

Connecting Your People to God:

A Guide for Adapting Sunday School/
Bible Study Materials

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Introduction: The Teacher as a Bridge

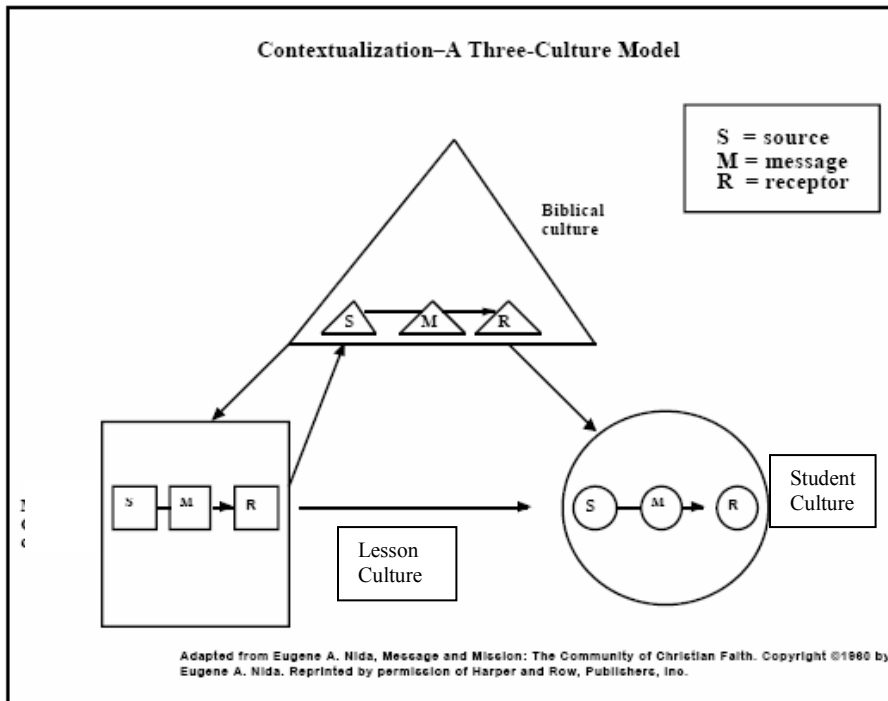
One morning, Junie met Paul at the door. Junie began the conversation: “Paul, I have been working for ten years at this company. I am one of the top salesmen, and I almost always meet my sales quota, but the Boss has not given me a raise in the last two years.” Paul replied, “I know that the Boss appreciates you. He often uses you as an example for others. Maybe he forgot this year about giving you a raise.” Junie said, “But I can’t just talk with the Boss about getting a raise. He might be angry at me. Would you be willing to help me? You are close to him. After all, he is your first cousin.” “No problem,” said Paul, “I will be glad to speak to him for you. I am sure he will not be angry.”

Junie asked Paul to become a mediator or “bridge” to talk with the Boss because Paul was both close to the Boss, and close to him. Through Paul, he was able to “connect” with the Boss, and get his message across clearly.

Some people use a bridge to help them communicate with people they do not know well, or are unsure of. For thousands of years, God has used people to bridge between Himself and others. He used the prophets and teachers of the Old Testament. Best of all, he used His own Son, Jesus Christ, as the mediator between God and men. Even today, He uses us to connect Himself with people who need His message of love and justice.

As a teacher, you are a kind of bridge between God and people. You may be the teacher of a Sunday School class, Bible Study, or a leader of a church. In many countries that use English as the medium of instruction, English Sunday School and Bible Study material is available. However, much of what is available was written for a different culture. The writers of this curriculum try hard to connect the God of the Bible and the people of Bible times with the people of their own culture. In many ways, these writers are very helpful, but since their students are from a different culture, the lessons that they have written may not connect well with students from another culture.

This diagram helps to illustrate the situation:



In this simplified model of communication, we see three aspects of communication, the Source, the Message, and the Receptor. The Source is the person who wants to communicate. The Receptor is the person with whom he wants to communicate. The three shapes represent three cultures. The top triangle represents God, through His prophet or apostle (The Source), who communicated His

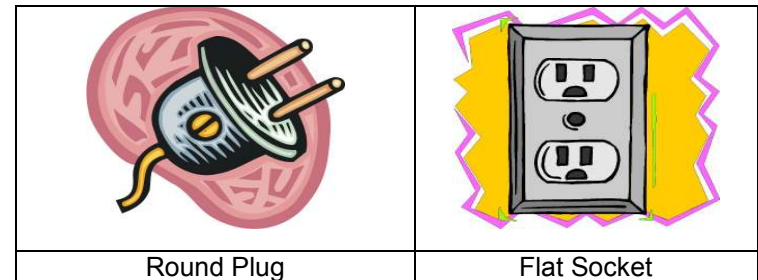
message (The Message) to the people of Bible times (The Receptors). The shapes of the Source, Message, and Receptor are all triangles. The message was formed within the Biblical Culture, represented by a triangle, by a Source from the Biblical Culture. God formed his message in a way that was appropriate to the culture of Bible times, to communicate with His Receptors.¹

In the lower left part of the diagram, a square represents the culture of the person who wrote the lessons for a Bible Curriculum. His/her thoughts are shaped by his/her own culture. His message, also a square, is formed to be understood by someone from his own culture.

Consider the lower right part of the diagram. Your job is similar to that of the author of the lesson. You are attempting to put God's message in a form (represented by a circle), which will be appropriate to your student's culture.

There are arrows pointing to you, both from the Bible culture, and from the culture of the lesson writer. As a teacher, you should connect with both the Bible culture (through reading the Bible and books about the Bible culture) and the culture of the lesson.

Different Shapes for Different Cultures



Have you ever purchased an appliance, only to find out that the plug could not connect to the socket in your home? The plug was the wrong shape because it was designed for a different country.

Just as a different shaped plug was designed for a different country's socket, so a Bible lesson guide can be written for a different culture. Even though it was written for a different culture, a Bible lesson guide can help you in many ways. Among these ways are:

1. It gives a Topic of study
2. It gives a structure for study.
3. It gives insights into the Bible Culture.
4. It gives a suggested Bible interpretation.
5. It gives a suggested Bible application.

However, since the shape or form of the message was designed for a different culture, it may not fit your students in every aspect. Let us look at three examples of Sunday School lessons. They will illustrate some of the ways in which lessons fit, or do not fit.

Adult Sunday School Lesson on Romans: Course Introduction²

Lesson Content	Observations
<p>“What was Paul like?”</p> <p>Religion and Conversion. Paul came from a background that prepared him to be a “Hebrew of the Hebrews,” which means he was, in our vernacular, a “Perfect” Jew. His background also included a hatred of Christians. However, the Lord gloriously saved Paul while he was traveling the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-16).</p>	<p>This section is a great help in lesson preparation, for it gives background important to understanding the Bible Character (Paul) and the Bible Culture.</p>
<p>Education. Paul’s background also prepared him intellectually. Tarsus, in Cilicia, Paul’s birthplace, was a cross-section of the Roman world of that day. From his boyhood, Paul enjoyed exposure to a variety of cultures and ideas...</p>	<p>This section tells where Paul was born, and a little about his world. Would your students know where Cilicia is located? What would they understand of the Roman world? How could you teach your students about geography and the Roman world?</p>
<p>What did He say about himself in his letter?</p> <p>...A Servant of Jesus Christ. Literally, Paul identified himself as a bondsman (1:1). Slavery was practiced widely at the time the book of Romans was written. Of the more than a million people in Rome, half were slaves.</p>	<p>This section gives valuable insight about Rome, where the recipients of this letter lived.</p>

Lesson Content	Observation
<p>Why did Paul give the gospel to people?</p> <p>Paul’s main reason for visiting Rome was to be an ambassador of Christ. In verse 14, Paul stated that he owed a debt, a debt that compelled him to help others spiritually... <i>Like the apostle Paul</i>, believers today owe the gospel to all people. As a servant of God and others, each of us has a personal obligation to witness...</p>	<p>Here, the author is making a comparison between Paul and his students. Paul felt this personal obligation because of the evil he had done before his conversion to Christ. Why should your students feel this personal obligation? You could ask them if they feel obligated to God. If so, why do they feel this obligation?</p>
<p>Recognizing witnessing as a personal obligation.</p> <p>Taking the initiative.</p> <p>We can’t merely put up church buildings, establish schedules of services, and wait for people to come to us, especially these days.</p>	<p>Actually, putting up a building would be a very expensive, and perhaps unnecessary thing for many people in the world. Some might be meeting in a church with a building. Some may live in a society where no new church buildings are allowed to be built.</p>
<p>Paul knew that at Rome the air would be heavy with indifference and disdain. Christianity was regarded as a vulgar superstition. Nevertheless the apostle declared, “I am not ashamed. People today are no more sympathetic to the Lord Jesus Christ than they were in Paul’s day. (Try introducing a spiritual thought into the next ordinary conversation and note the awkward pause it makes!)</p>	<p>The audience of the author is not used to talking about spiritual things. What is your audience like? Do they object when someone talks about spiritual things? In some societies, people talk frequently about religion. It may be that the offense of the cross is related to holding religious views that are different from those of the majority population.</p>

Primary Sunday School Lesson: God's Great Promise³

Lesson Content	Observations
When a person makes a promise, we always know there is a possibility that he won't be able to keep the promise. But when God makes a promise, we can know for sure that He will keep it. We learned about a man named Abraham... The Bible tells us about a man named Isaiah who lived hundreds of years after Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.	Do your students understand the passage of a long period of time? Do they know these people of the Old Testament?
The Jews did not have pastors like we have today.	Do the children have a pastor? Do they know what a pastor is?
Isaiah knew God is holy or perfect; God cannot sin. But Isaiah knew he was not perfect; he had sinned many times.	Do the children understand the concept of sin? They may come from a culture that emphasizes shame instead of sin.

These two examples illustrate how Sunday School curriculum written in a foreign culture may be of great help in the culture of your students, yet contain many elements that are not the right cultural "shape". In some cases, they do not help your students "connect" to the God of the Bible and the people of the Bible culture.

Adapting Curriculum Written for Another Culture



If you discover that you bought an appliance with the wrong kind of plug, you can buy an adapter to make it fit the socket in your house. Adapting curriculum written for another culture is not as simple as that! These steps will be of help.

Book Analysis

This step only needs to be done once for every Sunday School quarterly or Bible Study Guide. It is done in the period of time before you actually begin to teach. Its purpose is to understand the Bible culture, the culture of the lesson author, and the culture of

your students. If you lack information about the culture of the lesson author, you could e-mail or talk to someone who is from that culture.

Here is an example of a completed Book Analysis:

Book Analysis Chart

	Bible Audience	Lesson Audience	Your Audience
Name	Romans, mostly of Jewish Background	Americans	Chinese
Age Group	Mixed age Adults	Adult	Adult
Gender/ Family Status	Mixed singles and married	Mixed singles and married	Mixed singles and married
Location	Rome, Capitol of large city	United States, probably suburban	Beijing
Level of Obedience to God	New Believers	Mixed: Some committed, some uncommitted	Seekers from Atheistic families
Level of Bible Knowledge	Good Knowledge of the Old Testament	Relatively knowledge-able	Very little Bible Knowledge
Economic Status	Unclear, but probably able to contribute to an offering	Owens a car, perhaps a home or rents an apartment	From poor families, but with opportunities for good jobs
Major Desires	Nominal Christians. Some are struggling with pride, lust.	Nominal Christians Various struggles.	Mostly material desires, good relationships
Major Needs	Understand-ing of Salvation,	True Commitment to Christ	Understand-ing God, Desiring God, Salvation, Godly lifestyle
Fears and Concerns	Persecution, Conflict between Jew and Gentile	Financial woes, popularity status conflict	Bad relationships Bad luck Possible Persecution
God's Goals for them	Unity, spiritual growth, assurance of salvation	Spiritual Growth	Belief in God, Salvation, Forming a Christian Group

The better you know your students, and the better you know God, the more you will understand what His goals are for them. As their teacher, you cooperate with God in moving your students towards His goals for them. The better you understand the Bible Culture and the culture of the lesson author, the better you will be able to recognize what parts of the lesson you need to adapt to your students.

Lesson Analysis

Most Bible lessons include these 4 basic sections

1. **Getting Attention:** This section gets the attention of your audience. It begins with their needs/concerns/goals and directs them towards the topic of the lesson.
2. **Observation:** This section deals with the events and teaching of the Bible Text.
3. **Interpretation:** This section follows basic principles of interpretation to attempt to understand the author's original Message.
4. **Application:** Application compares the lives of Bible people to your own times, giving life lessons for your own students. It aims at redirecting your students towards God's goals for their lives, and gives practical suggestion on how they can put the Message of the lesson into practice.

Finding these parts of the lesson will take some practice. Different Bible Study or Sunday School lessons label these in different ways. Here are some examples from Sunday School manuals written in the United States:

Adult Sunday School Manual Sections

1. Getting Attention
2. Knowing and Understanding the Bible: Observation and Interpretation
3. Applying the Bible: General Application
4. Practicing the Bible: Specific Application

Junior Sunday School manual sections

1. Setting the Tone: Preparing the Students
2. Sparking their Interest: Getting attention
3. Searching God's Word: Observation and Interpretation
4. Seeing the Reality: Application

Pre-Primary Sunday School Manual Sections

The "Learning God's Word" section includes these divisions:

1. Introduction: Getting Attention
2. Paragraphs are titled according to parts of the story, and are mostly Observation with some Interpretation.
3. Conclusion (Application)

In preparation for your lesson, look through the lesson book, and label the Getting Attention, Observation, Interpretation, and Application sections.

Lesson Adaptation:

After you have labeled the sections, look at each section and ask yourself the following questions. Using these questions as a guide, write suggested changes in your lesson book, or in your notebook, that will adapt your teaching to your students.

1. Getting Attention
 - a. Does this method of getting attention speak to the Desires, Needs, Fears, or Concerns of your students? If not, get attention in a way more appropriate to your students.
 - b. Does it require materials that you have readily available? If these are not available, create a method of getting attention using locally available materials.
 - c. Does it direct attention towards the lesson Goals for your students? If not, change the Attention Getting section so it will do this.
2. Observation and Interpretation
 - a. Will your students understand the Bible lesson, at their level of Bible Knowledge? If not, add additional explanations.
 - b. Does the author use comparisons to his own culture to explain the Bible Culture? If so, are these comparisons appropriate for your own culture? If the comparisons are not, write other more appropriate comparisons and use them.
 - c. Are there additional aspects of the Bible Culture that are close to aspects of your own culture? If so, make your own comparisons with your own culture.
3. Application
 - a. Is the application appropriate to the level of Bible Obedience of your student? If not, make a more appropriate application.

- b. Is the application specific enough for your student, so he/she will know what to do? If not, make a more specific application.
- c. Is there anything in the culture of your students that will make this application particularly difficult? If so, provide additional help in doing this application, or make an application that is within their abilities.

Your lesson application will be determined by the goals that you have set for your students. Make sure the goals are appropriate for them.

Lesson Goal Chart

Many Sunday School teachers' books or Bible Study guides give suggested goals. Many of them are very general goals, for the author of the book does not know your students as well as you do. After you have analyzed the lesson, you can make lesson goals that are appropriate for your students. Here are some examples of Lesson Goal Charts.

A Lesson on Paul's Prayer from the Book of Romans⁴

	Bible Audience	Lesson Audience	Your Audience
Person	Paul and the Church at Rome	North American long-time church attenders	Chinese atheists who are curious about Christianity
Present Action	Praying, but finding it unanswered	Learning to pray more deeply	Wondering if prayer works
Knowledge Goal		God may answer their prayers after delay, in an unexpected way.	Prayer is not magic. God is a person who may still decide to answer your prayer, based on what is good for you, from His perspective.
Feeling Goal		Feel confident	Continue curiosity about prayer
Action Goal		Continue praying even if God does not answer immediately.	Ask Christians about God's answer to their prayers.

A Lesson for Adults from the Book of Romans on Witnessing⁵

	Bible Audience	Lesson Audience	Your Audience
Person	Paul: Now an apostle, but a former persecutor of Christians	North American long-time church attenders.	Vietnamese Office Bible Study. Some are new believers, some seekers
Present Action	Boldly witnessing for Christ in places where people are hostile.	Most are lazy about witnessing.	Some are beginning to witness, but are afraid of losing their jobs.
Knowledge Goal		We must realize persecution is inevitable.	We must realize persecution is inevitable, but God will keep us eternally safe. Paul's soul arrived safely in heaven. 2 Timothy 4:18
Feeling Goal		Feel that because of God's goodness to us, we must share it with others	Feel confident in God's protection. Feel a passion to share Jesus, despite the temporary consequences.
Action Goal		Give a tract to a friend at work.	Share a personal testimony on how God answered your prayer to a close friend.

	Bible Audience	Lesson Audience	Your Audience
Person	Israelites in the time of Jehoshaphat and Ahab	American boys in the first 2-3 years of High School in a secular culture with Christian influence. Mostly children of church members.	Filipino High School boys. A mixed group with long-term attenders and new boys.
Present Action	Choosing whether or not they will marry or form alliances with idolaters.	Choosing who their friends will be.	Choosing what their response will be to idolatry. Choosing who their friends will be.
Knowledge Goal		Learn from scripture that close associations with unbelievers are not wise	Learn that God does not want to be worshipped through Idols. Learn to make close associations with believers.
Feeling Goal		Desire to tell people about the truths of God’s Word.	Feel a desire to please God above everyone else.
Action Goal		Remember to ask the Lord for help in avoiding the temptations of unsaved friends.	Be able to tell why he does not worship idols, while showing respect to others that do. Form a friendship group of believing boys.

Visuals

Visuals are helpful, as they attempt to connect your students more directly to the people of the Bible lands. We do have some historical information and some crude drawings of what people looked like in Jesus’ time. We can look at modern day shepherds in Palestine, and guess what shepherds might have looked like in Palestine 2000 years ago. However, visuals, like other parts of the Sunday School lesson, come from the culture and expectations of the artist.

In one Sunday School visual packet, Jesus was portrayed as a Caucasian with short, wavy hair, parted on the side, with a beard. The picture showed him without a turban or headgear, while most of the other figures of men do have headgear. Many artists draw Jesus to resemble someone of their own race.

In a Catholic culture where images of Christ are worshipped, use pictures of Jesus with discretion. Handle the pictures of Jesus by teaching that He is God, who is a Spirit, yet He also took on humanity. You could tell your students, “Nobody knows how Jesus looked, although He was Jewish in nature. Someday we will see how He looked, and here is how an artist painted Him”.⁷

In the same packet, there is a picture of a boy stealing candy from a store. He is reaching onto an open shelf. Do stores in your country have open shelves, where children can take candy themselves, or does almost every store have its candy behind bars, accessible only to the storekeeper? Such a visual may not connect your student to the concept of stealing.

Wisely select visuals that will help connect your student with the Bible Culture. You may want to make some of your own visuals, or create some out of locally available materials.⁸

Conclusion

Your students are of great value to God. John Angell James, a British Sunday Teacher wrote in 1816:

“Every child that passes the threshold of your school on a Sunday morning, carries to your care, and confides to your ability, a SOUL, compared with whose worth the sun is a bauble (a cheap piece of jewelry); and with whose existence time itself is but as the twinkling of an eye.”⁹

Your students are very valuable to God, yet they are all different. John James goes on to compare the different students in a class with different kinds of flowers:

“A Sunday School may be considered as a plantation of young minds, the plants of which grow in different ways, and blossom at various times; each of them requiring a method of culture adapted to its nature. Some need to be brought forward to the sun; others to be thrown back into the shade. Some need to have their luxuriant growth repressed; others to have it encouraged.”¹⁰

James wisely recommends that the teacher adapt his lesson to the different personalities of a student, as a wise gardener cares for different plants in different ways. Your students may all be in the category of tropical plants, or desert plants. Your lesson also should be adapted to the culture of your students, in the same way that lesson writers from foreign countries try to adapt the lesson to the culture of their students. It may be that God may gift you as a teacher to write your own individual series of Bible Lessons, designed especially for your own “garden” of students. May God give you wisdom, as you serve as His Bridge between your students and Him!

¹ Hesselgrave, David. *Contextualization that is Authentic and Relevant. International Journal Of Frontier Missions, Vol 12:3 Jul.-Sep. 1995*

² Rockwell, David; Barram, Jonita; Johnson, Jim. *Transforming Grace: a Study in Romans*. Schaumburg, Ill.: Regular Baptist Press. 2001.

³ Anonymous. *God’s Word for Primaries: We learn to Worship God. Winter Quarter 2001-2002* Schaumburg, Ill.: Regular Baptist Press. 2001.

⁴ Rockwell.

⁵ Rockwell.

⁶ Dyet, James, and Ray, Heidi. *Battle of the Ages*. Schaumburg, Ill.: Regular Baptist Press. 1994

⁷ Kennedy, Elaine. *Christian Education in the Church for Children*. Manila: Church Strengthening Ministry. 2000.

⁸ Kennedy’s book has a number of suggestions

⁹ James, John Angel. *The Sunday School Teacher’s Guide*.

http://www.gracegems.org/25/sunday_school_teacher.htm accessed April 7, 2006

¹⁰ James. http://www.gracegems.org/25/sunday_school_teacher3.htm accessed April 11, 2006

Charts:

Book Analysis Chart

	Bible Audience	Lesson Audience	Your Audience
Name			
Age Group			
Gender/ Family Status			
Location			
Level of Obedience to God			
Level of Bible Knowledge			
Economic Status			
Major Desires			
Major Needs			
Fears and Concerns			
God’s Goals for them			

Lesson Goal Chart

	Bible Audience	Lesson Audience	Your Audience
Person			
Present Action			
Knowledge Goal			
Feeling Goal			
Action Goal			