

Summary of SOTE Conference Sessions with Jackson Wu

SESSION ONE: REINTERPRETING CONTEXTUALIZATION

A key idea from the first session was “All theology is contextualized theology.” Although this has become common speak among many missiologists and theologians, Jackson Wu used a variety of approaches to demonstrate what this idea means in practice.

He used slides, social science and testimony to highlight the practical consequences of our having limited worldviews. One’s worldview lens will cause readers either to notice certain things while overlooking others. Unfortunately, this often means Christians become divided over the meaning of a text even though both persons might be affirming true ideas. He explained how it is possible for someone to have a relative perspective on absolute truth. Since we all come to Scripture with a limited worldview lens and various assumptions, theologians and missiologist must take intentional steps to account for this dynamic.

In addition, the opening session examined common evangelical views about contextualization. By and large, evangelicals regard contextualization merely as application and communication. Wu suggests that a holistic approach to contextualization has a more foundational starting point—biblical interpretation. He argues for two criteria to assess healthy contextualization. Such contextualization will be biblically faithful and culturally meaningful.

Finally, he answered an oft asked question, i.e. “What is the relationship between culture and the Bible?” In the process, he suggests that theology is not equivalent to the totality of biblical truth. Because our theology is influenced by our subcultures (e.g. denominations, churches, etc.), it is possible that a local culture may provide a better lens to notice biblical truths than does our Christians subculture (and thus theology). Wu reminds us that contextualization stems from God’s own self-revelation in history. Thus, the Bible itself is an example (or a series of examples) of contextualization because God used concepts from ancient culture to reveal Himself and His plan. This is a key reason why “all theology is contextualized.” As a result, reader must intentionally broaden their own cultural lens, considering a diversity of global and historical cultures. In so doing, readers become more attentive to details in the biblical texts that would be overlooked if one used a monocultural perspective.

SESSION TWO: HOW DOES THE BIBLE FRAME THE GOSPEL?

This session considered the question, “How does the Bible frame the gospel?” Wu surveyed various ways that biblical writers explicitly present the gospel. Amid a diversity of presentations, readers find that a distinct set of themes frames them all. Specifically, these include creation, covenant and kingdom. Wu referred listeners to his book to see the further exegetical defense of this claim (though he did present a concise overview of his argument). These three “framework” themes constitute a firm approach by which Paul could claim there was only one gospel. Nevertheless, because these framework themes shape the grand biblical narrative, they also provide a large degree of flexibility when preaching the gospel in various cultural contexts.

Wu emphasized that any model of contextualization must account for the firm and flexible nature of gospel presentations as seen in the Bible. Accordingly, in addition to framework themes, biblical writers use a number of “explanation themes” to clarify the significance of this good news. Each type of theme complements each other as they serve different functions. The explanation themes highlight the significance of the gospel.

They help us answer four key questions routinely answered in discussions about the gospel -- Who is Jesus? What has he done? Why does he matter? How should we respond? These questions were listed in this order to show which questions should be prioritized (in terms of emphasis). If we primarily focus on the third question (which concerns individual salvation), we risk “compromising the gospel by settling for truth.” The gospel’s core message is this: Jesus is king of the entire world. Because the Bible provides multiple answers to each of the above four questions, Christians have great flexibility when sharing the gospel. Wu suggests that this model not only derives directly from Scripture, they also provide the necessary lens for ministering in diverse cultural contexts.

SESSION THREE: HOW DOES THE BIBLE EXPLAIN THE GOSPEL?

Session Three began with a few key reminders. For instance, Christians should not “assume the gospel.” By this, Wu means that we should not assume our primary way of explaining the gospel is most foundational. Every gospel explanation is clothed in some cultural expression and set of metaphors (e.g. one might use law language or speaking of “salvation” or “purification”). Yet, by assuming the gospel in this way, we make healthy contextualization nearly impossible since we will essentially “contextualize a contextualization.” The latter refers to some sort of conventionally assumed presentation, which itself is a contextualization (whether one realizes it or not).

Appealing to the “Four Fields” parable, Wu says that we need to reexamine the seed we are sowing. Using an agriculture analogy (whereby scientists have modified strands of wheat DNA), it is possible that we are sowing genuine “seed” (the gospel) but that we might exaggerate certain strands of gospel thought to the point that our presentations can also bring about negative results (e.g. de-emphasis on church, easy believism, etc.).

Furthermore, he introduced an “honor-shame perspective” in order to show Stages Two of his contextualization model. This is necessary since contextualization is not done in abstract terms; it requires a concrete social context. In general, honor-shame cultures lay stress on group identity, one’s honor or reputation, authority and tradition. These various features could be captured in three broad terms: what is standard, what is social, what is sovereign. After elaborating further about how honor-shame works, he reminded us that all cultures are honor-shame cultures to some degree or another.

At the end of stage two, Wu showed us how we can use the biblical framework and explanation themes to understand the culture in which one serves. For example, “relationship” is an underlying theme of covenant; authority underlies “kingdom”, etc. We then place important cultural concepts within the main cultural framework circles according to their meaning within the culture.

SESSION FOUR: A PRACTICAL APPROACH TO BIBLICAL CONTEXTUALIZATION

This final session demonstrated how to apply our model of contextualization within specific ministry settings. Wu completed his explanation of his contextualization model, focusing on Stages Three and Four. The final two steps illustrate two kinds of contextualization—exegetical contextualization and cultural contextualization. The former interprets the Bible through a cultural lens (gained from Stage Two, which itself is framed by Stage One). This step requires exegesis and rejects eisegesis.

On the other hand, cultural contextualization mainly concerns application and communication. The biblical insights gained from Stage Three help us critique and challenge the local culture. Wu comments that the Stage One and Stage Four are designed as guards to protect against cultural syncretism. Perhaps, one might also say that Stages Two–Three are especially helpful for protecting against “theological syncretism”, such as the tendency to reduce Christian truth to our denominational emphases. Some time was spent allowing the audience to practice using this model.

Finally, Wu surveyed various other implications stemming from the message of his lectures. Some regard the selection of leaders, the training of missionaries, and the use of orality strategies. He urged listeners to consider the standard they use to judge the “success” of contextualization. Good contextualization might or might not lead to higher numbers of “converts”, those who make professions of faith. Yet, he gave numerous reasons why contextualization will increase the proportion of *genuine* professions of faith. While contextualization cannot change people’s hearts (only God does that), it can help people pay closer attention to our message. When we present the gospel in a biblically faithful and culturally meaningful way, we have reason to expect that people will become disciples, whose worldview is changed, not merely “religious converts” who want to use Christianity for personal blessing.

For more information on the various topics raised in his lectures, he directed conference participants to his books, articles and resources, which can be found at jacksonwu.org.