

# COMMISSIONED

## THE ART OF LIVING OUT THE WORDS, WAYS, & MISSION OF JESUS

### 7. 1 Partnering in the Mission of Jesus

#### Operating Contextually

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**Contextualization is the work of communicating unchanging truths in understandable ways in ever-changing cultural contexts.** It's presenting the Good News about God and his work in the world in a way that can be heard and understood within a particular cultural context, language, and people group.

It's doing what Paul did when he went into the Areopagus in Athens. That was the marketplace of ideas in the first-century Greco-Roman World. Paul walked with humble confidence into the arena of the best thinkers and philosophers of the day to contend for the message of Jesus. It's worth noting his approach. Paul didn't criticize the Stoics or the Epicureans. He didn't confront their worldview, or correct their religion. In fact he praised it "I see that you are very religious." He didn't attack their culture but quoted their poets. And then used their altar to an unknown God to tell them about Jesus.

He found symbols and images and language that established commonality, forged connection, and opened doors of conversation.

**Paul would describe this approach in [1 Corinthians 9:22](#), "I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some."**

But Paul was not the first to contextualize. Rather, he was walking in the pattern already established in the missional approach of Jesus.

[John 1:14](#) describes the birth of Jesus like this: *The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.*

**The incarnation of Jesus is the *greatest example of contextualization.***

When we think of the miracle of Christmas, we think of the virgin birth, angelic visitations, the night skies erupting in heavenly choruses, and curious stars guiding seekers from the East.

But the greatest miracle of Christmas is that God stuffed all of his goodness into a tiny, helpless infant human being in order to most fully demonstrate his love for us.

Jesus entered the space-time continuum that he created to become like us. He wrapped in the skin of his own creation, subjected himself to the care of his own creation so that he could restore order to chaos and life to decay and justice to oppression.

**To *identify* with us,  
to *reveal* the Father to us,  
to *represent* us to the Father,  
and to *reconcile* us back to the Father.**

**He came to be a bridge *between heaven and earth.*  
He showed us *what God was really like.*  
He gave us an example that we could *see, touch, and feel.***

He came to our world, to speak our language, to live as us and with us so that we could know him.

**As Dr. Dick Foth said, Jesus left his place, to come to our place, to take our place, so that we could go back to his place.**

Partnering in the mission of Jesus means that we follow his pattern. We work hard to build bridges and paint pictures that make the Gospel relevant, understandable, accessible, and portable within unique cultural contexts, where we live, where we work, and where we play. And we find our inspiration and our example in Jesus himself.

As we consider today how we might contextualize the Gospel where we live, where we work, and where we play, let's meditate on this thought from St. Augustine's sermon, "**On the Feast of the Nativity**":

*Our Lord came down from life to suffer death; the Bread came down, to hunger; the Way came down, on the way to weariness; the Fount came down, to thirst. He so loved us that, for our sake, he was made man, who made man. He was created of a mother whom he created. He was carried by hands that he formed.*

*He cried in the manger in wordless infancy, he the Word, without whom all human eloquence is mute.<sup>1</sup>*

So let's follow the pattern of Jesus to contextualize the good news of God. Let's be bridges between heaven and earth. Let's show pictures of what God is really like. Let's be examples that others can see, touch, and feel to understand the goodness of God.

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<sup>1</sup> Augustine, Sermon 188, "On the Feast of the Nativity (Quotation taken from 1001 Quotations that Connect, by Craig Brian Larson and Brian Lowery, © 2009, Zondervan)