses today you see more bonding than bridging. If we do not deliberately create conditions to encourage real bridging, we are left with a series of disconnected conversations that do not feed or challenge one another, a kind of archipelago of islands of like individuals occupying the same ocean, and not a community forged of common ground. (Julio Frenk, President of the University of Miami, 2016, para. 12)” (p. 1)

**Essential Element:** This relates to the essential element approaches to contextualization.

**Additive/Variant Analysis:** This material is additive to my understanding of contextualization as it suggests two different approaches, not necessarily competitive but complimentary of bonding and bridging.

**Contextualization:** Within Christendom and its dual call to evangelize the world and care for others and also to provide spiritual care and nurture for those within the Christian community, the concepts of bridging and bonding are useful. Within the Christian community bonding involves strengthening relationships within a close-knit group that shares common values, beliefs, or backgrounds. In the Christian community bonding is crucial for maintaining doctrinal unity and reinforcing the faith within the church community. Believers come together to deepen their understanding of shared traditions, participate in communal practices, and support one another in their spiritual journeys. This intra-group solidarity is vital for the preservation of theological purity and the reinforcement of a shared Christian identity. It is vital for the spiritual care of individuals within the community.

As vital and necessary as bonding is, the church is called that is in this world but not of this world is called to engage this world. Bridging may create connections between groups with different values, beliefs, or worldviews. Bridging becomes important for engaging with the broader world, especially in a secular, postmodern culture that often challenges traditional religious perspectives. This involves reaching out to those outside the church, understanding their beliefs, and finding common ground where possible on universal issues like justice, compassion, and the search for truth. While postmodern culture is skeptical of absolute truths, Christians can engage in respectful dialogue, offering the good news of Jesus Christ as the Holy Spirit operates through transformative power of the proclaimed Gospel. The primary goal here is not to win arguments but to invite others to explore the deeper meaning and purpose that Christianity offers with the insight that where the Gospel is heard the Holy Spirit may operate to open hearts and minds to faith and transformative living.

There is a place and time for each approach. Both bonding and bridging are necessary within the Christian community and for our reaching out to connect with those outside the faith. Sometimes the compassionate distance of bridging is needed and sometimes the empathic commitment to shared relationship in bonding is needed. And as I argue in my forum paper, we can over empathize, over bond, so feeling the needs of others that we allow the pain, the needs, the perspective of the person we reach out to, to drive and change the message that is provided. Bridging has the advantage of gaining a hearing without distorting one identity or distorting the message.

**Comment 12:**

**Quote/Paraphrase**

“Scholars have called for more pluralistic leadership models that transcend traditional authoritarian modes and instead focus on empowerment and the sharing of power. Such revolutionary leadership models are shaped by institutional context, promote learning and change, are process oriented, and emphasize collaboration. These models deviate from traditional white, male, heterosexual perspectives by deemphasizing hierarchical relationships, acknowledging cultural differences, and reflecting awareness of one’s positionality as a leader. Rather than a values-neutral leadership paradigm, revolutionary leadership assumptions emphasize teamwork, partnership, collaboration, and interconnectedness with an acute awareness of the need for social justice and social change.” (p. 58)

**Essential Element:** This material relates to the essential element approaches to contextualization.

**Additive/Variant Analysis:** The material is both additive and variant to my understanding of contextualization. As a Christian who aligns with a traditional conservative approach to Scripture and contextualization, who has little faith in postmodern, neo-liberal, critical approaches, there is much here that stimulates a gut reaction. But reading past the concerning points there is value that can be garnered here.

**Contextualization:** On one hand I question the value of leadership models that are so focused upon social justice and social change, so driven by the felt needs of this world and shaped by the secular, humanist, materialistic, nihilistic frameworks that so influence the hypothesized answers, that said leadership pursues paths devoid of and often contrary to Holy Scripture. Leadership should be servant first oriented and indeed expressing love of neighbor as Jesus taught, but it is grounded in the entirety of God’s Word, not in cherry picked portions of it. True empowerment and effective collaboration arises from a shared understanding of the real, both the things that God has left open and free, the things that God has designed and are operative forces providing both limitations and possibilities, and of the limitations imposed on our freedom both by a responsibility to a community of humanity but also imposed by the corrupted fallenness of our human nature. Love of neighbor is understood through the lens of accountability to God’s commandments rather than solely driven from an awareness of felt needs or the imposition of positional power, or even the drive for the masses to accumulate and express power in a nihilistic way. Leadership, especially Christian leadership, should reflect Christ’s humility and servant-heartedness, while recognizing authority rests in God’s Word.

That said, the call for pluralistic and collaborate leadership models, as advocated for in the material, presents a noteworthy and nuanced approach to authority, empowerment, and change within institutions. Lutheran theology, rooted in the doctrines of vocation and the priesthood of all believers, affirms that every Christian has a calling to serve others according to their gifts and vocations. This principle could align well with collaborative models that value contributions from all members rather than exclusively relying on traditional, hierarchical structures. The idea of empowering others to serve and participate reflects the Lutheran emphasis on the mutual service of believers within the body of Christ and the concept that authority is given by God for the purpose of loving service rather than personal dominance.

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1. To be fair to Ortega, the full quote is as follows: “"I am myself and my circumstances, and if I do not save them, I do not save myself."  This fits well into the subject of contextualization but goes down a path different from the matter discussed here. As a Lutheran who recognizes the truth and value of the first phrase, I cannot affirm the second as we simply cannot save ourselves and there will be no salvation for humanity through saving our circumstances. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)