

Contextualization

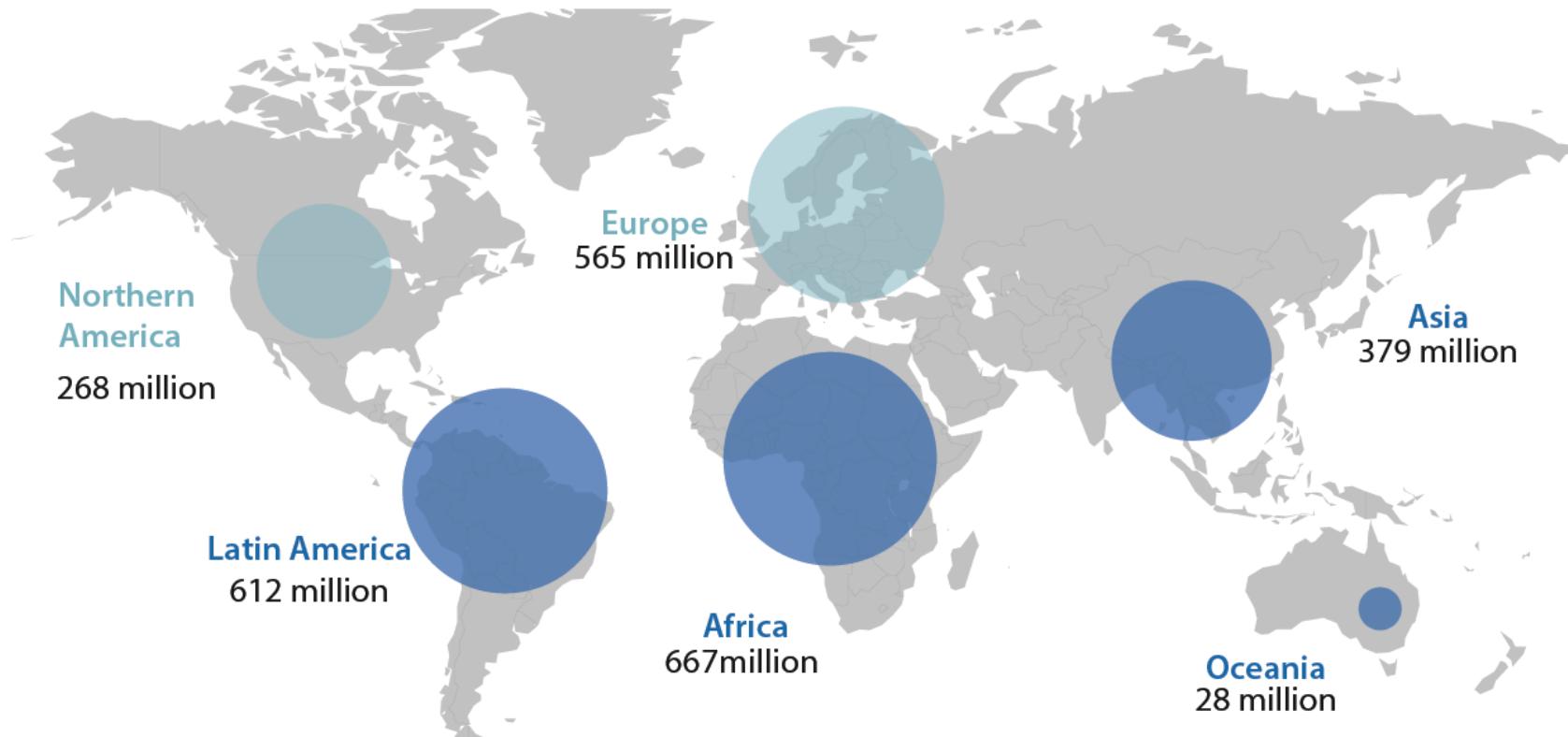
Relating the Unchanging Word to Changing Cultures

Shifts in Global Christianity

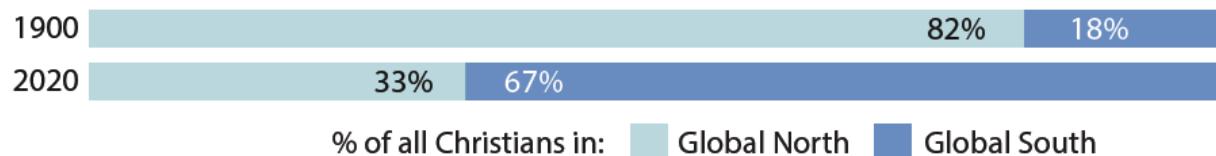
- In 1793, 98% of Protestant Christians lived in the West
- Today the MWC is outside the West, with the Bible translated in over 2,000 languages across the globe

Shifts in Global Christianity

Christians by continent, 2020

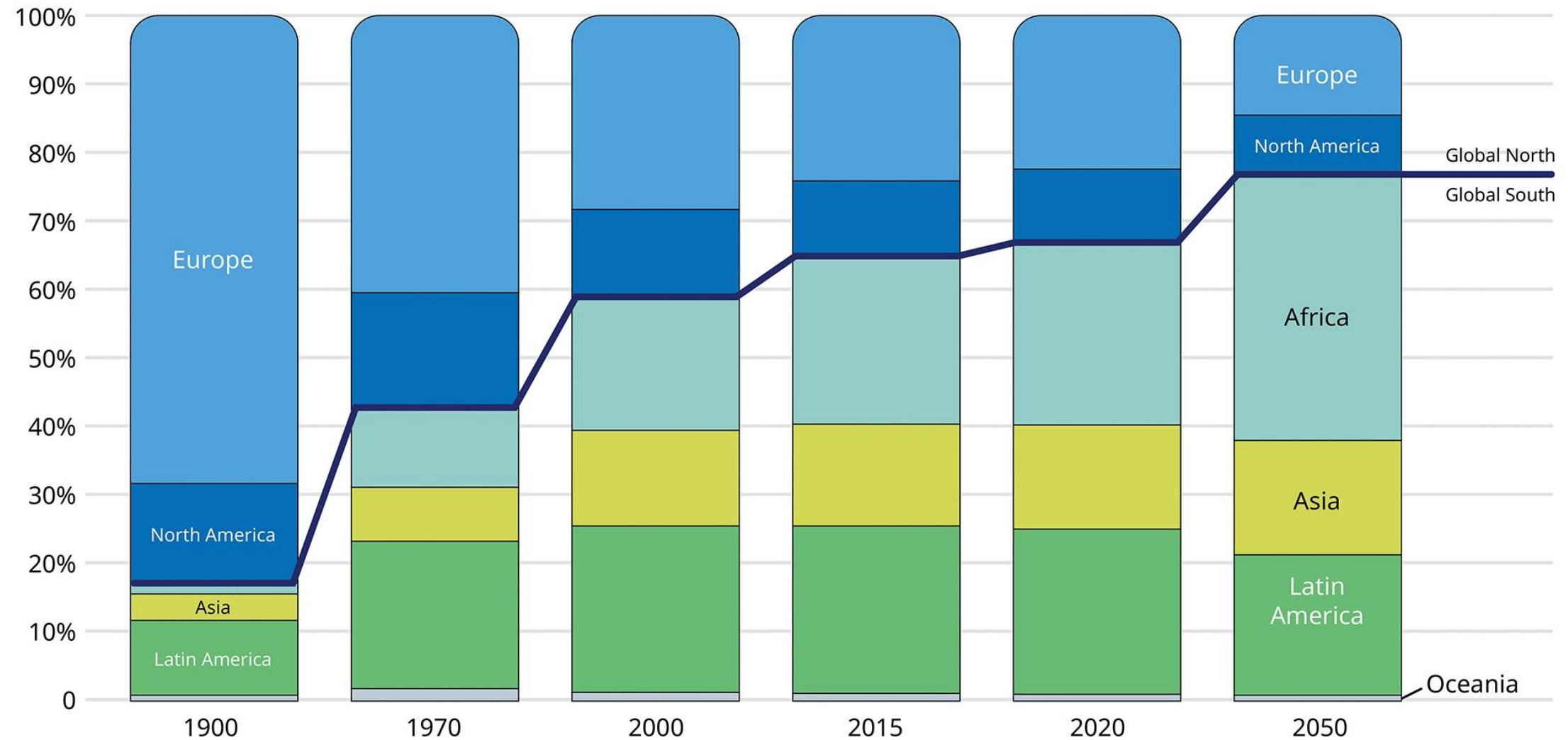


North/South distribution



Source: World Christian Database

Regional Distribution of Christianity



Key Questions

- How should Christians relate to the culture around us?
- How do Christians live out our faith in our cultures and in our human vocations?
- In other words, how do we contextualize the unchanging word of God to ever-changing cultures?

Cultural Mandate of Christians

- 26 Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”
- 27 So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.
- 28 God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground” (Gen 1:26-28)

Cultural Mandate of Christians

- Implicit in this command are the activities of:
 - **Begetting**—the organic multiplication of people
 - **Forming diverse cultures**—the image of God fully realized in the multiplicity of races, ethnic groups or cultures
- Embedded in this human activity is the development of agriculture, the arts, economics, laws, family dynamics and everything related to human flourishing to the glory of God
- Thus, the separation between the sacred and the secular is unbiblical

Common Grace

- Although sin has come into the world, human cultures continue to develop and evolve
- However, they do so in directions that are no longer for the glory of God
- Because sin has come into the world, the earth is subjugated to sin in personal, physical, and structural dimensions
- Humans toil but labor is difficult, fatiguing, and even futile
- Yet God still gives common grace to everyone regardless of faith
- After the fall, common grace is the pre-condition for the stability of society
- ¹⁷ Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows (Jas 1:17)

Common Grace

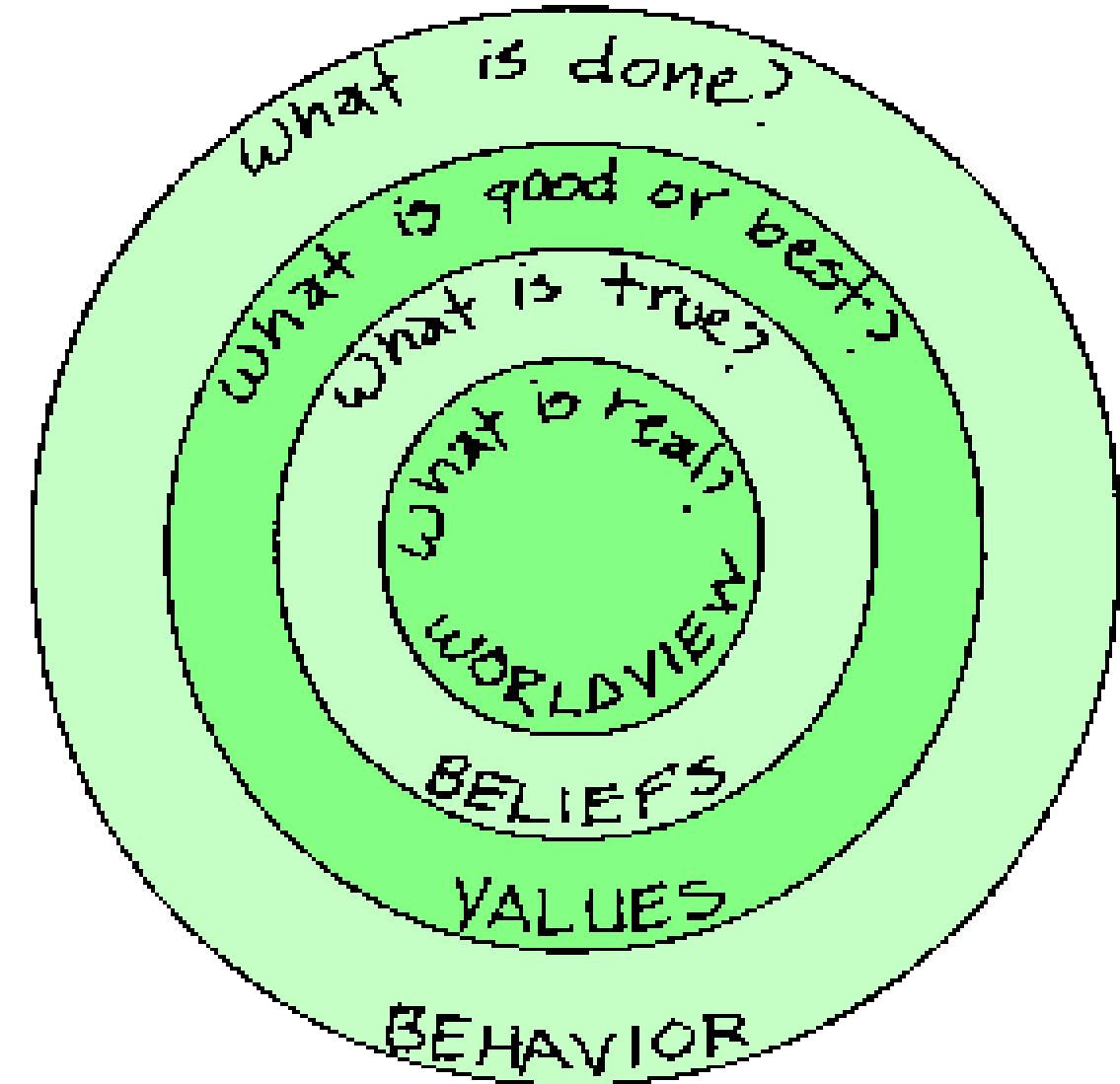
- ¹⁴ But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of this, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting: ¹⁵ “Friends, why are you doing this? We too are only human, like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them. ¹⁶ In the past, he let all nations go their own way. ¹⁷ Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy.” ¹⁸ Even with these words, they had difficulty keeping the crowd from sacrificing to them (Acts 14:14-18)

The Dualism of Sacred and Secular

- God created everything and considered it “good,” a world under the Lordship of God
- Thus, it would be a mistake to wedge a separation between “culture” and “religion”—the “earthly” and “heavenly,” and the “sacred” and the “secular”
- The entrance of sin separates the work of culture from religion, because humans are no longer motivated by the love of God and neighbour but the love of self
- The moral law might restrain human rebellion, but left to themselves sinners would eradicate that law for the sake of autonomy

The Phenomenon of Culture

“The more or less integrated systems of ideas, feelings, and values and their associated patterns of behavior and products shared by a group of people who organize and regulate what they think, feel, and do” (Paul Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*, 30).



How to Relate to Our Culture

- **By being a counter-culture:** We want to be a church that not only gives support to Christians in their personal walks with God, but one that also shapes them into an alternative community God created by his Word and Spirit
- **For the common good:** We want to be radically distinct from the culture around us and yet, out of that distinct identity, we should sacrificially serve neighbours and even enemies, working for the flourishing of people

How to Relate to Our Culture

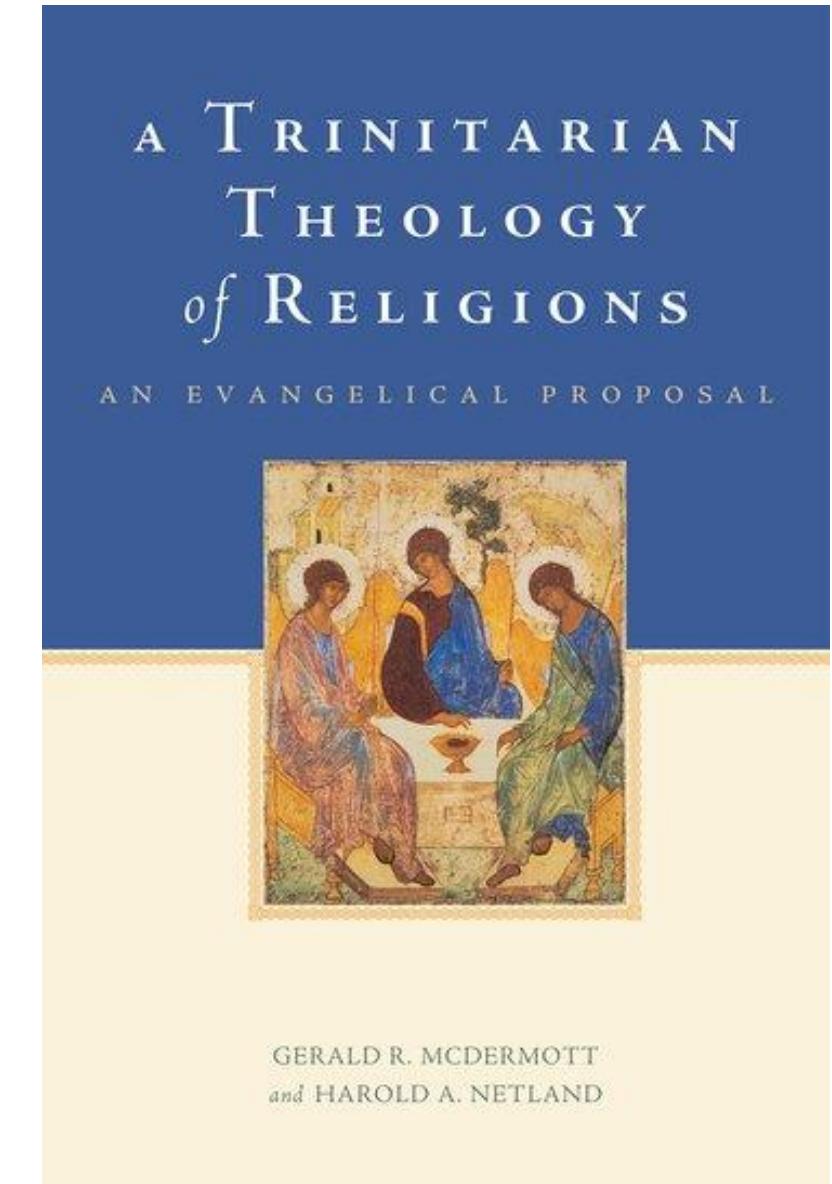
- Corporate worship services may not be the primary connecting point with those outside of the Christian faith
- Rather, we expect to meet our neighbours as we work for their peace, security, and well-being, loving them in word and deed
- If we do this, we will be “salt” and “light” in the world (sustaining and improving living conditions, showing the world the glory of God by our patterns of living; [Matt 5:13–16](#))

Contextualizing the Gospel

- We must therefore learn to contextualize the Christian faith and message to non-believers
- We believe that every expression of Christianity is necessarily and rightly contextualized, to some degree, to particular human culture
- There is no such thing as a universal, a-historical expression of Christianity
- But we never want to be so affected by our culture that we compromise gospel truths
- So, how we keep our balance?

Defining Contextualization

“We might think of contextualization as the process through which, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the gospel of Jesus Christ is expressed in appropriate local linguistic, cultural, and religious patterns and the ways in which particular Christian communities live out their commitments as disciples of Christ within such cultural contexts” (McDermott and Netland 2014, 208)



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Key Questions

- How should we communicate the gospel to people in a way that is culturally intelligible to them, yet without compromising its biblical integrity?
- How should a people who receive the gospel shape their theological understanding of divine revelation in a way that does not eliminate their cultural identity, but rather fulfills their cultural aspirations?
- Contextualization is understood as comprising two parts: *transmission* of biblical faith, and the *application* of that faith by its recipient

APPROACHES TO CONTEXTUALIZATION

- Transplanters—repeat the message as stated in biblical form to the context
- Transformers—alter the content of the text in order to relate to the context
- Translators—reexpress the message without distorting the content

OT Examples

- OT gives examples of God using linguistic, cultural, and religious forms already familiar to his people to reveal himself.
 - A primary name for God in Hebrew is ***EI***, which was the name of the high god of the Canaanite pantheon
 - The act of **circumcision**, a transition rite of puberty, was loaded with divine implications when God made it the mark of identity for his people
 - God shaped the revelation of himself by using the known, ancient phenomenon of **covenant**

NT Examples

- The gospel spread from Jerusalem but was distinguished from Judaism (Acts 15)
- John's use of the term *logos* as an impersonal divine principle in Greek philosophy
- Paul's use of the term *theos* for gods or demons (1 Cor 10:20)
- Recording of Jesus' word from Aramaic to Greek shows the translatability of Christianity
- Paul's contextualizing efforts: Acts 13:13-52; 14:8-20; 17:16-34

The Role of Scripture

- Evangelicals accept the Bible as “God-breathed” and is the ultimate source of authority for faith and practice (2 Tim 3:14-17; 2 Pt 1:21)
- The Bible remains the primary source for contextualizing all dimensions of life, though we recognize that lived experience or culture and history or tradition play a secondary theological source
- We must seek to read the text the way it was meant to be read

The Role of Context

- Influences what we see and don't see in the biblical text
- Raises questions and issues that need biblical answers
- Helps us appropriately communicate the biblical message

Steps in Contextualization

- Presupposition: Bible is recognized as the normative standard for faith in practice in all areas of life
- Cultural exegesis: Study the local culture phenomenologically. The purpose is to understand the old ways, not to judge them
- Scriptural exegesis: Look to Scripture to examine the related question at hand
- Critical evaluation: The local people must critically evaluate their own past customs in the light of their new biblical understandings and to make decisions regarding their response to their new-found truths
- Implement a new contextualized practice

Dealing with Traditional Practices

- Adoption: Old practices judged not unbiblical can be retained
- Rejection: Old practices judged unbiblical must be rejected
- Modification: Transform old practices, giving it a new, Christian meaning
- Substitution: A new symbol or practice is created to substitute for the old
- Toleration: Practices are less than the biblical ideal, but changing it immediately would create a greater evil

Stability and Change

- Affects the **emphasis and focus**—the term “shalom” in prosperity gospel
- Affects the **language and symbol**—the term “bread” in Jn 6:35
- Affects the **organization and presentation**—the “Four Spiritual Laws”
- Affects the **appropriation or application**—dawn prayer meetings in Korean culture

Sino-Christology

- Gospel “fúyīn 福音”
- Jesus is the Bread of Life “生命的粮”
- Relationship in Chinese culture “guan-xi 關係”
- Grace-passion-true-Lord “en-qing-zhen-zhu 恩情真主”
- Middle-guarantor) “zhong-bao 中保”
- Saviour-Lord “jiu-zhu 救主”

Avoiding Syncretism

- An emphasis on Scripture as the primary source for all contextual theologizing
- Although the church worldwide has the right to self-theologizing (Hiebert 1985, 193-224), no local theology can be incongruent with the theology of the church around the world and throughout the centuries
- A comprehensive, critical contextualization addresses all dimensions of culture, safeguarding local practices from slipping into syncretism
- Lamin Sanneh of Yale Divinity School insists that the gospel must continually engage culture. Once the process of reinterpretation stops and culture becomes fossilized, that is when syncretism takes place

Conclusion

- Christian faith, culture, and vocation (society) must not be compartmentalized
- Christians must do scriptural and cultural exegesis to be effective witnesses of Jesus Christ
- As Karl Barth famously declared, a Christian must read the Bible and the newspaper in order to communicate the gospel relevantly to our captive audiences