

Principles of Contextualization (IMB, 2007)

Approved by the Trustees of the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, November 2007

1. We affirm that the Bible is the only infallible text that exists. It is appropriate to evaluate all other books by the Bible. We encourage our personnel to search the Scriptures daily to see whether the principles presented by any text or teacher are true (Acts 17:11). Content that is in accord with biblical truth should be embraced. What is contrary to sound doctrine should be rejected.
2. We affirm that there is a biblical precedent for using "bridges" to reach out to others with the Gospel (Acts 17:22-23). The fact that Paul mentioned an aspect of the Athenians' idolatrous worship was not a tacit approval of their entire religious system. He was merely utilizing a religious element of their setting (an altar to an unknown god) to connect with his hearers and bridge to the truth. Similarly, our personnel may use elements of their host culture's worldview to bridge to the Gospel. This need not be construed as an embracing of that worldview. It should be noted that Paul not only used their system to connect, he also contrasted elements of it with the truth. Our evangelism must go beyond bridges to present the whole unvarnished truth of the Gospel (1 Corinthians 15:1-4).
3. We affirm an incarnational approach to missions that is bound by biblical parameters. Following the example of Him who became flesh (John 1:14), it is appropriate that our personnel continue to tailor their ministry to their setting. The Apostle Paul likewise embraced this approach, "I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some" (1 Corinthians 9:22b). We advocate the learning and appropriate utilization of language and culture. Constant vigilance is required lest contextualization degenerate into syncretism.¹ Where linguistic categories and cultural mores are deficient, these must be challenged and corrected with biblical truth.²

¹In John Travis' spectrum of contextualization, C-4 would be the extent of indigenization acceptable for IMB personnel ("The C1 to C6 Spectrum." *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 34. [4]:407-408).

²For example, the theological construct represented by the term "Allah" in the Qur'anic system is deficient and unacceptable. However, the primary issue is not

4. We affirm both the sufficiency and unique nature of biblical revelation (2 Timothy 3:14-17). We deny that any other purported sacred writing is on a par with the Bible. While reference to a target people group's religious writings can be made as a part of bridge-building, care should be exercised not to imply a wholesale acceptance of such.

5. We affirm the need to be ethically sound in our evangelistic methodology (2 Corinthians 4:2). Becoming all things to all men in an incarnational approach does not necessitate an ethical breach. Jesus instructed his disciples to be as "wise as serpents, and harmless as doves" (Matthew 10:16). We are to be wise in our bridge building. We are to be harmless in our integrity as we hold forth the truth.³

the term. The same name is used by devout Christians and it represents a sound, scriptural view of God. In fact, historically, the Christian use of "Allah" predates the rise of Islam. The missionary task is to teach who "Allah" truly is in accord with biblical revelation.

³Integrity requires, for example, that we not imply that a false prophet or a body of religious writings other than the Bible are inspired. There is a level of contextualization that crosses the line of integrity. Our Board has dismissed personnel who have refused counsel and deliberately positioned themselves beyond that line.