

# APPENDIX IV.

## AWARENESS - CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS



The mental model above was created by Rick Taylor, formerly of Fellowship Bible Church, Little Rock, Arkansas. This conceptual pyramid is a way of illustrating the macro-steps of planting a church or reaching a city/neighborhood.

### WHY AWARENESS FIRST?

It's important to highlight the difference between vision and strategy from the onset. Some make the mistake of building a church on a strategy. For example, I've heard a church planter say, "My vision is to plant a church in the local YMCA and maybe even multiple to other YMCAs!" What happens when the national office of the YMCA says churches can no longer meet there? Does your vision dissolve? No. You simply lost a strategy and have to regroup.

Vision is God's preferred future (i.e. what the Kingdom coming to this context would look like). Vision can be pursued through a variety of strategies that may change over time. So while most are clear on this distinction, very few begin with deep awareness. Particularly, those planting in the country of their origin assume they know all there is to know about their context. After all, they've been here a while. This is akin to the fish that has forgotten water.

Lesslie Newbigin was British but served as a missionary to India for forty years. Upon his return to England, he looked at his native country as he had learned to do on foreign soil. He largely discovered

that the context had changed, but the church had failed to notice or adapt. A failure to listen to the culture in an ongoing way leaves all of us susceptible to the same mistake. We're wise to spend time seeking deep awareness of the content from an anthropological standpoint.

It begins with awareness. Awareness is seeing the reality of a place through God's eyes. How does God view this place? The more awareness you have, the more robust and contextual your vision will be. You will be speaking right to the brokenness in particular terms that your audience will resonate with. This is vastly different from copying and pasting vision from somewhere else irrespective of context. You'll know you have a solid awareness when your hearers are regularly demonstrating verbally and non-verbally that you really get them and the problems of this place.

### WHY IS AWARENESS THE BROADEST SECTION?

No cultural analysis is perfect or static. It is helpful to gain awareness about your context by forming a "hypothesis" around what you observe some people valuing and then testing that hypothesis over time. Approaching these hypotheses from a variety of perspectives will strengthen the insights (young/old, majority culture/minorities, rich/poor, etc.). Cultural observations are not static because context changes. In a mere seven years, an entire neighborhood's demographics can change. New immigrants move in. The next generation has radically different values than their parents. So cultural analysis is an ongoing commitment of paying attention to the people God has sent you to. It requires making significant shifts in your approach in response to the significant shifts occurring in your context. In one sense, it's appropriate that the pyramid is growing ever larger as your awareness of your contexts grows. Listening well over many years will result in a deep understanding of the hearts and minds of the people you are trying to reach. This can lead to an increasingly fruitful application of the gospel to their values, questions, doubts, and challenges. At its root, this is what we are doing when we speak of gospel fluency. An ever-growing knowledge of the gospel and its implications and an evergrowing understanding of the people you are sharing it with.



## HOW WELL ARE YOU LISTENING TO YOUR CONTEXT?

We have to listen in order to determine how well we are clarifying the gospel for a specific people in a specific time and place. We have to know our audience. Assumptions can result in lackluster fruit. With this in mind:

What feedback loops do you have with members within your church that help you see what is confusing, moving, helpful, or offensive about the teaching and lifestyle of the church?

What feedback loops do you have with not-yet-believers in your city that help you see what is confusing, moving, helpful, or offensive about the teaching and lifestyle of the church?

**Assignment:** Record your initial hypotheses about your context based on the conversations you've had and things you have observed. Use the following anthropological categories to organize your observations:

Are people more status-conscious/achievement-focused?

Are they more likely to display/conceal material wealth?

Is your context more formal/informal?

Is the culture primarily matriarchal/patriarchal?

Are people inclusive/exclusive?

Is the mindset individualistic/collectivistic?

How do people view youth/seniority (e.g. America celebrating youth vs. Japan honoring elders)?

What is the view of human sexuality?



What is the view of time, routine, and schedule?

What is the attitude toward space and property? What is the view of public/private use and exploitation (methods of control, attitude toward the use and sharing of resources)? (e.g. The National Parks vs. a large private ranch in Montana?)

What are people's primary associations (family, kin, peers, and sub-culture)?

What's the view of education?

Do people think dichotomistically/holistically?

Is there a crisis/non-crisis orientation?

What is the view of concealment/exposure of vulnerability?

What is the concept of beauty? (What is ugly/beautiful?)

What is abnormal/normal?

What is the threshold for the paradoxical/logical?

What is the threshold for that which is intuitive/irrational/rational (e.g. tribal story-formed vs. cold scientism)?

What is evil/good?



Is there a metanarrative or salvation story?

e.g. Portland, Oregon's metanarrative, which might be termed "The Eco-Salvation Narrative," argues the Earth evolved to be a good, self-sustaining place, but through over-consumption, corporate evil, and pollution, the earth has become an unsustainable, tainted place. However, through the human efforts of the "Green/Sustainable" movement, they can see the Earth restored to her good, self-sustaining state. The new Eco-Pharisee looks down on others who have too many children, don't recycle, or drive large, gas-guzzling SUVs. Pharisees pray on the street corner (i.e. signaling their "greenness") by bike commuting to work with a bumper sticker that reads, "My bike gets infinity miles to the gallon," or by letting you know they installed a gray water system and water barrels to minimize waste.

What are the defeater beliefs in your context? (Tim Keller defines "defeater beliefs" as those which you must defeat before people will listen to the rest of what you are teaching/preaching.)

e.g. How can you say there is only one legitimate religion? It is so exclusive.

If you believe in absolute truth, you cannot be a good citizen (the New Atheism). How can you live in a democratic society characterized by diversity in light of your proselytizing faith that believes everyone must come to the same conclusions that you have come to?

What positive aspects of the culture can you affirm?

e.g. "You value human rights? God does too. In fact, the Imago Dei ("image of God") has been the basis in the West for most progress in human rights. So the thing that we both value is grounded in Christian theology. Let's work towards that together."

Tim Keller, in his important book *Center Church*, states that "sound contextualization shows people how the plot-lines of the stories of their lives can only find a happy ending in Christ." He then goes on to list six ways of making a biblical appeal to people to come to God:

- Out of fear of judgement and death
- Out of a desire for a release from the burdens of guilt
- Out of appreciation for the attractiveness of truth
- To satisfy unfulfilled existential longings
- For help with a problem
- Simply out of a desire to be loved



Which of the six do you see as natural onramps for gospel emphases? Which do you personally resonate with? Which one do you most shy away from?

Tim Keller also notes that there are various different “languages” or “grammars” by which the saving work of Christ on the cross is presented.

- The language of the **battlefield**. Christ fought against the powers of sin and death for us. He defeated the powers of evil for us.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.

Which field of language do you most often use to describe the gospel?

**Assignment #2:** As an exercise, write a first draft of how you would retell your city or culture’s story in light of Jesus and His holistic redemptive work in the Kingdom coming.

