

The Final Word on Contextualization

Scripture: Acts 17:22–34; 1 Corinthians 9:22–23

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Several weeks ago Grace to You launched a blog series examining the subject of *contextualization*, the pragmatic approach to evangelism that says the gospel can be made more powerful by adapting it to cultural contexts. John MacArthur opened that series by asking an important question: Where did Christians ever get the idea they could win the world to Christ by imitating it?

Believe it or not, church marketing specialists answer that question by claiming the apostle Paul as their inspiration. They say he modeled contextualization when he addressed the Athenian philosophers on Mars Hill (Acts 17:22-34). But their favorite passage to cite to justify contextualizing the gospel is 1 Corinthians 9:22-23, where Paul wrote, “I have become all things to all men, that I may by all means save some. And I do all things for the sake of the gospel, that I may become a fellow partaker of it.”

John MacArthur confronted and corrected that false way of thinking about Paul’s statement with a careful, reasoned explanation of the text. Far from mandating pragmatism in ministry, the apostle Paul was calling for personal sacrifice on the part of the evangelist. He was describing not his willingness to sacrifice the message, but his willingness to sacrifice himself to *preach* the message. He would give up everything to promote the spread of the gospel—his rights, privileges, and ultimately his own life.

That’s precisely how Paul lived and ministered. The history of his ministry in the New Testament bears proof after proof of that claim.

Paul was no contextualizer. His point in 1 Corinthians 9 was that no evangelist should let his Christian liberty hinder anyone’s hearing and understanding the message of Christ. In that passage, Paul was describing—and in some sense, advocating—an attitude of personal sacrifice, *not* compromise. Paul would never alter Christ’s call to repent and believe the gospel under any circumstances—and neither should you.

In case you missed John MacArthur’s articles, here are the links:

1. [All Things to All Men](#)
2. [Giving Up to Gain](#)
3. [Liberty in Christ](#)
4. [Servants of a New Covenant](#)
5. [For the Jews I Became Jewish, Part 1](#)

6. [For the Jews I Became Jewish, Part 2](#)
7. [For the Gentiles I Became a Gentile](#)
8. [For the Weak I Became Weak](#)
9. [“Contextualization” and the Corruption of the Church](#)
10. [By All Means Save Some](#)

John ended his critique of the contextualization movement by issuing a warning and plea to the church:

By all means we are to seek the salvation of the lost. We must be servants to all, deferential to every kind of person. For Jews we should become Jewish; for Gentiles we should be like Gentiles; for children we should be childlike; and so on for every facet of humanity. But the primary means of evangelism we dare not overlook: the straightforward, Christ-centered proclamation of the unadulterated Word of God. Those who trade the Word for amusements or gimmicks will find they have no effective means to reach people with the truth of Christ.

Because Grace to You was occupied with hosting the [Truth Matters conference](#), we decided to shut off the comments throughout the course of the series. We know many of you wanted to respond to the articles, so now's your chance. What do *you* think?

Take it to the thread!

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