



Engaging with Context

Sample

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Unit 2. Principled pragmatism

It is difficult to contextualise the gospel out of a love for others. It requires careful thought and a willingness to call my instincts into question. This is far more difficult, for example, than being a legalist. For legalists, everything is set out for you and every situation is anticipated. Your life consists of prescriptions and proscriptions:

Moral dilemma 1: Set response	Fancy a bacon sandwich? I cannot eat pork.
Moral dilemma 2: Set response	Want to go out for a drink? I cannot drink alcohol.
Moral dilemma 3: Set response	Seen Tom Cruise's latest film? I cannot go to the cinema.

But if you do not approach life through a set of rules like this then you have to make fresh decisions much of the time. The number of absolutes is limited. You have to make decisions using other criteria. Sometimes the situations are complex. Worst of all, sometimes the answers vary from situation to situation.

We need to avoid 'situational ethics' – a kind of make-it-up-on-the-spot pragmatism. We, therefore need a *principled pragmatism*. In the previous unit we explored principled contextualisation. Here we focus on principled pragmatism. Paul was a skilled practitioner. Take his approach towards circumcision for example. In one situation he was happy for Timothy to be circumcised (Acts 16:3). But then he was adamant that Titus would not be circumcised (Galatians 2:3). This is not situational ethics or relativism or inconsistency. The situation did not determine his response – the gospel did! Timothy ought to be circumcised because he would then have access into synagogues to preach the gospel. Titus should not be circumcised because it was being demanded of him as a 'gospel-plus' requirement. The principle of the gospel made it necessary to say "Yes" in one case and "No" in the other. This is principled pragmatism.

However, not everyone can cope with that approach. The Corinthians were unable to when it came to Paul's approach to ministry. This is clearly evident in 1 Corinthians 9. As we listen to Paul's defence of his ministry, we will see some remarkable outworkings of some fairly radical principles.

1 Corinthians 9: principled pragmatism

We will provide an overview of 1 Corinthians 9 before focusing in on verses 19–23.

Verses 1–14: Self-defence

The first thing that hits you as you read this section is just how many questions Paul asks. There are seventeen in fact. Why does Paul do this, and how does it follow on from chapter 8?

Paul has interacted with the Corinthians on the presenting issue of eating at a temple (8:10). But he showed that there was a far bigger issue: it is love, and not knowledge, which should define our actions — at least, not knowledge in the sense in which the Corinthians understood it. The Corinthians' primary concern was their freedom and their rights. They were free to attend so they should go ahead and enjoy themselves. In other words, without the controlling ethic of love, they were slaves to their freedom.

In 8:13 Paul switches to the first person singular: “I will never eat meat again that I might not cause my brother to stumble.” He demonstrates a right use of freedom in contrast to the Corinthian abuse of that privilege. But curbing his freedom does not mean he is not free as the Corinthians might think. Hence his initial question in chapter 9: “Am I not free?” That is, “If I choose not to eat meat because of someone else, does that mean I am not free?”

This is only half the story because what follows is actually a defence of his own ministry. So Paul uses himself as an example. Yet at the same time he is defending his approach against those who cannot handle his principled pragmatism because it looks inconsistent. So his next question is: “Am I not an apostle?” The Corinthians were not at all sure. But Paul was adamant and so proceeds to demonstrate it beyond any reasonable doubt.

The most striking evidence he gives in support of his assertion is the existence of the church of God in Corinth (9:2). But then from 9:4 onwards he shifts the focus to a specific contentious point, namely the matter of financial support for his ministry. Initially it looks as though Paul is building up to a plea: “Give me your money!” He uses:

- apostolic precedent (9:5)
- practical wisdom (9:7, 13)
- biblical argument (9:8–10)
- deductive reasoning (9:10–11)

However, he is not asking for their money. Quite the opposite, in fact. They want to give him money and he is adamant that he does not want it. But it is Paul's refusal that raises questions in the minds of the Corinthians. What kind of 'guru', 'sophist', 'wandering wise man' is he, if he has to resort to menial work to support himself (9:6)? And why is he willing to take support from the Macedonians, for example, yet so adamantly refuses money from them? What kind of apostle is he?

“A culturally-sensitive one,” is Paul's reply. This alerts us to something significant about the issue of contextualisation: cultural sensitivity sometimes means *not* doing what is expected of you. That is, instinctive contextualisation always results in 'aping' the surrounding culture. In contrast, principled contextualisation and principled pragmatism means that you actually see the bigger picture. You understand the underlying issues in a local culture — the idols, structures, the things people value, the stories they tell about themselves, the way identity and status work.

Patronage was the norm in the Corinthian culture. As a matter of course, itinerant philosophers were supported by wealthy people. The better the philosopher, the more money he was given and the more people wanted him to be their man because that made them look good! (This is like the corporate sponsorship of athletes and other celebrities today.) Paul was not going to buy into that because it actually undermined the gospel and his ministry. However pragmatic or flexible Paul makes himself out to be in this section, we should recognise that Paul was actually very clear about his non-negotiables.

He was appointed by God to this apostleship, and that is his ultimate defence. He had no other choice, no option, no career decision to make. He is not talking about some inner compulsion or some psychological need. He is talking about God's sovereign, irresistible, providential activity in his life. Paul did not choose this. God thrust it upon him. And who argues with God? Not Paul, because he was so conscious of God's will in this matter that he was convinced of judgement should he decline (9:16).

Had he chosen this role, then he would have gladly received payment. But as he was a slave, payment was altogether inappropriate (9:17). According to some commentators, Paul tells a joke in 9:18. What is my pay? Not to receive any payment! Why is that his reward? Because it means that he can model the gospel. It is a gospel of free grace which he can offer freely. It is a gospel that focuses on the needs of others so by freely forgoing his 'rights' he can discharge his ministry without fear or favour. He of all people, slave though he claims to be, is free from everyone. He is at no one's beck and call. As a self-supporting piper, no one else is in a position to call his tune! And within the prevailing culture of Corinth, that was a vital cultural response.

Verses 19–23: Strategic slavery

In this section we are at the hottest part of the furnace. Paul now gets back to the issue of a right use of freedom. Paul is so free that he can use that freedom to enslave himself to other people as a deliberate choice or specific strategy. The context of his ministry determines his approach. So his conduct and strategy change depending on those with whom he is working. In all probability, he is dealing with the specific question of 'to eat or not to eat' that he addressed in 8:13 and to which he will return. This is not the same as attending the cultic meals, but specifically what you do with marketplace meat when you know it is already been placed at the feet of a Greek god. But the application is far wider because the text itself moves in that direction.

Verse 20 — Paul speaks of his strategy amongst Jews with specific reference to their legal obligations. The law forbids eating certain foods and so Paul freely abstains (Acts 21:23–26). This is not out of obedience to the law, but out of love for those he is seeking to win.

Verse 21 — Paul speaks of his strategy among Gentiles. Because he is not under law, he is free 'to eat or not to eat', and the cultural expectations of his 'audience' determines his response. Precisely because such things are 'things indifferent', he can partake or abstain. It matters not. What is absolute is Paul's longing to see both Jew and Gentile won for Christ.

Verse 22 — And that includes the weak, those he referred to in 8:11 with tender and vulnerable consciences in these dietary matters. He wants to win them. He wants their

consciences to be strengthened so that they will be able to live consistently with the gospel. He wants them to enjoy the freedom that is theirs in Christ. And the way to do that is to respect their scruples and accommodate their hang-ups, to get alongside them, to remove all unnecessary stumbling-blocks, to be sensitive and responsive, so that they might be won. "In all my ministry," says Paul, "this is the controlling principle. I change and adapt, endure any hardship, forgo any right, deprive myself of any comfort, and bind myself to the conscience of another, so that I do absolutely everything I can to see them won for Jesus. In other words, I do everything for the sake of the gospel." This means that everything is a gospel issue.

Implications

In informing us of his ministry and motivation, Paul actually reveals something absolutely crucial in this area of contextualisation. It appears at the beginning of verse 20: "To the Jew, I became as a Jew." Consider this assertion in light of the rhetoric of Philippians 3:5, for example: "Circumcised on the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews ..." Paul the Jew became a Jew to Jews! But how can someone who is one *become* one? It is because his identity in Christ superseded his cultural heritage. The reason he could be so incredibly flexible in cultural issues was because his status as a Christian, his new citizenship, broke the power of his own cultural taboos. He was free to engage any culture precisely because the gospel had effectively disengaged him from his own!

This issue of identity is important. Our culture significantly shapes our identity. But the gospel has saved us from being enslaved by our culture. Our identity is not in the fact that we are British, American, Italian, Senegalese and so on, but children of God and citizens of heaven. We are members of the community of the coming age in which there is neither Jew nor Greek. When we properly believe this then we are free to be sensitive. We are free to contextualise and free to express our commitment to others. We have the freedom to break out of our subcultures because love is our creed.

In verse 21 Paul speaks of the 'law of Christ'. It is not another legal code with rules and regulations. We gain some insight from the final exhortation of the entire section in 11:1: "Imitate me, as I imitate Christ." The law he has internalised, that which directs him and 'tells' him how to behave, is nothing less than the behaviour of Jesus himself. Paul did not dream up this radical contextualisation. God did when he clothed himself in human flesh and took identification to the absurd and appalling lengths of the cross. Jesus showed what true freedom was and it was a freedom to serve, to love others to such an extent that they might be saved. Of course when we do that there will be conflict, both internal and external.

There will be external conflict in the charges of inconsistency and even relativism from those who do not appreciate or understand why we are doing what we are doing. Internal conflict will arise because our actions may run contrary to deep-seated cultural traits in our personality. But if the gospel does its prior work of decontextualising us then we have the freedom to truly contextualise. We have not only the freedom, but also the mandate.

Paul ends in 9:23: "that I may share with them in [the gospel's] blessings." This might seem something of an anti-climax. But for Paul this radical commitment to others and their salvation is not voluntary. It is integral to the gospel itself. Gospel-focused ministry is the

essence of a gospel-impacted life. I cannot claim to have been transformed by the gospel if my life does not reflect that transformation.

Exercise

Note some contextualisation issues you face where you live and work. How might you think about them in terms of principled pragmatics and principled contextualisation?

Just how far can you go?

Just how far can you go with contextualisation, behavioural adaptation and cultural sensitivity? And can you actually go too far? Paul has not really addressed this question yet. So far his concerns have been altruistic, that is, our behaviour being determined by other people when their salvation is in view.

You can, however, go too far — but only if your contextualisation is of the instinctive rather than the principled kind. That is what the Corinthians were doing. As we have seen, the cultural issue involved attending temple meals. But the Corinthians were shaped by the ‘cultural norms’ of rights and freedom. Paul has dealt with the cultural norms. Now he specifically addresses the cultural behaviour, and it turns out that both were wrong! In chapter 10 Paul returns to deal with the practice of those within the church who are attending sessions at pagan temples. They argued that, as there was no such thing as an idol, it was okay. But Paul thought otherwise.

It seems that something more than just a theological conviction lay behind the attitude of those in the know in Corinth. It seems they thought that they were so spiritual that they did not have to worry about the issue. They could visit the temple, “eat, drink and be merry”, and come to no harm. They laboured under delusions of indestructibility and inviolability. They were the untouchables. That is why Paul ends chapter 9 with verses 24-27. “Look,” says Paul, “you have not made it yet! You have got to keep going, and you must do it with self-control and self-discipline. Because it is only the one who crosses the finishing line first who gets the prize. Run as though that is going to be you. I do! I endure all kinds of hardships because I want to win the prize, and I do not want to be disqualified.” If that meant working with his hands, which was considered menial and degrading, he was willing. If that meant forgoing his rights, so be it! Because as Jesus himself said, it is those who endure to the end who are saved. Perseverance is the ultimate mark of election.

1 Corinthians 10:1–22

There is a hint in 10:3-4 that part of the misplaced confidence of the Corinthians lay in their participation in the so-called sacraments of baptism and communion. “But just look at the generation that was lost in the wilderness,” says Paul. Paul then provides example after example of those who ‘fell’ and came under God’s judgement. “Make sure this is not you,” he says. The problem was that it could so easily have been them for by visiting the temples and participating in the meals they were playing with fire.

Responsible assurance

The Corinthians were joining in temple feasts on the basis of a misplaced assumption of grace — hence the direct warning of verse 12: “Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.” We then come across one of the better-known Bible verses: “No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.” (10:13) This has rightly been a source of encouragement to many Christians. Its real genius is the way in which it encapsulates what we can call the ‘tension of grace’. Falling away was a real possibility for some of the Corinthians. So Paul warns them to beware. But the danger comes not from the ordinary circumstances of life, but from their extraordinary presumptuousness.

God has committed himself to preserving us from everyday trial and temptations. He has committed himself to ensuring that there is always an escape route. So much so, that we can say that when we fall into sin we do so unnecessarily. But that does not lessen the force of verse 14: “Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry”. The promise of God is to preserve us in the midst of all kinds of trials and temptations. The responsibility of the believer is to flee idolatry and run from situations of danger. And Paul has a keen sense of the danger at these temples. Although the idols do not in any sense represent a god (there being only one God), that does not mean that there is not some supernatural power behind them. The statues may not represent a deity, but they are a guise for demons (10:20). And by participating in the cultic meals, the Corinthians had crossed the line. Such behaviour was totally incompatible with the new life of those who belonged to Jesus.

Implications

Evidently the Corinthians had taken contextualisation too far. This alerts us to the possibility of doing the same. Those who have any experience in missiology will know that there are many who have done the same, in both their message and their practice.

For instance, the pluralism of our age is pervasive, and not all of it is bad. It is right that people of differing religions and convictions live together. It is right that people are free to express their convictions and to worship at the altars of their choosing. But we cannot lose sight of the exclusivism of Christ, no matter how ‘unfashionable’ or unpalatable it may be. But we are often in danger of that, albeit unknowingly. You hear people talking positively about Muslims or Hindus they come into contact with. And they should. That contact leads many people into studying the belief systems of these different religions so that an effective apologetic can be developed. They then discover that there are many areas of agreement, either at a doctrinal or an ethical level. This then often leads to an appreciation of and respect for these religions. All of this so far is fine. But let us not forget that these systems are idolatrous, and are, in essence, demonic for the simple reason that they keep people away from Christ. They satisfy human longings, but in such a way as to prohibit people coming face to face with Jesus. So there should be a sense in which we despise rather than admire these religions. That is because when the people bow down in their mosques or temples, they do not bow down to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore they do not bow down to God, or any god for that matter, but to demons! This is not to undermine the principle of toleration. Much less is it intended to undermine

our respect, love and admiration for many people who are devotees of these religions. But that love should not lead us to a misplaced regard for what they believe (Acts 17:16).

Contextualisation can be taken too far. We can end up building bridges that we are never going to bring anyone across. And we too can be guilty of presumption when it comes to getting alongside others. We should not under-estimate the supernatural power that lies behind other religions out of some misguided commitment to modernity. Maybe that is why so many people who begin with an admirable passion to reach others in other cultures often end up a long way from where they began. Maybe they simply under-estimated the power of demons to deceive.

1 Corinthians 10:23–11:1

Paul is rounding off this section at the point where he began. The issue in contextualisation is *passion*. It is not principally a cool and calculated strategy. He does what he does out of a passion for real men and women because of a desire to see God glorified (10:31). And what is God's principal glory? Saving sinners. Against this, my own personal freedom and rights pale into relative insignificance.

"Imitate me, just as I imitate Christ," says Paul (11:1). The cross remains the most radical expression of contextualisation. It was costly and painful, but it was motivated by a passion for the salvation of men and women. If people and their salvation are our focus then we will make whatever changes we need to our lifestyles, our church structures, our models of ministry and our evangelism.

We will, for example, reject the idea of 'friendship evangelism' in favour of friendship — friendship which respects and honours people for who they are. We will listen before we talk. We will ask questions before we give answers. We will observe before we act. We will dispense with our own cultural baggage so that we have the flexibility to adopt the cultural patterns of others.

We should never forget the realism of Paul: "I have become all things to all men that I might by all means ... save *some*." (1Corinthians 9:22) What a contrast to the triumphalism of our age! But it is the prize that awaits us which drives us on. So it was for Jesus who "for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, despising its shame." (Hebrews 12:2) So, just as Paul imitated Jesus, let us press on to the prize, to cross the finishing line as victors, with those we have won for Jesus cheering as we pass through!

Reflection

- Have you ever done any 'instinctive contextualisation' which you later regretted? Most of us have. Can you think of places where your church looks so much like the surrounding culture that you have lost your gospel edge? (Think, for example, of the kinds of houses you live in, the cars you drive, your wedding ceremonies, your public gatherings and so.)
- Can you think of places where you have not contextualised enough? (For example, do you always expect unbelievers to meet on your territory where

you feel comfortable rather than loving them enough to take the gospel to where they feel comfortable?)

