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Exegesis of 1 Corinthians 9:19–23 as the foundation of an inclusive theology for the Komering community amid cultural and technological transformation

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This research was motivated by the dynamics of the Komering community, which is currently undergoing cultural transformation alongside rapid developments in digital technology that have the potential to shift local social values and spirituality. The purpose of this study was to analyse 1 Corinthians 9:19–23 through a contextual exegetical approach in order to formulate an inclusive theological framework relevant to the Komering community. The method employed is an exegetical method within a qualitative research framework, integrating historical–sociological analysis of the text with contextual theological study. The findings indicate that the principle of the Apostle Paul 'becoming all things to all people' provides a theological foundation for adaptive and dialogical ministry that respects local culture without compromising the core of faith. The discussion emphasises the importance of applying the incarnational principle in the church's mission in the digital era, including the use of technological media as a means of inclusive proclamation.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: Intradisciplinarily, this study enriches understanding within biblical studies and practical theology, particularly in applying contextual exegesis to issues of culture and church ministry. Interdisciplinarily, it opens avenues for collaboration among theology, cultural anthropology and digital communication studies to develop more comprehensive approaches to understanding and responding to social, cultural and technological changes in modern society.

Keywords: exegesis; 1 Corinthians 9:19–23; inclusive theology; Komering community; cultural transformation; digital technology.

Introduction

Along with the advancement of globalisation and information technology, indigenous and local ethnic communities in Indonesia, particularly the Komering people of South Sumatra, are experiencing rapid and multidimensional cultural transformation. Traditional values and cultural practices such as language, marriage customs, social rituals and the collective identity system of the Komering community are being challenged by the penetration of popular culture, digital media and new modes of communication. A study affirms that Digital media functions as a tool for preserving local culture as well as a medium for the entry of external values that can erode locality if not filtered critically (Putra Dadri & Purnawati 2023). Furthermore, a study shows how Indonesian youth use social media to express their cultural identity, yet at the same time are exposed to global cultures that sometimes displace or alter the meaning of their original cultural values. At the same time, the church and Christian faith communities in Komering are called to remain relevant, empowered and inclusive, that is to be able to embrace all segments of society, including the younger generation, marginalised groups and those less familiar with dominant cultures, without neglecting local cultural roots and theological commitments.

In this context, the study *Indonesian Online News and Digital Culture: A Media Ecology Perspective* shows that Online media not only influences communication and information patterns, but also cultural public spaces, where community participation can strengthen or weaken local values depending on access and adaptive capacity (Dame Laoera & Wibowo 2023). Therefore, the biblical text can no longer be viewed merely as a historical document, but rather as a living source that is called to be read contextually to respond to the challenges of the times and to cultivate a theology that is both inclusive and applicable.

The narrative of 1 Corinthians 9:19–23, in this regard, is particularly compelling because Paul presents cultural adaptation as a crucial element in ministry and evangelism: 'I have become all things to all people, so that by all possible means I might save some' (1 Cor 9:22–23). An exegesis of this text, when approached with attention to cultural context and technological change, offers an opportunity to formulate a normative foundation for the practice of inclusive theology. A study affirms that Paul's message is related to the willingness to relinquish personal rights for the sake of winning others to the Gospel, an ethic of love characterised by sacrifice and adaptive openness (Terblanche 2023). However, existing literature has not yet extensively connected Paul's exposition with the context of the Komering indigenous community, which is currently undergoing cultural transformation and the penetration of digital technology.

The Komering community possesses distinctive cultural forms such as the *Adok* or *Jejuluk* customs in marriage, a social value system that emphasises kinship, family solidarity, respect for tradition and local rituals that serve functions of identity and social cohesion. This sociocultural order, as revealed in anthropological studies, shows that customs are not only symbolic ceremonies, but also a structure of social action that forms the framework of life in the Komering community (Gusty, Wardani & Saddono 2023). However, cultural reorientation is also taking place: technology and digital media have entered daily life, influencing intergenerational communication, informal education methods, and the ways people access information and build communities.

Research on social media explains that digital media has transformed social structures and local communication through a process of 'glocalisation', namely the encounter between global culture and local identity, which adapt to each other in order to remain relevant (Farisal et al. 2024). Meanwhile, a study illustrates how young people experience identity pressure through social media, yet they have the potential to become agents of cultural preservation if supported by education and inclusive spaces for expression (Gandana & Oktaviandy 2021).

Based on this background, several main research problems can be formulated: Firstly, how can the principle of cultural adaptation in 1 Corinthians 9:19–23 be explained exegetically as the foundation of an inclusive theology? Secondly, how can this principle be contextualised within the values and cultural practices of the Komering people? Based on these problem statements, the objectives of this study are: Firstly, to conduct a contextual exegesis of 1 Corinthians 9:19–23 in order to explore theological principles of cultural adaptation and inclusivity; secondly, to analyse in depth the value structure and culture of the Komering community as the context for applying these principles. Thus, this study is expected to enrich the discourse of Indonesian contextual theology and provide practical contributions to the development of church ministry within indigenous communities undergoing transformation.

The basic concept of exegesis and contextual exegesis

The basic concept of exegesis requires readers to engage in a careful reading of the text, exploring its linguistic structure, the communicative intent of the author, narrative coherence and the historical-cultural context in which the text was written. Meanwhile, contextual exegesis expands the analytical scope by positioning the text in a dialogical relationship with the present context of life. The contextual approach compels the interpreter to ask not only, 'What did the text mean to its original audience?' but also, 'How is that meaning relevant to today's socio-cultural challenges?' This approach often adopts a multidisciplinary methodology drawing from social history, cultural anthropology, sociology of religion and media theory, particularly when the contemporary context is influenced by the digital world. The methodological implication is the need for balance: maintaining the historical-theological integrity of the text while courageously applying it in an ethical and relevant manner. In the practice of Christian theology, this model is evident when interpreters draw on Paul's example (1 Cor 9:19–23) as an accommodative paradigm remaining relevant to diverse groups without negating the core truth of the Gospel. This serves as an essential starting point for formulating an inclusive form of contextual theology. Recent studies on contextual interpretation affirm that this methodology is effective in addressing modern problems that are multidimensional in nature.

Inclusive theology as a contextual paradigm

Inclusive theology, viewed as a contextual paradigm, functions as both a theoretical and practical tool to mediate between the demands of doctrinal truth and the needs of humanity within a pluralistic society. Theoretically, it proposes a hermeneutical framework that upholds the essential claims of faith while granting legitimacy to interreligious learning and respect for local cultures. Practically, this theology guides religious actors to develop practices that foster dialogue, humanitarian cooperation and social solidarity. A clear distinction between inclusivism, exclusivism, and pluralism must be understood for its proper application: inclusivism opens opportunities for collaborative engagement without obscuring theological identity, exclusivism closes such opportunities, and radical pluralism often eliminates theological distinctiveness. In the context of church policy and pastoral programmes, the inclusive paradigm encourages a dialogical approach, for example, cross-community service initiatives, education that instils shared civic values and the use of digital platforms for cross-cultural communication so that theology becomes not an obstacle but an empowering force for a just social order. National literature on inclusive theology demonstrates its practical application within Indonesia's pluralistic context, while international studies provide a solid conceptual framework for local adaptation.

Socio-cultural context and the transformation of the Komering community

The Komering community, as one of the ethnic groups in South Sumatra, possesses distinctive cultural characteristics: a strong customary system (including marriage traditions such as *adok or jajuluk*), along with values of mutual cooperation [*gotong-royong*], adherence to kinship structures and religious practices deeply embedded in daily life. Research shows that in Komering marriage traditions, the giving of *adok or jajuluk* is understood as a manifestation of structured cultural, social, and religious values. For example, the study 'The Jejuluk in Komering tribe weddings in the globalisation from a siyâsa perspective' shows how this procession is still preserved despite the pressure of globalisation (Yusdani, Arifai & Arfaizar 2023). In addition, the study 'Provision of Adok to the Komering Community in East OKU' also explains the socio-cultural meaning of *adok* as 'a cultural value, religious value, and social value' that continues to be preserved within the Komering community. In the field of education, the integration of Komering cultural content into the basic curriculum was reported by Syidik and Karsono in a study that found aspects such as language, local knowledge, social organisation, religion and art have already been integrated, while the economic and technological aspects remain underrepresented.

However, modernisation and technological transformation present real challenges such as migration, social media penetration, and economic change that erode certain traditional practices while simultaneously opening access to knowledge and the reorganisation of identity. As an illustration, an intercultural study on the Komering notes that Komering's youth are increasingly open to national and international popular culture, but at the same time are seeking ways to revitalise local cultural symbols through digital platforms, such as turning cultural parades or wedding customs into digital content or social media. Anthropological studies reveal changes in the practice of giving *adok or jejuluk*, including modifications to the stages, the addition of war chants and the adaptation of new cultural symbols (Gusty et al. 2023). The challenge for faith life is how religious practices and church ministries can respond to these changes without alienating the older generation or disregarding the core values of local culture (Talan, Bilo & Purdaryanto 2024).

Contextual exegetical analysis of 1 Corinthians 9:19–23

Through a contextual exegetical approach, this text can be understood more deeply by considering the historical, social and cultural background of the Corinthian congregation, as well as the theological reflections that arise from Paul's interaction with that context.

The historical and social context of the first Epistle to the Corinthians

The first Epistle to the Corinthians was written within a pluralistic and dynamic urban context, namely the city of Corinth in the first century CE. This city was one of the major centres of trade and cultural interaction in the Greco-Roman world, characterised by religious diversity, complex social stratification and a strong tradition of public rhetoric in its societal life. Studies indicate that the Corinthian society was not merely an ordinary agrarian community but rather an urban society with complex social characteristics, where the early Christian community likely attracted people who did not neatly fit into the established social categories of agrarian societies (Duckor & Racine 2022). This condition produced a highly heterogeneous congregation consisting of converted Jews, philosophically minded Greeks, freed slaves and social elites. Consequently, internal conflicts regarding social status, the practice of eating meat sacrificed to idols, and differing understandings of Christian freedom became particularly prominent. Social-structural studies also affirm that the social structure of the Corinthian ecclesia is a reasonable cause for the dissensions that had occurred between her members, since they perceived the church through various social models available at the time such as the household, associations [*collegia*], political institutions (*ekklesia*) and the Jewish synagogue thereby allowing the social values embedded in these models to shape the internal dynamics of the congregation (Mihăilă 2019).

In this context, Paul's relationship with the Corinthian congregation was complex. He was both the founder of the community and a pastoral authority who had to admonish, correct and guide them toward unity in the Gospel. Studies on Paul's leadership show that amid institutional change and a crisis of authority, Paul negotiated renewed acceptance as Corinth's founder and apostle by undermining the legitimate power of his opponents, who claimed Jewish descent and apostolic miracles as key leadership markers (Barentsen 2018). Thus, Paul's pastoral approach in this letter was not merely theoretical or dogmatic but also strategic and contextual. Historical-social literature emphasises that many of the issues within the Corinthian congregation reflected the cultural pressures of the city, such as the patronage system, the values of honour and shame and religious pluralism. Therefore, Paul's response appears as both a rhetorical and practical action, adapted to the congregation's concrete situation for the sake of maintaining *koinonia* and ensuring the continuity of the Gospel proclamation.

Textual analysis of 1 Corinthians 9:19–23

A grammatical analysis of 1 Corinthians 9:19–23 provides an important foundation for understanding Paul's theological intention in expressing the principle of freedom and contextual ministry. In the Greek text, Paul writes ἐλεύθερος γὰρ ὢν ἐκ πάντων πᾶσιν ἐμαυτὸν ἐδούλωσα, ἵνα τοὺς πλείονας κερδήσω 'For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them' (1 Cor 9:19).

The main verb *edoulōsa*, 'I made myself a servant', is the first-person singular aorist active indicative form of the root *douloō*, [to enslave or to make a servant]. The aorist form here indicates a voluntary action performed by Paul as a deliberate and decisive choice, rather than a passive condition or an act of compulsion (Fee 2008). This act of making himself a servant carries an ironic contrast to Paul's status as *eleutheros*, 'free'. Syntactically, the construction ἐλεύθερος γὰρ ὢν ἐκ πάντων employs the participle ὢν (present active participle of *εἰμί*), emphasising Paul's existential state of being free from all human obligations; yet rhetorically, he chooses to become a servant for the sake of his missionary purpose (Thiselton 2000).

Furthermore, the phrase τοῖς πᾶσιν [to all people] broadens the universal scope of Paul's ministry. In verse 22 appears the well-known clause τοῖς πᾶσιν γέγονα πάντα [I have become all things to all people]. The verb γέγονα is the perfect active indicative form of *γίνομαι* [to become], which indicates a resulting state that continues into the present. This perfect form is significant because it shows that Paul's adaptation was not a momentary act but an ongoing missionary identity that he continually maintained (Garland 2003). In a rhetorical context, the repetition of the word ἐγενόμην [I have become] in verses 20–22 creates an anaphoric pattern that underscores the intensity of Paul's commitment to adapt himself to various groups (Jews, non-Jews, those under the law, the weak) without compromising the truth of the Gospel. This pattern demonstrates the use of a classical persuasive strategy known as *imitatio*, in which Paul serves as a model for the congregation in living an adaptive missionary life.

Moreover, the use of the purpose conjunction ἵνα [so that] in verses 19, 20 and 22 marks the teleological intention behind Paul's actions. This repetition emphasises the missional orientation of the entire passage: all of Paul's adaptations are carried out not for personal gain, but ἵνα πάντως τινὰς σώσω 'so that by all means I might save some'. Grammatically, this structure combines elements of freedom (status), voluntary action (aorist active), and a soteriological purpose [*hina* clause], thereby forming a coherent and theologically grounded argument (Garland 2003).

This grammatical analysis shows that Paul is not advocating ethical relativism, but rather teaching a form of missional flexibility rooted in love and freedom in Christ. The structure and choice of verb forms in the Greek text highlight the balance between theological identity (freedom in Christ) and social solidarity (becoming a servant to all). Thus, a grammatical understanding of this text reinforces the theological reading that Paul's principle of ministry is incarnational and adaptively responsive to context, yet firmly grounded in the unchanging Gospel.

Practically speaking, in societies undergoing cultural and technological change, such as ethnic communities or local churches facing digitalisation and the pluralisation of values, Paul's thought encourages strategies that make use of contemporary means (e.g. digital media, cross-community forums) while emphasising character formation and intergenerational dialogue, so that adaptation does not become an assimilation that erodes cultural roots.

Studies in mission and global contextual theology regard Paul's example as a classic source for theological practice that prioritises relationality, critical inculturation and dialogical engagement, in which the local church is called to develop a 'translation' of the Gospel that is sensitive to the language, symbols and social structures of the community without compromising its ethical and Christological demands.

For instance, Neller points out that 1 Corinthians 9:19–23 can be read as a 'model for those who seek to win souls' in a cross-cultural context (Neller 2019). In other words, 1 Corinthians 9:19–23 offers a model of both hermeneutics and praxis: a dialogical hermeneutic and an inclusive praxis, both of which are crucial for a church that seeks to be effective and faithful within a pluralistic and rapidly changing society.

Contextual application for the Komering community

In actualising 1 Corinthians 9:19–23 within the Komering community, it is essential to understand its distinctive socio-cultural characteristics, such as kinship, solidarity and respect for tradition. Paul's principle of 'becoming all things to all people' is highly relevant for building a testimony of faith that honours and engages local culture.

The relevance of Paul's principle to the Komering context

Paul's principle of making himself 'all things to all people' (1 Cor 9:22) holds profound relevance for the Komering community, which faces the challenges of modernity while seeking to preserve its local cultural identity. In the Komering context, 'becoming all things' does not mean compromising one's faith or diluting the core truth of the Gospel; rather, it reflects humility and cultural sensitivity, for example, valuing Komering customs, the spirit of mutual cooperation (gotong royong), close kinship ties and the distinctive cultural symbols of the Indonesian archipelago.

A mission approach that honours local culture means that Christian ministry and proclamation among the Komering people should not appear as a foreign cultural agent that erases tradition, but as a friend and companion who appreciates and embodies those values. This aligns with the perspective of contextual missiology, which speaks of mission as frontier-crossing and identity-formation where mission crosses cultural boundaries and fosters the formation of a new, inclusive identity in Christ (Simon 2013). Therefore, a mission strategy in Komering can adopt Paul's model, adapting the language, symbols and methods of proclamation to the Komering culture (for example, through traditional music, communal meals and the Komering language), while preserving the core of faith, namely Christ as Saviour and the

call to live in love and justice. In this way, the presence of the church within the Komering community can serve as a cultural transformation agent that honours local roots without losing the universal dimension of the Gospel.

Cultural transformation and technological challenges

The Komering community is undergoing a cultural transformation driven by digitalisation and the rise of social media. Younger generations increasingly engage with the internet, smartphones and digital platforms that introduce global values, which may at times conflict with or overlap with traditional Komering norms. The impact of digitalisation on Komering values and spirituality is evident: face-to-face interactions within families and customary communities are being replaced by online communication, oral traditions of storytelling and sharing are shifting to digital media, and the cultural identity of the Komering people is experiencing pressure from global homogenisation. In a study, it is shown that the digital era has created new spaces for cross-cultural interaction, but it has also brought about challenges such as the erosion of traditional values and the rise of secularism (Langi et al. 2025). The potential of digital media as a means of inclusive evangelisation among the Komering community is significant: local churches can utilise digital platforms (such as short videos in the Komering language, podcasts on Komering identity and faith and intergenerational online forums) as mediums for proclaiming the Gospel while simultaneously revitalising local culture. However, the use of technology must be accompanied by character formation and intergenerational dialogue to ensure that technological adaptation does not turn into cultural assimilation that erodes local roots. In this regard, a contextual theological approach suggests that technology should not merely function as a tool but also as an arena of communal practice that sustains the relational, collective and cultural values of the Komering people.

An inclusive theological model for the Komering community

For the Komering community, comprising multiple generations and often positioned at the intersection between traditional customs and modern transformation, the church can serve as an inclusive space across cultures and generations by developing a dialogical and adaptive model of inclusive theology.

A dialogue between Christian faith and Komering local values is essential: the Christian faith affirms that all human beings are created in the image of God and are called to live in love, justice and community; meanwhile, Komering cultural values such as gotong royong (mutual cooperation), respect for ancestors and communal meals can become mediums of Gospel inculturation, provided that these values do not conflict with the core truths of faith.

The study 'Contextual Theology and the Challenge of Globalisation' asserts that contextual theology enables the emergence of local and inclusive expressions in which the Gospel is lived out within specific cultures without losing its essential truths. An adaptive and contextual ministry ethic for the Komering community includes cultivating humility (servant leadership), listening to the community, valuing local culture and selecting contextually relevant methods, for example, ministry within traditional village settings as well as, more recently, within digital spaces.

As an inclusive space across cultures and generations, the church must be able to bring together the various generations of the Komering people, traditional elders, digitally oriented youth and urban Komering communities into a shared dialogue of faith, so that cultural and technological change does not divide but rather enriches the community.

Conclusion

A contextual exegesis of 1 Corinthians 9:19–23 affirms that Paul's missional principle of 'becoming all things to all people' provides a theological foundation highly relevant for developing an inclusive theology within the Komering community, which is currently undergoing cultural and technological transformation. Paul demonstrates that true freedom in faith is expressed through a willingness to adapt without compromising the core of the Gospel, a model that can be applied in the Komering context through a dialogue between Christian faith and local cultural values such as *gotong royong* [mutual cooperation], solidarity and respect for tradition. In the face of digitalisation and shifting values, the church in Komering is called to become an open space across cultures and generations, utilising technology as a medium of contextual proclamation rooted in the love of Christ. A recommendation for future research is the need for empirical and ethnographic studies on the implementation of this inclusive theological principle in the practice of the Komering church, including how digital media, faith education and intercultural interaction can be effectively integrated to strengthen Christian witness amid the ongoing social and technological dynamics.

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CRediT authorship contribution

Febriaman L. Harefa: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Software, Validation, Visualisation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. Jeane Paath: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Validation,

Visualisation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. Both authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

The authors confirm that the data supporting this study and its findings are available within the article and its listed references.

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