# General Contextualization Questions for Bethlehem’s Global Partners

Name:

Date:

1. How will you help a new believer express *his* identity in Christ within his community?

2. As a minister of the gospel, how will you communicate *your* identity in Christ to those among whom you seek to minister?

3. In your ministry context, what aspects of the local culture may be retained, and which aspects must be rejected?

4. How will you communicate the identity of Jesus in the language and culture of the context in which you minister?

5. What will cross-bearing look like for new believers in your context? Are new believers truly ready to suffer for Christ? How will you help prepare them?

6. How will you present the gospel in such a way that Jesus is the stumbling block (not cultural practices, leadership style, dress, customs, habits)?

7. How will you proclaim the gospel with gentleness, respect, and with all boldness in your host context (especially in highly restricted areas)?

8. How will you demonstrate the supreme and exclusive authority of the Bible among peoples who revere other sacred texts as supreme authority?

9. How will you instruct the new believer in Christ regarding his relationship to his community and to local religious groups/practices/gatherings?

10. How and when will you distinguish the intrinsic differences between God as revealed in the Bible and the god written about in other religious texts?

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# Biblical Considerations to Guide Bethlehem’s Global Partners

*I have become all things to all people that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings. (1 Cor. 9:22-23)*

*But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God’s word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God. (2 Cor. 4:2)*

**1. How will you help a new believer express his identity in Christ within his community?**

**Biblical considerations:** The person who trusts in Christ is a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17-18). He is one whom God has miraculously rescued out of the darkness of idolatry and rebellion and into His own family (1 Peter 2:9) that he might be to the praise of His glory in Christ (Eph. 1:12). The new believer’s personal identification with Christ is a declaration of this change of allegiance (1 Thess. 1:9, cf. 1 Kings 18:21). Ethnic, social, economic, gender and class distinctions are no longer that which primarily defines a new believer’s identity (Gal. 3:28-29, 6:15). Rather, for the one who is *in Christ*, his identity is organically tied to Jesus himself *and* those elect for whom he died (2 Cor. 6:14). Thus, the new believer’s identity is not to be understood in purely individualistic terms, nor simply hidden within former religious community terms, for he is part of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13-27).

Additional questions to consider:

* What aspects of the culture and former religion should be considered “darkness”, from which new believers in Christ should repent and walk in light (1 Jn. 1:5-7)?
* When does the missiological goal of “staying within one’s community,” as new believers in Christ, violate Jesus’ warnings of loving family more than him (Matthew 10:32-39)?

**2. In your ministry context, what aspects of the local culture may be retained and which aspects must be rejected?**

**Biblical considerations:** While ‘culture’ is a morally neutral term, there are positive potentials and intrinsic vulnerabilities in every culture. In a culture that is intimately tied to a religious system, discerning what is to be retained and what is to be rejected is crucial for the clear communication of the gospel – both in the lives of new believers and *through* their lives to the larger community. The New Birth, allegiance to Christ alone, identification with the local and global expression of Christ’s Church, and the implications of persecution and suffering, are realities that will have a deep impact on this question (Acts 19.17-20). Our emphasis must be the clear communication of the gospel and a clean conscience. We must encourage that which cultivates faith and removes confusion (2 Cor. 4:2; Heb 12.1-2). We must also be careful not to advocate liberties or adherence to former religious practices that would violate the consciences of new believers or cloud the gospel message within his community (Romans 14, 1Cor 8.1-13).

Additional question to consider:

* What terminology (or terms of identity) of the surrounding culture is so closely tied to another religion that, if the new believer were to continue using them, would cause community members to believe that the so-called “new believer” is still an adherent to the other religion?

**3. As a minister of the Gospel, how will you communicate *your* identity in Christ to those among whom you seek to minister?**

**Biblical considerations:** While there is no biblical mandate to call oneself a “Christian,” our aim is to communicate in a way that honestly and clearly identifies us with the Christ of the Bible (2 Cor. 4:5-6). Language is important (Psalm 19:14; Matt. 16:15-18; 2 Cor. 2:17). We must reject any community-dominant religious terminology that would bring reproach upon Christ or call our identity with the God/Christ of the Bible into question (Dan. 3; 2 Cor. 4:2)

**4. How will you communicate the *identity of Jesus* in the language and culture of the context in which you minister?**

**Biblical considerations:** The identity of Jesus is at the center of the Gospel (Mt. 16.13-18; Acts 4.12). The gospel-writers go to great lengths to show the theological and redemptive-historical significance of titles. Jesus, in fulfillment of prophecy, is the Messiah, the Royal Son of God (cf. Ps. 2; Rom 1.2), and the divine Son of Man (Dan 7.9-14; Lk 21.27ff; Rev. 1.13-16 ). Jesus is the One by whom, and for whom, all things were created (Col. 1.13-20). The resurrected Christ taught his disciples that only through an understanding of the Old Testament will the deep significance of his death, resurrection, and global proclamation be seen as the apex of all of redemptive history (Lk. 24.44-49). From the beginning of the Church age, the apostles’ task was to communicate these deep realities in different cultures and contexts – even when the concepts themselves were highly offensive (or ridiculous) to their hearers (1 Cor. 1.18-31).

**5. What will cross-bearing look like for new believers in your context? Are new believers truly ready to suffer for Christ? How will you prepare them?**

**Biblical considerations:** While there are many places in the world where visible persecution on account of Christ does not occur, the Bible anticipates suffering as part of every believer’s experience (Phil. 1:27-28, 1 Pet. 4:12-19). The Apostle Paul experienced great persecution as a missionary and reminded fellow believers that anyone who desired to live for Christ would also be persecuted (2 Tim. 3:12). Jesus taught that his followers would experience suffering and persecution on account of him, sometimes coming from their own friends and family (Matt. 10.16-33). When persecution occurs, there must be prayerful discernment whether to stay and endure persecution or to flee from it (Matt. 10:23; Lk 21:21; Acts 9:24-25). The all-surpassing pleasure to be found in Christ is what enables and drives radical self-denial in the life of the believer (Luke 9:23-26).

Additional questions to consider:

* + - When does “salt lose its saltiness” in your host community (Matt 5.13-17)?
    - How is the light of Christ shining, or hidden under a bushel in your host community (Mark 9:42-49)?
    - How are God’s “chosen ones” proclaiming the excellencies of Him who called them out of darkness and into His marvelous light (1 Pet. 2.9)?

**6. How will you present the gospel in such a way that *Jesus* is the stumbling block (not cultural practices, leadership style, dress, customs, habits)?**

**Biblical considerations:** Paul strove to communicate the gospel clearly and compellingly both in his speech and his lifestyle. When his financial support was an obstacle, he made tents to support himself (1 Thess. 2.5-9). His aim was to orient his life in such a way that the only stumbling block to faith was the message of Jesus crucified (1 Cor. 1.18-31). He rejected the notion of avoiding persecution by adhering to former religious practices (Gal. 6:12-14). Paul’s evangelism was grounded in the reality that, though Paul planted and Apollos watered, it was only God who could give the growth (1 Cor. 3:6-7). Because of this precious reality, there was no impetus for Paul to impress people with flawless oratory or esoteric knowledge (1 Cor. 1:17, 2:1-5).

**7. How will you proclaim the gospel with gentleness, respect, and with all boldness in your host context (especially in highly restricted areas)?**

**Biblical considerations:** The Apostle Peter writes that, in a hostile environment we should communicate the gospel with gentleness and respect (I Pet 3.15-16). Yet when Peter is dragged before local leadership, beaten, and told not to preach the name of Jesus, he declared “we cannot but tell all that we have seen and heard.” This was followed by fervent prayer with the body of Christ for greater boldness as the word of God was fulfilled (Acts 4.29-30). As ministers of the gospel, we are being sent out as sheep in the midst of wolves (Lk. 10.3). Jesus exhorts us to be “wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Matt. 10.16) in our gospel ministry. When we are dragged before religious authorities and secular governors we will have opportunity, in the midst of persecution and physical suffering, to communicate His supremacy. Our confidence is to be in the Father’s promises to give us words to speak by his Spirit (Matt. 10.19-20), and that not even a hair of our head will perish even, if we are put to death (Lk 21:16,18).

**8. How will you demonstrate the supreme and exclusive authority of the Bible among peoples who revere other sacred texts as supreme authority?**

**Biblical considerations:** While the New Testament indicates that there is a place for using brief quotations from local religious or cultural literature as a pointer to Christ (Acts 17.23, 28; Titus 1.12), the Apostles were exceedingly careful to show that God’s word alone is the ultimate and authoritative truth (2 Tim 3.16-17). The ongoing reverence of any other religious book besides the Bible is unheard of in the NT and runs the risk of subtly affirming the other religious book as equally authoritative to the Bible. We must be careful in our discipleship to distinguish the supreme authority of the Bible above every other writing, striving to communicate the uniqueness of the Word of Christ and its purpose in redemptive history (John 17:17; 2 Pet 1:16-21; Rom 10:17).

Additional questions to consider:

* How will the use of other religious texts in evangelism or discipleship reinforce the sole authority of God’s self-revelation in the Bible? Will using these other texts clarify or muddle this issue in the minds of your hearers? [[1]](#footnote-1)

**9. How will you instruct the new believer in Christ regarding his relationship to his community and to local religious groups/practices/ gatherings?**

**Biblical considerations:** The new believer’s understanding of his identity in Christ and the implications of being a new creation and a member of Christ’s body will impact his view of the other religious centers/communities. Since there are deep redemptive-historical differences between the interaction of the *early church* with the *Jewish synagogue,* on the one hand, and the *modern church* and the *mosque/temple*, on the other hand, we should be cautious in treating these two relationships as parallel. It is important to note that the apostles were very deliberate in their evangelism of ethnic Israel, but as the large-scale Jewish rejection of Jesus grew violent, the believers were scattered and continued to preach the word of Christ *and form* *churches* wherever they went (Acts 8:3-4; 9:31; 13:1-3).

Those who are born-again will joyfully accept the call to radical discipleship (Matt 10:37-39; 13:44-45) and, by the Spirit’s power, will turn away from former ways of ignorance (1 Pet 1:14-19). This often comes at significant relational cost (Matt 10:34-36), though with great relational reward – *and* eternal life (Mk 10:29-30). While corporate worship, celebration of the Lord’s Supper and Baptism, teaching, discipleship and fellowship will happen in the context of his new community – the church­ – (Acts 2:41-47), there may be occasions when he seeks opportunities to reach his neighbors during certain community functions (which often occur in connection with the other religious centers). While the distinctions between religion and culture are more evident in Western culture, they nearly vanish in Islam, as well as in other religions. Thus, while new believers in both contexts must wrestle with the presuppositions that undergird customary practices, Christian converts from other religions must be encouraged to consider the way that former practices could disguise or deny gospel-reality. Desires to highlight the sufficiency and uniqueness of Christ should drive wise decision-making (Matt 10:16) as believers seek strategic opportunities to win members of their community. At the same time, global partners must also be careful not to violate the consciences of new believers who may *want* to sever all connections with their former community.

**10. How and when will you distinguish the intrinsic differences between God as revealed in the Bible and the god written about in other religious texts?**

**Biblical considerations:** Working from clear common ground, cross-cultural ministers of the gospel should build a thoroughly Biblical understanding of God – his person, character and purpose in history.We must be diligent to discern where theological misunderstanding might occur, and examine presumed areas of connection between Biblical revelation and other religions in light of Scripture. At the Areopagus, Paul exemplified such discernment in his evangelism to the Athenians. While being very careful not to identify the God of the Scriptures with the unknown god they venerated, Paul uses the opportunity to tell them about the true God. He engages them on their terms and creates new categories to challenge their ignorance– categories demanded by God’s self-revelation in his Word and consummately in Christ (Acts 17:22-34). He also soundly warned them against continuing in their ignorance – lest they face God’s impending judgment (17:29-31). In similar fashion, we must begin by acknowledging what *can* be acknowledged by all people – namely, that God exists, that creation declares his glory, that his power is real, and that all thanksgiving and honor are due him (Rom. 1:19-20). We should also affirm our friend’s earnest desire to know God, and urge him to compare his understanding of his god to what the true God is like – most clearly seen in the person of his Son (Heb. 1:1-12).

Additional Questions to consider:

* From what common ground will you start in order to show the true God to adherents of the local religion?
* How does this local religion understand sin? How does it account for human sin if original sin is denied?
* How does this religion regard the holiness of God? If sin is arbitrarily forgiven, can God be holy?

1. Phil Parshall notes that a 1995 survey of national C5 MBB’s, representing 68 congregations from 66 villages, revealed that 96% still believed that the Koran was divinely inspired; 66% said that the Koran was the greater than the Bible; and 45% felt peace or close to Allah when listening to the reading of the Koran. Parshall, Phil. *Muslim Evangelism: A contemporary approach to contextualization,* Gabriel Pub, 2003, pg. 70. This should serve as a caution to all of our global partners, even those not working in Muslim contexts. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)