The Gospel in Human Contexts

Anthropological Explorations for Contemporary Missions

Paul G. Hiebert
Contents

Illustrations 7
Acknowledgments 9
Introduction 11

Part 1 Theoretical Foundations
1. Changing Views 17
2. Missional Theology 36

Part 2 Exegeting Humans
3. Changing Images 61
4. Early Anthropology 76
5. Recent Anthropology 108
6. A Systems Approach 127
7. Research Methods 160

Part 3 Mission as Intercultural Mediation
8. Missions as Glocal Mediation 177
9. Missionaries as Global Mediators 187

References Cited 201
Index 215
The Christmas pageant had come to a good end after a rocky start, I thought. There were scenes of the angel addressing Elizabeth, Mary, and Joseph, of Elizabeth’s meeting with Mary, and of the birth of Christ. Then the shepherds came on stage, staggering in drunk (in South India shepherds and drunkards are synonymous), followed by a dozen sheep bouncing on all fours and butting one another (all the young children who had no other roles in the play). When the angels of the Lord appeared, they all kneeled, sober and reverent. There were the wise men following the star and, finally, the manger scene as all gathered around the newborn child. The message had gotten through!

Then from behind the curtain leaped Santa Claus, giving gifts to all, the hero of the evening. I was stunned. My first reaction was “Syncretism!”—a mix of Christian and Hindu beliefs. Then I remembered that the missionaries from the West had brought Santa along with Christ. In the West, we have two Christmases. The sacred Christmas centers on the baby Jesus, Mary, Joseph, angels, shepherds, and wise men. It takes place in a warm climate, has palm trees and other tropical plants, sheep, cows and camels, angels, and the star of Bethlehem. The secular Christmas focuses on Santa Claus and elves. It takes place in a cold climate and has evergreen trees, reindeer, sleighs, and the star of the North. We mentally keep the two separate, although we do bring evergreen Christmas trees into the church and mix the two at home. Indian villagers have no supernatural/natural dichotomy and see all these participants as parts of one whole picture. The cultural differences between the missionaries and the villagers had led to a fundamental miscommunication.
As missionaries, pastors, and evangelists, we are involved in complex ministries. To prepare for these, we seek extensive training in Bible schools and seminaries. There, most of the courses focus on exegesis of the Scriptures. Systematic and biblical theologies are at the fore. This training is essential because those who are ministers of the gospel must know it well in order to communicate it effectively. Church history helps us understand the ways Christians have understood the gospel since New Testament times. And we take a few courses on preaching and counseling (Western style). But when we go out in missions, we find that just knowing the gospel in its original context is not enough. We must communicate that gospel to humans who live their everyday lives in worlds far different from our own. Unfortunately we receive little training in the exegesis of human beings and their contexts. At best we may have taken a course on how to learn a new language. Consequently, the gospel we preach goes off into space and does not reach the people we serve (fig. 1).

How should we, as missionaries, pastors, and church workers, prepare for our ministries? It is increasingly clear that we must master the skill of human exegesis as well as biblical exegesis to meaningfully communicate the gospel in human contexts. We need to study the social, cultural, psychological, and ecological systems in which humans live in order to communicate the gospel in ways the people we serve understand and believe. Requiring only a course or two on human exegesis is like preparing a doctor by teaching him to put on Band-Aids, stitch wounds, and administer
artificial resuscitation. Christian missions and ministries are as complex as medicine and open heart surgery, and, consequently, they require a deep understanding of humans to be effective.

Not only must missionaries and ministers learn how to exegete humans, they must also know how to put the gospel into human contexts so that it is understood properly but does not become captive to these contexts. The gospel is not simply information to be added to current cultural understandings. It is a transforming power that changes individuals and societies into signs and witnesses of the kingdom of God. Moreover we must learn to exegete our own contexts, because these shape the way we understand and communicate the gospel. We often speak of this encounter between gospel and human contexts as indigenization or contextualization.

In this book we look at ways of exegeting human contexts and of communicating the gospel faithfully in these contexts. We argue that this process of communicating the gospel in human settings is a third way of practicing theology, parallel and complementary to systematic and biblical theologies. This third way we call missional theology.
Part 1

Theoretical Foundations
How can we embody in human contexts divine revelation given to us in Scripture so that people believe and follow Christ, and societies are transformed? And how can we do this in such a way that the gospel does not become captive to the world? Before we answer these questions, we need to study the way we as Christians have viewed the relationship between the gospel and human contexts.

As humans we live in particular contexts: our family, our neighborhood, our town, our country. We seldom give specific thought to them, but these contexts shape what we see, feel, and value, and what we believe without question to be true, right, and proper. These beliefs are so obvious to us that they seem to be universal. They simply are the way things truly are. We assume that others see things the way we do. Houses have bathrooms, bedrooms, kitchens, and living rooms. Cars are driven on the right side of the road, stay in lanes, and stop at stop signs. We must put postage stamps on letters before dropping them in the mailbox. We fail to recognize that many of the assumptions and values that underlie our culture are not biblically based. They are our human creations.
Most of us, particularly in our childhood, are monocultural. Only when things go wrong, or change rapidly, or when our views of reality conflict with the assumptions from another culture do we question them. Such experiences make us aware that we live in particular contexts, and they force us to start thinking about them—their structure and givens. Others of us have grown up or live in multicultural contexts: missionaries, missionary kids, immigrants, business people, diplomats, and refugees. We are aware of cultural differences and have learned to negotiate between two worlds in daily living. Still, even in these circumstances we often do not stop to consciously examine these contexts, the way they shape our thinking, and the deep differences between them. We are, to some extent, bicultural, but would find it hard to explain to others what this means.

In a rapidly globalizing world, it is important that all of us give thought to human contexts and the way these shape others as well as ourselves. We need to learn how to live in a multicontext world, to build bridges of understanding and relationship between different contexts, and to judge between them. This is true for social, cultural, linguistic, religious, and historical contexts. How do, and how should, we relate to others and to otherness?

As Christians, we are often unaware that our beliefs are frequently shaped more by our culture than by the gospel. We take our Christianity to be biblically based and normative for everyone. We do not stop to ask what parts of it come from our sociocultural and historical contexts, and what parts come from Scripture. Missionaries are forced to deal with sociocultural differences and, therefore, with social and cultural contexts. But even they may take little time to systematically study in depth the contexts in which they serve, despite the fact that the effectiveness of their ministries is determined in large measure by how well they do this.

Finally, humans live in many types of contexts: geographic, social, cultural, political, and historical. Missionaries seek to plant churches in local social contexts and to communicate the gospel in local cultural contexts. The church without the gospel ceases to be the church. The gospel without humans and social institutions, such as families and congregations, dies. In this chapter, we focus primarily on social and cultural contexts and the

1. The word *society* as it is used here is defined as the system of relationships that enable people to form communities. The word *culture* is defined as the partially integrated system of ideas, feelings, and values encoded in learned patterns of behavior, signs, products, rituals, beliefs, and worldviews shared by a community of people. Society and culture are subsystems that are part of human realities. Other subsystems include those that are physical, biological, psychological, and spiritual.
importance of understanding them for the sake of missions. A full analysis of missions must take historical, personal, and other contexts into account and examine the relationships among the different contexts in which the people we serve live.

Views of Contextualization

Our conscious awareness of cultural contexts, including our own, often goes through changing perceptions as we encounter others and otherness. Those who grow up in multicultural settings develop at least some awareness of social and cultural differences and, therefore, of societies and cultures themselves. The changing perceptions outlined below are a model—a way of looking at our growing awareness of others and otherness in cross-cultural ministries. It is not a descriptor of the phases all persons go through in their encounters with other cultures. These changes are not necessarily linear, and they may overlap. Rather, the model is a tool to help us understand the history of the modern mission movement that carried missionaries from Europe and North America to the ends of the earth, and to help us learn from past experiences. Nonetheless, both personal and corporate views of contextualization change as we encounter other cultures and face the questions raised by “otherness.”

View One: Noncontextualization

Most monocultural people are largely unaware of the cultures in which they live, or the depth to which these contexts shape how and what they think and do. For them the contextualization of the gospel is not an issue.

Noncontextualization

“Just go and preach the gospel. Why waste time going to college and seminary?” my boss said when he learned that I wanted to be a missionary and wanted, first, to complete college, seminary, and graduate studies. His is a widespread attitude commonly found in the church.

When people go as missionaries, we know they need to understand the gospel, but we are sure they know enough from church and Sunday school to reach the lost abroad. Even if we recognize their need for more Bible training, most of us are unaware of the profound issues raised by cultural, social, and historical differences. We know that missionaries might benefit...
from a class or two on the culture in which they plan to serve. We are confident that in a few years they will naturally learn the local language and customs and be able to minister as they have in our church. All they need to do is proclaim the gospel to the people, and the people will understand and believe. They need to persuade the people to leave their old gods and receive Jesus as their Savior, and move on to new areas where the gospel has not been proclaimed. The gospel is seen as acultural and ahistorical in its very nature.

In this phase we equate the gospel with our Christianity (fig. 1.1). New converts should learn from us and our ways, and they should join us because we are Christians and this is the way we practice it. To live Christianity differently raises difficult questions. How differently can Christians in other cultures live? Is our Christianity normative for all? To what extent has our way of practicing Christianity been shaped by the gospel, and to what extent by our culture? We avoid these difficult questions and come as outsiders, assuming that new converts will join and imitate us.

The epistemological foundation for this phase is positivism (Hiebert 1999), which holds that our scientific knowledge is an accurate, true photograph of the world and corresponds one-to-one with reality. Its theories are not models but facts. Scientists seek objective truth and must eliminate feelings and morals from the rational/empirical processes used to ascertain truth because they introduce subjectivity—and subjectivity is viewed negatively as contaminating the Truth.

Theological positivism holds that our central concern is truth, and that our theology corresponds one-to-one to Scripture. Other theologies and religions are false and must be refuted. We are concerned with truth and define it in rational terms. We divorce it from feelings and values because these undermine the objectivity of the truth. Our concern is that people

![Figure 1.1: View One: Noncontextualization](image-url)
Changing Views

believe the gospel to be truth because that determines whether they are saved. We define the truth in propositional terms and seek to transmit it unchanged. We see ourselves as God’s lawyers and put our trust in experts who have studied Scripture deeply. Finally, we see the gospel as acultural and ahistorical. It is unchanging and universal, can be codified in abstract rational terms, and can be communicated in all languages without loss of meaning. Neither the sociocultural contexts of the listeners nor that of the messengers need be taken into account.

Most missionaries, when they enter another culture, move quickly to phase two, but some remain in phase one all their lives. They work through translators and control the converts and churches. They make certain that new Christians conform to the cultural norms introduced by the missionary. Converts must wear clothes, learn to read, and have only one wife. They cannot practice theological reflection on their own. They must learn theology from the missionary.

Minimal Contextualization

When we enter another culture, we soon encounter deep differences. We experience culture shock: the feeling of disorientation that arises when all our familiar cultural ways no longer hold. We experience language shock—the inability to communicate even the simplest messages and the growing realization that languages shape the very way we experience and see reality. We also experience religious shock—the fact that other religions make sense to their followers, even though to us these are strange and obviously wrong. We meet Muslims and Hindus who are good people, often better than some of the Christians we know. They can articulate their beliefs clearly and persuasively. How can we say that they are lost? Why are we Christians? Was it a matter of conviction or of birth and upbringing? We are forced to examine our own beliefs more deeply and the basis for our convictions. Such encounters with cultural differences force us to deal with others and, ultimately, with the question of otherness.

This encounter with otherness requires missionaries to decide how they will live in a new land. What kind of food should they eat at home? What kind of clothes should they wear? What kind of houses should they live in? In this stage, missionaries try to preserve their culture abroad for psychological survival and for their children, who, they assume, will eventually return to their home culture.

Otherness also raises the question of the messengers’ attitudes toward the local people. They are so different—so other! In this view, we see them as “primitive,” “backward,” and in need of help to become like us. As we
come to know them personally, they become more human to us—friends and neighbors—but we keep a psychological barrier between ourselves and them. They are others, not us. We do not think seriously of migrating and becoming citizens of the new country or that our children might marry locally and settle down as natives. We think of “returning home” when we retire.

The more we live with and study the people we serve, the more we become aware of the depth and power of their culture and the need to contextualize both the messenger and the message for them to understand and live the gospel. But we are afraid that this contextualization will distort the gospel, so our conclusion is that it must be done minimally (fig. 1.2). We realize that we must speak and translate the Bible into the people’s language, and we organize their services and churches in ways the people understand, but we still equate Christianity with our own beliefs and practices.

In this paradigm we link Christianity to civilization. We see ourselves as modern and others as primitive and backward—in need of development. Therefore, we do not need to study other cultures deeply, except to find the distortions they cause in understanding the gospel. We build schools and hospitals to teach people the truths of science and to civilize them. We see other cultures as primitive or evil, with little to contribute to our own understanding of reality. There is little in the old culture worth preserving. The minds of the natives are a tabula rasa on which we can write Christianity and science. To become Christian and civilized, the people must become like us. As the Chinese used to say, “One more Christian, one less Chinese.”

In positivism signs, such as words and mathematical formulas, are thought to correspond directly to empirical realities (fig. 1.3). The word tree refers to real trees, the word cow to real cows. This view assumes that
Changing Views

All people live in essentially the same world and simply attach different labels to realities. Their thought categories, logic, way of ordering realities, and worldview are essentially like our own, only less developed. In communication and Bible translation, missionaries need simply to find the corresponding words in another language, adjust the grammar, and the people will understand the message accurately.

One characteristic of this view of signs is its strong affirmation of singular truth. Signs are mere labels, but they are directly attached to the truth. So in evangelism and teaching, an emphasis is placed on accurate, rationally developed arguments and apologetic confrontation with other religions. A second characteristic is that communication is measured by what is said or transmitted. It is sender-oriented communication. What is important is the number of sermons preached, hours of radio broadcast, and quantity of tracts and Bibles distributed.

In contextualization, positivist semiotics assumes that signs in other cultures, such as drama, drums, and music, are inherently tied to their pagan meanings and therefore cannot be used by Christians. This leads to widespread rejection of local signs, and the importation of Western Christian ones. We sing Western hymns translated into the local language, build churches in European styles, and import our liturgies. If we are Anglicans, we have priests; if Presbyterians, we have presbyters; if Baptists, we introduce voting. The result is a minimally contextualized approach to missions.

**View Two: Uncritical Contextualization**

The more deeply we are involved in cross-cultural ministries, the more we realize the reality of social, cultural, and historical contexts, the depth of the differences between them, and the difficulties in dealing with these differences. Early anthropologists and missionaries studied...
other cultures using Western theoretical frameworks. After the 1930s, anthropologists began to realize the importance of understanding the world as the people they study see it.² This led to a profound shift in the nature of anthropological and missiological theories, and to an ongoing exploration of the differences between cultures and their mutual intelligibility. Can we truly understand others? Can we compare their cultures with our own and, if so, on what basis? We begin by studying the people we serve, but end with studying ourselves and our own assumptions. This process relativizes viewpoints and places them on equal footing (fig. 1.4).

![Figure 1.4: View Two: Uncritical Contextualization](image)

The growing awareness of anthropological insight into human contexts has led in missions to a growing awareness of the importance of radically contextualizing the gospel in other cultures to make it comprehensible and to allow people to become followers of Jesus Christ more easily. This awareness is the result of two paradigm shifts. The first was the emergence of Saussurian semiotics. Ferdinand de Saussure (1916) raised the question of the relationship between sign and reality, and came to the conclusion that it was arbitrary. In fact, he argued that signs do not refer to external realities at all, as formerly thought. Rather, they are mental constructs that create meaning systems in the mind. Signs have forms and meanings, but both are in the mind, and there are no links between signs and realities other than the conventionalities of human cultures. Meanings are wholly subjective (fig. 1.5). If this is true, then an accurate literal translation from one culture to another does not guarantee the preservation of the mean-

² Bronislaw Malinowski and British structural anthropology pioneered ethnographic fieldwork that stressed living with people and learning to see the world the way they see it. This raised the question of whose perspectives are “right” and, eventually, to the belief in cultural relativism.
Changing Views

Furthermore, we must measure communication not by what is said by the speaker but what is understood by the listener. We need translations in which mental meanings are preserved in cross-cultural communication rather than literal references. The result is dynamic equivalence, or receptor-oriented Bible translations.

The second paradigm shift occurred in epistemology. Positivism, which was the foundation for the Enlightenment, was increasingly challenged as false, arrogant, oppressive, and colonial. In its place emerged postmodern instrumentalism (also known as pragmatism), which sees knowledge systems as the creation of human minds. They are cultural Rorschachs, not photographs, of reality. There is no way to test whether they are true, so we adopt those that are most useful to us (Hiebert 1999; Laudan 1996). The result is cultural relativism. All cultures are considered to be equally good and true. None can judge another. Moreover, the preservation of cultures becomes an unquestioned good.

The introduction of Saussurian semiotics and instrumental epistemology profoundly challenged the fundamental assumptions of the Western mission movement and its colonial attitudes. Western “civilization” was no longer seen as superior and local cultures were to be valued. If there was good in all religions, why should missionaries seek to convert others at all? In any case, if missionaries do go, they should become insiders and identify fully with the people they serve. Local people should be encouraged to read the Scriptures for themselves and to formulate their own theologies.

The further outcome of the movement to contextualize occurred when culturally sensitive missionaries, such as E. S. Jones and Lesslie Newbigin, returned to their home countries. They began to look at these as mission fields and were shocked at the uncritical contextualization of the gospel in Western contexts (fig. 1.6). The gospel had become part of the culture, not an outside counter-culture community. It had largely lost its prophetic
voice. Furthermore, the culture itself had moved on, leaving the church behind. Out of their prophetic calls emerged the Gospel in Our Culture movement. This movement has combined strong critique of the Western churches for having become outdated with a call for the radical contextualization of the gospel in North America by becoming seeker sensitive.

**View Three: Critical Contextualization**

In recent years there has been a reaction to radical contextualization. The questions arise: Is the gospel still the gospel when it is radically contextualized, or has it become captive to the cultural context? Does the most contextualized gospel lead to the most vital, biblical churches? Out of this concern has emerged a critical approach to contextualization (fig. 1.7). Central to critical contextualization is the fact that the gospel cannot be equated with any contextual expression of it. As Andrew Walls notes:

> No one ever meets universal Christianity in itself: we only ever meet Christianity in a local form and that means a historically, culturally conditioned form. We need not fear this; when God became man he became historically, culturally conditioned man in a particular time and place. What he became, we need not fear to be. There is nothing wrong in having local forms of Christianity—provided that we remember that they are local. (1996, 235)

Contextualization is an important and valuable process, necessary to the communication of the gospel. But culturally, contextualized Christianity is always a reflection of a much deeper universal reality.

3. It is important to note that both Jones and Newbigin, in their encounters with Hinduism, moved well beyond an instrumentalist view and religious relativism to affirming the truth of the gospel and the need to bear bold witness to it. In North America, the Gospel in Our Culture movement is led by George Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder (1996), inspired by the writings of Lesslie Newbigin (1986; 1989).
Changing Views

Underlying this new paradigm is a rejection of Saussurian semiotics and the emergence of Peircian semiotics (fig. 1.8). Charles Peirce, an American mathematician and linguist, proposed a third way of looking at signs. He rejected the dualism of form and meaning introduced by Humboldt and Saussure and introduced instead a triadic view of signs. Each sign, he said, had (1) the sign (the signifier; e.g., the spoken or written word, the sound of a bell, a picture of an arrow); (2) the mental concept or image it evokes in the mind (the signified); and (3) the reality to which it refers (the significatum). For example, the word tree points to real trees in the forest and invokes a mental image of a tree at the same time. In other words, a sign is the
linking of mental images to realities by means of words, gestures, sounds, and images. They have an objective dimension and a subjective dimension. This means that they are not simply arbitrary human constructs. However, humans conceive of their worlds—and they do so in many different ways—their cultures must reflect in fundamental ways the order of reality itself. If there were not a great deal of correspondence between a peoples’ view of reality and reality itself, life would be impossible. Driving down a road, we would need to watch out not only for mentally constructed traffic but also for traffic that is indeed real and deadly.

There is also a growing reaction to postmodern instrumentalism and the emergence of a post-postmodern critical realist epistemology (Hiebert 1999; Laudan 1977). According to this view, humans can know reality in part. But their knowledge is not a photograph of reality with a one-to-one correspondence between theory and facts. It is more like a map. Maps must correspond to reality in what they claim to affirm, but they are mental images that are schematic, approximate, and—of necessity—limited and selective. A road map does not make truth claims about property boundaries or economic variables. Moreover, to be useful it must be simple, not showing every bend in the road or every pothole or bridge. However, it must get drivers to their intended destinations.

Given Peircian semiotics and a critical realist epistemology, it is possible to compare human belief systems and to test them against reality. To do so, we need to develop metacultural grids that enable us to evaluate different worldviews, to translate between them, and to negotiate between them. In Bible translation, Peircian semiotics leads beyond dynamic equivalence to double translations in which the translators seek to communicate ideas accurately while preserving as much as possible the historical realities spoken of in Scripture, often by using footnotes or parenthetical clarifications.

4. Charles Sanders Peirce wrote in the late nineteenth century. He named his epistemological theory “pragmatism.” William James and John Dewey drew on his insights but transformed the theory so fundamentally that in the end Peirce rejected it and renamed his theory “pragmaticism.” This term never caught on, and many believe that Peirce is the father of what currently is known as pragmatism or instrumentalism and of epistemological relativism. Peirce’s epistemology was not relativistic, but it was the basis for what is now known as critical realism.

5. There is no one true metacultural grid. Rather, metacultural frames are created by people from different cultures gathering together and comparing the way they translate between cultures, something all transcultural people learn to do, even if they give little thought to it. Developing suitable metacultural and metatheological frames is the first step in building mutual understanding among people from different contexts, and for comparing and evaluating these contexts in the light of divine revelation.
The new view calls for critical contextualization or practicing missional theology (Hiebert and Tiénou 2006). The Bible is seen as containing divine revelation, not simply humanly constructed beliefs. In contextualization, the heart of the gospel must be kept by encoding it in forms that are understood by the people, without making the gospel captive to the contexts. This is an ongoing process of embodying the gospel in an ever-changing world. Here cultures are viewed as both good and evil, not simply as neutral vehicles for understanding the world. No culture is absolute or privileged. We are all relativized by the gospel.

A critical realist epistemology differentiates between revelation and theology. The former is God-given truth; the latter is human understandings of that truth and cannot be equated fully with it. Human knowledge is always partial and schematic, and does not correspond one-to-one with reality. Our theology is our understanding of Scripture in our contexts. It may be true, but it is always partial and perspectival. It seeks to answer the questions we raise. This calls for a community-based hermeneutics in which dialogue serves to correct the biases of individuals. On the global scale, this calls for both local and global theologies. Local churches have the right to interpret and apply the gospel in their contexts, but also a responsibility to join the larger church community around the world in seeking to overcome the limited perspectives each brings, and the biases each has that might distort the gospel.

In this view of contextualization, missionaries are transcultural people—outsiders and insiders at the same time, people who come to serve the local churches as fellow believers and mediators, not as inside rivals for power and position (as we will see in chapters 8 and 9).

Views of Scripture

While affirming that Scripture is divine revelation, it is important to keep in mind that the Scriptures themselves were given to humans in particular historical and sociocultural contexts (fig. 1.9). This is obvious to Old and New Testament scholars but is often overlooked by ordinary Christians. Differentiating between eternal truth and the particular contexts in the Bible is not an easy task, but is essential if we are to understand the heart of the gospel, which is for everyone.

Nonetheless, a full view of the gospel in human contexts must emphasize that the gospel is indeed divine revelation to humans, not humans searching for the truth (fig. 1.10). This revelation is given in the particularities of
history and locality. But it is given by God and reveals God’s universal message to all humankind. It is easy, particularly in the academy, to ask what humans think about God. We must always remember, as Charles Malik reminds us (1987), that the real question is: what does God think about us? It is difficult in a pluralist world to affirm with deep love that the gospel is uniquely God speaking to us, not just human theological reflections about

---

Paul G. Hiebert,
The Gospel in Human Contexts: Anthropological Explorations for Contemporary Missions,
ultimate realities. But, as E. Stanley Jones points out (1925), we are called not to be God’s lawyers, but to bear bold witness to the truth that Jesus Christ is the only way to God and his kingdom. If we truly believe this is true, then to affirm other ways is to withhold from people knowledge of the way to eternal salvation.

Gospel and Human Contexts

What, then, is the relationship between gospel and human contexts, and how can we communicate the gospel to people in their contexts? Three principles can help us here.

The first principle is that the gospel must not be equated with any particular human context, not even the biblical cultural context: gospel versus cultures. Not only is this true with regard to Western Christianity, but it is also true with respect to the Scriptures. The gospel was revealed in the historical and sociocultural contexts of the Old and New Testaments, but those contexts are not normative for Christianity around the world.

It is important to remember that the gospel is distinct from human cultures, but this does not set the two in opposition to each other. Rather the two are separate, interrelated realities. We must recognize that divine revelation was given to humans in particular social and cultural contexts, and so the gospel is not to be equated with any one of these contexts.

The second principle we need to keep in mind is that the gospel must be put in specific sociocultural contexts for people to understand it: gospel in cultures. To do so we must seek to understand and study both the Scriptures and human cultures, and to incarnate the gospel in these cultures without losing its distinct divine nature.

The third principle to guide us in understanding the relationship of the gospel to human social and cultural contexts is that the gospel is transformative—gospel transforming culture. The gospel is not simply a message to be affirmed as true, but a call to follow Christ throughout life in radical discipleship. Newbigin (1989) speaks of the relationship of church to culture in terms of a missionary “encounter” with culture.

In transformation, we must begin where people are and help them grow, just as God begins with us where we are but leads us into maturity and faithfulness. Conversion is to turn to follow Christ, as individuals and as churches (Hiebert 1982). It is the first step in spiritual growth and obedience. This transformation must be both personal and corporate. As individuals
we need to be *born again* into a new life. As a church we need to model not the ways of this world, but the ways of the Kingdom, and to challenge the evils in our societies and cultures.

In transformation, we need to involve people in evaluating their own cultures in the light of new truth. This draws on their strength. They know their old culture better than we do and are in a better position to critique it and live transformed lives within it, once they have biblical instruction. We can bring outside views that help them see their own cultural biases, but they are the ones who make decisions as they grow spiritually through learning discernment and applying scriptural teachings to their own lives. The gospel is not simply information to be communicated. It is a message to which people must respond. Moreover, it is not enough that leaders be convinced that changes are needed. They may share their convictions and point out the consequences of various decisions, but they and their people must together make and enforce the decisions they have arrived at corporately. Only then will old beliefs and practices not be pushed underground, subverting the gospel.

In transformation, we must deal with the deeper issues involved. Too often we act on immediate cases at hand and do not use them to stimulate longer-range reflection on the underlying issues. Specific cases should stimulate further reflection in systematic and biblical theologies and human studies that facilitate well-grounded responses to the personal, social, and cultural contexts at hand.

Transformational theology focuses on mission. It takes humans seriously in the particularity of their persons, societies, and cultures, and their ever-changing histories. It integrates cognition, affectivity, and evaluation in its response to biblical truth and defines faith not simply as mental affirmations of truth, or as positive experiences of God, but as beliefs, feelings, and morals that lead to obedience to the word of God. It rejects the division between pure and applied theology, and sees ministry both as a way of doing theology and as a form of worship.

**Missiology as a Discipline**

Missiology is an academic discipline like systematic theology, anthropology, and history. A discipline or research tradition is defined not by the theories it generates as answers, but by the central questions it asks, the data it examines, and the methods it legitimates.
The central question of missiology is: how can the gospel of Jesus Christ be incarnated in human contexts so that people understand and believe, societies are transformed, and the kingdom of God is made manifest on earth as it is in heaven? Behind this question is the greater question: what is God’s mission in creating and redeeming the world? Missiology’s central question can be broken down into many subquestions, such as: (1) What is the relationship of human missions to God’s mission? (2) What is the nature of the gospel in a particular human context? (3) How can the gospel be communicated so that people believe? and (4) How does the gospel transform societies?

Missiology seeks to integrate four bodies of data into a single discipline: theology, anthropology, Scripture, and church history. Each of these bodies is the basis for another discipline. In this sense, missiology is an integrative discipline drawing on four sets of theories and findings to answer its central question.

The four bodies of data can be diagrammed on two axes, the axis between divine revelation and human contexts, and the axis between synchronic and diachronic analysis (fig. 1.11). Along the vertical axis, missiology must understand the gospel in order to communicate it to humans in the particularities of their lives. Here missiology draws on systematic and biblical theologies. Missiology also studies humans. Here it draws on the social sciences, humanities, and history to understand people. Just as systematic and biblical theologians need to guard against becoming captive to the human rational and historical methods of the academy, so, too, missiologists must understand the theories they draw from the social sciences and humanities, lest they become captive to worldviews that subvert the gospel.
Along the horizontal axis, studies can be either synchronic or diachronic. Synchronic studies examine the basic structures of reality as they exist at a single point in time. For example, synchronic studies of Scripture lead to systematic theology. Synchronic studies in the sciences lead to biological, psychological, social, cultural, and spiritual models of human beings that identify the different elements of the human makeup and demonstrate the relationships among those elements. For instance, a doctor may study various systems, such as the nervous, skeletal, muscular, and digestive systems, and the relationships among these. Synchronic theories seek to formulate broad generalizations from large bodies of data and to enable us to control our lives in certain ways.

Diachronic studies look at the underlying story of the data being examined. In the case of individuals, this is their biographies; in the case of humans, it is their history. In missions this includes the study of the history of God’s mission in the Old and New Testaments and the history of the church since then. Here the models identify starting points, plot, and ending points to demonstrate meaning in the data that otherwise would be a disconnected set of historical happenings. Diachronic theories seek to formulate an understanding of divine and human purposes in history.
Changing Views

The central question of missiology is: how can the gospel be incarnated? This question is addressed in a unified way by drawing on data from the study of both divine revelation and human contexts, each conducted in both synchronic and diachronic fashion. Theology, anthropology, the study of Scripture, and church history all contribute.

Missiology and Other Disciplines

It is clear that missiology must draw on and contribute to a number of related fields: systematic theology, biblical theology, social sciences, and history (fig. 1.12). The relationships with these have been varied. With the rise of the university, disciplines have carved out and laid claim to their own territories. The academy is no longer a uni-versity but a multi-versity. The result is reductionist or stratigraphic worldviews that disintegrate reality into many parts, losing the picture of the whole. What is needed is community hermeneutics involving scholars in related disciplines, learning and sharing with those in missiology who specialize in cognate fields: historians and mission historians, systematic theologians and mission theologians, and social science disciplines with missiologists specializing in these fields.

Missiologists representing the different fields, through community hermeneutics, must work to integrate their subfields into one unified discipline with one vision. This will require revising the theories in each of the subdisciplines to make them complementary to one another, not contradictory. On a higher level it requires metatheories that bridge the gap between different fields of missiology and enable us to grasp, if only “as in a mirror darkly,” the big picture and big story of God and his mission. These metatheories need to show the relationship between divine revelation and human contexts, and between diachronic and synchronic theories of reality. The next chapter provides a model for how this can be done.