

**Paul G. Hiebert. *The Gospel in Human Contexts: Anthropological Explorations for Contemporary Missions*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009. 224 pp. Paperback, ISBN 978-0-8010-3681-1. \$21.99 Paperback.**

One of the first books I read on the subject of contextualization two and a half decades ago was Paul Hiebert's *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*, and I have assigned that book to many beginning mission students since. That book wrestled with the insights of cultural anthropology for communicating the gospel in various cultural contexts. It summarized a broad area with the competence that comes from the mastery of a subject. Numerous illustrations in mission practice from Hiebert's personal experience made the book come alive. Since that book many more have come treating the inter-related issues of anthropology, gospel, cultural context, epistemology, and mission with the same skill of a scholar and practitioner. This book published posthumously stands as the last in a long productive career. Hiebert served as a Mennonite missionary in India, taught at Fuller Seminary, and finally served as distinguished professor of mission and anthropology at Trinity Divinity School until his death in 2007. The community of mission scholars is indebted to Hiebert for his decades of work on the subject of cultural anthropology and mission.

The book is loosely structured in three sections and gathers together a number of related essays, some already in print. Part 1 is entitled 'Theoretical Foundations.' In chapter one Hiebert treats changing views of contextualization by advocating his now familiar, yet helpful view of critical contextualization over against noncontextualization and uncritical contextualization. The second chapter is a shared chapter with Tite Tiénou in which mission theology is offered as a third way of doing theology parallel with and complimentary to biblical and systematic theology. Part 2 is entitled 'Exegeting Humans.' Hiebert believes that "missionaries, pastors, and church workers" (p. 12) need to master the skill of human exegesis, a study of the cultural and social systems that shape human life. To that end he offers the insights of cultural anthropology. There are four chapters arranged historically. In the first he traces the way Western people have viewed the other. The next two chapters offer a historical survey of anthropology over the past two centuries before turning to a systems approach in the next chapter. A final chapter in this section analyses research methods used in anthropology. This section presents a helpful overview of anthropology with sporadic applications to mission and Christian analysis. Part 3 is entitled 'Mission as Intercultural Mediation' in which two chapters articulate his vision of missions and missionaries as mediators between

churches in various cultural contexts. Those who live in more than one cultural setting are able to bridge different contexts providing understanding, enrichment, and correction between churches.

The goal of this book is to equip the church for its mission by offering the insights of anthropology to help wrestle with the relationship of the gospel to cultural context. Most of the time, it appears that by missions Hiebert is primarily thinking about a verbal communication of the gospel in a foreign context. Yet his insights are important for an embodiment of the gospel in life, word, and deed in all cultures including the West. Indeed the wisdom of relating gospel to culture garnered in missiology is an important resource for the whole church but I fear this book will remain within the bounds of cross-cultural missions.

Two questions remain in my mind about Hiebert's approach—issues I have struggled with for some time that again appear in this book. First, Hiebert advocates a “metatheology” that will enable us to understand, translate, compare, and evaluate various contextual theologies. His diagrams on pages 48 and 185 highlight the problem: standing above and over various cultures is something he calls a “metacultural grid” and a “metacultural conceptual framework.” While I appreciate his concern to avoid cultural relativism and to keep the gospel as a final authority over all theologies I cannot imagine who could formulate such a grid. Much more helpful is his call for dialogue in the church within all cultures as a hermeneutical community that will enable each one to see their own blind spots and deepen their understanding of the gospel (p. 100). Second, I continue to find much more compelling theories of culture developed by missiologists who see religion as the centre and directing dynamic of culture. Hiebert seems to be somewhat uncritical of secular anthropology's bias to relegate religion to one structural component of culture rather than as an all-embracing power that arises from seeing all of human life in community as a response to God.

The book is a fitting capstone on a fruitful career. It is full of wisdom and insight, and will serve to help many struggle afresh with the urgent issue of what it means to faithfully embody the gospel in various cultural contexts. If it can provide for a new generation of Christians what his first book provided for me it will have served its purpose well in God's kingdom. One only hopes these insights will move beyond foreign missions.

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