

All About Context

1 Corinthians 9–10

CCC 3/18/2024

Intro – Thanks to Jed/Jen/Alex – National Board meetings plus Green City – 50/43 hours, 50 litres of sweat, but fifty buckets of encouragement... more later in the message. Love to teach through the Bible... Messed Up Church... Key idea build on Jed

Plugging through Corinthians. Next week, skip to 15, then back to 11–14. This is all about Easter—resurrection stuff at Easter time. And I want you to know that the next two weeks will be a prime time to invite people to church. We will unpack the evidence for the resurrection next week and the meaning of the resurrection the following week. These are not only critical to the life of every Christian, but they are the best card in our deck in terms of winning others to the Christian faith.

For this week, I am going to build on the foundation that Jed began last week in chapter 9. I must say that the spirit led a direction for this message that I did not intend when I planned it last October, so you are getting a raw download here.

You'll remember that Paul was exulting in his freedom in Christ to do so many things, but he put a governor on his freedom... even called himself a slave... for one reason. To reach one more. Or to win as many as possible. It wasn't that there weren't tons of things he was allowed to do... he just limited his freedom to win people.

¹⁹ Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. ²⁰ To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. ²¹ To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. ²² To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.

So, Paul becomes weak for the weak, a Jew for the Jews, and a Gentile for the Gentiles. Paul is like, "If I never eat bacon again for the rest of my life... I'll do it if it wins one Jewish person." When I moved to Omaha I asked a pastor-mentor for advice on leading in a new city and one thing he said was "Cheer where you live." So I was an instant Bluejay/Husker fan. I think if he lived today, he might even stoop so low – and I know this is hard - as to become a **Hawkeye fan** to win lowans to Jesus.

In fact, you might remember that he had just come from a council in Jerusalem in Acts 15 that said you don't have to get circumcised first in order to be Christian. But then in Acts 16, his disciple Timothy was circumcised because they knew he would be ministering to Jewish people and didn't want it to become an issue... now *that's* commitment!

So, this idea that “I become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.” has a big missiology word for it. Are you ready?

Contextualization

Sometimes, it is our traditions that are the biggest barrier to the gospel, not the gospel itself. Every time you experience the Christian faith, you experience a hybridized version of it, depending on which culture you are in. So, if you experience church in Mexico, it is a combo of Mexican-Christian or Mexican-Catholic. If it is Zambia, it is Zambian-Christian; in America, it is a hybrid of American and Christian. Sometimes, that is just preferences for musical style, but sometimes, the values of the culture get wrapped into Christianity, and it becomes difficult to unwrap them.

So I am going to use the message time today to talk about contextualization – with four examples – here at CCC, on the other side of the planet, an example from history, and then back into our individual lives.

Biblical Norms vs. Cultural Forms

- We get confused all the time! In fact, I think that one of the biggest barriers to people coming to faith is when we Christians are married to our traditions – our cultural forms.
- Building, for example—we often say we “go to church” as if the building is what Church is. But the early church met in homes and in public and didn't even have a building. We could meet in a warehouse or a bar or a bakery or a theatre or a school and worship would be beautiful!
- Yostie may wear a suit while Alex has ripped jeans and a sweatshirt...
Contextualization – I'd love to see Yostie in ripped jeans...
I mean, Jesus would be wearing a toga, so...
- Musical Styles – Five Generation Church, reaching five generations
- Pews – who are we reaching?
- The importance of all of this is JESUS. We will compromise on cultural forms but never the gospel. “I become all things to all people so that by all possible means, I might save some.”
- We NEED different kinds of church to reach different kinds of people.

- Messianic Jewish congregations that still practice Passover and celebrate Jewish history.
- I saw Cowboy Church at the Newton exit on I-80 planted to reach cowboys.
- We need someone to use hip-hop and urban slang to reach urban youth.
- Would you pray with me that God would raise up a new generation of people to reach the next generation in their context?
- I become all things to all people so that by all means I might reach some.

Green City IWs - Contextualization is the art of planting the gospel seed in culture's diverse soils without also planting the flowerpot. —Harvie Conn

- Green City Challenge
 - One of the interesting things in Green City is that introducing yourself as a pastor in an all-Muslim culture is a surefire way to get doors shut for relationships. So, each pastor or international worker has a real identification that is a way to gain entrance into relationships. Here is one example:
 - An NGO has been started (picture of the IWs with NGO sign) to reforest areas devastated by palm oil plantations or coal mining. They are planting trees by the tens of thousands. The trained NGO staff leads a team of locals (Muslims) every day in planting the trees, creating a context for relationship and trust-building among some least-reached people groups. Every day, they can see the gospel in their boss but also can see a picture of the gospel in the way God takes an area that was abused, abandoned, or destroyed and makes it beautiful. Pray for these pioneers!
 - What is even cooler is that corporations that want to exhibit corporate responsibility and awareness will hire the NGO to plant the trees—making it financially sustainable and creating an opportunity for witness to the corporate folks as well. Win-win-win-win.
 - Others contribute through ESL programs or skills training for the poorest of the poor... but all consider their context in proclaiming the gospel to the least-reached people. And we need an army to do this.
 - While the team was in Green City, I was asked to preach at a Bible School of some of the reached tribes of this nation and to challenge them to go to their own unreached neighbors. So, I did.
 - And before the sermon was done, fifty people stood to be senders to the least reached and seventeen stood to be the ones who would go to the least-reached people in their own nation.

- You'll be happy to know that we struck a deal with your Reach One More contributions to fund the education of anyone who is serious about going to the least-reached in their nation.
- I challenged the students that someone needs to start a K-pop church—that is using the very popular Korean pop music—and wearing soccer jerseys to reach the emerging youth culture.
- Want to reach Muslims? You might need a church with green carpet, use the name *Isa* for Jesus, choose never to eat bacon again, wear long beards... These are cultural forms, not biblical norms. Would you pray for them?

Oh, and as a sidenote, our international workers asked if I know anybody who is an expert in composting. It is not about conformity to behavior, but trajectory toward Jesus.

St. Patrick Story

As a teenager, Patrick was kidnapped, taken from his home in southern Britain, and sold into slavery on the island of Ireland. During his six years as a slave, he converted to Christianity and earned a reputation as a fervent evangelist. In the dark of the night Patrick escaped his bonds and fled Ireland. Following a long journey home, he entered theological training and full-time service to the Lord. God spoke to Patrick in his dreams and told him that he would return to Ireland and serve as a missionary to the people who had kept him in servitude.

In AD 432, 25 years after fleeing Ireland, Patrick returned to the place of his bondage. He did not return with malice in his heart but as a missionary eager to convert the Irish. Patrick served in regions of Ireland where outsiders had never traveled. While roaming through Ireland he preached to pagans and also instructed Christian believers. Patrick trained Irish helpers and ordained native clergy. He was bringing a new way of life to a violent, war-oriented pagan culture. His work was both groundbreaking and Christ-honoring.

“Daily I expect to be murdered or betrayed or reduced to slavery if the occasion arises,” Patrick wrote while serving in Ireland. “But I fear nothing, because of the promises of heaven.”

Patrick was countercultural to the Roman Catholic church of his day. He was Catholic, to be sure, but he did ministry **without cathedrals**—or even buildings. He set up communes at street corners and empowered the locals for ministry. He ordained the Irish of all people and handed over the leadership of a community to them as he went up the road to start another. Used local analogies – like the three leaf clover as a representation of the trinity.

Patrick **valued literacy** when the Irish did not. He taught his people to read and write, to store the treasures of the scriptures in their hearts, and to start simple libraries.

In fifth-century Ireland, **women were a commodity**. Selling a daughter or arranging a politically strategic marriage was common. Patrick upset the social order by teaching women they had a choice in Christ, that they were valued by him, and that they could not only say no to slavery but could become leaders in the Christian community and remain chaste for him.

In fact, it was Patrick who called the people of the island to **eliminate slavery** as a whole. As a former slave himself, he knew the darkness and destruction and was among the first Christians to call for an end to slavery.

Patrick entered an Ireland full of paganism, slavery, misogyny and idol worship. Just a few short decades after Patrick arrived, a healthy, Christ-honoring church was thriving. You know, there are a lot of myths about St. Patrick that are amazing, but none as amazing as the reality of his influence.

In fact, in the centuries after Patrick, the Dark Ages arrived. Barbarian Germanic hordes demolished the Roman Catholic Church in most of Europe. The literature and tradition were lost. History became “dark” because of that influence. But the barbarian hordes never reached Ireland. So, Patrick’s people became a repository of literature, scripture, and civilization. So, when it was time, centuries after Patrick, it was his people who became the missionaries in the way of Patrick—at street corners, making disciples, empowering the nationals, and bringing literacy—that repatriated Europe. In fact, some say it was the Irish who saved civilization though Europe.

How the Irish Saved Civilization, The Celtic Way of Evangelism

Patrick was ingenious in separating what was necessary for the gospel and what was just extra. He brought about the kingdom of God in counterintuitive but totally productive ways. “I have become all things to all people so that in all ways, I might save some.”

But here is the cool thing about contextualization and the cool thing about God. Contextualization doesn’t just come down to churches contextualizing. God creates individual Christians in a particular form with particular nuances to reach particular people. I mean, **nobody is able to reach everybody... but everybody is designed to reach somebody.**

- We NEED different kinds of Christians to reach different kinds of people—contextualizing even further...
 - Are you a hockey player? Awesome, we need hockey players to reach hockey players!

- Are you of Croatian background? Great! I'd love to see Croatians reaching Croatians!
- Are you a knitter? Then work on reaching knitters for Jesus!
- Your goal is to become so enamored with the gospel that it drips through you into your cultural forms. I am convinced that it is not only your presence in these groups that matters because of who you are, but there are stories and analogies of the gospel that will relate to those people in particular. There are gospel golf analogies, and Mexican-American Jesus stories, and accountant stories of transcendence and transformation—stories that have been woven into the fabric of the universe by God himself that will help particular people understand this universal message.
- Did you realize that God made you for this? Students—you are the best people in the world to reach students. Grade-school moms—you are the best in the world to reach grade-school moms. Omaha CEOs—you are the best in the world to reach Omaha CEOs.

Paul says, “I am willing to compromise a lot of things in order to reach people. In fact, I look for the cultural forms that will reach the weak, or the Jew, or the outcast, or the athlete or the tentmaker or whomever I am reaching. I become all things to all people so that by all means some might be saved.”

Here is a good question for your lunchtime discussion: **“What are the cultural forms of Christianity that I hold on to that may be a barrier for someone to come to faith in Jesus?”** Likewise, **“What are the open doors for my cultural context?”**

You see, we always have this challenge—and every generation has it: How to take an unchanging message of the gospel and bring it to a rapidly changing world. And the world has never been changing faster. The answer is “contextualization.” Young people, let me appeal to you in particular... the Church needs you to be mobile and thoughtful and flexible and to adapt to new forms quickly to reach emerging audiences. Us old dudes have the unchanging gospel part down, but we are depending on you to understand the cultural waters you swim in quickly to communicate to your generation and the next one.

Whoever you are, young or old—you have a nursing home to reach, a campsite, a neighborhood, a swim team. We become all things to all people so that by all means we might reach some.

Pray