

A Biblical Theology of Missions and Contextualization¹

Terry L. Wilder
Professor of New Testament
Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary
Fort Worth, TX
twilder@swbts.edu

Introduction

When I first saw the title of the conference at which this address for pastors and students was delivered—*Sola Scriptura* or *Sola Cultura?*—it seemed presented simply as an either/or type of question. My next thought, I confess, was “Is that a trick question or something?” The answer to that question seemed so blatantly obvious, especially for Baptists who claim to be a people of the book, the authoritative word of God. Unfortunately, the answer is not as obvious to many as it is to us.

I am not a missiologist and have no particular expertise in the discipline into which I now trespass. I do have an interest in the field, but I am no specialist.² So, anything I might have to say on this subject will be based upon Scripture, the word of God, and particularly the New Testament, which, frankly, is how I think it should be, even for a specialist, because our authority is the word of God. Scripture should dictate and govern our faith and practice.

I have the challenging task and enjoyable assignment of looking at the biblical text to see what we might learn about evangelism, missions, and contextualization, particularly the latter issue as it relates to the former ones. Though others in this journal issue will describe “contextualization” for you better than me, I would like to offer some brief definitions: “Simply put, contextualization is taking into consideration the cultural context in which we are seeking to communicate the gospel.”³ Tim Keller puts it this way:

¹Adapted from an address delivered at the *Sola Scriptura* or *Sola Cultura?* Conference held at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, April 14–15, 2011.

²This is very similar to what John Stott expressed when he, a pastor-scholar trained in New Testament, wrote the first edition of his book on Christian ethics. See John Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), Preface to the First Edition (1984), 9.

³This definition is one put forward by Juan Sanchez, “To Contextualize or Not to Contextualize: That is NOT the Question,” *The Gospel Coalition* (Dec 13, 2009). See <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/tgc/2009/12/13/to-contextualize-or-not-to-contextualize-that-is-not-the-question/> (accessed: 15 Oct 2012).

Contextualization is “giving people *the Bible’s answers*, which they may not at all want to hear, *to questions about life* that people in their particular time and place are asking, *in language and forms* they can comprehend, and *through appeals and arguments* with force they can feel, even if they reject them.”⁴

I am grateful to Dr. Paige Patterson, who wrote the article in this issue covering the four Hebrew children in the Old Testament book of Daniel. He identified the four Hebrew children as prime examples of those who followed the Lord God, even when they encountered and lived in a culture other than their own. Despite the king’s edict to the contrary, e.g., Daniel still kneeled three times daily to pray and give thanks to God, as was his habit (cf. Dan 6:10). By looking at such texts, President Patterson lent a hand to me in that I do not now have to cover passages on their contextualization experience, which I had originally planned to do.

It is impossible in the space allotted to look in detail at every biblical passage that touches on missions and contextualization. However, some often cited, key New Testament texts that do touch on the subject will be examined—for example, Matt 28:19-20, Acts 17:16-34, and 1 Cor 9:19-23—to derive some theological and methodological principles to help believers as they engage in evangelism, missions, and contextualization. I am not under any delusion that this address will solve any problems concerning contextualization issues, but as we take a fresh look at these texts in their biblical contexts, we may discover some truths that are overlooked, or at least, rarely emphasized.

Matt 28:19–20

At a conference that was subtitled, “Reasserting the Biblical Paradigm for the Great Commission in the Twenty-First Century,” it seems only proper that any look at the biblical text start with Matt 28:19-20. Perhaps like me you tire of hearing people say we need to come up with a “vision” for doing missions. Now, I think I know what people mean when they say such things, but I always want to reply, “You know what? Aren’t you fortunate?! God has already done that for you in his word. We have the Great Commission.”

Indeed, Matt 28:19-20 is Christ’s Great Commission to his church, the command of the resurrected Lord to his disciples before his ascension into heaven. And in his Gospel, Matthew presents Jesus as the rejected Messiah of Israel, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham, the ever-present, divine Son of God who has all authority and power to establish his rule and reign. One can see something of Christ’s authority, for example, in the Sermon on the Mount when he often says in a section known as the Antitheses, “*You have heard that it was said . . . but I say to you*” (5:21-22, 27-28, 31-32, 33-34,

⁴Timothy J. Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 98.

38-39, 43-44).⁵ At the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount one reads the words, “The crowds were amazed at His teaching; for He was teaching them as *one having authority*, and not as their scribes.”⁶ Jesus did not teach like the scribes did. To support their statements they would say, “Rabbi so-and-so has said,” or “Rabbi ben-Jonah has said,” but Jesus said, “I say to you.” And in Matt 28:18 the resurrected Christ, who, according to Rom 1:4, “was declared [to be] the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead, according to the Spirit of holiness,” issued this command. Christ is God; he is the Son of God; and as such, he possesses all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, in light of the fact that Christ is God and has all authority, he is able to commission his church.

Christ commanded his church to “Go and make disciples.” The main verb in the text is the aorist imperative μαθητεύσατε (“make disciples”). Aorist imperatives, in general, convey a sense of urgency and immediacy of action. The main verb μαθητεύσατε is modified by the aorist participle, πορευθέντες; not “as you go,” as is frequently explained, but “Go and make disciples.”⁷ Πορευθέντες is an attendant circumstance participle; that is, the action “go,” in some sense, is coordinate with the action of the finite verb, “make disciples.”⁸ And as such, the participle takes on imperatival force as well. Further, the action of the participle is “something of a prerequisite before the action of the main verb can occur.”⁹ That is to say, no making of disciples will take place unless you go: “Go and make disciples!”

The object of the main verb “make disciples” (μαθητεύσατε) is πάντα τὰ ἔθνη (“all the nations”)—every nation on the face of the earth, every people group on the planet—red and yellow and black and white, all are precious in his sight. Followers of Jesus are to make disciples of everyone everywhere, regardless of color or locale. Thus, the Great Commission involves not only sharing the gospel (i.e., not just missions and evangelism: “Go”), but another great responsibility: “make disciples.” A disciple is basically a follower of Christ and his word/teachings. He is a learner, adherent, and follower of the Lord Jesus Christ, someone who seeks to spread the gospel and its teachings to others. Believers in Jesus are to train those with whom they have shared the gospel and led to the Lord. They are to do “follow-up.” They are not to leave converts to Christ unchurched, untrained, and undisciplined.

The text contains two participles of means, βαπτίζοντες and διδάσκοντες (“baptizing” and “teaching”), that define the action of the main verb “make

⁵Emphasis added. Unless otherwise noted, translations of the biblical text are my own.

⁶Emphasis added.

⁷Emphasis added.

⁸Though Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 640, 645, places the attendant circumstance participle “go” into the “disputed examples” category in the latter book, he rightly presents it as a clear example in his abridged *The Basics of New Testament Syntax: An Intermediate Grammar* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 280-81.

⁹Wallace, *Basics of NT Syntax*, 280.

disciples.”¹⁰ In other words, they make more explicit what Jesus intended to convey with the command to “make disciples.” Participles of means convey the means by which disciples are made, namely, by baptizing, then teaching. First of all, disciples are to be baptized/immersed. Before they are baptized they have no doubt to come to an understanding that as Christ’s followers, they are dead to sin, buried with Christ in his death, changed and raised to walk in a new way of life. When they are baptized, they are immersed, notice: “in the name [sg.] of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit” (εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ τοῦ υἱοῦ καὶ τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος; the triune God).¹¹ Baptized followers of Christ will need to be trained, and so another crucial means by which Christians make disciples is teaching. They are to be taught “to keep/obey all things as many things as Jesus commanded” (τηρεῖν πάντα ὅσα ἐνετειλάμην ὑμῖν). In other words, they are taught the teachings of Christ, the things that Christ commanded, the word of God; and, not only are they trained, they are taught to obey the commandments of Jesus.

Jesus concluded the Great Commission with the words: “And behold *I am with you always* to the end of the age” (καὶ ἰδοὺ ἐγὼ μεθ’ ὑμῶν εἰμι πάσας τὰς ἡμέρας ἕως τῆς συντελείας τοῦ αἰῶνος).¹² Earlier in Matt 1:23 his readers were told of the promised Savior, the Messiah to be born to Mary, Jesus, who will be called Immanuel, “God with us.” God himself through the person of Jesus was promised to be present amongst humanity. And, he was present on the earth through the Incarnation. In these climactic verses of Matt 28:19-20 the resurrected Lord who commissioned his followers also promised to be ever-present, with them always to the end of the age. That truth ought to be a comfort and an assurance for believers in Jesus as they are engaged in missions and making disciples.

Several principles can be derived from this text. First, followers of Jesus are vested with an authoritative message from the authoritative Christ. Second, they are commanded to go and make disciples. Third, they are commanded to make disciples of the people of all nations. Fourth, they are commanded to make disciples by means of baptizing (in the name of the Triune God) and teaching (which includes teaching them to obey Christ’s commandments). Fifth, the authoritative Christ through his Holy Spirit always accompanies and empowers believers as they do.

Acts 17:16–34

When considering the book of Acts, one first needs to consider the Gospel of Luke. Scholars treat these biblical books together as Luke-Acts because they are believed to be written by the same author, Luke, and because Acts is a sequel to the Gospel of Luke. In his Gospel, Luke used eye-witness reports and written accounts to provide his own orderly, trustworthy

¹⁰See Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 645.

¹¹Insert added.

¹²Emphasis added.

version of Christian origins (Luke 1:1-4). The purpose for the good doctor's Gospel is specifically found in Luke 1:4. He writes to Theophilus (and no doubt others like him) so that he/they might know of God's *pledge-promise* (ἀσφάλεια; most often translated as "exact truth") to him/them with respect to Jesus Christ and the preaching of the gospel. He/they were given a pledge assuring him/them of the truthfulness of Christ's passion and the certainty that the gospel will spread in spite of opposition.

Luke wrote with the above theme and purpose in mind; his Gospel is indeed one of promise and fulfillment. For example, God promised Zechariah through an angel that he and his wife Elizabeth would have a son whom they would name John (1:13). That promise was fulfilled with the birth of John the Baptist (1:57-66). Through this same angel God promised that John the Baptist would be the forerunner to the Christ, the Messiah (1:16-17). That promise came to pass in the ministry and preaching of the Baptist (3:1-20; esp. 3:3-6, 16-17). The angel Gabriel promised Mary that she would give birth to a son named Jesus (1:26-38). That promise was fulfilled of course when Jesus was born (2:6-7). An angel of the Lord proclaimed Christ's birth to shepherds and gave them a sign: they would find the baby lying in a manger (2:8-12). Later, the shepherds found the infant lying in the feeding trough (2:16-17), just as the angel promised. Jesus stood in the synagogue at Nazareth to read Isa 61:1-2, an OT promise about the Messiah (4:16-22), then sat down and told those attending that particular Scripture was fulfilled in him that day (4:21). When his disciples asked about future things to come, Jesus gave them a *climactic* promise concerning the preaching of the gospel, viz., as they preached Christ as the Messiah they would be brought "before governors and kings" because of him, leading to an opportunity for witness (21:12-15). Christ's promise to them is fulfilled throughout the book of Acts as the disciples are engaged in ministry, persecuted, seized, and brought before the magistrates. The resurrected Jesus also gave his disciples the promise *par excellence*, the Holy Spirit, telling them to wait in the city of Jerusalem until they received power from on high (24:49). The fulfillment of that promise occurs in Acts in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-13).

Acts shows the sovereign spread of the gospel with all "bold speech" amidst great opposition. Key terms in Acts are *παρρησία* ("boldness; bold or frank speech"), *παρρησιάζομαι* (to preach boldly, fearlessly), and their cognates. Jesus' disciples practice this kind of speech throughout the book of Acts. In addition to bold proclamation, other themes found throughout Acts include prayer and persecution. All three of these themes are perhaps best exemplified in Acts 4:23-31 and its context. Peter and John have healed a man and were preaching that salvation comes through no one else but Jesus Christ (4:12). Consequently, they were brought before the Jewish leadership, examined, threatened, and released, but told never again to do these things. They replied to those who tried them "we are unable to stop speaking about the things we have seen and heard" (4:20). Subsequently, Peter and John go back to their own people and report what had happened; then, they do not

pray for deliverance, but instead lift their voices in one accord in prayer to God asking him to do great works through the name of Jesus and to give them boldness (*παρρησία*) to keep preaching Jesus fearlessly (4:29-30).

In the book of Acts, Paul had also been boldly preaching. He was preaching in Thessalonica (17:1-9) until a mob riot of jealous Jews caused him to leave for Berea (17:10-15). In Berea, Paul's preaching was warmly received until the Jews from Thessalonica followed him, discovered he was preaching Christ, and caused trouble for him there as well (17:13). Consequently, Paul was escorted by believers to the city of Athens (17:15).

In Athens Paul was greatly distressed (*παροξύνομαι*; "provoked") seeing that the city was full of idols (17:16). This word is often used in the LXX to describe the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, who is "provoked" to anger when he sees idolatry.¹³ Paul was "provoked" in spirit by the idolatry he saw and no doubt had a desire to convert the Athenians from idolatry to belief in the true and living God. This provocation is sometimes described as "jealousy."¹⁴ Exod 34:14 states that "the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God" (LXX). The Lord God resents competition; he brooks no rivals. When Paul saw the idolatry in Athens, his very soul revolted at the sight of people giving to others and to things the worship that rightfully belonged to God.¹⁵

Seeing others give their worship to idolatry, i.e., God-substitutes, should move the followers of Christ in a similar fashion because people's worship should go to the Lord God Almighty. Motivation for doing missions and evangelism should be obedience to the Great Commission, and compassion should motivate believers to action as well, but so also should jealousy or zeal for God's glory and Jesus Christ his Son. Paul's response to the idolatry he saw resulted in witnessing to others: bold preaching. In other words, Paul's reaction compelled him now to give gospel testimony (17:17). First, he reasoned in the synagogue with Jews and God-fearers (Gentiles who sought after God in the synagogue). No doubt he would have proclaimed there that the Lord Jesus Christ was the Messiah of their Old Testament Scriptures. Second, he also witnessed daily to anybody who happened to be present in the *ἀγορά* (marketplace). Third, he also encountered and conversed with some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers (17:18). The Epicureans were philosophers who "considered the gods to be so remote as to take no interest in, and have no influence on, human affairs."¹⁶ They believed that the world came into being through chance, a random coming together of atoms.¹⁷ They also thought there would be no continued existence after death,

¹³John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, The Bible Speaks Today, gen. eds. J.A. Motyer and John R.W. Stott (Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 278.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid., 279.

¹⁶Ibid., 280.

¹⁷Ibid.

and thus, no judgment.¹⁸ Pleasure was their aim in life, and they sought to live free of pain and fear. The Stoics, on the other hand, acknowledged a supreme being but did so in a pantheistic, God-is-everything, sort of way.¹⁹ They believed in fate, self-sufficiency, doing their duty, and living in accord with reason and the natural world.²⁰ Several of these philosophers would appear on the Aeropagus council before which Paul would later appear.

The philosophers with whom Paul had been sharing the gospel reacted to his message in a couple of ways. First, some insulted him, “What does this scavenger of information (σπερμολόγος) wish to say?” (17:18). They thought he had no original thoughts or ideas of his own. “But others said, ‘He seems to be a proclaimer of strange/foreign deities’ (ξένων δαυμονίων)” (17:18). Luke tells us that they made that remark because Paul was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. Stott suggests that they thought Paul was introducing to Athens a new male God named Jesus with his female consort, Anastasia (ἀνάστασις, the Greek word for “resurrection,” also a lady’s name), to add to their pantheon of gods.²¹ If so, notice Luke did not record in Acts a response by Paul that we might imagine as contextual and cultural-friendly: “Well, I’ll just let them keep on thinking that for the sake of culture. That’s part of their culture and now that I’ve got a foothold amongst them with their idea of the resurrection, I’ll just let them keep thinking that, and then later on when they are ready, I will explain to them more fully what the resurrection really is.”

No, Paul’s preaching instead led to his being taken and having to give an account for his teaching before the supreme council of Athens: the Aeropagus (17:19).²² The members of the council wanted to know what this new teaching was that Paul was proclaiming (17:19). They explained they wanted to know what these astonishing things meant (17:20). This reaction is understandable because to them, what Paul was preaching seemed to be a trendy thing (cf. 17:21). So, standing before the Aeropagus council members, and in response to their request, Paul masterfully guided them to an explanation of the unadulterated gospel of Jesus Christ. The verses that follow are at the heart of matters regarding contextualization.

As Paul began to address the council he told them that he had observed they were “religious in every way” (17:22). This observation was no understatement because of the rampant idolatry in the city. He next explained that as he was looking at their objects of worship throughout the city, he had even seen inscribed upon an altar the words: “To An Unknown God” (17:23). He then “eagerly seized on this inscription as a way of introducing his proclamation of *the* unknown God. There was, to be sure, no real connection

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid., 280-81.

²¹Ibid., 282.

²²Literally: “the hill of Ares” (Roman: Mars). At this point in time, however, it referred to the council of Athens and not the place.

between ‘an unknown God’ and the true God; Paul hardly meant that his audience were unconscious worshippers of the true God.²³ In other words, Paul was not acknowledging the authenticity of their unknown God nor their pagan worship. Rather, he took advantage of the Athenians’ knowledge of an anonymous altar he had come across while in their city and used their acknowledgment of an unknown God to enlighten their ignorance. As Marshall explains, he drew “their attention to the true God who was ultimately responsible for the phenomena which they attributed to an unknown God.”²⁴

Christ-followers engaged in missions and evangelism ought also to look for similar items to pique the interest of their hearers, i.e., ways to connect, conversation starters if you will, as they present the gospel to those who do not know Jesus. I can remember sharing the gospel with an orthodox Jew on one occasion as I returned from the country of Turkey. After exchanging pleasantries, my initial bridge or way to connect with him was to discuss not only Isa 7:14 but also the role of the Ten Commandments in Judaism. These subjects are important to believers in Jesus, but they are especially important to Jews, and out of that discussion, with that way to connect, I was able to share the gospel. Or, I think of the illustration that President Patterson once gave in a Southwestern Seminary chapel service when he told how he had met on a flight a man who obviously had an interest in hunting. The man had observed, as I recall, that Dr. Patterson was reading something related to hunting, and he asked the president, “Are you a hunter? He replied, “Why yes I am; I hunt goats.” The man thought about it for a moment and then said, “Okay, I’ll bite,” and Dr. Patterson then shared the gospel with him after that conversation starter.

Paul next began to describe the God of the gospel for the members of the Aeropagus (17:24). When he did, he focused on only a few points of agreement between their different religious systems/worldviews and the Christian message. Mostly, however, and this is important to note, *he drew out the contrasts between their beliefs*. Paul used a contrastive bridge, if you will, as he presented the gospel. First, Paul preached that God is the Creator of the universe (17:24).²⁵ This proclamation struck at the heart of building structures for idols for “a God who is Creator and Lord clearly does not live in a temple made by human hands.”²⁶ The apostle pointed out a difference between the Athenians’ manmade idols and the true and living God. Second, Paul preached that God is the source and sustainer of all life (17:25).²⁷ Thus, “such a God has no need of men to supply him with anything; on the contrary, it is he who is the source of life.”²⁸ Third, Paul preached that God is

²³I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, TNTC, gen. ed. Leon Morris (Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 286.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Stott, *Acts*, 285.

²⁶Marshall, *Acts*, 286.

²⁷Marshall, *Acts*, 287; Stott, *Acts*, 285.

²⁸Marshall, *Acts*, 287.

sovereign over all the nations (17:26–27). He created from one man (Adam) everyone on the face of the planet, fixed their days and time, and even determined the boundaries of their countries and where they would live. God's purpose in all of this (according to 17:27) was that people “*might seek after him* in the hope of touching and finding him.”²⁹ Paul relayed that seeking and finding him should not be difficult because God is not far from each one of us (17:27). This line of thought was apparently current in Stoic philosophy but only in an impersonal, intellectual sense. As a follower of Christ, Paul of course meant it in a personal sense.³⁰ Fourth, Paul proclaimed that God is the Father of all mankind (17:28–29). He used some truth that he found in pagan philosophy and applied it to God. He spoke out against their idolatry on the basis of the fact that mankind is God's offspring.³¹ Fifth, Paul preached that the God is the Judge of the world (17:30–31).³²

If one reviews several of the contrasts that Paul pointed out as he proclaimed the gospel, he will see that the ideas that he preached exposed the false ideas about God that the Council, these philosophers, had. The gospel Paul preached as he spoke about God goes against ideas like men should be self-sufficient. Paul taught that God sustains life. Paul's preaching goes against the idea that the world was created by chance. He taught instead that God is the Creator. Paul's preaching about the God of the gospel went against all of their idolatry, and then he zeroed in on the fact that God will judge them (17:30–31). It is difficult to argue that such preaching is seeker-sensitive and contextualization friendly. Paul has just met these men, and shortly later he started preaching judgment. He told them that God, in his mercy, had been very patient with them up to this point; he had overlooked their ignorance and idolatry, and had not yet visited it with the punishment that it deserved (17:30). But now, Paul told them, you have no excuse because God commands all men everywhere to repent—to make an “about-face,” to change their minds and make a 180-degree turn away from sin and towards God—because of the certainty of the coming judgment (17:31).

Indeed, he has fixed a day when he will judge the world—everyone will be judged; it is all-inclusive in scope; no one is exempt. On that day, God will judge the world righteously, with justice. And that day is fixed; it is definite, and the judge has already been appointed. The Judge is the Man whom God has appointed—Jesus Christ. God has committed the judgment to his Son Jesus, and he has given proof of this judgment to come by raising Christ from the dead. Verse 32 says that when they heard of the resurrection, some sneered, some said—whether they meant it or not—we will hear you again sometime, so Paul left their midst. A few (Dionysius the Areopagite, Damaris, and some others), however, became followers and believed (17:34). Despite the rejection, those who were saved made it all worthwhile.

²⁹Ibid., 288.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Ibid., 289.

³²Stott, *Acts*, 287.

Principles that might be learned from this passage in Acts that touch on evangelism, missions and contextualization include the following. First, followers of Jesus need to ask God to burden them for the souls of people, i.e., to feel the way that he does toward them, and that is, to grieve for those who reject Jesus as Savior and Lord, seeing them as sinners, people precious in the sight of God who stand in need of salvation from the penalty and judgment of sin. God forbid that the reason that Christians do not witness to others as they should is because they do not feel the way that God does about people. Second, followers of Christ need to develop and sharpen their skills in proclaiming the gospel. They should learn to seek out common interests with people so that they can be used to share the gospel with them. These are things to take advantage of so as to present the gospel message. Compromise here is not an option. Believers in Jesus do not accept or acknowledge, even for a short period of time, the false ideas or designations of worldviews contrary to the gospel. Third, believers in Jesus need to learn to expose false ideas that are contrary to the gospel. This is indeed bold preaching. And, as you explain the gospel, you do not focus so much on any similarities as you do instead pointing out the contrasts between Christianity and the belief systems of others. That is part and parcel of being a gospel preacher. Christ-followers are distinctively different and so is their doctrine. Believers in Jesus need to know Scripture well enough to deal with false ideas whenever they encroach upon the gospel and the truth of God's word. Likewise, they ought to be familiar with some other belief systems outside of Christianity, particularly if they become involved in missions to a specific locale. For instance, if one is going to serve in India, he should know the beliefs of Hinduism fairly well. With the latter religion, if a preacher does not point out contrasts and spell out the gospel clearly, the Hindu will simply incorporate Jesus into his belief system as one of his many other gods. Similarly, if one is going to serve in the Middle East, then he should know the beliefs of Islam well, and so forth.

1 Cor 9:19–23

First Corinthians 9:19–23 is probably one of the clearest and yet most controversial texts of all when it comes to discussing evangelism, missions, and contextualization. Some background information is necessary before we plunge into this passage. The occasion behind 1 Corinthians goes something like the following. Paul's founding visit to Corinth is in Acts 18 (c. A.D. 50–52). A couple of years later, while Paul was in Ephesus, he wrote the "previous letter" (5:9). Though the contents of this letter are unknown, it surely must have dealt with the problem of sexual immorality in the church. Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 5 suggest that the Corinthians had misunderstood his directives in this letter. This misunderstanding led to the writing of 1 Corinthians (c. A.D. 55). This letter was occasioned by several events: (1) Paul heard from Chloe's people (1:11) that a factional party spirit had de-

veloped in Corinth; (2) he also received a letter from the Corinthian church to which he began to respond in 1 Corinthians 7. He took up the items in the church's letter one by one, most of them introduced by the words "now about" (cf. 7:1, 25, 8:1, 12:1, 16:1, 12). Most likely, this letter from Corinth was written as a response to Paul's "previous letter" and was carried to Paul by three men (Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus) from Corinth (16:15-17). This Corinthian delegation may also have brought oral reports to Paul about the problematic situation in Corinth; things were not going so well.

Paul wrote to chide the Corinthian church into acknowledging the Lord's "ownership" of them and the implications of that ownership in the different areas of their lives (cf. 6:19-20). The Corinthian church was chock full of problems. As Paul penned this letter, he critiqued the division within the church (1:11-15) and the errant beliefs which led to this split. He taught them that they did not belong to Paul, Apollos, Cephas, and others (cf. 1:12), but rather they belonged to Christ. They were not their own and had been bought with a price, thus they were to glorify God with their bodies (6:19-20), i.e., their slave-bodies (σῶμα).³³ Paul also sought to address the questions raised by the Corinthian church.³⁴ They had questions about spiritual gifts; they had questions about marriage, and in 1 Corinthians 8 they had questions about meat offered to idols.

Whenever idol worshippers offered sacrifices, the shares of what was left of the animals that had been burned up was given first to the priest, then to the families who had presented the offerings. The leftover meat was eaten at dinners in the pagan temple or its vicinity, or at home by their families, guests, and friends, or it would end up in the marketplace to be sold. So you can see how this situation might become difficult. The Corinthians had some questions about eating this kind of meat. Does a follower of Christ eat meat offered to idols? Some of the Corinthians said, "Yes, it doesn't violate our conscience; it doesn't hurt our testimony, no problem!" Whereas others thought it was a sin to eat meat like that. Someone, somewhere along the way, must have said, "I know! Let's ask the apostle Paul." So they did.

Paul told the Corinthians that there really is no such thing as an idol (8:4); however, he went on to say that not everybody knows this fact (8:7). For Paul, idols are of no significance because there is only one true God (8:5-6). But in the matter of meats offered to idols, he said, love must regulate your knowledge that there is no such thing as an idol by giving up rights which will cause a weaker brother to stumble (8:7-13). Some Christians did not realize that there is nothing wrong with this, and they would defile their consciences by eating the meat (8:7-8). And if you eat the meat, Paul said, you are going to ruin your weaker brother and cause him to sin against Christ (8:9-12). And so, Paul told the church in 1 Cor 8:13 that the liberty of believers in this matter should be limited by concern for their brother's well-

³³First Corinthians contains much slavery language, of which this is but one example.

³⁴He also instructed the Corinthians to participate in the offering for the Jerusalem saints (16:1-4).

being: “Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, so that I may not cause my brother to stumble.” So, some important principles of Christian liberty are found in chapter 8 that need review before proceeding to chapter 9.

After warning the church in chapter 8 how improperly exercising one’s liberty in Christ might lead to the ruin of those who are weak in faith and conscience, Paul then illustrated how he was more than willing to exercise restraint, even when it came to the liberties he had as an apostle of Jesus Christ. And Paul’s relinquishing of his privileges as an apostle in order to preach the gospel illustrates the attitude towards Christian liberty that gains God’s approval (9:1-27).

Paul started chapter 9 with a series of four questions that each anticipate the answer “Yes.” He demonstrated he was a true apostle who had certain rights that go with his office. His position as an apostle was based on his vision of the resurrected Christ and the evidence of his apostolic work (9:1-3). He had the right to eat and drink as he was involved in his missionary endeavors (9:4). He had the right to take along a believing wife, as did others (9:5). Paul also taught that he had a right to refrain from working with his hands; his apostleship entitled him to financial support because any worker is deserving of his wages as the Lord had commanded (9:4-14). Nonetheless, he had not used these rights and was also not trying to secure them for himself (9:15). Apparently, some critics in Corinth criticized Paul for not taking support (cf. 2 Cor 11:7-12). He pointed out, however, that rather than using that right, he endured all things—(catch this if you catch nothing else)—*so that he would cause no hindrance to the gospel of Christ* (9:12). That is one of the extremely important, key operative principles for Paul as he lived out his life and engaged in ministry. Paul put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ.

For Paul, the gospel put the importance of his apostolic work into perspective. He had used none of his apostolic rights to support. He gave up those rights in order to gain a reward for going beyond his duty (9:15-18). He did not want his reason for preaching the gospel to be suspect. Paul knew that he had to preach the gospel without thinking about compensation. He belonged to the Lord and was indebted to preach (9:16). He knew he would receive a reward from God if he willingly preached the gospel apart from the praise of men and remuneration.³⁵ Even when he did not feel like it, nonetheless God had still entrusted him with the gospel, a stewardship in trust (9:17). Stewards (chief household slaves in those days entrusted with the affairs of their masters) did what their masters told them to do whether they liked it or not. Paul’s reward involved offering the gospel he preached without cost; he did not want to use or abuse his right to financial support; offering the gospel to the lost without charge was his reward (9:18).³⁶

³⁵Robert G. Gromacki, *Called to be Saints: An Exposition of I Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 112.

³⁶Ibid.

Paul also taught that the gospel puts the methods of his ministry into perspective (9:19-23). Now remember, the context of this passage has Paul *refraining* from the use of his rights/liberty in Christ. So, we need to be careful here. The point here is not to stress how much liberty I have and what all I might do and get away with as I am engaged in missions and contextualization, but rather, from what should I *refrain* as I am attempting to reach others for the Lord/gospel. That distinction is an important one. Paul gave up personal rights in other areas as well in order to win more to the gospel. Notice that this text begins in 9:19 with Paul's remark that though he is free from all, he has "made himself a slave [a slave has no rights] to everyone,"³⁷ and then he fleshed that statement out with some concrete examples of the type of people whom he serves as such when engaged in mission. In the examples that follow in 1 Cor 9:19-23 Paul's words are not without restriction. He never meant something like, "To the adulterer, I became as an adulterer. To the embezzler I became as an embezzler. To the cannibal, I became as a cannibal." He would not say such things. What about to the New Ager? "I became as a New Ager?" "To the Hindu, I became as a Hindu?" "To the Muslim, I became as a Muslim?" Would Paul say that? What did he mean?

Paul said, "I made myself a slave (*δουλόω*) to everyone" (9:19). First, "To the Jews, I became as a Jew that I might gain Jews" (9:20). How did Paul do that? We have some concrete examples in Scripture. He preached in the synagogues on the Sabbath (throughout Acts). He had Timothy, a half Jewish and half Greek co-worker, circumcised so that his mission team might be more effective (Acts 16:3); as a witness to Jerusalem Jews, Paul agreed to the request to associate himself with Jews who had undergone purification vows (Acts 21:20-26).³⁸ So, there are ways in Scripture that Paul "became as a Jew to the Jews." Second, "To those under the law I became as one under the law" (9:20). This phrase may be exegetical and refer to the Jews he just mentioned in 9:19, or it may refer to Gentile proselytes to Judaism. Third, "To those without law I became as one without law" (9:21), i.e. Gentiles (we have already seen an example of an approach to Gentiles in Acts 17), though Paul did not want anyone to misunderstand; he made it clear that he was not without morals. He was not without God's law for he was still under the law of Christ; indeed, he was a slave to Christ and his teachings. Fourth, "To the weak I became weak" (9:22). We have already seen an example where Paul became weak to the weak. This reference either refers to unbelievers or likely back to 1 Corinthians 8 where Paul spoke of the weak. In the latter case, if eating the meat caused his weak brother to stumble he would not eat meat; he would not do anything to hinder the gospel of Christ. It is important to note that Paul is not in any of these categories. He is no longer a Jew under the law; he never was a Gentile; he is not a weak brother—no; he has accommodated his weak brother in Christ. But, he "flexes," as many have put it,

³⁷Insert added.

³⁸Examples borrowed from Gromacki, *Called to be Saints*, 113.

to communicate the gospel.

Paul became “all things to all men” (9:22). He was a slave to all. On Paul’s words here Tullian Tchvidjian aptly remarks,

Becoming ‘all things to all people’ does not mean fitting in with the fallen patterns of this world so that there is no distinguishable difference between Christians and non-Christians. While rightly living “in the world,” we must avoid the extreme of accommodation—being ‘of the world.’ It happens when Christians, in their attempt to make proper contact with the world, go out of their way to adopt worldly styles, standards, and strategies. When Christians try to eliminate the counter-cultural, unfashionable features of the biblical message because those features are unpopular in the wider culture—for example, when we reduce sin to a lack of self-esteem, deny the exclusivity of Christ, or downplay the reality of knowable absolute truth—we’ve moved from contextualization to compromise. When we accommodate our culture by jettisoning key themes of the gospel, such as suffering, humility, persecution, service, and self-sacrifice, we actually do our world more harm than good. For love’s sake, compromise is to be avoided at all costs.³⁹

Yes, Paul engaged in contextualization, but only up to a point. He never compromised the gospel message; he never compromised his morals, nor did he ever contradict the teaching of Christ and the will of God as found in the teaching of the word of God. He clearly operated within boundaries. He was flexible, yet firm, accommodating his lifestyle and the methodology with which he shared the gospel to the group he was aiming to reach for Christ.⁴⁰ Paul willingly gave up the exercise of his rights “on account of the gospel” and by doing so saw himself as participating in it (9:23). The example *par excellence* of one who gave up his rights is found in Jesus and the Incarnation. He is the basis for our mission and contextualization efforts. Though he is God he did not take advantage of that right; rather he forsook the glory of heaven to become a slave, taking on human form, amongst us. He did so in order to save humanity through the cross (Phil 2:5-8; cf. Heb 2:14-18).

Paul went on to say that the gospel puts the discipline of his life into perspective (9:24-27). Within boundaries, he did whatever it took to share the gospel with others. In this passage, Paul explained that he gave up his rights to gain God’s approval in the same way that an athlete disciplines himself in order to win the prize. Athletes would constantly train under oath ten months prior to the games, eat the right diet, and abstain from indulgences.

³⁹Tullian Tchvidjian, “Contextualization without Compromise,” *Resurgence* (online at <http://theresurgence.com/2010/04/22/contextualization-without-compromise>; accessed: 13 April 2011)

⁴⁰Gromacki, *Called to Be Saints*, 112-13.

Paul used the illustrations of running and boxing, probably taken from the Isthmian games held at Corinth, to underscore the need for self-control in the Corinthians' Christian lives (9:26). He declared that he himself did not run without a definite goal in mind and did not box as one "beating the air." This statement referred to the image of when a boxer threw a punch in a fight. The opponent would do his best to dodge the blow so that it would be uselessly thrown in the empty air. To connect with one's punches was extremely important in antiquity because the ensuing momentum of a missed punch would make the boxer extremely vulnerable to his adversary's brutal blows. Greek boxing gloves (*himantes*) were leather straps wrapped around a boxer's hands and wrists in such a way to become like a club. The Romans in turn modified the leather thongs by adding a metal insert so that the boxing gloves (*caestus*) were even more deadly. Paul maintained that every punch that he threw connected. He did not throw empty and meaningless punches in the air when it came to the preaching of the gospel and the contextualization of that gospel to others.

Several principles may be derived from this passage and its context. First, for the sake of Christian love and the propagation of the gospel of Christ, we need to be willing to refrain from the exercise of any rights that we may have as believers or individuals. Second, we must do nothing to hinder the gospel of Christ. Third, we need to be flexible and firm as we operate within boundaries and accommodate our lifestyles and methodologies to share Christ with different peoples. Those boundaries would include never violating the word of God as we do so. We should also never compromise the Christian message of the gospel nor our morals. Once we do, we lose our credibility and further, the blessing of God. Fourth, we must be disciplined and exercise self-control as we are engaged in evangelism and missions being as effective as we possibly can, making our opportunities count. Fifth, in all of this, we keep our eyes focused on the Lord Jesus, who is the basis for our contextualization (Phil 2:5-8).

A Concluding Prayer

Father, burden us for the souls of people and empower us through your Holy Spirit and by your grace not to do anything that might hinder the gospel of Jesus Christ as we are engaged in mission. The gospel of Jesus puts all of our evangelistic, missionary, and contextualization efforts into perspective. Help us to remember that fact. Protect us, we pray, from the evil one. Let us neither compromise the gospel, nor compromise ourselves. Instead, let us lead holy, disciplined lives, and be distinctively different so that the world sees the love of Christ in our lives and in the message of reconciliation with which we are entrusted. God help us and bless us as we seek to be effective and faithful stewards. In Jesus' precious name, we pray. Amen.