

EXEGETE

YOUR CULTURE

**10 Checkpoints
for Knowing and Reaching
Your Culture**

"...of Issachar, MEN WHO HAD UNDERSTANDING of their times..."

1 Chronicles 12:32.

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INTRODUCTION

This is an exciting resource. Not because of how amazing it is, but because of the amazing potential of pastors applying it in their context. The *amazing* happens is what you do with it. I hope as you work through this, you might also send us your story. How has exegeting your culture changed how you've done ministry? Send your story to equipthemission@gmail.com.

The concept of cultural exegesis is simple. You have a context, a culture in which you live, where you look to preach the gospel, love your neighbor, and worship your God. Cultural exegesis studies the culture, and learns what people in that culture love, fear, value, and so on. This resource is here to guide you to understand the culture so you can speak the Gospel into your context with the utmost clarity.

Exegeting the culture has never been more important. Christianity in the West has been marginalized by the prevailing winds of Secularism, driven by the engine of globalization that will continue to exert significant pressure on the ministry of the Church in various contexts. While many are (prematurely) predicting the end of Christianity in the West, it is a far cry from reality.

If the Church is 'in Christ,' she is involved in mission and her whole existence will have a missionary character. This is our journey, to engage culture through the Gospel as a missionary people. My hope is that this material would serve you well as you exegete your culture in order to engage it with the Gospel.

PART ONE: EXEGETING YOURSELF

Self-understanding and self-denial precedes authentic ministry effectiveness. Pastoral ministry in ANY setting is not for the fainthearted and requires constant attention, humility and a desire to grow and develop along with the church or organization we're serving as a leader. There is an increasing need for pastors and Christian leaders to clarify their call, purpose, and gifting in order to be fruitful in that ministry. Lamentations 3:40 encourages us: "Let us examine our ways and test them and let us return to the Lord". Before you exegete your culture, you have to exegete yourself.

LEADING WITH AUTHENTICITY

An important challenge in Christian leadership in today's world is that far too many pastors lead the church in their heads. Leading with our head only leads to unbalanced, unhealthy and ineffective ministries that neither glorify God, nor help us find success in mission. There's nothing more refreshing than honesty, openness, authenticity and humility from leaders about the challenges they face, and about their own limitations.

Perhaps, the vision of ministry a leader has does not match the culture or DNA of a particular church or ministry, leading to frustration and disappointment. It's easier, oftentimes, to love other communities from a distance rather than your own, or have a sense of longing for change that's outside of our grasp as leaders. Truth is, you won't engage your community effectively if you love a different community, or a church model. Many church leaders pastor the church in their heads and not in their context. This leads to a monument and not a movement.

We need to get our minds out of the clouds of idealistic ministry concepts and into authentic, missional, Gospel-Centered and Spirit-led ministry. Pastors, repent when your self-exegesis reveals this kind of idolatry. There is no quick fix or magic formula. Seek God on this.

If the problem is leading from the head, the solution must be leading the church in your heart and with your hands and feet. Before anything else you need to be called to your community with a clear sense of biblical

purpose, much like the early Apostles were, as recorded in the book of Acts. A clear calling leads to a passion for the people of your community, and an authentic engagement in ministry that often leads to faith in those who hear the Gospel. The heart and head of Christian leaders needs to be aligned in order for our self-understanding and giftedness to have a bearing on our community.

Take a moment to pause, here are a few reflective questions to consider before progressing:

- i. Can you identify particular passages in the Bible that God has used to speak to you about his design for your life and the life of your church?
- ii. Can you give specific examples of answered prayer in relationship to God's direction for your life and the ministry of your church?
- iii. In what ways do other believers affirm God's call and direction in your life and the life of your church?

Ministry is not necessarily a professional enterprise; we need God-called leaders, not mere professionals doing a 'job'. When ministry becomes a profession and not a vocation, we're in serious danger of not only wasting our lives, but wasting God-given opportunities to impact the lives of many others. If we're not convinced in our hearts and minds that ministry within our communities, for the greater good, is our mandate, then perhaps it's time to consider another vocation. You cannot love God and your church without loving your neighbor and your community.

One of our greatest needs is to fall deeply in love with the people and place where God has placed you.

There is a profound sense in which one is disqualified from ministry effectiveness when we take our eyes off the goalposts that God has set in place. Our ministry becomes anemic when love for people and a place are replaced with personal preferences, love of self, and lack of readiness for the challenges of leadership.

Consider how cross-cultural (international) missionaries fall in love with the people and culture they go to. It's often difficult for them to come home. Jesus modeled a love for people and a place without compromising

God's mission. The Gospels are crammed full of examples of how Jesus loved people. In His incarnation he came among us and moved into our neighborhoods (Eugene Peterson's MSG translation of John 1:14). Jesus became one of us. He welcomed children, accepted the weak, healed the hurting, and He loved so deeply he gave his life for us.

One thing that most missionaries and Jesus had in common is a clear sense of God's call. Most missionaries I know have a profound sense of calling that is confirmed in the pages of the Bible and can be affirmed by others around them. Jesus' life and ministry were fueled by God's vision and mission. Jesus' calling was fulfilled on the cross of Calvary when he cried out "*tetelesti*"- it is finished! Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:20, "We are ambassadors for Christ, certain that God is appealing through us." You want to talk about a mission? Paul says he is *certain* God is working through us. This is both wonderful and challenging. Leaders need to pray for the people and place God sends them to as ambassadors, in order that God alone would complete the work started (Phil. 1:6).

THE DEATH OF CHURCH (AND YOUR LEADERSHIP) AS YOU KNOW IT

A big problem that persists in the church is love for our preferences. We have things we love and hold on to and end up building a church culture that doesn't reflect the culture around us in the ways it should. Leaders can no longer simply optimize and repeat inherited preferences and still deliver paradigm-shifting results. Alan Hirsch reminds us that:

Part of the problem we face in the twenty-first century church is that most churches operate out of a largely obsolete understanding of the church that was developed in a completely different age and for a completely different set of cultural and social conditions- largely that of European Christendom. This is like trying to negotiate New York with a map of Paris or Rome. We can all spot the insanity of this with regard to geographical maps, but we persist in doing this with our ecclesial ones. The very marginalization of the contemporary European church itself is a tragic witness to this obsolescence. This alone should shock us into reality and yet, in the name of some absurd commitment to long-hallowed church habits, we persist in using outworn ecclesial maps to negotiate new cultural territories¹.

Part of the solution to the problem is recovering the movemental and missional nature of Christianity that has become buried under the modern pastorate with its tendency toward co-dependency. Woodward and White's definition of a movement is an important starting point: "Movement occurs when the making of mission-shaped

disciples—who live in the world for the sake of the world, in the way of Christ—goes viral. Movement is about developing structures and systems that catapult people into mission, where reproducing discipleship groups, missional communities, churches and networks of churches is a natural part of its DNA”². Woodward, in his recently published book, *‘The Church as Movement’*, describes the contemporary church as industrial complex, where, in our American imagination success means growing bigger, collecting more resources, consolidating power, creating strong hierarchical structures and growing rapidly. We have perhaps unintentionally turned spirituality into a product, church growth into a race, leadership into a business and members into consumers³.

Pastor, as you do self-exegesis, do you discover that defines how you pastor? If God has called you to reach a people in a place, you have to give up your preferences in order to reach them. Additionally, is your church willing to leave its Christian subculture to relate to and reach the lost? The truth is that Churches cannot simply be concerned with effectively connecting within their own local church. They must go beyond their walls and become streams of living water within their community and into their neighborhoods. Preferences may preserve you for a while, but will limit your influence with the culture.

Relevance is a tool; gospel proclamation is the goal. When we pursue relevance as the goal, it leads to an unhelpful pendulum swing—making relevance the focus. As we have observed in America, generations shift wildly back-and-forth between "pop psychology" preaching that is devoid of the Gospel and "pure preaching" that rejects cultural relevance entirely. Where do we begin? How do we even start the process of recalibrating our ministry, leaders and churches to the mission of God?

EXAMINING YOUR OWN LEADERSHIP READINESS

Leaders, good exegesis of self should result in fewer excuses for our lack of community impact and Gospel transformation. It’s important if we assess ourselves and find ourselves lacking to admit that maybe we just weren’t ready. Like the early disciples, gathered in the upper room, full of fear and uncertainty, leaders today need to readily admit when you realize you are unprepared to do what you are attempting to do. We’re not the ones with all the answers; and we do not possess wisdom to chart the way forward for growth and development in and of ourselves. The story of the growth of the church in the book of Acts is equally a story of

the growth and development of leaders through the empowerment, guidance and direction of the Holy Spirit. And from my reading of the New Testament, I understand that when we lead in obedience to the command and call of God, He empowers and extends the work of our hands. Weak, yet obedient leaders are the best candidates for successful ministry in the kingdom of God.

Start here with an honest assessment of your readiness to lead your church, ministry or organization. How prepared are you for missional engagement with the people and place God has called you to? What aspects of your own leadership need to be surrendered to God in order that he may use you? As you pray for your church to reach the lost, prepare yourself to lead them well in that direction. Not only should you pray but read, get a mentor or some coaching. There are people and resources to help you.

A number of years ago I spoke on Missional Leadership at to Trinity Evangelical Divinity School⁴ about missional leadership readiness that I believe will assist you personally in your self-assessment. These somewhat represent praxeological shifts in leading for Gospel transformation and not simply personal gratification.

1) Recalibrate your Leadership Axis

Millions of Americans live in the shadow of churches that have become consumer Christian centers, but pastors are ruined and the mission of God is cheated when consumers enjoy goods and services from their local church. In their book, *'God is Back'*⁵, John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge described the state of the American church as the "Disneyfication of God" or "Christianity Lite – a bland and sanitized faith that is about as dramatic as the average shopping mall." Believers who think like customers contribute to the underachieving church in America. The damages move far beyond ineptness at engaging the mission of God. The incessant demands of a consumer congregation cause irreparable damage to those who lead such congregations. Some of the consumer demands are based on pastoral perception too. Pastors often experience chronic anxiety because they fear their flock and simultaneously want to please each member. Does this sound like your church?

Robin Swift is the Director of Health Programs for the Clergy Health Initiative at Duke Divinity School. She has been a part of extensive research by Duke Divinity School to understand the challenge of being a pastor. In a recent NPR interview, Swift talked about realities faced by pastors: “Pastors, because of their calling, put everybody else first and have a difficult time naming their needs for self-care, and they also, like the Marines or emergency room staff, expect a level of high functioning from each other”⁶. Another prominent example of this unhealthy situation. Wayne Cordeiro, founding pastor of New Hope Christian Fellowship in Honolulu, Hawaii has experienced incredible popularity among Christian leaders worldwide. His success is well chronicled through thousands of attendees at New Hope and planting over 100 churches in the Pacific Rim. Yet he was transparent about his near personal collapse in spite of his success in his book, *Leading on Empty*: “I was out on a run on that balmy California evening. One minute I was jogging along the sidewalk, and the next minute I was sitting on the curb sobbing uncontrollably. I couldn’t stop, and I did not have a clue what was happening to me . . . For over thirty years I had invested my life in Christian ministry . . . But now I wasn’t sure I could keep going”⁷. Such situations make one wonder if the damage (self-inflicted and from consumer Christians) is inevitable in a modern care-giving profession like the pastorate? Are pastors destined to be victims of their own calling? What do they contribute to the situation?⁸ Understanding how we lead and approach leadership is an important endeavor as many leaders vacillate between a success-driven approach to ministry and a missional approach- depending on what bears fruit. This approach is problematic, and will bear diminishing returns in the future. There’s a shift away from the heroic pastor figure, to a vocational gifting basis with missional congruence that values the discipleship core and priesthood of all believers as primary ministry drivers.

Below are a number of leadership paradigm shifts that you need to be aware of in your self-assessment:

- a. From superman to everyone- an inclusive and gift-based ministry
- b. From church to kingdom- a healthy focus on the broader sphere of God’s reign
- c. From ‘me’ to ‘we’- a participatory involvement in ministry through teams
- d. From personal power to people empowerment
- e. From three tiers to one mission- mobilizing the multitudes to living out their faith
- f. From "called to the ministry" to "called to ministry"

- g. From "called to missions" to "sent on mission"
- h. From exceptional to ordinary and from excellent to faithful.
- i. From "priests" to a "priesthood of believers"

Does the axis of your leadership need to shift in order for ministry to be more effective? What aspects of your specific approach need recalibration?

2) Renewed priority and centrality of God's mission

Far too many churches are caught in the business cycle, where programs matter more than people, numbers are the preeminent metric and complacency has led to spiritual drift in the church. In this environment, it's becoming increasingly clear that churches must renew their priority for the gospel. Most segments of the church actually realize something is wrong, even if they cannot quite put their finger on it. We live in a time of gospel malaise. Our gospel proclamation is anemic, and it is largely because our gospel is not big as life itself. Program maintenance on church campuses has veiled our sight to the gospel's power in our communities. When the gospel is an optional feature—an introductory transaction, or the add-on to conclude the sermon—lives will not be transformed.

The gospel should be presented as bigger than personal salvation, more robust than going to heaven when one dies, and more pressing than just at the time of conversion. It is those things, of course, but a missional renaissance requires seeing the gospel not as merely the entry fee to Christianity but as the currency of the Christian life. "The gospel is not the ABC's of the Christian life," as Tim Keller says, "but the A to Z"⁹.

This A-Z gospel means living and speaking as if Christ's kingdom is true and real. And living and speaking this way necessarily requires we stop living like the world while clutching our ticket to the heaven. A gospel this big provokes a radical rethinking of the Christian life and mission. The good news of God's reign means much more than "sin management." The gospel does not merely pacify sin, but redeems and transforms lives into bearers of the Light. We become carriers of redemption across the entire landscape of human lives. When we

understand the scope of the gospel, we will once again believe that its transformation works exponentially! We need to rediscover the gospel *of* Jesus, and not merely the gospel *about* Jesus. This is a message that is lived, not simply believed (as if the two could actually be divided). It is lived and incarnated *because* it is believed.

When we look at the biblical gospel in its fullness and repent of our reduction of it, we are primed to undergo the recovery of the mission God ordained for His church. And this recovery begs the contemporary evangelical church for one other radical shift¹⁰.

What important shifts are needed in your ministry to center your ministry?

- a. From "full service" to "simple mission"
- b. From "pay, pray, and get out of the way" to "join God on His mission"
- c. From decision-ism to disciple making
- d. From "mission statement" to "Jesus' mission"
- e. From a behavior-change to a transformational focus

3) Realignment toward missional priorities in ministry

The last decade witnessed great progress for the evangelical church as to the rediscovery and re-awakening of her true calling and purpose. The church appears to be picking up the mantel as a *sent* people rather than religious colonialists creating a new nation. By renewing our sense as a *sent* people, we have made great headway in a recovery of Paul's instruction to believers to live as ambassadors for the kingdom of God (2 Cor. 5:20). But for as much ground that has been taken in this regard, there is much more territory that needs to be pioneered in order to see significant impact in the world.

Many are walking away from the notion that they are in the business of producing church services. The emphasis is returning to making disciples that take a missionary stance in the marketplace, in their

neighborhoods, and throughout their daily lives. In many instances, this return will involve pastors and other leaders repenting of measuring spiritual success by worldly standards. Yes, *repentance*. For some it may only involve tweaking of focuses or shifting in emphases. But in all cases it involves a renewed understanding that the biblical mission of the church exists in the orbit of “go and tell,” and less and less lands on “come and see.” The missional thrust of Jesus and His first followers was not to “set up shop,” but rather to take the message of the Kingdom to the lost sheep outside the sheep pen. If a missional renaissance is to occur, rediscovering the mission of Jesus will involve a fresh look at his gospel.¹¹

Is the essence of your ministry structured around these missional pillars?

- a. God is a missionary God and at work in the world we inhabit
- b. The church is sent into the world to make disciples and not only count converts
- c. I personally join Jesus on mission, modeling it to those I influence
- d. I lead others to join Him on mission
- e. I equip others for gospel multiplication

In the following section we will unpack what it means practically to live out our God-given mandate to make disciples and complete the mission of Christ in our local contexts through simple checkpoints that will allow us to search our hearts and apply best practice for the common good. Does your ministry, mind and heart embrace these missional pillars? What are some of the hindrances and obstacles to such an embrace?

PART TWO: EXEGETING YOUR CULTURE

In contrast to many churches and ministries today, the story of the early church is a story of crossing boundaries and transforming cultures. The book of Acts narrates the movement of the gospel of Jesus Christ from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth, according to Jesus' promise in Acts 1:8. The story of the church has always been deeply intertwined with culture, peoples and places. The first signs of a boundary-defying gospel are present on the Day of Pentecost (see Acts 2). The outpouring of the Holy Spirit is accompanied by the miracle of people from all nations hearing the good news in their various languages. This illustrates that the Gospel is not confined to the Hebrew language or culture. The story of Philip's encounter with an Ethiopian official on a desert road enables the gospel to cross another boundary (see Acts 8:26-39). This man is a dark-skinned African, probably a Gentile. At the same time, he is a sincere seeker after the God of Israel, returning from worshipping at the temple in Jerusalem. Philip meets him, by the Holy Spirit's guidance, and explains the Scriptures that he is already reading. The result is that for the first time in Acts, a Gentile comes to faith in Jesus the Messiah. Racial, cultural, and geographical barriers come down¹². The book of Acts is full of examples of Gospel progress in various cultures and involving myriad peoples and places. If one compares what Paul said to a group of Jews at a synagogue in Antioch (Acts 13:13-43) to his sermon to educated Gentiles in Athens (Acts 17:16-33), we observe Spirit-led sensitivity to their context. Paul's message in Athens commences with a common point of contact well-known to his audience, Paul refers to an altar to an unknown god, which becomes a springboard to engage around the supremacy of the Lord of heaven and earth to their mute idols. Paul converses in this context in a language these biblically illiterate people can understand, and rather than a series of scriptural quotations, he cites their own Greek poets!

Taking full use of this opportunity, Paul does not compromise his message and he announces the good news that God raised Jesus from the dead, despite many in the audience thinking Paul was foolish. The Acts 17 narrative of Paul's Gospel encounter in Athens offers a good model for us today. Our efforts in mission must always be sensitive to the life situations of the different groups of people we encounter. This takes the synthesis of our head, heart, hands and feet, as discussed earlier. At the same time, through cultural and textual exegesis, we must proclaim and demonstrate the good news without compromising the message. The gospel challenges aspects of every worldview and culture—including our own. Before we progress to explain the concept of cultural exegesis, Lesslie Newbigin's warning needs to be heeded:

Everyone with the experience of cross-cultural mission knows that there are always two opposite dangers, the Scylla and Charybdis, between which one must steer. On the one side there is the danger that one finds no point of contact for the message as the missionary preaches it, to the people of the local culture the message appears irrelevant and meaningless. On the other side is the danger that the point of contact determines entirely the way that the message is received, and the result is syncretism. Every missionary path has to find the way between these two dangers: irrelevance and syncretism. And if one is more afraid of one danger than the other, one will certainly fall into the opposite¹³.

Exegesis and eisegesis are two related terms that carry significant weight when it comes to the interpretation of Scripture. When applied to cultural contexts, I propose they have similar value; it's easy to read into culture (eisegesis) what's not there or live within culture without any understanding or real impact, just like one is able to read things INTO scripture and abuse certain texts by bad interpretation techniques.

Dean Gilliland reminds us of the importance of good contextualization and cultural exegesis practice:

Contextualization [is] a delicate enterprise if ever there was one . . . the evangelist and mission strategist stand on a razor's edge, aware that to fall off on either side has terrible consequences . . . Fall to the right and you end in obscurantism, so attached to your conventional ways of practicing and teaching the faith that you veil its truth and power from those who are trying to see it through very different eyes. Slip to the left and you tumble into syncretism, so vulnerable to the impact of paganism in its multiplicity of forms that you compromise the uniqueness of Christ and concoct 'another gospel which is not a gospel.'¹⁴

Many churches today are isolated from culture and insulated against any friction with those perceived to be foreigners or outsiders, which leads both a false understanding of the Gospel, and a misleading relationship with the world. As has been illustrated so far; Some people need to be pushed to engage the culture more faithfully, while others need to be pushed to preach Christ more faithfully.

In this section, we will be dealing with a number of important concerns around exegeting one's culture to enable you to be like the men of Issachar and Berea, who were discerning regarding the times they lived in. In Acts 17:10-12, Luke contrasts the people of Berea with those at Thessalonica, who had stirred up a riot against Paul, Silas, and their local friends because they preached Christ as the Messiah. In Berea, however, the synagogue welcomed them and examined the Scriptures daily to verify the missionaries' teaching. The Bible calls the Bereans more noble than the Thessalonians. You don't hear a lot about the tribe of Issachar.

They are not the tribe of Judah or Levi. They seem relatively unimportant, but they're described as ones "who understood the times and knew what Israel should do." If you are passionate about the people and community where God has sent you, and if you love them as He does, you will be motivated to know and understand the times (and their culture).

How are we to go about this task of exegeting our culture? What tools can be used on this journey? Tom Steffen and David Hesselgrave provide some questions to consider as we engage culture:

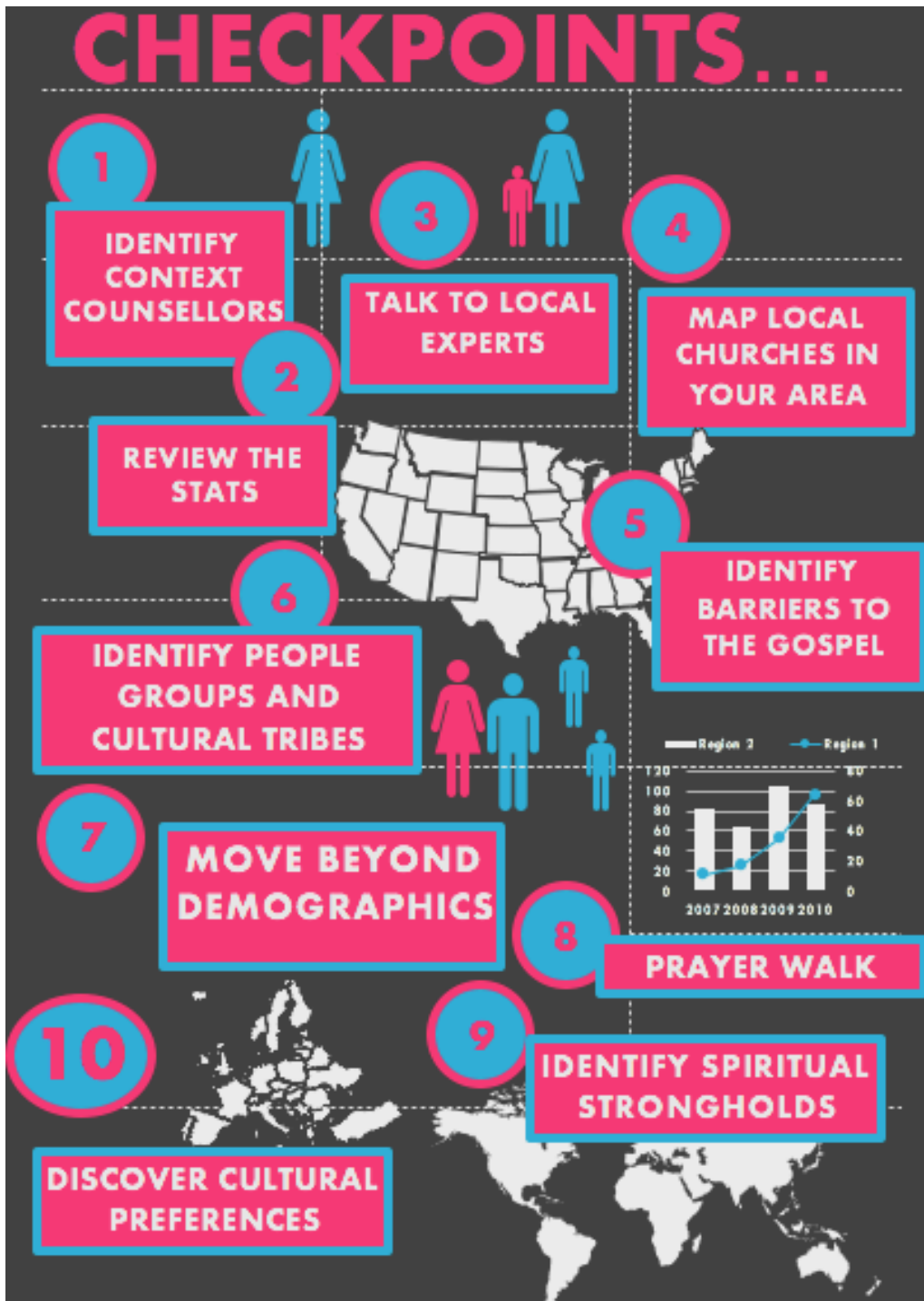
- What is the worldview of the target audience?
- What is the culture's decision-making pattern?
- What does it cost a person in this culture to become a Christian?
- What redemptive analogy is best for this culture?
- How does this culture view Christianity?
- What does this culture understand about the basic components of the gospel story?
- Is this culture based on shame or guilt?
- How will this culture understand Christian rituals?
- What is the best delivery system for exposing the people of this culture to the gospel?¹⁵

In the pages to follow, we will walk you through 10 important checkpoints toward cultural exegesis. They will provide a helpful framework through which you can effectively lead your church to love their neighbors and by which you will gain clarity for preaching and ministering to your community.

MAPPING YOUR CONTEXT FOR EFFECTIVE OUTREACH

Now let's get practical. In the pages to follow we will highlight 10 checkpoints toward understanding your culture. Remember, this is just a tool. It won't solve all your problems. But it will bring clarity and help you make decisions on how your church worships, ministers and talks to their neighbors. It will bring clarity to how you preach knowing that visitors have come from the community. Will you understand them well enough to speak to their hearts? That's what good cultural exegesis does.

And that's why it was important to first exegete yourself, to ensure that your heart and mind are in the right space for this tool to be truly effective. There are many books written on this topic (we will refer you to some of these to gain a better understanding of certain aspects), yet, some of these books are devoid of practical handles that can be used to gain traction for Gospel ministry. This section is about practical steps one can deploy to effective use in the mission on ground zero. Use this tool wisely and with discernment. Let's begin...



Be sure to place this free infographic somewhere helpful as a reminder to you of the checkpoints.

CHECKPOINT 1: GET COUNSELORS FROM THE CONTEXT

Ministry done by listening to counselors from within our churches and not from the community around our churches will lead to poor understanding of those who need the Gospel. One needs to become friends with people who are in the people group or sub-culture or tribe you want to reach. This isn't friendship seen as a project for Jesus, but meaningful and authentic relationships. Invite people into your home for dinner or dessert. Hang out where they hang out: cafes, parks, Friday night football game, diners, etc. To reach the community outside you need to understand their culture, get into their worldview and seek to understand before being understood. So get counselors from the context.

CHECKLIST:

- *In what ways are you seeking to be a blessing and hear the views, struggles and opinions of counsellors in your context?*
- *In what ways can your counselor contribute to a broader understanding of your community?*
- *In what ways can you relationally bridge the gap to the Gospel?*
- *Have you identified potential sports or hobbies that you can use to meaningfully connect to people in your neighborhood?*
- *Does your social media profile reflect your faith commitments without shoving it in people's faces?*
- *How can you best influence those in your social network through your media posts?*

CHECKPOINT 2: REVIEW THE STATS

Facts are our friends, and so are statistics! I love statistics! I know what you're thinking... I'm a nerd. Possibly, but, the truth is there are more nerds than you realize when it comes to statistics. Stats are important for a number of reasons, and, although they can easily be misused or misconstrued, overall they can be helpful to pastors and others in ministry. Those of you who know me know my tentative relationship with all things sports. But, with our move to Wheaton I wanted to approach our new home missionally, so I took in a Chicago Cubs game and now I'm a fan.

It isn't that I know nothing of sports; I just haven't kept up much. Going to the see the Cubs play, I'm learning the players, balls, strikes, touchdowns, and the like. Even though I haven't been *that guy* as a sports fan, Donna and I went to see *Moneyball* while it was in theaters. Now, almost everyone thought it was a movie about baseball—or about Brad Pitt—but it wasn't. At least not at the core. *Moneyball* was all about statistics—analyzing players' performance, then selecting and playing those players based upon advanced stats. Home runs, hits, runs scored, and RBIs were recreated in aggregate, often using cast-off players, rather than one superstar player. It was a revolutionary approach to the game, and it was based on a statistical foundation.

Statistics, of course, aren't limited to sports. What about those of you who are investors? Do you research the performance of a company that you are thinking about investing your money in? Sure you do. What about those who have an important and possibly dangerous surgery coming up, do you want to know the odds of a successful surgery and recovery? Of course. Very few people want to go into it with no idea of the possible outcomes. Numbers and statistics are part of our daily lives. Pastors and church leaders should embrace them as part of ministry¹⁶. Statistics shouldn't be used to change our definitive beliefs nor determine how we do ministry. But they can be used in the following ways: to help define reality; to teach people and to help leaders make strategic decisions.

How does an inexperienced pastor conduct helpful research to achieve this end? Here's a helpful process to follow to conduct basic research that will shape the decisions you make for strategic ministry in your community.

1. Consult with the census bureau (www.census.gov) to evaluate population trends. Consider looking in your public library for community information and be sure to ask for your denomination's resources if there is something that may be of assistance. Use the power of the internet and go online to research local economics as well as eccesiographics (local church demographics).

2. Identify population segments and population shifts that are evident.

- i. Age breakdown
- ii. Ethnic groups
- iii. Group characteristics
- iv. Changes and trends

3. Order demographic information that will be useful for your community.

- a. Leavell Center (www.leavellcenter.com)
- b. Denominational agencies

CHECKLIST:

- What is the makeup of your immediate community?
- How does the community differ from those attending on Sundays?
- How many churches are in the area and what is their affiliation?
- Are there any significant changes in population statistics that have a bearing on your ministry?
- Have you spent time walking the streets of your community and allowing the statistics to speak to you through the faces on the pavements and in the stores and schools?
- Does your denomination or affiliated network provide any tools for community assessment?

CHECKPOINT 3: TALK TO LOCAL EXPERTS

Every community is comprised of ‘elders’ that bear some of the historicity of a place in their memory for the community you are exegeting. Find those considered experts and seek to learn all you can about life in your context. Learn both about the community life now and the history of the community, as both are important indicators for the potential ministry of the church. When you engage with people in the community, consider asking them:

- What are three of the best kept secrets about this community?
- Who are three people who love this community and understand the people who live there?
- What changes do you see on the horizon for this community?
- What are some of the most significant events that have taken place in this community’s history?
- Can you tell me any community needs that are going unmet in this area?
- Who lives here? Who has moved here? Why have they moved here?
- What have been leading industries in the past?

In these meetings and interactions within your community, look for points of connection God can use to impact the culture, and for ways the church can be of service in the community.

CHECKPOINT 4: KNOW THE AREA CHURCHES

As demonstrated in Acts 17, Paul sought to understand the spiritual life of the city of Athens and spent time in the city observing. Developing a knowledge of churches in your area will be a very helpful exercise as your church grows and develops a heart for the community. The existence of many churches, though, is not always indicative of health and of true faith. Determine the spiritual temperature of people in your community and their response to the teaching of Christ. The following points may be helpful for you to consider:

CHECKLIST:

Have you approached any of the following?

- The story-keepers of the culture
- The Mayor or city leaders
- School board members
- Health professionals
- Community service leaders
- The planning commission
- City Council meetings
- The Chamber of Commerce
- Religious leaders in the community.

- Map out the churches, add cults and sects to fill in the broader picture.
- Find out who is and isn't growing, and try to understand why using your local knowledge too.
- Find out if new churches have been planted and what the results were.
- Contact churches who are reaching people your church is trying to reach and develop friendships.
 - What are they doing that's working?
 - What have they done that hasn't worked?

CHECKLIST:

- *What is the ecclesial history of the area?*
- *What is the reputation of local churches within the community?*
- *Have there been any church splits that you need to consider?*
- Meet with some willing pastors and consider networking for support and prayer in a Kingdom spirit.
- What is the strategy of churches in your community and why have some grown, and others declined or stagnated?

CHECKPOINT 5: IDENTIFY NATURAL AND OTHER BARRIERS

Every community has distractions from the Gospel and from church attendance and ministry participation. Take a special note of anything that limits the interaction of people in your area, as these may present themselves as challenges to overcome in your own ministry and you need to be well-prepared to meet the, head-on.

Consider:

- Naturally surroundings and barriers that divide
 - Interstate highways
 - Lakes and Rivers
 - Determine the main arteries that supply the area
 - Outdoor recreational favorites
- Other barriers that may not purely be physical include:
 - Good side of town vs bad side- Are there places people tell you not to go? That may affect where people go or don't go as a barrier to church, but it also may identify places where ministry is needed.
 - Drive barriers- Do people shop and play nearby? Or do they go to another town or suburb or

CHECKLIST:

- What natural features within your community do people enjoy?
- Why would anyone consider moving within your town or community?
- Is the location of your town or city strategic?
- How long do people take to commute and what is their primary means of transportation?

neighborhood? This may influence where they may or may not be willing to drive to a local church.

CHECKPOINT 6: IDENTIFY PEOPLE GROUPS AND CULTURAL TRIBES

One of the primary advantages of understanding culture and observing your community is that you begin to identify people within the community and subcultures that influence the community in ways that are not always evident. For missional engagement, it is of great importance to identify what missiologists call 'tribes'. Caleb Crider in, *'Tradecraft' observes*:

"Perhaps the single most significant observation in missions today is this- people everywhere are tribal. For most of us, the word 'tribe' brings to mind a primitive group of hunters and gatherers living in thatched-roof huts. In this sense, a tribe is a clan, a sort of extended family a person is born into...tribes are the social circles we move in...a tribe has rules, structure, leadership, and goals. Modern tribes may range in connectedness from tightly- to loosely-knit, and people respond differently to each..."¹⁷

CHECKLIST:

- Find out who lives in your community- not just people like you or your focus group.
- What cultural tribe do you belong to and what values underpin these subcultures?
- Visit www.peoplegroups.info for information related to people groups..

CHECKPOINT 7: MOVE BEYOND DEMOGRAPHICS

Studying the demographics and statistics is invaluable, but that is just knowledge and information without a heartfelt connection to the context and people. Just like a trip to the Holy Land of Israel enlivens your understanding and knowledge of the Bible, so too would personal engagement in the community elevate the deep seated needs, wants and desires of people on grass roots level. Consider doing a *windshield survey* by driving around and experience the neighborhoods around your town or city. What do you see? Feel? Smell? Eat local, shop local, go into the bank and get to know the tellers, pay for your gas inside and not at the pump. Make every effort and utilize every opportunity for connection to culture and people to grow relationships and your understanding of the community at large.

CHECKPOINT 8: PRAYER WALK

This checkpoint is of considerable importance. We see Jesus weeping over the city of Jerusalem in Luke 19:41: "As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it." Our observations met with out desire

for the lost leads us to pray more directly for those around us, for the good of the city, for the churches around us. Paul, similarly, prayed for Christians all over the world in towns and cities as it was the Apostle's priority to devote themselves to prayer according to Acts 6:4.

Walk the streets and pray as you go:

- Ask God to help you reach the people in the homes you pass.
- Ask God to prepare people's hearts to receive his Word and draw them daily to Jesus Christ.
- Ask God to reveal a person of peace as you move around the area.
- Ask God to help you understand the practical needs you see.

CHECKPOINT 9: IDENTIFY SPIRITUAL STRONGHOLDS

Part of the process of the last two checkpoints leads to identifying spiritual strongholds and the idols of the city. As you prayer walk God will begin to reveal other things about which to pray...things to stand against and things to affirm. Each city has a foothold that the enemy uses to distract the people of God from the mission of God, and get them worshipping the creation rather than their creator. What are these idols in your community? Why are these important to people in your community? How deeply entrenched are these idols? Pray that God might reveal what keeps local people from trusting in Jesus Christ, and then ask the Holy Spirit to break through those barriers.

CHECKPOINT 10: DISCOVER CULTURAL PREFERENCES

Cultural preferences can be very important for exegeting a culture. What they like might be good, bad or, as is often the case, somewhere in the middle. What cultural preferences do you notice? Some important questions...

- What are the top three local radio stations?
- What styles are used by different indigenous churches?
- How do people dress? What do they wear at growing churches in the area?

CHECKLIST:

- Are you prayerful about the needs in your community or do you retreat at the thought?
- When last did your church spend time praying in the community and for members of the community not connected to the church?
- Have you prayed for the future generations in your community?
- Do you have a formal ministry for prayer needs?

- Discover the leadership systems. Do people like strong central leadership? Participatory leadership? How are growing churches governed. Scripture gives normative forms, but how those are applied in individual contexts is often a cultural issue.
- How do people learn? Mentoring relationships? Classroom settings? Small groups? Through storytelling or a lecture format?

Understanding these issues will enable you to develop a culturally appropriate strategy as you are being led by the Holy Spirit to engage missionally in your community. Use the infographic as a reminder of the checkpoints, even after your exegesis is done. Please share this with your church leaders, peers and congregation in the hope they too would exegete their culture better for the sake of the mission.

CHECKLIST:

- Have you observed any local styles that are unique?
- What 'third places' are present in your community to observe and learn?
- What do people prefer doing on weekends?
- What pubs and restaurants are popular in your community and why?
- Where do people prefer to live in your community?

CONCLUSION

Since the Fall, sin separates people from God. Sin separates and divides, but the gospel restores and unifies. There is an evident spiritual separation between God and mankind that leaves people without hope and faithless. The gospel of Jesus Christ is the redemptive factor that needs to be proclaimed, demonstrated and lived out among the people in our community.

This material is a basic tool to use to grasp how to identify the differences and divides and become intentional about being missional in our communities as we serve the mission of God. Mission cannot be done by remote control, it requires personal and costly sacrifice. How can you deny yourself to be a better missionary to your context? What are you doing to be a catalyst for change and missional renewal in your community? You cannot remain passive, and have to act in faithfulness to the text of Scripture and to the God of mission. Take this opportunity to commit to an exegesis of yourself as well as an exegesis of your culture so that you are useful in His hands. *Soli Deo Gloria!*

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Endnotes

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- ² Forward' in "the Church as Movement". JR Woodward & Dan White Jr. Downers Grove: IVP Books.
- ³ (Pg. 25) "The Church as Movement". JR Woodward & Dan White Jr. Downers Grove: IVP Books.
- ⁴ Taken from: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2009/october/missional-leadership.html>
- ⁵ Micklethwait J. & Wooldridge A. 2010. God Is Back: How the Global Revival of Faith Is Changing the World. London: Penguin Books.
- ⁶ Article can be located here: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=128957149>
- ⁷ Cordeiro, W. 2010. Leading on Empty. Bloomington: Bethany House Publishers.
- ⁸ Content summarized from: <http://qideas.org/articles/how-christian-consumers-ruin-pastors-and-cheat-the-mission-of-god/>
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- ¹⁰ Taken from: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2016/june/issues-in-future-of-evangelicalism.html>
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- ¹⁴ Gilliland, D. (ed.)1989. The Word Among Us. Dallas: Word Publishing.
- ¹⁵ Steffen, T.A. & Hesselgrave D.J 1997. Reconnecting God's Story to Ministry: Cross Cultural Storytelling at Home and Abroad. Center for Organization & Ministry.
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- ¹⁷ Crider, C et al 2013. Tradecraft: For the Church on Mission. Portland: Urban Loft Publishers.