

MISSIOLOGY

Toward Ethnohermeneutics

Contextualization 2.0 and Beyond...

Larry W. Caldwell | Sioux Falls Seminary

The word “contextualization” is fewer than fifty years old. It stormed onto the theological scene in the 1970s and 1980s amid no little controversy, fueled by the writings of missionary anthropologists like Charles Kraft and Paul Hiebert.¹ Concepts such as “ethnotheology,” “dynamic equivalence,” and “self-theologizing” were hotly debated. Seminaries throughout North America soon offered courses on contextualization, and not just in specialized schools of world mission or intercultural studies. This was Contextualization 1.0.

Today the controversy is mostly gone. The desire to see peoples and cultures develop their own culturally appropriate ways of understanding theology—in other words, developing their own ethnotheologies—is taken for granted by most Bible teachers, theologians, and missiologists worldwide. Ethnotheology is now seen as a legitimate discipline. In fact, it has given birth to several other “ethno” disciplines: ethnomusicology (indigenous music), ethnodoxology (indigenous worship), and ethnohermeneutics (indigenous interpretation methods). This is Contextualization 2.0.

CONTEXTUALIZATION 2.0 AND ETHNOHERMENEUTICS

Ethnohermeneutics arose in the late 1980s. I and others observed that, while good ethnotheologies were occurring, the basic hermeneutical methods that undergirded them were based predominately on historical-critical and/or grammatical-historical approaches to hermeneutics. It was noted that these approaches, as good as they are, were often learned approaches that were not necessarily appropriate in a local context that used different hermeneutical approaches to their own written or oral literature. Thus, the question raised by ethnohermeneutics

was this: If local theologians were learning and using “foreign” Bible interpretation techniques, then was it possible that their ethnic theologies were not completely their own? I argued that both Western missionaries and local non-Western theologians should look for and use interpretation methodologies already present in the receptor culture, and from this foundation local theologians could subsequently develop their own appropriate ethnotheology.²

From those early days, ethnohermeneutics has now expanded beyond cross-cultural contexts to include both multigenerational contexts (differences between generations that, at their core, are hermeneutical differences) and multicultural contexts (given the complexity of our increasingly multicultural world). Here’s the definition of ethnohermeneutics most commonly used today: Ethnohermeneutics is Bible interpretation done in multigenerational, multicultural, and cross-cultural contexts and that, as far as possible, uses dynamic hermeneutical methods that

already reside in the culture. Its primary goal is to interpret and communicate the truths of the Bible in ways that will be best understood by the receptor culture.

IMPLICATIONS FOR BIBLE AND THEOLOGY PROFESSORS TODAY

Missiologists are in general agreement concerning the role of ethnohermeneutics and how it functions in a local culture. Several non-Western Bible scholars and theologians are using the basics of ethnohermeneutics in the development of their own ethnotheologies.³ It is important for all of us who teach the Bible and theology to recognize the increasing cultural complexity of our world and how this complexity directly impacts our students and how they do ministry (whether that ministry is multigenerational, multicultural, or cross-cultural). As a result, we all need to rethink how we teach Bible interpretation. Here are two practical suggestions:

- Appreciate the hermeneutical milieu of your students. Their hermeneutical milieu matters. All students come with their own valid and culturally appropriate hermeneutical approaches

*We need to help
students interpret
the biblical text
in light of
who they are.*

to their own written and oral literature. How do they process the meaning of the biblical text within their own hermeneutical milieu? As we teach them the nuances of historical-critical and/or grammatical-historical approaches to the biblical text, we also need to value their own hermeneutical framework and help them interpret the biblical text in light of who they are.⁴

- Teach the exegesis of both the biblical context and the local context. Most of our students will be preaching and teaching the Bible in multicultural and multigenerational contexts. We must equip them for this task; it should not be left primarily to the “practical” theology department and courses on preaching. In all of our Bible and theology courses, we need to help students exegete both the biblical text as well as their own local contexts.⁵ In this regard, we perhaps need a more holistic understanding of the hermeneutical process.

The new discipline of ethnohermeneutics gives us all much to think about as we teach the Bible. It compels us to consider new ways of making the unchanging Bible relevant for our constantly changing world. **D**

¹ Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979); Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1985).

² See Larry W. Caldwell, “Cross-Cultural Bible Interpretation: A View from the Field,” *Phronesis* 3 (1996): 13–35; and “Towards the New Discipline of Ethnohermeneutics: Questioning the Relevancy of Western Hermeneutical Methods in the Asian Context,” *Journal of Asian Mission* 1 (1999): 21–43.

³ See, for example, Nāsili Vaka’uta, *Reading Ezra 9–10 Tu’a-Wise: Rethinking Biblical Interpretation in Oceania* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011).

⁴ See Larry W. Caldwell, “Reconsidering Our Biblical Roots: Bible Interpretation, the Apostle Paul and Mission Today,” parts 1 and 2, *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 29 (2012): 91–100 and 113–21.

⁵ See Larry W. Caldwell, “Interpreting the Bible With the Poor,” in *Social Engagement: The Challenge of the Social in Missiological Education* (Wilmore: First Fruits, 2013), 165–90. For a practical application of ethnohermeneutical principles, see Larry W. Caldwell, *Doing Bible Interpretation! Making the Bible Come Alive for Yourself and Your People* (Sioux Falls: Lazy Oaks, 2016).



LARRY W. CALDWELL is working on a practical contextualization book tentatively titled *Doing Theology in Context*, as well as a textbook on ethnohermeneutics.

THEOLOGY

Learning to Value Limits

A Brief Bibliographical Reflection

Kelly M. Kapic | Covenant College

Although I studied the doctrine of creation during my undergraduate and seminary education, the topic never fully captured me. Yet two theologians jumpstarted my theological imagination, putting this doctrine at the front of my thinking and life.

First, my *Doktorvater*, Colin E. Gunton, loved the doctrine of creation and communicated his enthusiasm to me and other listeners as he integrated creation with the rest of Christian doctrine. To get a sense of this yourself, look at *The Triune Creator: A Historical and Systematic Study* (Eerdmans, 1998). Gunton displays why it matters not simply to believe in a divine reality over against the material world, but also to relish the beauty of the Triune God of life and love who created and sustains all that is not God.

Second, the work of the Puritan John Owen, especially in his handling of the humanity of the Christ, helped me connect the doctrine of creation with re-creation. Owen’s and Gunton’s voices have spoken profoundly into my theology—in particular, the research and writing of my recent book on suffering (*Embodied Hope: A Theological Meditation on Pain and Suffering* [IVP Academic, 2017]), and they continue to guide me on my current project, which is a theological reflection on human finitude.

Let me encourage readers to spend some time considering the place of creaturely embodiment and limitations in our concept of who we are. Understanding this is crucial to faithful discipleship, since this is how God has made us. Two recent works show how relevant the topic might prove to be to our life and ministries.

First, John Swinton has written a lovely volume titled *Becoming Friends of Time: Disability, Timefulness, and Gentle Discipleship* (Baylor University Press, 2016). As a Christian ethicist, Swinton has a

Our creaturely finitude is a gift from God rather than something to be overcome and denied.