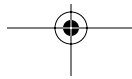
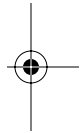




INTRODUCTION

I was fresh out of graduate studies, ready to teach my first class on New Testament theology at an international seminary in the Philippines. Armed with the advanced critical weapons of my theological training in North America and Europe, I proceeded to articulate the message of the New Testament in the language and categories that were familiar to me. I expounded on matters like the development of biblical theology in the West, the historicity of Christ's resurrection and the assurance of personal salvation. But then something changed. I started to *listen* to my Asian and Pacific students. I soon realized that many of the "answers" I had been giving them did not fully connect with the questions *they* were asking when they read the Scriptures. Questions like, what is the New Testament perspective on suffering and oppression? What theological resources does the Bible provide for our encounter with spiritual powers? What is the relationship between the Christian Scriptures and the writings of Asian religions? Is it wrong to honor our ancestors? These were questions that had seldom been addressed or even considered in the contexts where I had learned to interpret Scripture and do theology. For my students, however, they were burning issues that needed biblical and theological answers. As a result, I was forced to go back to the New Testament texts. I began to listen, together with my students, for theological perspectives that had previously been mute to my ears. In the process, my own understanding of the gospel and its implications was expanded and enriched.

My experience is hardly unique. Today there is a burgeoning recognition among Christians around the globe that in order for the Christian message to be meaningful to people it must come to them in language and categories that make sense within their particular culture and life situation. It must be *contextualized*. Contextualization has to do with how the gospel revealed in Scrip-



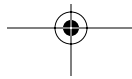


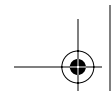
ture authentically comes to life in each new cultural, social, religious and historical setting. At one time, discussions about contextualization tended to be confined to the circles of missiology and intercultural studies. But as reflection on the matter has entered its second generation, they have moved more and more into the theological mainstream. We have increasingly realized that it is not crosscultural missionaries alone who must grapple with these issues. Every church in every particular place and time must learn to do theology in a way that makes sense to its audience while challenging it at the deepest level. In fact, some of the most promising conversations about contextualization today (whether they are recognized as such or not) are coming from churches in the West that are discovering new ways of embodying the gospel for an emerging postmodern culture.

In reality contextualizing the gospel is far from an easy task. In spite of an explosion of literature on the subject in recent decades, there is still a great deal of confusion about what it means and how it should be practiced. Many sincere Christians are still suspicious that attempts to contextualize theology and Christian behavior will lead to the compromising of biblical truth. Christians throughout the world find themselves caught between the desire to communicate the Word of God in culturally relevant ways and the fear of giving away too much of the gospel in the process. In addition, emerging global realities pose new challenges to the task of doing contextual theology. What, for example, will it mean to contextualize the gospel in a world that is moving toward increased economic and cultural globalization on the one hand but faces reactionary nationalism and intolerance on the other? And how should the church inculturate its faith when increasingly its field of mission is not just a single target culture but a multi-faceted cultural mosaic? These questions, along with many others, demand our renewed theological reflection.

This book is an attempt to look at the issue of authentic contextualization through the lens of the New Testament. This is a different path to the question than is normally taken. True to the missiological roots of the modern conversation about contextualizing the gospel, most theoretical reflection on the matter has drawn upon models from the fields of linguistics, anthropology, crosscultural communication studies, or contextual theology.¹ As helpful as these discussions have been, the contributions of biblical scholars or students of herme-

¹See, for example, Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1992); Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1979); David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meaning, Methods, and Models* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1989); Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1985).



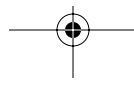


neutics have for the most part been missing from the dialogue.² In particular, we need to ask if Scripture itself can offer us a more adequate approach to the challenge of reappropriating the gospel. This book proposes that we must look to the New Testament for mentoring in the task of doing theology in our various settings.

But what does the New Testament have to do with a modern notion like contextualization? A great deal. Although the term *contextualization* was quite recently minted, the *activity* of expressing and embodying the gospel in context-sensitive ways has characterized the Christian mission from the very beginning. The New Testament itself bears witness to this process in at least two ways. First, it provides “stories of contextualization”—particularly in the Gospels and Acts—in which Jesus and the apostles tailor the gospel message to address different groups of people. The journey of the church from its beginnings as a Jewish sect to becoming a largely Gentile body that proclaimed a universal faith required the gospel to engage new cultural groups and circumstances at each point along the way. Second, the New Testament writings are themselves examples of the church’s theological task. All four Gospels, we could say, are attempts to contextualize the story of Jesus for different audiences. Paul’s letters are models of doing context-oriented theology for the diverse churches and situations he addressed. Indeed, each book of the New Testament represents an attempt by the author to present the Christian message in a way that is targeted for a particular audience within a given sociocultural environment. The New Testament documents show us the *process* as well as the product of this contextualizing activity.

The aim of this book, then, is twofold: first, to study the New Testament writings in order to discover how they demonstrate the task of doing context-sensitive theology; and second, to reflect on what these patterns and precedents

²Although a number of journal articles or book chapters look at biblical precedents for contextualization, none that I am aware of goes beyond a preliminary level of discussion. See Daniel von Allmen, “The Birth of Theology,” *IRM* 64 (1975): 37-52; Norman R. Ericson, “Implications from the New Testament for Contextualization,” in *Theology and Mission*, ed. David J. Hesselgrave (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1978), pp. 71-85; Dean S. Gilliland, “New Testament Contextualization: Continuity and Particularity in Paul’s Theology,” in *The Word Among Us: Contextualizing Theology for Today*, ed. Dean S. Gilliland (Dallas: Word Books, 1989), pp. 52-73; John R. Davis, “Biblical Precedents for Contextualization,” *ATA Journal* 2 (January 1994): 10-35; R. C. Hundley, “Towards an Evangelical Theology of Contextualization” (Ph.D. diss., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1993), pp. 29-37, 167-88. See also the valuable work of Mbachu Hilary, *Inculturation Theology of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15: An Inspiration for the Igbo Church Today* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1995). Mbachu, however, concentrates on one New Testament narrative (Acts 15) and relates it to the single context of the Igbo church in Nigeria.





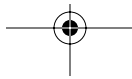
teach us about how the gospel might become embodied within our diverse cultures and life settings today. It is my hope that this study will not only help to provide a stronger biblical foundation for the church's efforts to contextualize the gospel, but also contribute to the reader's understanding of the New Testament as a collection of books that have the church's mission to all sorts of people at their very heart. By applying the questions raised by the problem of contextualization to the New Testament, we may well discover examples of doing contextual theology in Scripture that are often missed by traditional ways of reading the text.

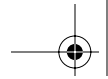
THE PLAN OF THE BOOK

The lion's share of this volume seeks to uncover the patterns of contextualizing the gospel we find within the New Testament.³ Due to limitations of space the focus will be on representative writings which contain some of the clearest and most suggestive New Testament examples of doing context-oriented evangelism and theology. I begin with the book of Acts, where we encounter the story of the church's earliest efforts to tailor its witness to particular cultural settings and groups of people. Acts provides a fitting entrée into our study by showing that contextualizing the gospel was intrinsic to the church's mission. Chapter one looks at Luke's chronicle of a series of critical moments in that expanding mission. These offer precedents for how the gospel addresses new situations and cultural groups in fresh ways. In chapter two, I focus on Paul's missionary sermons in Acts as compelling examples of evangelistic contextualization for a variety of audiences.

The apostle Paul—missionary, theologian, interpreter of Scripture—is undoubtedly the key figure for an understanding of the process of doing contextual theology in the New Testament. Consequently, I will spend a substantial part of this study (chapters three through seven) in conversation with Paul and his letters. Chapter three considers Paul as a contextual theologian, exploring

³Some readers might object that I have not examined Old Testament patterns of contextualization in this book. This omission is not because that study would not be fruitful. Such an investigation, however, could in itself be the subject of another entire book (e.g., how does Deuteronomy recontextualize the laws of Exodus for a new life setting, or how does Chronicles reinterpret Kings?). What is more, since my focus is on contextualizing the gospel in the context of the church, the canonical New Testament obviously provides the primary record of that process. For preliminary discussions of the implications of the Old Testament for contextualization, see Gleason Archer, "Contextualization: Some Implications from Life and Witness in the Old Testament," in *New Horizons in World Mission*, ed. David J. Hesselgrave (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1979), pp. 199-216; Arthur Glasser, "Old Testament Contextualization: Revelation and Environment," in *The Word Among Us: Contextualizing Theology for Today*, ed. Dean S. Gilliland (Dallas: Word, 1989), pp. 32-51.

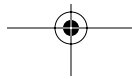
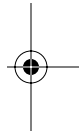




what it is that is nonnegotiable about his thought and how he enabled his abiding gospel to flexibly address the diverse situations of his mission communities. The role of culture in Paul's contextualizing of the gospel is the theme of chapter four. I first reflect on Paul's own cultural identity and then look at the various ways in which the gospel interacts with Paul's cultural world in his writings. Since contextualization has an important hermeneutical dimension, chapter five observes Paul as an interpreter, both of Israel's Scriptures and of the gospel tradition he received. My treatment of Paul concludes in chapters six and seven with several case studies that demonstrate how Paul does theology in relation to specific concerns. First Corinthians is a treasure trove of contextualizing, and chapter six asks what we can learn from two concrete examples of how Paul enables the gospel to reshape both the Corinthians' lifestyle and basic worldview assumptions. In chapter seven the letter to the Colossians enters the spotlight as a classic case of how the gospel addresses a context of religious pluralism and syncretism.

The focus turns to the four Gospels in chapter eight. I approach them as four retellings of the one story of Jesus for different target audiences, with the goal of transforming those hearers and their worlds. Our studies in the New Testament conclude in chapter nine with a foray into the book of Revelation. John's Apocalypse proves to be a fascinating theological response to churches living in a world dominated by the oppressive power and idolatry of Rome. Although these nine chapters concentrate on how the missionaries and theologians in the New Testament contextualize the gospel for their worlds, in each case I also try to draw out some implications for the challenge of doing context-sensitive theology today. The book's final chapter addresses that concern in more detail. It asks how the patterns we have seen in the New Testament might help to shape the church's ongoing efforts to engage the tapestry of cultures and contexts that make up its field of mission. Also, how might these New Testament precedents inform the task of authentically incarnating the gospel in light of complex realities like globalization, pluralism, and post-modernism? My aim in addressing such questions is not to tell readers *how* to do contextual theology within their own location and culture. Only they can best determine that. My concern is rather to examine how the New Testament as Spirit-inspired Scripture might provide readers with exemplars and resources for the task.

In my treatment of the New Testament I seek to address two distinct but closely related aspects of contextualization. First, how do the New Testament theologians and writers tailor their theological reflections to particular audiences so that the Word of God becomes an appropriate word for each specific context?





Second, how does the gospel engage the cultural and social world of the readers in a way that both participates in that world and at the same time challenges and transforms it? In taking up these issues, I stand on the shoulders of many others. In particular, some of the more recent studies of the cultural, social and political environment of the first-century Roman world have opened up new vistas for sighting the intriguing interaction between the gospel and culture in the New Testament.

Before we embark on our exploration of the New Testament writings, however, there are two preliminary matters that need to be addressed: I will first try to give a more precise definition to what I mean by “contextualization” and then I will look at a foundational theological paradigm for the entire study—the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

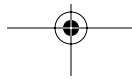
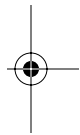
A WORD ABOUT WORDS

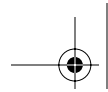
There has been no shortage of terms used to describe the activity of relating the gospel to local cultures and contexts that this book is concerned with—*accommodation*, *adaptation*, *indigenization*, *incarnation*, *translation*, *transposition*, and *rereading of Scripture* among them.⁴ A word that has gained much broader influence, particularly among Roman Catholic theologians, is *inculturation*.⁵ Although it overlaps considerably with the notion of contextualization, inculturation, as I understand it, focuses more narrowly on the cultural dimension of human experience. In contrast, *contextualization* is better able to embrace the gospel’s interaction with all kinds of contexts, including social, political, economic, religious and ecclesial settings. I will therefore reserve *inculturation* primarily for speaking of the encounter between the gospel and human cultures.

Unfortunately, *contextualization* has proved to be a slippery word. No doubt its very popularity has contributed to the fuzziness of its meaning. Today the term is used within a number of theologically related disciplines and by thinkers from a wide range of philosophical and theological perspectives. As a result,

⁴*Accommodation*, *adaptation* and *indigenization* are older terms that for various reasons have been widely viewed as inadequate for the question of doing contextual theology. For *translation*, see Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1989); for *transposition*, see C. S. Song, *The Compassionate God* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1982), pp. 5-17; for *rereading*, see William A. Dyrness, *The Earth Is God’s: A Theology of American Culture* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1997), p. 80.

⁵A helpful introduction to inculturation from a Roman Catholic scholar is Peter Schineller, *A Handbook on Inculturation* (New York: Paulist, 1990); cf. Alyward Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988).





there are different perceptions of what it is about.⁶ For example, some writers speak of contextualization as a hermeneutical activity that is virtually equivalent to what has traditionally been thought of as application of Scripture.⁷ Others define it theologically as the process of developing local theologies in a context of rapid social and cultural change.⁸ For still others, it is a missiological activity that involves the crosscultural communication of the gospel and various other functions of the Christian mission.⁹ Adding to the flux, there is still no consensus regarding whether the gospel (or Scripture) or the cultural context should play the lead part in determining the shape of the contextualizing process. Consequently, before we can talk about patterns of contextualization in the New Testament, we need to clarify what is meant by that activity.

Any adequate understanding of contextualization should not simply prescribe what *should* be done, as if we were initiating something new. It should also describe what *has been* and *is* being done, recognizing that it has to do with something that has been ingrained in the Christian mission through the ages. I take contextualization, then, to refer to the dynamic and comprehensive process by which the gospel is incarnated within a concrete historical or cultural situation. This happens in such a way that the gospel both comes to authentic expression in the local context and at the same time prophetically transforms the context. Contextualization seeks to enable the people of God to live out the gospel in obedience to Christ within their own cultures and circumstances.

To speak of the gospel as the focus of this activity assumes, in the first place, that there is something normative and transcultural about the Christian faith that has been revealed by God in Scripture and which serves as the text. Precisely what we mean by the gospel that is being contextualized from a New Testament perspective will be an important concern of this study.

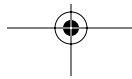
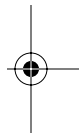
We must, however, not only ask, what is the *text* but also, what is the *context*? Some popular understandings of contextualization have equated *context* with human culture and the contextualizing process with the communication of the Christian message from a home culture to a different one. This is fine as far as

⁶On the origins of the term *contextualization*, which has roots in the conciliar movement, see Hesselgrave and Rommen, *Contextualization*, pp. 27-35.

⁷E.g., Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1991), pp. 318-38; cf. Hundley, *Towards an Evangelical Theology*, pp. 19-25.

⁸E.g., Shokie Coe, "Contextualizing Theology in Mission," in *Mission Trends No. 3*, ed. Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky (New York: Paulist, 1976), pp. 19-24; Bevans, *Models*, pp. 21-22.

⁹E.g., Krikor Halebian, "The Problem of Contextualization," *Missiology* 11 (1983): 95-111; Charles Taber, "Contextualization," *RSR* 13 (1987): 33; Hesselgrave and Rommen, *Contextualization*, p. 200.





it goes, but it is too narrow. Contextualization can occur *whenever* the gospel engages a new setting or a particular audience. As Gary Burge points out, any time one preaches a sermon, teaches a theology class, or shares one's faith with a group of university students, the message should be in some way shaped by the context of the people to whom it is being expressed.¹⁰ A *context*, then, might be defined by a variety of boundaries: regionality, nationality, culture, language, ethnicity, social and economic status, political structures, education, gender, age, religious or theological tradition, worldview or values. It is the "life world" of the audience. This understanding is important for our study of New Testament patterns of contextualization. Paul, for example, frames the gospel differently for the Thessalonians than he does for the Corinthians even though both communities are situated in a predominantly Greco-Roman cultural setting.

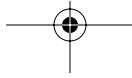
Contextualization is also comprehensive. It must take place at many levels: evangelism, preaching, Bible translation, hermeneutics, theologizing, discipleship, Christian ethics and social involvement, worship, church structures and leadership, and theological education among them. In short, it has to do with the mission of the church in the broadest sense. Due to the limited scope of this book, however, I will concentrate on the tasks of doing contextual theology and biblical interpretation, which are central to both the New Testament witness and the ongoing debate over contextualization today.

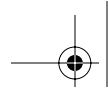
THE JESUS MODEL

In a sense the example of Jesus is foundational to everything I will say in this book. The incarnation of Jesus serves as a key paradigm for a contextualized mission and theology. The New Testament declares that the eternal Word of God was enfleshed in Jesus of Nazareth (Jn 1:14). Through his incarnation, Jesus explained or "exegeted" (*exēgēsato*) the Father to us. Jesus was no Melchizedek figure, someone cut off from any cultural past (Heb 7:3). Rather, he embraced the human context in all of its "scandalous particularity"—as a male Palestinian Jew, "born of a woman, born under the law" (Gal 4:4)—in a specific time and place. He was thoroughly immersed in his Jewish culture; he participated in its celebrations and traditions; he spoke Aramaic with a Galilean accent; he had distinctive physical features and personality traits. As Charles Kraft reflects, "God in Jesus became so much a part of a specific human context that many never even recognized that he had come from somewhere else."¹¹ Jesus became one with the weak and the marginalized of his society. As a humble village artisan

¹⁰Gary Burge, *Interpreting the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1992), p. 170.

¹¹Kraft, *Christianity in Culture*, p. 175.





from Galilee, he lived outside the mainstream of religious, administrative and economic power. Paul describes Jesus' radical identification with humanity as a "self-emptying," a "self-humbling" and a "self-enslavement" on behalf of those he came to serve (Phil 2:6-8). In C. René Padilla's words, "It may be said that God has contextualized himself in Jesus Christ."¹²

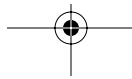
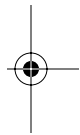
Furthermore, when Jesus did theology, he consistently used local resources. Jesus' preaching of the kingdom of God, his teaching on the law and righteousness, and his use of life-specific parables drew upon language, thought categories and rhetorical traditions from the Jewish culture of his day. He communicated to people not in theological abstractions but through familiar, concrete forms—miracles, illustrations from common life, proverbs and stories, master-disciple dialogue and the example of his life among them. Although he offered a radically new teaching he did not coin a new language to express it. Instead, he used the earthy images of everyday rural life. Fishing and farming, weeds and wineskins, soil and salt became the "stuff" of his theological activity. From the beginning the gospel was voiced in local, culturally conditioned forms.

What is more, Jesus' message and method of doing theology were context-specific. He mediated the good news in ways that were appropriate to particular people and occasions.¹³ A request from a centurion for a long-distance healing becomes an occasion to consider just who are the insiders and who are the outsiders in relation to God's kingdom (Mt 8:5-13). A rejection by a wealthy would-be disciple launches a reflection on how difficult it is for a rich person to be saved (Mt 19:16-26). A rebuke from Peter following Jesus' prediction that he would be killed and rise again leads Jesus to clarify that all true disciples are bearers of the cross (Mk 8:31-38). Jesus spoke differently to the crowds than he did to the Pharisees, differently to Nicodemus than to Peter. He tailored his exposition of the gospel to the situation at hand.

The incarnation of Jesus makes contextualization not just a possibility but an obligation. It establishes a paradigm for mediating God's redeeming presence in the world today. In a visit to the Basilica of the Annunciation in Nazareth, Israel, a number of years ago, I was struck by a series of full-length mosaics depicting Jesus that lined its walls: in one he is Asian, in another African, in another European, in another Latin American. Through the presence of the Spirit and the

¹²C. René Padilla, *Mission Between the Times: Essays on the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1985), p. 83. Cf. the critique of appealing to the incarnation as a paradigm for contextualization in Hundley, "Towards an Evangelical Theology," pp. 168-73.

¹³See Clemens Sedmak, *Doing Local Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2002), pp. 29-31, 37-38.





ministry of the church, Christ must be enfleshed in every contemporary human culture and context. To be true to the nature of the gospel itself, we must enable it “to enter the bloodstream of the people.”¹⁴

But at the same time, Jesus came to transform the human institutions he entered, and as a result the incarnation retained a universal significance. He prophetically challenged his Palestinian Jewish culture and sought to evangelize it from within. Jesus confronted the religious and political authorities of his social context; he reshaped people’s distorted understanding of the law and its observances. He radically redefined cultural notions of purity and impurity by claiming that it is the defilement that comes from within the human heart, not external matters like foods and physical conditions, that makes a person unclean (Mk 7:20-23). Jesus’ teaching subverted prevailing attitudes toward wealth and greatness (Mk 10:23-25, 42-45) and questioned the rules that governed social interactions like family obligations (Mt 8:22; 12:46-50) and divorce (Mt 5:31-32; 19:3-12). Jesus scandalized the dominant social norms by touching lepers, eating with tax collectors and zealots, and associating with sinful women (e.g., Lk 7:36-50). His message of the kingdom, although it was articulated in language and symbols thoroughly familiar to his Jewish hearers, had a boundary-breaking character and a cosmic eschatological vision that transcended his own social location and culture.¹⁵

Jesus’ death and resurrection, which are inseparable from his incarnation, likewise point to this transformational aspect of contextualization. Alyward Shorter insists that the dying and rising of Christ function in an analogous way for contextualization, which demands conversion of cultures at their deepest level. There must be a dying to what is sinful and incompatible with the gospel and a radical renewal of human cultures into something new.¹⁶ Furthermore, while Jesus in his earthly life functioned primarily within a Palestinian cultural setting and ministered to his own Jewish people, his sacrificial death and in particular his resurrection from the dead gave the incarnation a universal and intercultural thrust. Through the Spirit of the living Lord and his body the church, he can be present with people of every time and culture and nation.¹⁷

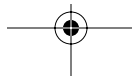
Jesus’ incarnation, then, in its fullest dimensions points the way to both a rad-

¹⁴Emefie Ikenga-Metuh, “Contextualization: A Missiological Imperative for the Church in Africa in the Third Millennium,” *Mission Studies* 12 (1989): 6.

¹⁵See Donald Senior and Carroll Stuhlmueeller, *The Biblical Foundations for Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993), 144-158.

¹⁶Shorter, *Toward a Theology*, pp. 83-85. Shorter prefers the term *inculturation* to *contextualization*. Cf. Peter Schineller, “Inculturation: A Difficult and Delicate Task,” *IBMR* 20 (1996): 112.

¹⁷Shorter, *Toward a Theology*, p. 83.



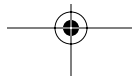
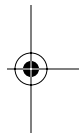


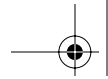
ical identification with each culture in all of its specificity and at the same time to a conversion of cultures from within. Jesus our example was an insider who never relinquished his outsider status that challenged people to see their world from an entirely new perspective. We will see that this tension between “at-homeness” and prophetic transformation is the consistent pattern of biblical contextualization.

ON READING THIS BOOK

This book is integrative and interdisciplinary. In particular it tries to bridge the gap between the normal interests of biblical studies on the one hand and missiology and contextual theology on the other. Through such a conversation, I believe both can be mutually enriched. Because of its integrative character, this volume is intended to have relevance to readers who approach it from a number of perspectives. No doubt a reader’s specific interests will be different if she or he comes to the work as a New Testament student or scholar, as someone engaged in intercultural ministry, as a Christian in the Third World living with a theology handed down from the West, or as a First World disciple grappling with how to engage a complex, rapidly changing cultural and religious landscape with the gospel. It is my hope that the biblical perspectives and precedents discussed in this book can speak meaningfully to all such interests and concerns. Further, I have attempted to minimize technical jargon to make it accessible to as many readers as possible. When I have included transliterations of Greek words from the New Testament, I have normally placed them in parentheses after the English translation. Discussions of some of the more technical issues raised by the study can be explored in footnotes. I would also encourage the reader to keep the Scriptures open, taking the time to read biblical passages being discussed and to look up the numerous scriptural references contained in parentheses. This additional effort will significantly enhance what can be gained from the reading.

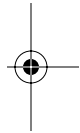
I make no effort to hide that this book deals with two things about which I care passionately—the message of the New Testament and the church’s calling to reflect on the gospel in authentic and context-appropriate ways. The impetus for writing this volume arises out of my own journey of faith and service. I am a North American whose academic training is as an exegete and teacher of the New Testament. The context in which I have fulfilled my ministry calling, however, has been primarily in communities of theological learning with immense cultural diversity—first in Asia and now in Europe. I have been privileged to teach and be taught by students in a wide variety of settings around the globe. I have also engaged in pastoral ministry in a multicultural setting in Asia. These





experiences have compelled me to grapple firsthand with the issues addressed in this book. In the course of teaching both biblical and mission studies I have wrestled for the better part of two decades, in tandem with my students and ministry colleagues, with what it means to contextualize the biblical message within a diversity of cultural and church settings. This joyful journey has taught me not only that authentic contextualization of the gospel is complex and demanding work—and I have sometimes practiced it poorly—but also that there is a pressing need for solid biblical and theological moorings for the task.

If the New Testament does indeed show us that to appropriately engage our world with the gospel is essential to what it means to be the church, and if the contemporary global scene cries out for such an engagement, then these are matters that ought to be of genuine concern to every follower of Jesus Christ. I am keenly aware that I do not have the answers to all of the questions this book may raise. But it is my deep-seated hope that the following pages might challenge readers to hear the Scripture story afresh so that the church might learn to sing the gospel in new keys within the rich mosaic of contexts in our world.¹⁸



¹⁸I am grateful to Brad J. Kallenberg's reflection on what it means "to sing the gospel story in a postmodern key" (*Live to Tell: Evangelism for a Postmodern Age* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos, 2002], p. 13) for stimulating my own thoughts on how this metaphor expresses the task of contextualization.

