

ACTIVE CONTEXTUALIZATION

To illustrate what is needed for effective contextualization, let's turn to the world of demolition. Say you are building a highway and want to remove a giant boulder. First, you drill a small shaft down into the center of the rock. Then you put explosives down the shaft into the core of the stone and detonate them. If you drill the shaft but never ignite the blast, you obviously will never move the boulder. But the same is true if you only blast and fail to drill — putting the explosives directly against the surface of the rock. You will simply shear off the face of it, and the boulder will remain. All drilling with no blasting, or all blasting with no drilling, leads to failure. But if you do both of these, you will remove the rock.

To contextualize with balance and successfully reach people in a culture, we must *both* enter the culture sympathetically and respectfully (similar to drilling) *and* confront the culture where it contradicts biblical truth (similar to blasting). If we simply “blast” away — railing against the evils of culture — we are unlikely to gain a hearing among those we seek to reach. Nothing we say to them will gain traction; we will be written off and dismissed. We may feel virtuous for being bold, but we will have failed to honor the gospel by putting it in its most compelling form. On the other hand, if we simply “drill” — affirming and reflecting the culture and saying things that people find acceptable — we will rarely see anyone converted. In both cases, we will fail to “move the boulder.” We may feel virtuous for being sensitive and open-minded, but we will have failed to honor the gospel by letting it speak pointedly and prophetically. It is only when we do our blasting on the basis of our drilling — when we challenge the culture's errors on the basis of something it (rightly) believes — that we will see the gospel having an impact on people.

For example, consider the biblical doctrine of “the priesthood of all believers.” This doctrine fits well with our Western concept of the freedom and rights of the individual, and Western churches can easily “drill” into this cultural narrative by stressing the importance of lay ministry. However, it is also possible for our Western individualism to have an unhealthy influence on the church. We see this problem when church members refuse to respond to church discipline and claim that no one — not even church leaders — has the right to tell anyone else how to live *their* Christian life. This is an area where some “blasting” work must be done, confronting the individualism of contemporary Christianity with the truth of God's Word.

The need for both drilling and blasting — for both respectful affirmation of culture and confrontation of culture — makes it challenging to engage in the work of contextualization.¹ We want to avoid both *cultural captivity* (the refusal to adapt to new times and new cultures) — and *syncretism* (bringing unbiblical views and practices into our Christianity). While the danger of the former is becoming incomprehensible and irrelevant, the danger of the latter is losing our Christian identity and distinctiveness.

So how do we proceed? Most books and chapters on gospel contextualization are (to me) frustratingly impractical. Christian leaders are therefore (1) ignorant of the very idea of contextualization, (2) naively against it, or (3) for it but don't know how to do it. As a result, most contextualization happens passively, and in this way we enculturate the gospel in all sorts of unconscious and unfruitful ways. Instead we need to engage in a process I call practical, active contextualization because it requires us to be proactive, imaginative, and courageous at every step.

What are these steps? Active contextualization involves a three-part process: *entering* the culture, *challenging* the culture, and then *appealing* to the listeners. These three parts generally relate to one another as steps, but they overlap.² And as we proceed through these stages, we will bring to bear all that we have learned about contextualization so far. We must

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make our assumptions and processes intentional (as discussed in chapter 7); we must stay aware of the need for balance (as discussed in chapter 8); and we must be faithful to the biblical patterns of contextualization (as discussed in chapter 9).

ENTERING AND ADAPTING TO THE CULTURE

The first step in active contextualization is to understand and, as much as possible, identify with your listeners, the people you are seeking to reach. This begins with a diligent (and never-ending) effort to become as fluent in their social, linguistic, and cultural reality as possible. It involves learning to express people's hopes, objections, fears, and beliefs so well that they feel as though they could not express them better themselves. In Francis Schaeffer's address to the 1976 Lausanne Congress (published as *2 Contents, 2 Realities*), he began by stressing the importance of sound doctrine. But he immediately added that this doctrine must be communicated in the form of "honest answers to honest questions." Truth should not be simply declared into a vacuum — it must be delivered as a response to the questions of particular people, and this means understanding their culture. He writes the following: "The lordship of Christ covers the whole man. That includes his so-called spiritual things and his intellectual, his creative and cultural things . . . Christianity demands that we have enough compassion to learn the questions of our generation . . .

Answering questions is hard work . . . Begin to listen with compassion."³

This emphasis on listening to questions is a crucial aspect of contextualization. When a church writes a "confession of faith," it is not simply writing down what the Bible says. A confession is a series of answers from the Bible to a particular set of questions the church is asking of it. There are some questions that almost everyone will ask of the Scriptures, but no one person or group will ask *all* the questions that can honestly and profitably be asked. Every church's questions depend on its experience, social location, historical period, and cultural situation.

Missions professor Harvie Conn used to point out that missionaries from the United States and Europe directed the new Presbyterian churches of Korea to adopt the Westminster Confession as their statement of faith. The Westminster standards were formulated in seventeenth-century Britain, and it should not surprise us that this confession contains very little about how to regard our ancestors, parents, and grandparents. Yet issues relating to respect for one's family and to ancestor worship are paramount in Korean culture. Koreans who want to live Christian lives need to know what the Bible says about the family, but the framers of the Westminster Confession simply did not ask the Bible much about that subject. This confession does not go into the level of detail necessary for most Asian believers.⁴

If twentieth-century Koreans had written their own confession, they would have likely asked several questions that the seventeenth-century British did not. And in doing so, they would have learned much truth from the Bible that would have been practically invisible to the British. Instead, opined Conn, Koreans never went through that exercise in contextualization and have in many cases uncritically adopted their culture's views of authority and family without examining them in light of the Bible. This does not mean that Korean and Hispanic confessions, by being different, would contradict British and older confessions. There would certainly be significant areas of overlap because many of the

questions human beings ask of the Bible are common questions we all ask. Nevertheless, different times and cultures will lead to a different range of questions. You can have different contextual confessions that are not contradictory — all of them being quite biblically sound.

HOW TO ENTER A CULTURE

So the first task of contextualization is to immerse yourself in the questions, hopes, and beliefs of the culture so you can give a biblical, gospel-centered response to its questions. When Paul began to speak to the philosophers in Athens, he began by saying he had carefully studied their objects of worship (Acts 17:23). We should do the same. There are several ways to become familiar with the questions and beliefs of a particular culture. One way is to get the point of view of outside experts, often academicians. Because I was “from the North” when I went to Hopewell, Virginia, to serve as a minister, it was important for me to read up on their cultural history, particularly the history of the Civil War and of the civil rights movement. Again, when I moved to New York City, I spent time reading several studies of the city’s demographics, as well as novels such as *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, which captured the spirit of the age of Manhattan in the 1980s.

Ultimately, the most important source for learning will be the hours and hours spent in close relationships with people, listening to them carefully. In the earliest days of my ministry in New York City, I preached at both morning and evening services. New Yorkers are gregarious, and after each sermon many people came up to give frank opinions about what they had heard. I made appointments to see them to discuss things at greater length, and I would often talk to fifteen or twenty people a week who bombarded me with feedback about my preaching. Christians were bringing a lot of non-Christian friends, and I was able to hear reactions to my preaching from people across the spectrum, from mature Christians to skeptics.

As I listened, I heard four categories of responses. Some told me about things I had said that *confused* them; some shared something that had

LEARNING A CULTURE FROM THE INSIDE

Most people know what IQ is, and many speak of EQ (emotional intelligence quotient), but ministry leaders should also be characterized by CQ (cultural quotient). Cultural resourcefulness is not easily developed.

First, cultural intelligence requires that we have a deep understanding of our own culture and how it shapes us. One of the biggest barriers to effective contextualization is the invisibility of our own cultural assumptions. Sometimes this blindness makes us disdainful of other cultures, particularly when we come to new cultures that are not wholly alien. For example, if a person from rural Indiana moves to Mumbai, he expects the culture to be different; accordingly, he sees the differences and tries to adapt to them. However, if this same person moves to downtown Chicago and discovers he isn’t fitting in, he is more likely to see Chicagoans as snobs. Instead of seeing the problem as cultural difference, he is likely to disdain urban people as arrogant. If we cannot see or too uncritically accept our own cultural biases, we will be less likely to contextualize well. The Bible states we are “aliens and strangers” in this world (Hebrews 11:13) and so must never be completely at home in any culture, including our home culture. The gospel and its critique of every culture can give us a detachment from our home culture that will enable us to better see its features in a way that others in it cannot.

So know your cultural influences. Here are some questions to explore: What institutions, schools, theologies, worldviews, regional cultures, artistic expressions, ministries, churches, and leaders have shaped me? What forms of ministry have shaped me? What can

I adapt, and what must I discard? Where do I need to “detox and rehabilitate” from these influences?

Second, cultural intelligence requires a heart shaped by the gospel — a heart secure enough that we are liberated from our culture’s idolatries and from the need for the approval of the new culture. We must also have the humility to respect and learn from others who hold very different views.

Third, cultural intelligence requires us to immerse ourselves in a culture, coming to love and seeking to understand its members as much as possible. Keep these points in mind:

- We can embrace the disorientation we feel when entering into a culture and allow this discomfort to yield fruitful inquiry and a relentless quest to understand more about the culture.
- We need lots of feedback from peers and mentors to help us get the most from our experiences. Most of us do not naturally seek the necessary debriefing with others to enable the implications of our learning to lodge deeper in our being.
- We can increase the number of cultural moments and artifacts that we are taking in on a weekly basis. Take time to evaluate the implications of what we are learning and experiencing for our ministry.⁵

moved and helped them; some related things that had *offended* them. This last category I divided into two. I came to see that some of the things that bothered people were simple, irreducible, biblical, gospel truths. But I also realized that some of my statements upset people because I had assumed beliefs listeners did not have and failed to clarify or qualify statements at crucial points. In other words, I had not known enough about the beliefs, fears, and prejudices of the listeners to speak

carefully enough to them. I had offended them unnecessarily. As time went on, these meetings had a profound impact on my sermon preparation. As I studied the biblical text with the objections and questions of my new friends still ringing in my ears, I saw implications and applications of the text I hadn’t seen before. I would think of a skeptic I had met with that week and say, “That is *exactly* what she was complaining about!” or “This answers his question very well.”

Immersion in the pastoral needs of people in our community and continued involvement in evangelistic venues could not be more important. If we are deeply involved in the lives, questions, and concerns of the people, then when we study the Bible in order to preach it to them, we will see God’s answers to their questions. If we are living in the culture and developing friendships with people, contextualization should be natural and organic. It will simply bubble up from the relationships in our lives and in our pastoral ministry.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AS YOU ENTER A CULTURE

Contextualized communication adapts to the “conceptuality” of the hearers. That is, the illustrations we use in communication are taken from the people’s social world; the emotion expressed is within their comfort range; the questions and issues addressed are highly relevant to them; the authorities cited are respected by them.⁶ Contextualized gospel communication will adapt to a culture in the way it persuades, appeals, and reasons with people. Missiologist David Hesselgrave speaks of three basic ways to reason. He calls them conceptual (or “Western”), concrete relational (or “Chinese”), and intuitional (or “Indian”).⁷ I summarize his categories this way:

- **Conceptual.** People make decisions and arrive at convictions through analysis and logic. This involves syllogistic reasoning in which premises are established and then necessary conclusions are drawn.
- **Concrete relational.** People make decisions and arrive at convictions through relationships

and practice. These are people likely to believe what their community believes. They also are concerned with practical living. They will believe a principle only if they see “how it works.”

- **Intuitional.** People make decisions and arrive at convictions through insight and experience. Intuitional people find stories and narratives more convincing and mind-changing than proving propositions through reasoning.

No one way of persuasion is inherently better than the others. All of them can lead to (or away from) the knowledge of God. The conceptual person may demand that we prove the existence of God; the intuitional person may refuse to make commitments that go against feelings; the practical person may not care much about truth and focus only on results. Yet the biblical authors use all of these appeals. If we have “entered” a culture, we will begin to discern which of these approaches and their many variants will have the most impact with the people we seek to reach. For example, on the whole, less educated people are more concrete and intuitional than educated people. Western people are more rational and conceptual than non-Western people.

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But keep in mind that culture is far more complex than these simple distinctions imply. Even within these broad categories there are generational and regional differences.

The eighteenth-century pastor and scholar Jonathan Edwards spent most of his career preaching at the Congregational Church of Northampton, the most important town in western Massachusetts, and a church filled with many prominent people. But when he was turned out of the congregation, he went to Stockbridge, Massachusetts, on the

American frontier, where he preached often to a congregation that included many Native Americans. Edwards’s sermons changed dramatically. Of course, they changed in content — they became simpler. He made fewer points and labored at establishing basic theological concepts. But in addition, he changed his very way of reasoning. He used more stories, parables, and metaphors. He made more use of narrative and insight and less use of syllogistic reasoning. He preached more often on the accounts of Jesus’ life instead of on the propositions of the Pauline epistles.⁸

To enter a culture, another main task is to discern its dominant worldviews or belief systems, because contextualized gospel ministry should affirm the beliefs of the culture wherever it can be done with integrity. When we enter a culture, we should be looking for two kinds of beliefs. The first are what I call “A” beliefs, which are beliefs people already hold that, because of God’s common grace, roughly correspond to some parts of biblical teaching. Because of their “A” beliefs, people are predisposed to find plausible some of the Bible’s teaching (which we may call “A” doctrines). However, we will also find “B” beliefs — what may be called “defeater” beliefs — beliefs of the culture that lead listeners to find some Christian doctrines implausible or overtly offensive. “B” beliefs contradict Christian truth directly at points we may call “B” doctrines.

In this first stage, it is important to identify the “A” beliefs — the wisdom and witness to the truth that God, by his common grace, has granted to the culture. Remember that “A” beliefs differ from culture to culture, so we will need to listen carefully. To use an obvious example, in Manhattan, what the Bible says about turning the other cheek is welcome (an “A” belief), but what it says about sexuality is resisted (a “B” belief). In the Middle East, we see the opposite — turning the other cheek seems unjust and impractical, but biblical prohibitions on sexuality make sense.

In our gospel communication, we enter the culture by pointing people to the overlapping beliefs they can easily affirm: *Do you see this in your culture? Do you see this well-known belief? The Bible*

says the same thing — even more strongly, even more clearly. Paul does this in his speech in Athens when he quotes pagan poets in order to establish the creation and providence of God (Acts 17:28). Spend time building in your listeners’ minds a respect for biblical wisdom in this way. A culture that puts a high value on family relationships and community should be shown that there is a strong biblical basis for the family. A culture that puts a high value on individual human rights and justice should be shown how the biblical doctrine of the image of God is the historical and logical foundation for human rights. One of the reasons we should take great care to affirm the “A” beliefs and doctrines is that they will become the premises, the jumping-off points, for challenging the culture.

Keep in mind that you never stop entering or identifying with a culture. It is not just a “stage” that you leave behind. Always show respect and empathy, even when you are challenging and critiquing, saying things such as, “I know many of you will find this disturbing.” Show that you understand. Be the kind of person about whom people conclude that, even if they disagree with you, you are someone they can approach about such matters.

CHALLENGING AND CONFRONTING THE CULTURE

As we saw in the previous chapter, Paul’s strategy was not simply to rail against the Greeks’ love of intellect and the Jews’ love of power, but to show them that they were pursuing those things in a self-defeating way. Valuing strength (as the Jews did) was a good thing, but without Christ, the pursuit of power leads to weakness, as David Foster Wallace so poignantly argued, while Christ’s apparent weakness brings true power.⁹ Paul does not simply dismiss a culture’s aspirations; rather, he both affirms and confronts, revealing the inner contradictions in people’s understanding. This is why it is so important to enter a culture before challenging it. Our criticism of the culture will have no power to persuade unless it is based on something that we can affirm in the beliefs and values of that culture. We can challenge some of the wrong things they believe from the foundation of those right things they believe. As we have said,

each culture includes some rough areas of overlap between its own beliefs and Christian beliefs. These Christian beliefs (the “A” doctrines) will make a lot of sense to members of the culture. Others will be quite offensive (the “B” doctrines).¹⁰ It is important to learn how to distinguish a culture’s “A” doctrines from its “B” doctrines because *knowing which are which provides the key to compelling confrontation*. This happens when we base our argument for “B” doctrines *directly* on the “A” doctrines.

Here is an illustration of what I mean. We all know that logs float and stones sink. But if you lash several logs together and then put the stones on top of the logs, you can get both the logs and stones across the river. If you try lashing the stones together and putting the logs on top, the stones will sink and the logs will scatter, and nothing will get across the river. You always float stones on logs, not the other way around.

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In the same way, we need to “float” “B” doctrines on top of “A” doctrines. Every culture (including our own) can readily grasp part of the truth but not all of it. And we know that biblical truth, because it is from God, is coherent and *consistent* with itself. What we refer to as “A” and “B” doctrines are equally true and interdependent, and they follow from each other. The confrontation occurs because every culture is profoundly *inconsistent*, conforming to some biblical truths but not to others. If those in a particular culture hold certain “A” beliefs, they are inconsistent not to hold “B” beliefs because the Scriptures, as the revealed truth of God, are always consistent. These inconsistencies reveal the points where a culture is vulnerable to confrontation.

Paul reasons this way in Acts 17 when he speaks on Mars Hill. In verse 28, Paul quotes pagan sources that teach the idea that God is the source of all

existence and life. Then in verse 29, he states this: “Therefore, since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone — an image made by man’s design and skill.” Notice that Paul does not call him “the Lord” or talk of creation *ex nihilo* — for these would have highlighted the differences between the Bible and pagan beliefs. Instead, for the sake of argument, Paul stresses the similarity between his hearers’ beliefs and the Bible’s. But then he turns on them, arguing something like this: “If we have been fashioned by God, how can he be fashioned by us — and worshiped as we wish, through images and temples we devise?” Paul is showing them that their beliefs fail *on the basis of their own premises*. He challenges idolatry by showing that it is *inconsistent* with the pagans’ own (and better) impulses about God. He tells them, essentially, “If you believe ‘A’ about God — and you are right — how can you believe in ‘B’?” David Peterson in his Acts commentary concludes, “Paul’s critique seems to go out of its way to find common ground with philosophers and poets, but his presuppositions are not drawn from Platonism or Stoicism but unambiguously from the Old Testament.”¹¹

This, then, is how we confront a culture and persuade faithfully. Our premises must be drawn wholly from the Bible, yet we will always find some things in a culture’s beliefs that are roughly true, things on which we can build our critique. We will communicate something like this: “You see this ‘A’ belief you have? The Bible says the same thing — so we agree. However if ‘A’ is true, then why do you not believe ‘B’? The Bible teaches ‘B,’ and if ‘A’ is true, then it is not right, fair, or consistent for you to reject ‘B.’ If you believe *this* — how can you not believe *that*?” We reveal inconsistencies in the cultural beliefs and assumptions about reality. *With the authority of the Bible we allow one part of the culture — along with the Bible — to critique another part.*¹² The persuasive force comes from basing our critique on something we can affirm within the culture.

GOD’S LOVE AND JUDGMENT

I once spoke to a missionary who worked among prostitutes in Korea some years ago. He found that

“A” OR “B”?

In general, Western societies make an idol out of individual freedom and embrace love and acceptance as attributes of God. Grace and forgiveness sound attractive, but sin and retributive judgment are difficult to accept.

In other cultures that make an idol of honor, the Christian idea of deep human depravity is self-evident, while the biblical concepts of free grace and forgiveness are seen as weakness or injustice. Retribution is critical, not only to maintain dignity, but also to keep order in society. People in these cultures are naturally more comfortable with the sovereignty, justice, and holiness of God.

A real-life example of this dynamic comes from a discussion with a Korean-American pastor, Dr. Stephen Um, in which we talked about a book that contended that people could not accept the idea of a God who judged and sent people to hell. Stephen responded that the statement was culturally narrow. He related how his grandfather struggled with Christianity. His grandfather had no objection to the idea of hell. He had seen firsthand how evil human beings could be, and he had no problem with a God who judged people for their actions. His real concern was with the concept of free grace — that forgiveness could be extended to someone regardless of what they had done in the past. His culture did not value this idea, and so the “A” doctrine to him (the acceptable belief) was not God’s love but God’s justice. Free grace was the doctrine he found objectionable.

No culture has the full set of prerequisite mental furniture necessary to receive the gospel, which tells us that while God is holy and must punish sin, at the same time he is loving and doesn’t want to punish us for our sin, and so Christ died in our place, making him both just and the justifier of those who believe.

women in that culture simply could not accept the idea of God extending grace to them. Their self-loathing was too great. No matter how much the missionary showed them narratives of Jesus' forgiveness or passages about God's love and grace, he got nowhere. Finally, the missionary, who was a Presbyterian, came up with a radical idea. He decided to talk to these non-Christian Asian prostitutes about the doctrine of predestination.

No one denies there are biblical texts that talk about God predestining and electing people to believe in him, though there is plenty of controversy about what these passages exactly mean. In our Western, democratic, egalitarian culture, the idea of God's sovereignty and his control of all things is definitely a "B" doctrine. We don't like those parts of the Bible that talk about God being completely in charge of history, or those parts where he opens the hearts of those chosen for eternal life (Acts 13:48; 16:14). So when sharing the gospel, we avoid this doctrine at all costs. For most of us in the West, predestination is not just a "B" doctrine; it's a "C" doctrine!

This missionary, however, realized that this was not necessarily true in mid-twentieth-century Korea. So he told the prostitutes about a God who is a King. Kings, he said, have a sovereign right to act as they saw fit. They rule — that's just what kings do. And this great divine King chooses to select people out of the human race to serve him, simply because it is his sovereign will to do so. Therefore, his people are saved because of his royal will, not because of the quality of their lives or anything they have done.

This made sense to the women. They had no problem with idea of authority figures acting in this way — it seemed natural and right to them. But this also meant that when people were saved, it was not because of pedigree or virtue or effort, but because of the will of God (cf. John 1:13). Their acceptance of this belief opened up the possibility of understanding and accepting the belief in salvation by grace. They asked my missionary friend a question that a non-Christian in the West would never ask: "How can I know if I am chosen?" He answered that if as they heard the gospel they wanted to accept and believe it, this was a sign that the Holy Spirit was

working on their hearts and that God was seeking them. And some of them responded. The missionary had discerned the difference between "A" and "B" beliefs and had built one on top of the other: "If you believe in a sovereign God, why won't you believe that you can be saved by grace despite all that you've done?"

A classic example of this type of argument is found in C. S. Lewis's appeal to his British readers to accept the idea of a jealous, holy God:

If God is Love, he is, by definition, something more than mere kindness... He has paid us the intolerable compliment of loving us, in the deepest, most tragic, most inexorable sense...

When we fall in love with a woman, do we cease to care whether she is clean or dirty, fair or foul? Do we not rather, then, first begin to care?...

In awful and surprising ways, we are the objects of His love. You asked for a loving God: you have one... not a senile benevolence that drowsily wishes you to be happy in your own way, not the cold philanthropy of a conscientious magistrate... but the consuming fire Himself, the Love that made the worlds, persistent as the artist's love for his work... provident and venerable as a father's love for a child, jealous, inexorable, exacting as love between the sexes. How this should be, I do not know: it passes reason to explain why any creatures, not to say creatures such as we, should have a value so prodigious in their Creator's eyes. It is certainly a burden of glory not only beyond our deserts but also, except in rare moments of grace, beyond our desiring.¹³

Note how Lewis confronts his own culture. He builds on an "A" doctrine held by Western people, namely, that if there is a God, he is a God of love. Lewis reasons that if this God is truly loving, he will also get angry. He must oppose sin and anything that hurts his beloved. A person may say, "I believe in a God of love, not a God of wrath against sin." But Lewis reasons that if we have a truly loving God, we will *have to* believe in a God of wrath against sin.

SIN AS IDOLATRY

When I first began ministry in Manhattan, I encountered a cultural allergy to the Christian concept of sin. I found that I got the most traction with people,

however, when I turned to the Bible's extensive teaching on idolatry. Sin, I explained, is building your life's meaning on any thing — even a very good thing — more than on God. Whatever else we build our life on will drive our passions and choices and end up enslaving us. I often referred to Augustine's description of sin in his *Confessions* as a disorder of love. So, for example, if we love our own reputation more than the truth, it's likely that we'll lie. Or if we love making money more than our family, we'll neglect our children for our career. Disordered love always leads to misery and breakdown. The only way to "reorder" our loves is to love God supremely.

This approach was very effective with young, secular professionals for two reasons. First, it neutralized (for the moment) the postmodern person's sensitivity to cultural diversity. The moment you say to them, "Sin is breaking God's law," they will retort, "Well, but different cultures and different times had different moral standards. Everyone has different ones!" Of course, postmodern people must eventually be challenged about their naive view of truth, but the concept of idolatry is a way to move forward and give them a convicting sense of their need for Christ before getting into these philosophical issues. The concept of idolatry helps them understand their own drivenness, fears, addictions, lack of integrity, envy of others, and resentment in properly theological terms. It tells them they have been looking to their careers and romances to save them, to give them something they should have been looking for only in God. Most important, this approach makes a great case that supports a "B" doctrine ("you are a sinner before God") on the basis of an acceptable "A" doctrine ("you were created to be free"). Former generations in Western society believed it was most important for someone to be a *good* person. Today in the West, our values have shifted, and our cultural narrative tells us it is most important to be a *free* person. The biblical theme of idolatry challenges contemporary people precisely at that point. It shows them that, paradoxically, if they don't serve God, they are not, and can never be, as free as they aspire to be.

From the Old Testament prophets to Paul (who did so in his speeches in Acts 17 – 20) and beyond, Christian theologians and commentators have often used the category of idolatry for cultural critique. For example, Alexis de Tocqueville's famous book on the United States noted how Americans believed that prosperity could bring deep happiness. But such a hope was an illusion, Tocqueville argued, because "the incomplete joys of this world will never satisfy [the human] heart."¹⁴ As a result, he spoke of a "strange melancholy often haunting inhabitants of democracies in the midst of abundance."¹⁵ This melancholy is, of course, the bitter fruit of idolatry that always leads to disappointment. False gods never give us what they promise.

We have already looked at David Foster Wallace's powerful insight: "In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship."¹⁶ Wallace was not a Christian, and his testimony is more powerful for it. First he argues that the biblical teaching — that we are *homo religiosus*, "man the worshiper" — is true. It is a powerful exposé. Most people think, "I am just working hard to be a good writer. I am just seeking to find someone to love me. I am working out so I can be a good steward of my body. I am working hard to accomplish something in politics or have a good career or just make a little money for security." But Wallace won't let us off the hook. He calls all that activity "worship," even though we won't admit it. Then he shows that worshipping some created thing rather than God leads to spiritual devastation: "The compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship . . . is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive."¹⁷ Until we recognize that what we are doing is worship, we will be eaten alive by it. We will feel enslaved and unhappy, and we won't know why.

I have found that when we describe the things that drive our lives in terms of idolatry, postmodern people do not put up much resistance. They quickly and even sheepishly admit that this is

exactly what they are doing. The biblical message of heart idolatry adapts the message of sin to their cultural sensibilities, but it's far from telling them what they want to hear. It convicts them and makes sin more personal. Making an idol out of something means giving it the *love* you should be giving to your Creator and Sustainer. Depicting sin as an act of misplaced love, not just a violation of law, is more compelling to many people in our culture today.

Of course, a complete biblical description of sin and grace must recognize our rebellion against the authority of God's law. But I've found that if people become convicted about their sin as idolatry and misdirected love, it is easier to show them that one of the effects of sin is living in denial about our hostility to God. Why is this? In some ways, idolatry is much like addiction (and the vernacular of addiction is very familiar to the present generation). We become ensnared by our spiritual idols in much the same way that people are snared by drink and drugs. Once we understand this, it is possible to hear the message of Romans 1 and accept that we live in a state of denial — that we repress or “hold down” the truth that we live in rebellion and bear hostility toward God. Communicating the concept of sin through the biblical teaching on idolatry is an effective way to convey the idea of spiritual blindness and rebellion to postmodern people.

Does the understanding of sin as idolatry remain true to the Pauline gospel of justification by faith alone? It does; in fact it provides a natural stepping-stone to get there. Luther, in his Large Catechism, shows that idolatry (violating the first commandment) is the very same thing as trusting something besides Jesus for our justification.¹⁸ Idolatry, then, is always a failure to accept salvation by grace alone through faith in Christ alone. Any sermon that calls for repentance from idols and offers freedom through Christ can also call people to move from justification by works to justification by faith alone.

OTHER PRESSURE POINTS

What are other ways we can challenge our contemporary secular, pluralistic, Western culture? There

are several other “pressure points” at which our culture in the West is vulnerable to challenge. Western culture longs for community and for justice — these are “A” beliefs — but the culture's own commitments and beliefs end up destroying these very precious things. Here are a few examples:

1. The commodification of sex. Thinkers have long discerned the difference between a consumer relationship, which is characteristic of the marketplace, and a covenantal relationship, which has historically been characteristic of personal relationships, particularly within the family. A consumer relationship is maintained only as long as the consumer gets goods and services at an acceptable price. There is no obligation for the consumer to stay in the relationship if it is not profitable. However, a covenantal relationship is based not on favorable conditions of value but on a loving commitment to the good of the other person and to the relationship itself. Social historians tell us that increasingly the values of the market are being applied to areas of human life traditionally seen as covenantal. People now feel free to sever family and relational ties if they are not emotionally fulfilling for them. *Commodification* is a technical term for a process by which social relationships are reduced to the terms of economic exchange.

And this brings us to the subject of sex. Traditionally, you did not have sex with someone who was not your spouse. Put another way, you didn't give your body to someone unless you committed your whole life to them (and they to you) and you both gave up your individual freedom to bind yourself in the covenant of marriage. Contemporary adults, however, want freedom, including sexual freedom. So they have sex with each other without committing their lives to one another, which typically leads to chronic loneliness and a sense of being used — and well it should. Sex in our culture is no longer something that unites people together in binding community; it is a commodity for exchange. But the Bible tells us that sex is designed by God, not as a means of self-gratification, but as a means of self-donation that creates stable

human community. If the Christian sex ethic is propounded in this way, using the culture's "A" belief in the goodness of community, it can be very persuasive.¹⁹

2. The problem of human rights. Western society also has a powerful concern for justice and human rights. At the same time, a secular worldview is being promoted that tells us there is no God. We are here by accident and evolution, and there is no supernatural world or afterlife. Increasingly, thoughtful non-Christians admit these two ideas run on tracks that can never meet: There is a contradiction between a belief in human rights and a disbelief in God. The philosopher Jacques Derrida states, "Today the cornerstone of international law is the sacred . . . the sacredness of man as your neighbor . . . made by God . . . In that sense, the concept of crime against humanity is a Christian concept and I think there would be no such thing in the law today without the Christian heritage."²⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre makes the same point in a negative form: "God does not exist, and . . . it is necessary to draw the consequences of his absence right to the end . . . There can no longer be any good *a priori*, since there is no infinite and perfect consciousness to think it . . . Dostoevsky once wrote 'If God did not exist, everything would be permitted' . . . Everything is indeed permitted if God does not exist."²¹

You see, if we are merely the product of evolution — the strong eating the weak — on what basis can we object to strong nations oppressing weak ones, or powerful people oppressing marginalized ones? This is completely *natural* to the world if this material world is all there is. And if people are not made in the image of God but are simply the accidental product of blind forces, why would human beings be more valuable than, say, rocks and trees? This is a significant pressure point today. Because young adults are particularly sensitive to injustice, it is possible and necessary to show them that human rights and justice make far more sense in a world made by God than in a world that is not made by God.²²

3. The loss of cultural hope. In his book *The Real American Dream: A Meditation on Hope*, Columbia University scholar Andrew Delbanco

gives a history of what American culture has put its hope in over the years, under the headings "God," "Nation," and "Self." He observes that the original Americans believed that life had meaning and our nation had a purpose because we lived for the glory of God. This later changed to a narrative of scientific and moral progress — and particularly of democratic values — promoted in the world through the growth of the United States. However, today "hope has narrowed to the vanishing point of the self alone," so that America's history of hope is "one of diminution."²³ In the last part of his short book, Delbanco argues that we are now in a cultural crisis. To say that the meaning of life is mere self-fulfillment cannot give a society the resources necessary to create a cohesive, healthy culture. A narrative must give people a reason for sacrifice — for living and dying — and the self-fulfillment narrative cannot do it.

Delbanco quotes the philosopher Theodor Adorno, who "recognized that in modern culture the 'pretense of individualism . . . increases in proportion to the liquidation of the individual' — by which he meant that the modern self tries to compensate with posturing and competitive self-display as it feels itself more and more cut off from anything substantial or enduring."²⁴

A few pages later, Delbanco writes the following:

*[Alexis de] Tocqueville's detection of a "strange melancholy in the midst of abundance" has a special salience today — because while we have gotten very good at deconstructing old stories (the religion that was the subject of my first chapter was one such story; the nationalism that was the subject of my second chapter was another), when it comes to telling new ones, we are blocked . . . We live in an age of unprecedented wealth, but . . . the ache for meaning goes unrelieved.*²⁵

In short, if we are allowed the absolute freedom to define and create ourselves, we become untethered from anything bigger or more enduring than ourselves. The result is meaninglessness, loss of moorings, and increasing hopelessness about the future. This is an enormous opening and opportunity for persuasive gospel communication to contemporary secular people.

APPEALING TO AND CONSOLING THE LISTENERS

As we have seen in 1 Corinthians 1:18 – 2:16, Paul’s approach to his listeners was not simply to denounce their culture. He does not merely critique the Greek passion for intellect and the Jewish desire for practical power. Instead, he shows them that the ways they are pursuing these good things are ultimately self-defeating and then urges them to find ultimate fulfillment of their cultural aspirations in Jesus Christ. And so he ends on a positive note, a note of invitation and consolation, though it always comes with a call to repent and believe.²⁶

Having entered a culture and challenged its idols, we should follow the apostle Paul in presenting Christ to our listeners as the ultimate source of what they have been seeking. When we enter a culture with care, we earn the ability to speak to it. Then, after we challenge a culture’s belief framework, our listeners will feel destabilized. Now, in this final stage of contextualization, we can reestablish equilibrium. Having confronted, we now console, showing them that what they are looking for can only be found in Christ. Put another way, we show our listeners that the plotlines of their lives can only find a resolution, a “happy ending,” in Jesus. *We must retell the culture’s story in Jesus.*

This aspect of appeal and invitation should not be seen as a third stage cut off from the other stages of contextualization. All throughout our gospel communication, we are seeking to connect to our listeners’ deepest desires. We are trying to heed the advice of Blaise Pascal, who, in one of his *Pensées*, wrote, “Men despise religion; they hate it and fear it is true. To remedy this, we must begin by showing that religion is not contrary to reason; that it is venerable, to inspire respect for it; then we must make it lovable, to make good men hope it is true; finally, we must prove it is true.”²⁷

How can we make our appeal? As we saw in chapter 2, the intercanonical themes uniting the Bible are richly diverse. They speak of sin and salvation, using the language of exile and homecoming; of temple, presence, and sacrifice; of covenant and faithfulness; of kingdom and victory. When we seek to communicate the gospel to a particular culture,

we will find that some of these themes resonate more deeply than others. Paul was able to speak to a wisdom-obsessed culture by using one of the great themes of the Bible, the wisdom of God as it comes to its climax in Jesus Christ (see 1 Cor 1:18 – 2:16). The Bible has enough diversity to enable us to connect its message to any baseline cultural narrative on the face of the earth.

ATONEMENT “GRAMMARS”

It is commonly said that the Bible contains several different “models” of atonement. I prefer to call these different “languages” or “grammars” by which the saving work of Christ on the cross is presented.

- 1. The language of the battlefield.** Christ fought against the powers of sin and death for us. He defeated the powers of evil for us.
- 2. The language of the marketplace.** Christ paid the ransom price, the purchase price, to buy us out of our indebtedness. He frees us from enslavement.
- 3. The language of exile.** Christ was exiled and cast out of the community so we who deserve to be banished could be brought in. He brings us home.
- 4. The language of the temple.** Christ is the sacrifice that purifies us and makes us acceptable to draw near to the holy God. He makes us clean and beautiful.
- 5. The language of the law court.** Christ stands before the judge and takes the punishment we deserve. He removes our guilt and makes us righteous.

It is sometimes implied we can choose which of these models we prefer and ignore the others, but this is misleading. Each way of communicating the atonement reflects a piece of inspired Scripture, and each tells us great things about our salvation that the others do not bring out as clearly. Each will have special resonance with certain temperaments and cultures. People who are fighting oppression or even enslavement and long for freedom will be helped by the first two grammars (the battlefield

and the marketplace). People seeking relief for guilt and a sense of shame will be especially moved by the last two — the temple and the law court. People who feel alienated, rootless, and rejected will find the exile grammar intensely engaging.

But perhaps the single most consoling and appealing theme is what theologian Roger Nicole has called the one, irreducible theme that runs through every single one of these models — the idea of *substitution*.²⁸ Dr. Nicole taught that, regardless of the

The single most consoling and appealing atonement theme is substitution.

grammar being used, the essence of the atonement is always Jesus acting as our substitute. Jesus fights the powers, pays the price, bears the exile, makes the sacrifice, and bears the punishment *for* us, in our place, on our behalf. In every grammar, Jesus does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. *He* accomplishes salvation; we do nothing at all. And therefore the substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus is at the heart of everything.

This act — giving one's life to save another — is the most compelling, attractive, and electrifying story line there is. J. K. Rowling, for example, could hardly end her Harry Potter series in any other way because it is the ultimate drama, the most moving ending possible. Lifting up the substitutionary sacrifice of Christ is the ultimate way to appeal to any culture, to attract them to him. The various ways of speaking about the atonement furnish us with wonderfully fitting ways of showing each culture how this atoning work of Jesus specifically solves its greatest problems and fulfills its greatest aspirations.

We live in the first era of history that considers happy endings to be works of inferior art. Modern critics insist that life is *not* like that — rather, it

is full of brokenness, paradox, irony, and frustration. Steven Spielberg was denied Oscars until he stopped making movies with happy endings and directed *Schindler's List*. Yet people continue to flock to movies and read books that have fairy-tale endings. There are deep human longings that modern realistic fiction can never satisfy: to escape death and live forever; to hold communion with other personal beings like elves or aliens or angels; to find love that perfectly heals and from which we never part. Most of all, we want to see and, if possible, participate in the final triumph over evil in the world. People turn to fairy tales because they depict these desires coming true.

The gospel is by no means a sentimental view of life. In fact, the Bible has a far darker vision of reality than any secular critic. It tells us that Satan and his legions of demons are at work in the world. It tells us we are so deeply flawed and cruel we can't save ourselves without God's intervention. And yet the gospel has an astonishing message about these longings for love and death and triumph. First, the gospel *explains* them. Human beings have been made in the image of God, which means we were originally designed to know and experience all these things. We were created to live forever. Second, the gospel tells us that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is hard *proof* that all these things will come true again. If you believe in Jesus Christ, you will see and know escape from death, love without parting, and triumph over evil. You will talk to angels and supernatural

IT'S IN OUR BLOOD

Ajith Fernando, a Sri Lankan evangelist, communicates the idea of substitutionary atonement to his listeners by using an illustration:

Have you ever had an infected wound or sore? When you open it, what comes rolling out? Pus. And what is that? It is basically the collective corpses of white blood cells fighting the infection that have died so that you may live. Do you see? Substitutionary salvation is in your very blood.

beings. You will live forever. And why will we get eternal life? Because he was killed. We get eternal love because he was forsaken. We triumph over evil because he was tortured, murdered, and defeated. In the salvation of Jesus Christ, we learn that the happy ending we long for is not a fairy tale.

The gospel is the deepest consolation you can offer to the human heart. Once you have taken care to enter and have found the courage to challenge the world of your hearers, be sure to offer this consolation with the passion of one who has experienced it firsthand.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

1. Keller writes, “The first task of contextualization is to immerse yourself in the questions, hopes, and beliefs of the culture so you can give a biblical, gospel-centered response to its questions.” What are some ways you have found to read and study the culture around you? What questions is the culture asking? How has involvement in the pastoral needs of your community helped you to better understand the culture and people you seek to reach?
2. This chapter highlights three ways of reasoning: conceptual, concrete relational, and intuitional.
 - *Conceptual*. People make decisions and arrive at convictions through analysis and logic.
 - *Concrete relational*. People make decisions and arrive at convictions through relationships and practice.
 - *Intuitional*. People make decisions and arrive at convictions through insight and experience.

Which of these three approaches resonates most with you? With the people you are trying to reach? If they are different, what can you do to bridge the gap?

3. Another task of contextualization is discerning the dominant worldviews and belief systems of a culture. Keller writes, “Contextualized gospel ministry should affirm the

beliefs of the culture wherever it can be done with integrity.” He identifies “A” beliefs, which “roughly correspond to some parts of biblical teaching,” and “B” beliefs, which contradict Christian truth (“B” doctrines) and “lead listeners to find some Christian doctrines implausible or overtly offensive.”

Take a moment to identify a key “A” doctrine — a teaching from the Bible that would be generally accepted and affirmed by your target culture — and how it expresses itself in the culture through “A” beliefs. What is an example of a “B” belief in your culture, and what “B” doctrines does it conflict with directly?

4. Keller writes, “It is important to learn how to distinguish a culture’s ‘A’ doctrines from its ‘B’ doctrines because *knowing which are which provides the key to compelling confrontation*. This happens when we base our argument for ‘B’ doctrines *directly on the ‘A’ doctrines*.” Using the examples you discussed in the last question, how might you do this?
5. This chapter gives a summary of several cultural pressure points and atonement grammars as it concludes. Which of these pressure points and grammars are less familiar or natural to you, but worth investigating? How might adding them to your repertoire strengthen your effectiveness in mission?

CHAPTER 10 – ACTIVE CONTEXTUALIZATION (pages 119–32)

1. See David F. Wells, “An American Evangelical Theology: The Painful Transition from Theoria to Praxis,” in *Evangelicalism and Modern America*, ed. George Marsden (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 90, 93. Wells writes, “Where is the line between involvement and disengagement, acceptance and denial, continuity and discontinuity, being ‘in’ the world and not ‘of’ the world? Contextualization is the process through which we find answers to these questions. The Word of God must be related to our own context . . . The preservation of its identity is necessary for Christian belief; its contemporary relevance is required if Christians are to be believable.”
2. Richard Cunningham, director of University Colleges and Christian Fellowship (UCCF) in Great Britain, gives practical training on how to give an evangelistic talk. He advises that every speaker *identify, persuade, and invite* (Alex Banfield Hicks and Richard Cunningham, “Identification, Persuasion and Invitation,” Christian Persuaders Podcast #1, www.bethinking.org/what-is-apologetics/introductory/identification-persuasion-and-invitation.htm [accessed January 20, 2012]). These three stages (though they overlap too much to be called true “stages”) correspond closely to my three steps of *enter, challenge, and appeal*.
3. Francis Schaeffer, *2 Contents, 2 Realities* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1975), 17–18.
4. Of course the Westminster Confession and catechisms treat the commandment “Honor your father and mother,” but the answers it draws from Scripture show it was not searching the text with ancestor worship in mind. The Confession tends to generalize the command to mean respect for all in authority, such as civil magistrates.
5. Thanks to Mark Reynolds for the ideas in this section.
6. In Acts 17:26–28, Paul quotes pagan poets. If you are speaking biblical truth to those who are skeptical of the Bible’s authority, it is good to reinforce your points with supplemental, respected authorities. So, for example, if you are teaching what the Bible says about something, and (in our Western society) you have some empirical, scientific study that confirms the Bible’s statement—use the study. It gradually strengthens the skeptical listener’s trust in the Word. Contextualization includes learning which supplemental authorities are credible to the listeners.
7. See David J. Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 198–236.
8. See the sermons from this period, with illuminating commentary by the editor, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards: Sermons and Discourses, 1743–1758*, vol. 25, ed. Wilson H. Kinnach (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2010).
9. See ch. 1, p. 34.
10. I believe this principle is implied in 1 Peter 2:12, a striking verse that assumes the world will in some respects praise and admire Christian faith and practice and yet in other respects will hate and persecute it; see Miroslav Volf’s article on 1 Peter, “Soft Difference,” www.yale.edu/faith/resources/x_volf_difference.html (accessed January 20, 2012). I am not arguing that this verse proves the principle—a principle more readily seen in Paul’s actual reasoning with listeners, as in Acts 17.
11. David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 496.
12. Thanks to Rochelle L. Cathcart for this insight.
13. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), 29, 34–35.
14. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: HarperCollins, 1988), 296.
15. *Ibid.*, 538.
16. Emily Bobrow, “David Foster Wallace, in His Own Words” (taken from his 2005 commencement address at Kenyon College), <http://moreintelligentlife.com/story/david-foster-wallace-in-his-own-words> (accessed January 20, 2012).
17. *Ibid.* When Wallace says we should worship “some sort of god or spiritual-type thing,” he then lists “JC or Allah, be it YHWH or the Wiccan Mother-Goddess, or the Four Noble Truths, or some inviolable set of ethical principles.” So he is counseling religious pluralism with a vengeance! But just as Paul in Acts 17:28 was careful—in the early stage of his argument—to express commonality between pagan poets and God, it is possible to accept Wallace’s description of the *problem* as sound (i.e., that we need to build our lives around something that transcends this world).
18. See Martin Luther’s comments on the first commandment in his Large Catechism (Birmingham, Ala.: CreateSpace, 2011), 1–3.
19. For an in-depth treatment of this subject, see chs. 1 and 3 of my book *The Meaning of Marriage* (New York: Dutton, 2011), esp. 80–82.
20. Richard Kearny, moderator, “On Forgiveness: A Roundtable Discussion with Jacques Derrida,” in *Questioning God*, ed. John Caputo, Mark Dooley, and Michael Scanlon (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2001), 70.

21. Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism Is a Humanism," in *Existentialism from Dostoyevsky to Sartre*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Meridian, 1989), 352 – 53, www.marxists.org/reference/archive/sartre/works/exist/sartre.htm (accessed January 20, 2012).
22. It can be argued that belief in human rights makes far more sense if there is a God than if there is not. Nicholas Wolterstorff makes this case in "Is a Secular Grounding of Human Rights Possible?" and "A Theistic Grounding of Human Rights," in *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008), chs. 15 – 16. See also Christian Smith, "Does Naturalism Warrant a Moral Belief in Universal Benevolence and Human Rights?" in *The Believing Primate: Scientific, Philosophical, and Theological Reflections on the Origin of Religion*, ed. Jeffrey Schloss and Michael Murray (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 292 – 317; Timothy Keller, *Generous Justice: How God's Grace Makes Us Just* (New York: Dutton, 2010), ch. 7; Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton, 2008), ch. 9.
23. Andrew Delbanco, *The Real American Dream: A Meditation on Hope* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 103.
24. *Ibid.*, 103 – 4.
25. *Ibid.*, 106 – 7.
26. Theologian Dan Strange writes that non-Christian systems of thought are both antithetical to, yet practically "parasitic" on, Christian truth. That is, they must affirm some aspects of reality, of God's truth, even when they resist other parts of his truth. Strange concludes that ultimately the gospel is the "subversive fulfillment" for non-Christian systems. That is, the gospel challenges their aspirations and yet in another sense fulfills them (see "Perilous Exchange, Precious Good News: A Reformed 'Subversive Fulfillment' Interpretation of Other Religions," in *Only One Way? Three Christian Responses on the Uniqueness of Christ in a Religiously Plural World*, Gavin D'Costa, Paul Knitter, and Daniel Strange [London: SCM Press, 2011], 93).
27. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (New York: Collier, 1910), 68, #187.
28. See Roger Nicole, "Postscript on Penal Substitution," in *The Glory of the Atonement*, ed. Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James III (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2004), 445 – 52.