

3. PAUL'S LETTERS

Doing Theology in Context



From Jerusalem and as far around as Illyricum I have fully proclaimed the good news of Christ.

ROM 15:19

If Acts tells us stories of contextualizing the gospel in evangelistic settings, then Paul's letters are unrivaled in offering examples of doing contextual theology for diverse Christian communities.¹ To be sure, Paul's epistles have not always been read in this way. Earlier generations of scholars tended to think of Paul chiefly as a dogmatic theologian, the originator of a grand system of belief. If, however, there is agreement on anything about Paul today, it is that the man from Tarsus was not a systematic theologian, at least not in the modern sense of someone who wrote treatments of different theological topics. Recent interpreters of Paul have viewed him as a pastoral theologian, a task theologian, a missionary theologian, a hermeneutical theologian, and the like. These different portraits all support the understanding that Paul is a *contextual theologian*—his letters, case studies in the contextualizing of the gospel in ways that intersect the concrete lives and cultures of his hearers. My concern in this chapter, then,

regarding which letters should be included in Paul's authentic writings, see the brief but incisive discussion of Luke Timothy Johnson (*The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation*, rev. ed. [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999], pp. 271-73). Johnson questions the methodological assumptions behind the widespread view that Colossians, Ephesians, 2 Thessalonians, and the Pastoral Letters (1-2 Timothy, Titus) are non-Pauline. I agree with Johnson that, in particular, criteria which evaluate the style and content of these disputed letters against some perceived norm of consistency in the seven unquestioned epistles tend to be highly subjective. Such measures of which letters could or could not have been written by Paul fail to reckon with the great variety in style and theme within *all* of Paul's letters, including the seven normally taken to be Pauline. As a matter of practical method, I will base my conclusions about Paul's theological contextualization primarily on the generally accepted letters and Colossians, which is considered to be authentic by many interpreters of Paul. I believe that these findings, however, can find support in the entire Pauline corpus.

	Acts 13:13-52	Acts 14:8-20	Acts 17:16-34
Themes tailored to the audience	Fulfillment of God's messianic promise to the Israel; Scripture testifies to Jesus' resurrection	God's provision of rain, fruitful crops, and food (v. 17)—basic needs of life	Various points of contact with Stoic and Epicurean philosophy; e.g., God's providential care (vv. 26-27), unity of the human race (v. 26), God is near (v. 27), we are his offspring (v. 28)
Cultural resources used	Citations from the Hebrew Scriptures; Jewish methods of interpretation	Local religious background; Zeus seen as god of weather and vegetation (v. 17)	Language and traditions from Greek philosophy; quotations from their poets (v. 28)
The kerygma	The story of Jesus' crucifixion at the hand of the Jews, burial, and resurrection as the fulfillment of prophecy (vv. 27-33)	<i>Theological kerygma</i> (incomplete?); the story of the Creator God (vv. 15-17)	God has appointed the "man" Jesus, whom he raised from the dead, to judge the whole world (v. 31)
Challenge to the audience's worldview	Call to reshape Israel's interpretation of its history and Scriptures in light of the resurrection; Jews must abandon religious exclusivism	Challenges pagan polytheism and idolatry	Confronts the fundamental worldview of Stoicism, Epicureanism and popular religious pluralism; Greek notions of history and the afterlife
Evangelistic appeal	They must believe in Jesus for forgiveness of sins and justification (vv. 38-39); warning of judgment for following the pattern of Israel's unbelief (vv. 40-41)	Turn from idols to the living God (v. 15)	All people must repent, on account of God's coming judgment through the resurrected Jesus (vv. 30-31)
The Response			
Response to Paul's preaching	Initial openness to the grace of God, then rejection and persecution from the Jews; the gospel is offered to the Gentiles, who receive it (vv. 42-52)	Some "disciples" (v. 20), but most Gentiles continue in their misunderstanding (v. 18). Jews from neighboring towns win over the crowds, stone Paul and leave him for dead (vv. 19-20)	Some scoff at the resurrection, others want to hear more, some believe (vv. 32-33)

is not simply in the *what*—the theological content we find in Paul's letters—but especially in *how* they model for us the theological process of drawing out the implications of the gospel for new circumstances.

What motivated Paul's audience-sensitive approach to doing theology? More than bald pragmatism. Surely it was propelled by his sense of mission as one compelled by Christ's love (2 Cor 5:14). Paul was first and foremost a missionary-pastor who planted churches and wrote pastoral communications in order to build up his converts in their newfound faith in the crucified and risen Jesus. As one recent interpreter explains, "Paul's theological activity in writing letters to churches was an extension of his missionary activity, which he understood as an apostolic commission."² The dichotomy between evangelism and theology that is present in much contemporary theological education would have seemed quite strange to Paul. He did not consider his missionary work to be confined to his initial preaching of the gospel. Paul was profoundly concerned that believers would persevere in the faith and that his apostolic work would not be in vain (1 Thess 3:1-5; cf. 1 Cor 15:2). As a result, his Spirit-guided theological reflection focused on those issues that would sustain his missionary purpose for the churches. Paul's theology was a living, breathing theology of the mission field, capable of being enfolded in a whole variety of human contexts.

THE CENTER OF IT ALL

Before we take a closer look at Paul's missional approach to doing theology, there is a prior question that needs to be addressed: what is Paul actually contextualizing in his letters? If Paul's theology takes many shapes due to his mission concerns and the specific needs he encounters, what keeps it from becoming a "chameleon-theology," where the content itself is constantly morphing to fit the circumstances? Is there a nonnegotiable message that remains stable throughout all of its multiple manifestations? That Paul can speak of the "truth of the gospel" (Gal 2:14) in a setting in which he believes the gospel is under threat implies that he understands something normative, something *trans*contextual about the faith he conveys. Here is where the sea starts to get rough, however. Uncovering the constant center of Paul's thought has proved to be one of the most complicated and intriguing problems in all Pauline interpretation. Older scholarship searched for some controlling *idea* or core doctrine that could capture the true essence of Paul's theology—like "justification by faith" or "participation in Christ" or "salva-

²Mark A. Seifrid, *Justification by Faith: The Origin and Development of a Central Pauline Theme* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992), p. 261-62. See also Thomas R. Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 2001), pp. 38-39, 60-64.

tion."³ But that approach fails to capture the contextual nature of Paul's theological reflection. Paul is more than a talking head—someone who simply thinks in terms of theological concepts that are of greater or lesser importance. If we abstract Paul's theology from its specific mission context and from its connection to the life experience of God's people—including Paul's own—we risk cutting the vital artery between Paul the theologian and Paul the missionary-pastor.

More recently, interpreters of Paul have begun to think about the normative element in Paul's thought in more dynamic ways—as a foundational narrative or story about God and Christ that underlies Paul's concrete theological arguments in his letters,⁴ or as an abiding coherence within Paul's thought that is constantly interacting with the contingent circumstances of the mission field.⁵ Such approaches point us in the right direction, not least because they recognize that to understand Paul's contextual way of doing theology, we cannot short-change either the stable dimension of his thought or the specificity in which it comes to speech and engages Christians in the Roman Empire. "Coherence" and "contingency," as J. Christiaan Beker notably puts it, are inseparable.⁶

THE GOSPEL AS THE HEART OF PAUL'S THOUGHT

If there is something abiding in Paul's thought that transcends its many contextual expressions, can we be more specific about its actual content? What

On the various attempts to identify the center of Paul's thought, see Joseph Plevnik, "The Center of Pauline Theology," *CBQ* 51 (1989): 461-78, esp. pp. 469-76; Dean Flemming, "Essence and Adaption: Contextualization and the Heart of Paul's Gospel" (Ph.D. diss., University of Aberdeen, 1987), pp. 52-84.

The recognition of a narrative substructure to Paul's thought has gained considerable momentum in recent years. See, e.g., Richard B. Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ: An Investigation of the Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1-4:11*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2002); Richard B. Hays, "Crucified with Christ," in *Pauline Theology, Volume 1: Thessalonians, Philippians, Galatians, Philemon*, ed. J. M. Bassler (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), pp. 227-46; N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), esp. pp. 103-9; Ben Witherington III, *Paul's Narrative Thought World: The Tapestry of Tragedy and Triumph* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994); Norman R. Peterson, *Rediscovering Paul: Philemon and the Sociology of Paul's Narrative World* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985); Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001). See also the important analysis and critique of the narrative approach to Paul in B. W. Longenecker, ed., *Narrative Dynamics in Paul: A Critical Assessment* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002).

The "coherence-contingency" approach was articulated by J. Christiaan Beker. See *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980); idem, "Recasting Pauline Theology: The Coherence-Contingency Scheme as Interpretive Method," in *Pauline Theology, Volume 1: Thessalonians, Philippians, Galatians, Philemon*, ed. J. M. Bassler (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), pp. 15-24.

See Beker, *Paul the Apostle*.

makes the task so challenging is that we have no access to Paul's thinking (or that of any other New Testament writer) in a "noncontextualized" form. Much of what he writes is intended to mold moral behavior and change thoughts and attitudes in order to establish young Christians in their faith. Rather than simply stating his core beliefs themselves, Paul's letters largely consist of specific applications and interpretations of those beliefs within the course of his pastoral communication. Furthermore, his theological convictions are often embedded in rhetorical arguments that are designed to persuade a particular audience. To put it plainly, when Paul writes letters, *all* of his theology is contextual theology.

We need to look beyond Paul's targeted theological statements alone to determine the heart of his thought. Paul's primary calling as a missionary-pastor was not to formulate a theology but to proclaim the one gospel in order to "save some" (1 Cor 9:22) and to shape the lives of his converts in light of that gospel (e.g., Phil 1:27). Paul leaves little doubt that "the gospel" was the singular passion of his life and apostolic ministry (1 Cor 9:23). Paul J. Achtemeier is quite right that "what one confronts in Paul's letters are reflections on how the gospel intersects with the world in which his readers live and how they are to think and act in that world."⁷ I would argue, then, that if we want to discover the coherent element of Paul's thought, the matrix that gives shape to everything else, we must find it in "the gospel."⁸

If the gospel is at the heart of Paul's message, then what did he mean by it? By its very nature, *gospel* (*euangelion*) is a rather imprecise term. It has roots in the Old Testament announcement of the good news of God's coming salvation (e.g., Is 40:9; 52:7=Rom 10:15), and its Christian usage may go back to both Jesus himself (Mt 11:5; Lk 4:16-21) and the church before Paul (e.g., Acts 10:36-38).⁹ But *gospel* was also used to refer to the good news about the birth, accession, or victory of a king or emperor in the Greco-Roman world. As a result, the term *gospel* would no doubt have triggered political and religious associations related to the rule of the imperial "savior" in the minds of Paul's Gentile read-

⁷Paul J. Achtemeier, "Finding the Way to Paul's Theology: A Response to J. Christiaan Beker and J. Paul Sampley," in *Pauline Theology, Volume 1: Thessalonians, Philippians, Galatians, Philemon*, ed. J. M. Bassler (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), p. 25.

⁸The noun *gospel* (*euangelion*) appears sixty times in the Pauline corpus, forty-eight of them in the so-called undisputed letters. In addition, Paul often substitutes nearly equivalent terms such as "proclamation" (*kerygma*), or "word" (*logos*; e.g., "word of the cross," 1 Cor 1:18; "word of Christ," Col 3:16; "word of reconciliation," 2 Cor 5:19; "word of truth, the gospel," Col 1:5; Eph 1:13).

⁹See Peter Stuhlmacher, "The Pauline Gospel," in *The Gospel and the Gospels*, ed. Peter Stuhlmacher (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1991), pp. 156-66.

ers.¹⁰ Not unusually, Paul seizes a term that has both a Jewish and a pagan past, and gives it a distinctively Christian meaning.

First and foremost, the gospel stands for the powerful proclamation of Christ so that people will believe in him and receive salvation (Rom 1:16; 1 Cor 9:16-18; 1 Thess 1:5; Col 1:5-6). This gospel proclamation, however, is not limited to what Paul preached in missionary settings to non-Christian audiences. When Paul expresses his eager desire "to proclaim the gospel (*euangelisasthai*) to you also who are in Rome" (Rom 1:15), he is speaking not to unbelievers, but to Roman Christians. Peter T. O'Brien crafts a compelling case that Paul uses "gospel" language to include the full exposition of the gospel that is designed to edify believers and ground them in the faith.¹¹

Although the gospel is "the power of God for salvation" (Rom 1:16), it also has a coherent and stable content. This is clear from passages such as Galatians 1:6-9 and 2:5, 14 ("the truth of the gospel"), where "the gospel" stands for the nonnegotiable message Paul preaches and to which he expects obedience. The gospel is normative for both Christian belief and behavior (e.g., Rom 1:1-4; 10:16; 1 Cor 15:1-2; 2 Cor 9:13; 11:4; Phil 1:27; Col 1:5; Eph 1:13; 2 Thess 1:8; 1 Tim 1:11). Yet, in his letters the substance of Paul's gospel is generally assumed rather than spelled out. Paul only discusses those aspects of it that are relevant to the situation at hand. He could grant that his converts had already received instruction in the basic understanding of the faith, and in general Paul does not need to repeat this unless there is some misunderstanding of the gospel that needs to be corrected. Just as a sermon may not continually retell the story of the text on which it is based, but presuppose it throughout, so Paul's letters constantly assume and interpret the gospel story of God's redeeming action in Christ.¹²

When Paul does offer foundational theological statements or quote Christian confessions that are obviously close to the heart of his gospel (e.g., 1 Cor 15:1-5; Rom 1:3-4; Gal 4:4-7; 1 Thess 1:9-10), he always does so in the course of a contextual argument. In no case does he try to give the gospel a comprehensive or definitive expression. For example, Romans 1:3-4 defines the gospel christologically ("the gospel concerning his Son"), while later in the same chapter Paul articulates the gospel in terms of its saving purpose ("the power of God for salvation," 1:16-17). Even a basic affirmation like 1 Corinthians 15:3-5, which Paul

¹⁰See e.g., R. A. Horsley, "Rhetoric and Empire—and 1 Corinthians," in *Paul and Politics: Ekkelesia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation: Essays in Honor of Krister Stendahl*, ed. R. A. Horsley (Harrisburg, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 2000), pp. 91-92.

¹¹Peter T. O'Brien, *Gospel and Mission in the Writings of Paul: An Exegetical and Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1993), pp. 61-65.

¹²Idem, *Faith of Jesus Christ*, p. 227.

explicitly states is the gospel he preached to the Corinthians (1 Cor 15:1) is a minimal definition, chosen for its relevance to Paul's immediate argument concerning the Corinthians' misunderstanding of the future resurrection.

The gospel, then, has a coherent content, but determining its scope and limits is far from easy. Nonetheless, Paul's theological reflections on the gospel and his occasional restatements of it point to a number of features that seem to be indispensable to its meaning.¹³

1. The focus. Like the sun in our solar system, Paul's gospel has a radiating center—the Christ event. In simplest terms, the content of the message Paul preaches is “Christ” (Rom 16:25; 1 Cor 1:24; 15:12; Phil 1:15–18) or the “Son of God” (Rom 1:9; 2 Cor 1:19; Gal 1:16) or “Jesus Christ as Lord” (2 Cor 4:5), all of which can stand as shorthand terms for his gospel. It is above all the “gospel of Christ” (Rom 15:19; 2 Cor 9:13; Gal 1:7; Phil 1:27), a message about Jesus, God's beloved Son. Yet, it is also *God's* gospel (Rom 1:1; 15:16; 2 Cor 11:7; 1 Thess 2:2, 8). Paul's interest is not in Christology as such, but rather in the “good news” of God's loving and saving intervention in Jesus Christ “for us” (Rom 8:31–32). As Paul puts it to the Corinthians, “We proclaim *Christ crucified*” (1 Cor 1:23). This redemptive work focuses on Christ's death and resurrection as the saving events (1 Cor 15:3–4; Rom 4:24–25; 2 Cor 4:14; 1 Thess 4:14), but also includes his present lordship (2 Cor 4:5; Phil 2:9–11) and future return (1 Thess 1:10; 4:13–5:11; 1 Cor 1:7–8; 15:23; Phil 3:20–21). Furthermore, God's intervention in history in Christ is a political as well as a religious event. When Paul announces that Jesus, the cursed and crucified criminal, is Lord (Rom 10:9; 1 Cor 12:3; Phil 2:11), he rules out giving ultimate allegiance to all other so-called gods and lords, including the emperor himself.¹⁴

Consequently, Paul's whole understanding of the Christian faith and life fixes its gaze, not on some timeless theological truth or “supracultural” principle, but on a contingent, historical happening: the event of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Indeed, it is the scandalous particularity of the gospel that perhaps makes it so compelling for Paul, as well as for us today. Yet, it is also an event that transcends the particularities of history and culture, because through the crucified and risen Messiah, God has revealed his saving power and love to all of humankind. All of Paul's theological reflection, then, centers on

¹³After writing this section, I became aware that Gordon Fee has structured Paul's *theology* under categories that overlap with my own. See *God's Empowering Presence* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994), p. 12. Of course, all such attempts at categorizing no doubt reflect more of our own efforts to understand Paul's thought than how he himself would have described it.

¹⁴See Michael J. Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord: A Theological Introduction to Paul and His Letters* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2004), pp. 102, 107–9.

the one gospel of what God has done in and through Jesus Christ.

2. The framework. Is there a framework or underlying structure that holds this gospel together? Although there have been a number of suggestions—apocalyptic, eschatology, salvation history, the covenant, the Jewish Scriptures, among them—I believe that when we recognize that Paul's gospel has a *narrative* framework, we best capture the heart of his thought.

Although Paul nowhere narrates the story in detail, his writings provide considerable evidence that he conceived of God's saving work within the framework of an overarching metanarrative of God's dealings with humankind, a story that spans from creation to the consummation of history. Ben Witherington is no doubt close to the mark when he claims that this comprehensive story of redemption is actually made up of several tightly interwoven stories:¹⁵ first, the story of God, the Maker, Sustainer and Redeemer of the universe (Rom 8:18–25; 1 Cor 8:6); second, the story of humankind, which includes the story of Adam, the head of the old humanity, and his sin (Rom 5:12–21); and third, the story of Israel, within which we find the stories of Abraham and his faith (Romans 4, Galatians 3) and of Moses and the law (Galatians, Romans, 2 Corinthians 3). The sacred narrative comes to a focal point in the defining story of Christ, who through his death and resurrection delivers humanity from Adam's sin and the law and who is the head of the church, the community of those who are redeemed through faith in him. Yet it is an unfinished story awaiting a sequel, because the church's hope lies in the future, in the return of Christ (1 Thess 4–5) and God's final triumph (1 Cor 15). Within this grand narrative of redemption, the story of Christians, including Paul's own story, is intertwined with the story of Christ; they initially participate in his death and resurrection (Romans 6), they pattern themselves after him and are transformed into his image through the power of the Spirit in the present (Phil 2:5–11; 3:10), and they will be fully conformed to the likeness of Christ in the future when they are raised from the dead. The “master story” of Christ crucified and risen is a paradigmatic narrative for those who are “in” him. Paul reads all other subplots, whether the earlier narratives of God and Israel, or the stories of Paul and his churches that are still being written, through the lens of the story of Christ.¹⁶

This storied structure overlaps with the familiar notion of salvation history, which especially highlights the *continuity* of Paul's gospel with God's past deal-

¹⁵Ben Witherington III, *The Paul Quest: The Renewed Search for the Jew of Tarsus* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998), pp. 237–53.

¹⁶David G. Horrell, “Paul's Narratives or Narrative Substructure? The Significance of 'Paul's Story,'” in *Narrative Dynamics in Paul: A Critical Assessment*, ed. B. W. Longenecker (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), p. 168.

ings with Israel and the gospel's fulfillment of Scripture (Rom 1:1; 3:21; Gal 3:8). God's eternal plan of salvation has now been revealed in the fullness of time when "God sent his Son . . . to redeem those who were under the law" (Gal 4:4-5), fulfilling the ancient promise to Abraham (Gal 3:6-9, 15-18). Given this emphasis on continuity in the sacred story, we might be tempted to frame Paul's gospel like successive acts in a well-plotted drama—a story that passes from creation through God's dealings with Israel to the return of Christ, with the climax coming in the events of the cross and the resurrection.

Paul's gospel, however, also has what is commonly called an *apocalyptic* dimension, which highlights a surprising *discontinuity* between the story of Christ and what has gone before. For Paul, Jesus' death and resurrection bring an end to the world as it was and usher in the age to come. The "new creation" has dawned (Gal 6:14-15; 2 Cor 5:17). Through faith in Christ and in union with him, people can transfer from the old aeon of Adam, sin, death, and the law to the new time of salvation. Believers are called to embody the new creation through the gift and empowering of the Spirit. Still, the new era has not yet fully replaced the old. The church lives in the "eschatological twilight zone" at the turn of the ages, enduring the weaknesses and sufferings of the old order even as it awaits the full and final redemption of creation and the future resurrection (Rom 8:18-27).

How then do we reconcile the continuity and the discontinuity of Paul's gospel, the salvation-historical perspective and the apocalyptic one? Rather than pitting one against the other, it is better to hold them in tension. Both are integral to the narrative framework of Paul's thought.¹⁷ The Pauline metanarrative is not a single unbroken line, but rather a multilayered story in which the decisive story of the Christ event and its saving meaning is superimposed, so to speak, upon the story of God's gracious dealings with Israel. It is the fulfillment of the former story, but at the same time it is something revolutionary which mandates a rereading of Scripture as a witness to the gospel (e.g., Gal 3:8; 1 Cor 10:11). The sacred story is comprehensive enough to embrace both of these elements. This grand "theodrama," which views the entire history of God's saving activity for humanity from the perspective of its eschatological climax in Christ, is the underlying framework of Paul's thought. Like the girders of a great building, it is seldom in plain view, but without it, Paul's gospel could not stand.

3. Formative elements. In addition to a narrative framework, we can dis-

cover three foundational elements or building blocks that helped to shape the gospel message that Paul came to believe and preach: the Scriptures, the early church tradition, and Paul's own experience of Christ on the Damascus road. Each of these participates in the coherence of his thought.

The Jewish Scriptures. Paul's gospel is rooted in the symbolic world of Pharaic Judaism and of the Scriptures of Israel. It is true that Paul's experience of Christ dramatically altered his perspective on his Jewish past (see Phil 3:4-11) and that this new standpoint influences how he reads Scripture. All the same, the grand story that provides the framework of Paul's thought is anchored in the Old Testament. Paul claims that the gospel he preached was "promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures" (Rom 1:1-2; cf. 3:21; 1 Cor 15:3-4). Paul can even make the bold assertion that "the scripture . . . declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham" (Gal 3:8). It is to Israel's Scripture that he continually appeals to explain and interpret God's present redeeming actions in Christ (e.g., Rom 10:5-21; Gal 3:16); his letters are teeming with quotations from it and allusions to it. The Scriptures are an indispensable building block for Paul's understanding of the gospel, as well as a continual reference point for his reflections on the gospel in the course of his letters.

The Christian tradition. In a striking statement, Paul reminds the Corinthians that the gospel he preached to them was precisely what he had "received" in the form of tradition from other Christians and "handed on" to his converts (1 Cor 15:1-3; cf. 15:11). On occasion, Paul can call upon creed-like statements he inherited from the church and shared with the other apostles to express the heart of the gospel (Rom 1:3-4; 1 Cor 15:3b-5; 1 Thess 1:9-10). This gospel tradition, not surprisingly, centers on the narrative of the death and resurrection of Christ and its saving significance for people. Moreover, Paul's theological and ethical arguments are peppered with allusions to what are probably early confessional statements that help to express the central truths of the gospel.¹⁸ In addition, Paul occasionally vocalizes the gospel story with what appear to be early Christian hymns that were used in the worship of the Greek-speaking community (Phil 2:6-11; Col 1:15-20). The content of Paul's gospel is built not only on the foundation of the Scriptures but also the faith affirmations he held in common with those who had believed and preached the word before him.

In addition to the apostolic confessions, Paul was also aware of the story and

¹⁸These may include (1) "sending" statements—"God sent his Son" (Gal 4:4; Rom 8:3); (2) "giving up" statements—"he was given up (or gave himself up) for us" (e.g., Rom 4:25; 8:32; Gal 2:20; Eph 5:2); (3) resurrection statements—"God raised him from the dead" (e.g., Rom 4:24-25; 10:9; 1 Thess 1:10); and (4) confessional statements—"Jesus is Lord" (e.g., Rom. 10:9; 1 Cor. 12:3). Scholars still debate whether some of these are traditional or not.

¹⁷See James D. G. Dunn, "How New Was Paul's Gospel? The Problem of Continuity and Discontinuity," in *Gospel in Paul: Studies on Corinthians, Galatians and Romans for Richard N. Longenecker*, ed. L. A. Jervis and P. Richardson (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), pp. 382-88.

teachings of Jesus that he received from the church. The degree to which Paul knew and was influenced by the Jesus tradition has long been a matter of debate. A number of recent studies, however, have put together a persuasive case that the Jesus traditions were more significant for Paul's understanding of the gospel than is often recognized.¹⁹ While explicit references to sayings of Jesus are relatively sparse (e.g., 1 Cor 7:10; 9:14; 11:23-26; cf. 1 Thess 4:15), allusions and echoes of Jesus' life and teaching occur throughout Paul's letters with enough frequency that "this material [cannot] be dismissed as inconsequential in quantity or quality."²⁰

Yet, did these remembrances of Jesus help to shape Paul's gospel? This is not the place for an in-depth exploration of this complex question. Nevertheless, there are enough points of contact between the gospel Paul announces and the Jesus tradition that we must be open to the possibility. It is likely, for example, that Paul's use of the term *gospel* itself reflects the church's collective memory of Jesus as the one "who was sent to bring good news to the poor" (Is 61:1; Lk 4:17-19; Acts 10:38).²¹ Further, we find connections with Jesus in Paul's Christology (e.g., his allusion to Jesus' use of *Abba* in relation to Christ's sonship [Rom 8:15; Gal 4:4; cf. Mk 14:36]), his understanding of salvation (e.g., the parallels between Jesus' kingdom parables [Mt 20:1-16; Lk 18:14] and Paul's notion of justification by grace through faith), and his eschatological teaching (1 Thess 4:15-17; 5:1-7; cf. 2 Thess 2:1-12).²² Indeed, there is a real theological continuity between Jesus' preaching of the kingdom and Paul's notion of God's eschatological rule that is both manifested in the present through the Spirit and "inherited" in the future (e.g., Rom 14:17; Col 1:13; 1 Cor 6:9; 15:50; Gal 5:21). If we only occasionally hear the specific language of Jesus' kingdom preaching in Paul's letters, it is probably, as Seyoon Kim proposes, because Paul has recontextualized that language in light of Jesus' death and resurrection and the new situation of his largely Gentile churches.²³

Although allusions to the Jesus tradition are not always clear cut and differ-

¹⁹See especially David Wenham, *Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995); Seyoon Kim, "Jesus, Sayings of," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993), pp. 474-92; Seyoon Kim, *Paul and the New Perspective: Second Thoughts on the Origin of Paul's Gospel* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2002), esp. pp. 259-92.

²⁰Witherington, *Paul's Narrative Thought World*, p. 153. Seyoon Kim cites over twenty-five instances where he finds "certain or probable" references to the Jesus tradition, as well as over forty "possible echoes" of it in Paul ("Jesus, Sayings of," pp. 475-82, 490).

²¹Stuhlmacher, "Pauline Gospel," pp. 162-63.

²²See Kim, "Jesus, Sayings of," pp. 475-77; Wenham, *Paul: Follower of Jesus*, pp. 305-19.

²³Kim, *Paul and the New Perspective*, pp. 275-81.

ences remain, the cumulative evidence suggests that Paul was not only significantly aware of the story and sayings of the historical Jesus, but that the church's memories of Jesus significantly informed his understanding of the Christian message. Paul would surely have been perplexed by the wedge often driven between his gospel and the message of Jesus by modern interpreters. If our conclusion is right, it links Paul's gospel through the tradition not only with the other apostles but, even more importantly, with Jesus himself (1 Cor 11:23). Furthermore, it suggests that, for Paul, the gospel story embraces not just Jesus' death, resurrection and return, but his earthly life and ministry as well.²⁴

This all points to the conclusion that there is strong continuity between early Christian tradition and Paul's coherent gospel. This does not mean that the traditions themselves constitute Paul's gospel—he is still their interpreter throughout. Nevertheless, the church's creeds, confessions and hymns, as well as its memories of Jesus' life and teaching, served to shape his understanding of the message he taught and preached.

The Damascus road revelation. Most importantly of all, Paul's perception of what is constant and nonnegotiable about the Christian message is grounded in his own conversion and call. In Galatians, he defends his gospel and his apostleship against the charges of his critics with the claim that he received this gospel, not from any human source, but "by a revelation of Jesus Christ" (Gal 1:11-12). It is this revelational origin of the gospel that allows Paul to distinguish its content from the alternative interpretation of his Judaizing opponents (Gal 1:6-7) and to defend the "truth of the gospel" against those who would distort it (Gal 2:5; cf. 2:11-14).

When Paul speaks of receiving a "revelation of Jesus Christ" and of God revealing his Son in him (Gal 1:16), he is recalling his vision of the risen and exalted Christ on the Damascus road. Much of the heart of Paul's gospel and theology is a natural outworking of his reflection on this initial encounter with the Lord.²⁵ In the first place, Paul's conversion meant a "Copernican revolution" for his evaluation of Jesus (cf. 2 Cor 5:16). Instead of seeing a messianic pretender

²⁴This raises the question of why Paul did not refer to Jesus material more openly and more often. No doubt Paul could assume knowledge and acceptance of shared traditions about the life and teachings of Jesus among his converts, much of which he likely passed on himself in his missionary preaching. Paul had no reason to restate stories and sayings of Jesus to Christians who were already familiar with them, since the contingent needs of his hearers did not require it.

²⁵See, e.g., Seyoon Kim, *The Origin of Paul's Gospel* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1982); Kim, *Paul and the New Perspective*, and the various essays in R. N. Longenecker, ed., *The Road from Damascus: The Impact of Paul's Conversion on His Life, Thought, and Ministry* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1997).

who was cursed by God because of his crucifixion on a Roman cross (Deut 21:22; Gal 3:13). Paul recognized that Jesus was alive and had been vindicated by God. Paul's experience of Christ convinced him that Jesus was indeed Israel's Messiah, the Christ (cf. Rom 9:5). God's long-awaited agent of salvation. The connection of the cross to messianic identity would have been revolutionary for Paul, but later the notion of "Christ crucified" became a cornerstone of his message (1 Cor 1:23; 2:2). Furthermore, Jesus appeared to Paul as the living, risen and exalted Lord (1 Cor 9:1; cf. Acts 9:5), in whom the very glory and image of God were manifested (2 Cor 4:4-6). Paul also recalls that Christ was revealed to, or perhaps *in*, him on the Damascus road as the Son of God (Gal 1:16). This name comes to represent for Paul the one who stands in closest relationship to God and who has been lovingly sent by the Father as bearer of his promised salvation (Rom 1:2-4; 8:3, 32; 2 Cor 1:18-20; Gal 4:5-7).²⁶ In short, Paul's world-flipping encounter on the Damascus road provided him with the basic narrative structure of his gospel—that the crucified Jesus, whom God the Father has sent into the world as Messiah, is risen and has been exalted as Lord (cf. Acts 9:20-22, 28).

Second, Paul sees the purpose of his Damascus revelation to be his call and commission as apostle to the Gentiles (Gal 1:16; cf. 1 Cor 9:1; 15:8-9; Acts 9:15). This sense of missionary calling became foundational to Paul's life and thought; apart from it, the gospel he preached makes little sense.

Third, Paul's own experience of God's transforming love and grace undoubtedly played a critical role in the formation of these insights. Raymond Brown rightly perceives that it is Paul's personal encounter with God's overwhelming love in Christ that enabled love to be a primary motivation for Paul's mission to the Gentiles and a hallmark of his message:

In the [Damascus] revelation Paul . . . discovered a love that went beyond his previous imagination. He felt "taken over" by Christ Jesus (Phil 3:12). With awe Paul exclaims: "The Son of God loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 2:20). . . . This love became the driving factor of Paul's life when he came to understand how encompassing it was: "The love of Christ impels us once we come to the conviction that one died for all" (2 Cor 5:14).²⁷

²⁶Martin Hengel observes that although Paul speaks of Jesus as God's Son less often than as Christ or Lord, the title frequently appears in highly theological statements that describe the heart of his gospel (e.g., Rom 1:3-4, 9; 8:3, 32; 2 Cor 1:18-20; Gal 1:15-16; 4:4-5; Col 1:13-14; 1 Thess 1:10). See *The Son of God: The Origin of Christology and the History of Jewish Hellenistic Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), pp. 8-14.

²⁷Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), p. 449.

For Paul, cruciform love, God's love manifested in the cross of Christ, was central to his gospel and provided the pattern that shaped his own life and that of the Christian community (Rom 5:5, 8; 8:35-39; 1 Cor 13; 2 Cor 5:14; Eph 5:2; Col 3:12; 2 Thess 2:16).²⁸ Moreover, Paul repeatedly testifies that it was by God's surprising grace that he, a violent persecutor of the church of God, was justified and called to be an apostle on the Damascus road (Gal 1:13-15; cf. 1 Cor 15:9-10; 1 Tim 1:12-16). James Dunn underscores the connection between Paul's initial experience of God's grace and his gospel:

It was the experience of seeing Jesus risen and exalted on the road to Damascus which stopped him dead in his tracks and turned his whole life into a new channel. . . . To put it another way, it was his own experience of grace which made 'grace' a central and distinctive feature of his gospel—grace as not merely a way of understanding God as generous and forgiving, but grace as the experience of that unmerited and free acceptance embracing him, transforming him, enriching him, commissioning him.²⁹

Fourth, such a world-altering encounter no doubt contributed to Paul's radically new evaluation of the Jewish law and righteousness. This former Pharisee who had singularly devoted his life to upholding the law came to the stunning awareness that all his zeal for the Torah had only led him to the heinous sin of opposing God's will as expressed in his own Son.³⁰ God's vindication of the law-cursed Jesus signaled that Christ, not the law, must become the new fulcrum on which all things turn, the one valid passport for entering the people of God. In Philippians 3:4-11, Paul testifies that his whole system of values underwent a 180-degree turnaround as a result of his conversion. He has judged his former confidence in his Jewish identity and the law to be rubbish; now his life is shaped wholly by his experiential knowledge of Christ and the sharing in his death and resurrection (Phil 3:10). Righteousness by the law and righteousness by faith in Christ have become mutually exclusive alternatives (Phil 3:9). The core values and experience that Paul sets forth in this passage are surely close to the heart of his gospel.³¹

Other elements of Paul's gospel have been linked to his Damascus road encounter, including his "already/not yet" eschatological perspective, the Spirit, new creation, reconciliation, and transformation into God's image, which we do

²⁸On the centrality of love for Paul's life and thought, see esp. Gorman, *Cruciformity*, pp. 155-267.

²⁹James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM Press, 1990), p. 190.

³⁰Kim, *Origin*, pp. 280-81.

³¹Paul J. Achtemeier, "Finding the Way," p. 30.

not have time to explore. Suffice it to say that if we want to know what is formative and constant about Paul's thought, we cannot bypass the Damascus road. This has important implications for our study. It means that Paul's theology does not arise out of his ad hoc responses to specific problems or circumstances in the course of his missionary work. It is grounded in a much deeper well: his "revelation of Christ" and his conversion on the road to Damascus. Paul's contextual theological activity in his letters flows out of a coherent and enduring gospel that is anchored, not only in Scripture and Christian tradition, but in his own transforming experience of a divine revelation and calling.³² Paul's *gospel* of Christ and his *experience* of Christ go hand in glove.

These three foundational building blocks for Paul's gospel—Scripture, tradition, and revelation—reinforce our conclusions about the narrative framework for his understanding of the Christian message. The Old Testament places the gospel in the context of Israel's story, Christian tradition proclaims the story of Jesus, and in Paul's Damascus encounter the story of the risen and universal Lord becomes his own story. It is also true that the elements of Scripture, the church's collective memories, and Christian experience continue to serve as primary resources and reference points for Christian communities as they ponder the meaning of the gospel for their life circumstances today.

4. Fundamental convictions. Paul's reflection on Scripture, tradition and revelation, as well as his own and other Christians' experience of Christ and the Spirit, generated a coherent set of theological convictions, a tapestry of interrelated elements that participate in the heart of Paul's thought. These include the various images and beliefs that are vital to Paul's understanding of the gospel (e.g., being "in Christ," dying and rising with Christ, faith, righteousness, election, sanctification, reconciliation, the body of Christ, the gift of the Spirit, the end-time resurrection). For Paul, the gospel not only reveals what God has done in Christ, but also how what God has done is good news for us. Because Paul normally articulates these crucial convictions in response to the specific concerns of his communities, it would be difficult to come up with any comprehensive list.³³ It is therefore better to think of what is abiding in Paul's thought as an organic "heart," not a fixed "core." As J. C. Beker reminds us, the lines be-

³²We have no way of knowing, of course, how many of the implications of his gospel and its theological outworkings Paul grasped at or around the time of his Damascus revelation. He would surely have reflected extensively on that experience in light of the Christian proclamation and Scripture, as well as the contextual demands of his own missionary work. Refining and development would inevitably follow.

³³For one recent attempt to summarize twelve "fundamental convictions" of Paul, see Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord*, pp. 131-44.

tween coherence and contingency cannot be firmly drawn.³⁴

On the one hand, these abiding symbols and beliefs are anchored in the defining story of God's saving activity in Jesus, and they interpret its meaning for Paul and his readers. On the other hand, these motifs and images facilitate the dynamic interaction between Paul's gospel and the missional contexts in which he does theology. Paul can articulate specific elements of these convictions when he argues theologically, enabling him to contextualize the gospel in a way that is appropriate for each situation. This is why, for instance, the notion of righteousness looms large in Paul's exposition of the meaning of the Christ story for God's people in Galatians, but in 2 Corinthians he turns to the symbol of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18-20). In one sense, these big ideas lie behind Paul's concrete theological arguments in his letters. They are sometimes assumed rather than stated.³⁵ Yet our only access to Paul's coherent gospel is through what he actually *says* when these core convictions come to living expression in language. As a result, when Paul talks about sanctification or the Lord's Supper or Christ's victory over the powers in the course of his letters, these "surface-level" communications are not just relativized pastoral arguments that are peripheral to his thought. Rather, they interpret the normative meaning of the Christ event for his readers in a way that each community of faith needs to hear it. Paul's theological reflection flows out of a deep spring, the abiding gospel, whose various elements cohere together and support one another.

The fruit. Since the gospel is in the first place the proclamation of good news that has the power to transform people by the Spirit (Rom 1:16; 1 Thess 1:5), it always has a goal. Paul does not think of the gospel as a body of propositional truth or as simply a matter of correct belief. Its purpose is to elicit saving faith and to create a redeemed community that is being reshaped in the image of the Lord (2 Cor 3:18). This perspective springs naturally out of Paul's own experience when his life was turned upside down through his encounter with the risen Lord on the road to Damascus. The gospel story has meaning for Paul and his communities because it is their story as well. Through the Spirit, God's saving action in the death and resurrection of Christ becomes an experienced reality (Gal 4:4-7). The gospel transforms the world of Paul and his readers; it brings about a new creation, which demands a new way of living.

The gospel's ability to redeem and renew governs all of Paul's interactions with the churches under his care. He announces both at the beginning and the

³⁴Beker, "Recasting Pauline Theology," p. 19.

³⁵J. C. Beker speaks of the "subtextual location of 'the coherent'" in Paul's thought (*The Triumph of God: The Essence of Paul's Thought* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990], p. 125).

communications to real people within their real lives.⁴⁰ Instead, we encounter a theology in action—Paul's theological reflections on the gospel in light of the different pastoral situations he faced. Paul's writings are less a collection of doctrinal studies than a series of theological conversations between the apostle and his diverse audiences within their life circumstances.

One consequence of this is that none of Paul's individual letters, not even Romans, can serve as a ready-made summary of his *theology*. I therefore take issue with James D. G. Dunn's proposal that Romans—seen as a letter that is relatively unaffected by contingent circumstances and written by a mature Paul to a church he did not found—sets out “in complete terms the theology of the gospel.”⁴¹ In the first place, Romans is by no means a comprehensive statement of Paul's gospel or his theology. Issues that receive extensive treatment in Romans (e.g., the role and future of Israel in God's plan in chapters 9–11) do not get much attention elsewhere in Paul, while other key elements of Paul's thought (the Lord's Supper, the resurrection, the second coming) are largely missing from his longest letter. If we take Romans as the defining expression of Paul's theology, we might conclude that such matters were not after all very important to the man from Tarsus. Second, even if we recognize the relatively well-ordered and reflective character of Romans, Paul's theological arguments there are no less contextual than in his other letters. Although Paul's specific combination of reasons for writing Romans has been a matter of lively debate, there is a wide consensus that the letter is hardly a context-neutral rehearsing of the gospel.⁴² Like all of Paul's letters, Paul's exposition of the gospel in Romans is linked to concrete historical and missiological circumstances. To ignore this orientation is to misunderstand the entire thrust of the letter.

It is therefore Paul's interactive *theologizing*—theology as a verb—that is of particular interest for our understanding of New Testament patterns of contextualization. Paul's ongoing theological and ethical reflection on the gospel enables the eternal word to be fleshed out in particular forms of language and

⁴⁰This does not mean that the effort to discover a Pauline theology, in the sense of a synthesis of the results of Paul's theological activity in his letters, is misguided. This is a valuable and necessary task. However, it goes beyond the scope of this study, which focuses on Paul's *theologizing*—his method of theological reflection on the gospel. For instructive efforts to articulate a Pauline theology, see James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998) and Schreiner, *Paul: Apostle of God's Glory*.

⁴¹James D. G. Dunn, “Romans,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne et al. (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993), p. 840; see also idem, *Theology of Paul*, p. 25. Dunn generally recognizes the contextual nature of Paul's theologizing but thinks that Romans is a relative exception to this pattern.

⁴²For an excellent introduction to this discussion, see *The Romans Debate*, ed. K. P. Donfried, (rev. ed. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1991).

end of Romans that the goal of his gospel and apostleship is to bring about the “obedience of faith” among the Gentiles (Rom 1:5; 16:26). This means not only their conversion, but also a *life* of obedience that flows from their faith in Jesus Christ. Paul ministers the gospel in order that the Gentiles might be an offering that is acceptable and “sanctified by the Holy Spirit” (Rom 15:16). His fervent desire is that Christ might be formed in them (Gal 4:19) and that he might present them mature in Christ (Col 1:28). Conformity to Christ means living out the cross-shaped life of self-giving love (Gal 2:20; Phil 2:1–5). Richard B. Hays states it well: “There is no meaningful distinction between theology and ethics in Paul's thought, because Paul's theology is fundamentally an account of God's work of transforming his people into the image of Christ.”³⁶

Ultimately, the goal of the gospel is to lead Christians to experience God's re-forming work in a full and final sense (Rom 8:29–30; 1 Cor 15:49; Phil 3:21). Thus, the gospel's redeeming, transforming character is part of what is nonnegotiable in Paul's thought. Whenever Paul reflects theologically on the gospel in his letters it is with this end in view.

CONTEXTUALIZING THE GOSPEL IN PAUL'S LETTERS

The matrix of Paul's thought, then, is the gospel, God's good news about Christ, which Paul announced and which defined his life and missionary work. Paul's letters, however, are not the gospel as such; rather, they bear witness to the gospel and reflect upon it in light of the contingent circumstances of the mission field.³⁷ When Paul writes to the Thessalonians or the Corinthians, he *interprets* the gospel and draws out its ramifications in ways that are relevant and meaningful to his audience. As Beker describes it, this interpretation embodies the movement of the incarnation, “so that the eternal Word of the gospel is able to become ever anew a word on target for the people to whom the gospel is addressed.”³⁸ Put differently, the gospel serves as a kind of lens through which Paul views the various pastoral, moral and doctrinal issues that he confronts in the course of his ministry as an apostle.³⁹

But if Paul's letters are not *the* gospel, neither are they deposits for prepackaged doctrines. Paul's “theology” never stands on its own, independent of his

³⁶Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996), p. 46.

³⁷See Joel B. Green, “Scripture and Theology: Uniting the Two So Long Divided,” in *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology*, ed. Joel B. Green and M. Turner (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2000), p. 40.

³⁸Beker, *Triumph of God*, p. x.

³⁹Charles B. Cousar, *The Letters of Paul* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), p. 92.

modes of persuasion, and applied to a whole range of pastoral problems. Whether the issue at hand happens to be eating food offered to idols, the basis of Gentiles' acceptance into the people of God, the collection of an offering, or confusion over the Lord's return, Paul believes that the gospel story of what God has done in Christ speaks a specific and transforming word. Although Paul's stated evangelistic principle of being "all things to all people" (1 Cor 9:19-23) relates in the first place to his apostolic conduct, it would hardly be surprising if his way of doing theology shows that he can adapt to various human needs and circumstances as well.

Contextualizing theological language. Paul's ability to contextualize the heart of the gospel becomes clear in his flexible use of theological language. This creative adaptability takes several forms:

1. *Paul's letters display a richness and variety of vocabulary.* This diversity allows him to interpret the Christ event for multiple contexts. For example, Paul has no single, stock way of expressing the meaning of the death of Christ, which we have seen lies at the heart of his gospel. Instead, he draws upon a kaleidoscope of metaphors and symbols to communicate its meaning: reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18-20; Rom 5:10-11; Eph 2:16; Col 1:20-22), sacrifice (Rom 3:25; 8:3, 1 Cor 5:7), representation (1 Cor 15:14-15), redemption (Rom 3:24; 1 Cor 7:21-23; Gal 4:5), righteousness (Rom 3:21-26; 5:9; 2 Cor 5:21), curse (Gal 3:13), self-giving/emptying (Rom 8:32; Gal 1:4; 2:20; Phil 2:7), victory over the powers (Col 2:15), paradoxical power and wisdom (1 Cor 1:24-25; 2 Cor 13:4), to name only some.⁴³ This plurality of images not only testifies to the breadth of meaning of the death of Christ for Paul, but it also enables him to tailor his interpretation of that atoning death to fit the needs and circumstances of his audience. Thus, Paul turns to the metaphor of redemption in Galatians, where he must counter opponents who are trying to enslave Gentile believers by adding to faith in Christ the yoke of circumcision and law obedience. Redemption language not only evokes Israel's ransom from bondage in Egypt, giving it a grounding in Scripture and tradition; it would also have been familiar to Gentile readers from the secular practice of buying back slaves in the Greco-Roman world. The power of the metaphor for the Galatians is obvious. Christ's death means ransom and release for those who have been slaves under the law and its curse (Gal 3:13; 4:1-5). Yet, Paul is free to adapt the image for his purposes as well. I. Howard Marshall keenly observes that "[a] preacher would surely have delighted . . . to con-

trast the price paid by the slave in the secular world with the free gift of God in Christ."⁴⁴

The diversity of metaphors and symbols expressing the meaning of Christ's death is perhaps excelled only when Paul comes to describe the believer's experience of the new life in Christ. Paul's salvation language draws upon a wealth of images from both Scripture and secular culture, including those from everyday life experience (inheritance, putting on or off clothes, salvation/rescue, putting on armor), commerce (redemption, "seal" of ownership), agriculture (grafting, first fruits), the customs and practices of society (justification, reconciliation, freedom/liberation, citizenship), religious practice (sanctification, washing, cleansing, anointing), major life events (birth, adoption, marriage, death and life), as well as various others (new creation, transformation, union with Christ).⁴⁵ Rather than consistently talking about the meaning of salvation in Christ in a few standard terms, he deploys whatever language will bring out the particular dimension of salvation a given church needs to hear. This observation has implications for our efforts to describe the experience of God's saving work to contemporary people. It surely ought to caution us against exalting any single metaphor or theme—whether "justification by faith" or being "born again" or "spirit baptism"—to a dominant position. If we follow Paul's lead, we will recognize both the richness of language available to us to describe the church's multidimensional experience of salvation and the variety of situations to which that language must be applied.

2. *Paul can use the same image in multiple ways or with different emphases as the context demands.* Thus the symbol of the cross—a scandalous stigma in the first century world—becomes an emblem of God's "foolishness" that contradicts worldly wisdom and boasting in 1 Corinthians (1 Cor 1:18-2:8), a means of liberation from the law and its curse in Galatians (Gal 2:19-20; 3:13; cf. 6:14), a model for Christian humility and obedience in Philippians (Phil 2:5-8), a wrecking bar to demolish the wall separating Jew and Gentile in Ephesians (Eph 2:14-16), or a venue of victory over the hostile powers in Colossians (Col 2:15). Paul likewise uses the metaphor of reconciliation, which interprets Christ's death in terms of bringing together two parties at enmity, for a variety of pastoral purposes. Reconciliation language allows him to target the restoring of his ruptured relationship with Christians at Corinth, as he appeals for them to "be reconciled

⁴³I. Howard Marshall, "The Development of the Concept of Redemption in the New Testament," in *Jesus the Savior: Studies in New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 1990), p. 242.

⁴⁴See Dunn, *Theology of Paul*, pp. 328-33.

⁴⁵These varied metaphors frequently overlap in their usage and meaning, as pregnant passages such as Romans 3:21-26, Galatians 3:10-14, 2 Corinthians 5:14-6:2 and Colossians 2:11-15 demonstrate.

to God" (2 Cor 5:20), and later affirms his openness and affection for his Corinthian "children" (2 Cor 6:11-13).⁴⁶ In Romans 5 such language is closely linked to the theme of justification that is so prominent in chapters 1-4, helping to describe the blessings of justification for the believer (Rom 5:1; 9-10). Colossians 1:20 speaks of God's reconciling himself to the entire cosmos, while in Ephesians 2:16 the focus is the reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles both to God and to one another. Each of these applications of the image fits the particular context that Paul addresses.

3. *The contextual dimension of Paul's theologizing helps to explain why one symbol or theme appears predominantly in certain letters and not in others.* This sheds light on the uneven distribution of the language of justification or righteousness by faith, which has been a flashpoint for the debate about what is the kernel of Paul's theology. Paul's interpreters have tended either to heap too much weight on the notion—making it the controlling principle of Paul's entire gospel, as in the case of Luther and much of Reformed Protestant theology—or too little, viewing it merely as a byproduct of Paul's battles with Jewish Christian opponents. In reality, Paul unpacks the theme theologically in just three letters—Galatians, Romans, and, to a lesser extent, Philippians. In each case, there is a question over the significance of the Jewish law and the conditions for Gentiles' membership in the people of God. Since justification is only one among many metaphors for expressing what God has done for believers through Christ, when those issues are not at stake, Paul generally turns to other ways of articulating the gospel. In 1 and 2 Corinthians, for example, justification language appears as just one of a number of images (see especially 1 Cor 1:30; 6:11; 2 Cor 5:21). It is an indispensable, but hardly a comprehensive or controlling, image of God's saving work.⁴⁷ The Reformers discovered a contextualized message for their own time in the doctrine of justification by faith, but in their reading of Paul, it seems they overplayed their hand.

Paul is free to draw upon whatever theological themes or images enable the gospel to be incarnated into the life worlds of the communities to which he writes. Beker uses the analogy of a military field command center that is able to dispatch the required material according to the needs of the various field outposts.⁴⁸ For the Romans and the Galatians, the theme of "righteousness" is crucial to Paul's exposition of the gospel. In 1 Corinthians he turns to other sym-

⁴⁶ Joel B. Green, "Death of Christ," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993), p. 204.

⁴⁷ See the studies of Seifrid, *Justification*, and Colin G. Kruse, *Paul, the Law, and Justification* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1996) for detailed support for this conclusion.

⁴⁸ Beker, *Triumph of God*, p. 131.

bols, such as the cross, wisdom, and the body of Christ. He develops the motif of the weakness of the cross in 2 Corinthians in response to the triumphalist theology of his rivals. Contextual needs in Thessalonica prompt him to focus on the second coming and sanctification. In Philippians Paul draws upon political language that befits a Roman colony (Phil 1:27; 3:20) and exhorts Christians over and over to have joy in the face of suffering. In Ephesians and Colossians the language of power and of reconciliation come into focus. In each case, Paul crafts a targeted response to the concrete issues he faces. The result is a distinctive exposition of the abiding gospel that addresses the needs of the audience.

In this regard, the Pastoral Letters of 1-2 Timothy and Titus present us with a particularly intriguing case. It has long been recognized that the vocabulary and theological emphases of these letters differ from the rest of the Pauline writings in significant ways. There is little doubt that the gospel is still at the very heart of the Pastorals (1 Tim 1:11-16; 2 Tim 1:9-10; 2:8; Tit 2:11-14; 3:4-7). But we hear that gospel voiced in new language—language that has more of a "Greek" accent than what we encounter elsewhere in Paul. The Christian message is described as a "deposit" to be guarded and as "sound" or "healthy" teaching. Both God and Jesus are repeatedly called "savior" (cf. Phil 3:20; Eph 5:23), a title that was commonly used of various Hellenistic deities and the divine emperor. The striking terminology of "epiphany" is applied not only to Jesus' second coming (1 Tim 6:14; 2 Tim 4:1, 8; Tit 2:13, instead of *parousia*), but to his first advent, as well (2 Tim 1:10; Tit 2:11; 3:4). The Christian life is depicted in the language of popular Greco-Roman moral teaching, above all as "godliness" (*eusebeia*), which never shows up in Paul's other letters. All of this vocabulary seems to be drawn from a Hellenistic or Hellenistic Jewish well.

How do we account for this new "translation" of the gospel? Many assume that the Pastoral Letters were written at some point after Paul's death in order to speak to an altered set of circumstances and needs in the church. In the words of one recent commentator, these letters "represent a creative attempt to re-express Pauline theology in new ways for a new situation and to use fresh terminology to do so."⁴⁹ I agree with the basic thrust of this statement. Yet, if what we have seen about Paul's versatile use of theological language and emphases is true elsewhere in his writings, could not this "creative theologian" of the Pastoral Epistles have been Paul himself? The issues that surround the answer to this question are many and complex. Nevertheless, I would suggest that a number of factors at least make this a plausible option.

⁴⁹ Howard Marshall, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), p. 78.

Terms like "sound teaching" and "godliness" that are singular to the Pastoral letters are probably borrowed from the false teaching that the author is trying to counteract. Paul commonly seizes language from his opponents—such as "wisdom" in 1 Corinthians or "weakness" in 2 Corinthians—and redefines it in light of the gospel, and that seems to be the case in the Pastorals as well. Likewise, the frequency of the term "Savior" could be connected to Paul's desire to correct the false teachers' limited and exclusive view of salvation. Salvation is for "all" people, and God in Christ is Savior of all (1 Tim 2:3-4). The need to confront theological error results in fresh ways of articulating the gospel. Furthermore, Philip Towner makes the credible suggestion that Paul's heavy use of Hellenistic ethical terms was related to his concern that the behavior of Christians in Ephesus and Crete was bringing disrepute to the gospel (1 Tim 3:7; 6:1; Tit 2:10; 3:2) and thereby damaging the church's mission in the world. Consequently, "for him to encourage the churches to live a life that would measure up even to the pagans' critical estimate was sound evangelistic technique" (cf. Phil 4:8).⁵⁰

I would suggest, then, that even in the Pastoral Letters, the distinctive theological language we encounter probably has more to do with form of expression than with widely different content. Nothing is incompatible with Paul's gospel as it is found elsewhere. If we allow for factors such as (1) the possibility of some development in Paul's thought; (2) the role of a secretary in perhaps helping to shape the letters' style and theological language; and (3) the recognition that Paul's addressees are close associates with at least moderately Hellenistic backgrounds, it seems quite conceivable that the Pastoral Epistles offer a prime example of Paul's creative contextualizing of the gospel for new circumstances.⁵¹ In any case, whether one accepts Paul as the author of these letters or not, the contextualization principle holds true. The Pastoral Epistles give striking testimony that new challenges and situations require a fresh minting of the gospel into language that speaks to the context.

4. *Paul's flexibility enabled him to appropriate traditional language and images and recontextualize them under the guidance of the Spirit.* This occurs regularly with Jewish cultic terms. Paul can, for example, appeal to the religious

⁵⁰Philip H. Towner, *1-2 Timothy and Titus* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994), p. 30.
⁵¹"When we talk about 'new circumstances,' we cannot forget that each of the three Pastoral Letters has a somewhat different concern and situation that Paul is addressing. Consequently, his responses to those concerns vary from letter to letter, as well. See the recent defenses of the position that Paul himself is the creative theological force behind the Pastoral Letters by William W. Mounce, *The Pastoral Letters* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), pp. xli-ccxxv, and Luke Timothy Johnson, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), pp. 55-59.

language of sanctification taken from the Old Testament purity code that particularly focused on separation from ceremonial defilements. He transposes that language, consistently applying it to the ethical character and behavior that was the responsibility of every believer (Rom 6:19; 12:1; 1 Thess 3:13; 4:3-7; 5:23; Eph 1:4; 5:26-27). Again, Paul draws upon the notion of "sacrifice" from Israel's worship (language that would also have carried religious significance for first century Gentile audiences) and uses it to speak of the atoning death of Christ (Rom 3:25; 5:21; 8:3; 1 Cor 5:7; Eph 5:2), as well as the moral response of God's people (Rom 12:1). Surprisingly, he can even adopt "circumcision"—in spite of his robust opposition to requiring Gentile converts to be circumcised—as a metaphor for the death of Christ and its saving significance for believers (Col 2:11). True circumcision is no longer an outward Jewish rite, but an inward work of God and a matter of the heart (Rom 2:28-29; Phil 3:3).

Paul's recontextualizing of traditional language is not limited to cultic terms. Consider the "kingdom of God" language that was so characteristic of Jewish thought and Jesus' own teaching. Paul can invoke it to help resolve divisions over food and drink in Rome (Rom 14:17), or to warn the boastful Corinthians that they may face the "rod" of apostolic discipline (1 Cor 4:20-21). In Galatians the traditional theme of inheriting God's kingdom is combined with Paul's crucifixion language (Gal 5:21, 24).

We find in Paul's letters, then, a delightful creativity in the use of theological language and imagery that allows him to express the meaning of the gospel with both flexibility and precision. Contemporary interpreters of the gospel would do well not only to learn from the end product of Paul's theologizing but also from his way of doing the theological task. Paul's pattern of creatively engaging his world and using familiar images to draw out the implications of the gospel speaks to the ongoing challenge of reimagining our expression of the gospel for our changing social and cultural worlds.

Does the content change with the context? Paul has been compared to a jazz musician, someone who "improvises" theologically as he innovatively adapts his message and methods to changing circumstances.⁵² There is much truth in this. Paul was certainly capable of exercising theological imagination when the Corinthians were confused about marriage obligations (1 Corinthians 7) or the Galatians were in danger of surrendering their Christian freedom. But this also raises an important question. How fluid *was* Paul's thought? Was it being generated ad hoc as he wrote his letters, so that his coherent message was

⁵²Mark Strom, *Reframing Paul: Conversations in Grace and Community* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000), p. 182.

grounds this reframing of the gospel in the Christ event itself. The one who was "crucified out of weakness" yet who "lives by the power of God" (2 Cor 13:4) becomes the paradigm for Paul's own apostleship and for the Corinthians' discipleship. The gospel story, articulated in this way, turns the triumphalism and self-promotion of the apostle's opponents upside down. The humiliation and weakness of the messenger, far from subverting Paul's apostleship, enables him to embody the heart of the gospel itself—the "weakness" of the crucified One. Both the message he proclaims and the manner of life he lives bear the marks of the cross.

Other theological images emerge in the course of Paul's conversation with the Corinthians, such as "reconciliation" in chapter 5. This metaphor, as well, is tailored to a context of conflict and mistrust. On the basis of God's already accomplished reconciling work in Christ (2 Cor 5:18-19), Paul entreats the disaffected and alienated Corinthians to "be reconciled to God" (2 Cor 5:20). His appeal encompasses their need to be restored to both the gospel and to God's messenger. The life situation in Corinth thus draws out particular theological images and ideas that are a part of Paul's understanding of the gospel, enabling this letter to become a well-aimed message for his audience. At the same time, because Paul's theological reflection has its mooring in the story of Christ crucified, he is able to reframe the gospel in fresh terms without syncretizing or distorting the message. This is the fundamental difference between Paul and his ancient critics, who have taken their cues from Greco-Roman cultural models of self-praise and the flaunting of personal power rather than the pattern of Jesus' self-giving love. The rivals' triumphalistic interpretation of the Christian story is outside the pale of the gospel (2 Cor 11:4) precisely because it tries to bypass the cross on the road to resurrection power and glory.

If, then, Paul reappropriates the story of Christ in light of the realities in Corinth, is the relationship between gospel and context simply a one-way street running from Paul's core convictions to his readers' life circumstances? This seems unlikely. No doubt the adversarial environment in Corinth led him into a deeper reflection on the meaning of the Christ event as the "gospel of weakness," but one that was in continuity with his understanding of the story of Christ from the beginning. Likewise, the distinctively Pauline image of reconciliation, which is probably rooted in Paul's experience of God's reconciling him, a former persecutor, on the Damascus road,⁵⁵ surely came into sharper focus as a metaphor of God's saving work in Christ as a result of Paul's clash with the Corinthians. This dynamic interplay between substance and situation

⁵⁵See Kim, *Paul and the New Perspective*, pp. 214-38.

continually being shaped and altered by the new circumstances he addressed? Did Paul's core assumptions about the gospel itself only progressively emerge in the process of his contextual theologizing, as many interpreters of Paul now hold?⁵³ If this were true, it would fly in the face of much of what we have seen earlier in this chapter regarding the stable and transcontextual dimension of Paul's thought.

I would argue that the contexts Paul addresses do not create or reinvent his understanding of the coherent gospel. Leander Keck's conclusion about the theology of Romans can be applied to Paul's letters as a whole: "Romans ticks because Paul did not allow his immediate situation to govern completely what he had to say, but allowed the inner logic of his gospel to assert itself."⁵⁴ Ultimately, it is *the gospel* that directs the process of Paul's theological reflection, not the audience or the issues he addresses. Paul's thought transcends the shifting tides of contingent circumstances precisely because it is anchored in the abiding truth of the gospel. This means that Paul's contextualization does not take place at the level of the basic content of the gospel itself, which focuses on God's saving activity in Christ. It happens when Paul articulates, interprets and applies that gospel in light of real human needs. The context, in turn, helps to determine what aspects of his thought Paul appropriates in a given situation and how they come to expression in language that will be persuasive to his hearers.

Second Corinthians might illustrate this process. Behind the letter is a bubbling conflict, as a group of opponents try to discredit Paul's ministry among the Corinthians, apparently claiming that his personal weakness, lack of status and suffering nullify his gospel and apostleship. In response, Paul re-presents the gospel for the Corinthians through a series of striking paradoxes—suffering/comfort (2 Cor 1:3-11; cf. 4:8-9; 6:3-10), death/life (2 Cor 4:10-12; 5:14-15), slavery/triumph (2 Cor 2:14), poverty/wealth (2 Cor 4:7; 6:10; 8:9)—which above all come to expression in chapters 10–13 in the notion of "power in weakness." Engaging in a daring act of countercultural rhetoric, he actually parades his own social humiliations and physical sufferings as evidence of his experience of God's power that is manifested in weakness (2 Cor 11:16–12:10). "If I am accused of *weakness*," Paul seems to say, "I plead 'guilty as charged.'" Paul

⁵³This is the position of, e.g., Srom (*Reframing Paul*, pp. 182-83) and of Paul W. Meyer, who claims that the "coherence" of Pauline theology is itself the product of historical process, i.e., it is itself "contingent" ("Pauline Theology: A Proposal for a Pause in Its Pursuit," in *Pauline Theology*, Vol. 4: *Looking Back, Pressing On*, ed. E. E. Johnson and D. M. Hay [Atlanta: Scholars, 1997], p. 150).

⁵⁴Leander Keck, "What Makes Romans Tick?" in *Pauline Theology*, Volume 3: *Romans*, ed. D. M. Hay and E. E. Johnson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), p. 29.

characteristic of Paul's way of doing theology. On the one hand, the eternal purpose of God in Christ is contextualized in light of ever-new horizons and challenges. On the other, that very theological task brings fresh insight into the meaning of the gospel for the interpreter. We can therefore be open to the possibility of growth in Paul's theological understanding under the guidance of the spirit (cf. 1 Cor 13:8-12; Phil 3:12-16) without having to assume that Paul continually changed his mind about his fundamental convictions as he faced new problems.⁵⁶ This also suggests that our efforts to sing the gospel in new keys today may well gift us with a fresh and fuller grasp of the old, old story of God in Christ.

Inconsistency or flexibility? Context-sensitive theology will no doubt produce some logical and rhetorical tensions. Paul's interpreters have long struggled with how to handle the diversity of his thought, particularly when individual theological arguments, either in different writings or within a single letter, seem to be in conflict. Rather than viewing those statements as purely situational arguments that lack internal consistency,⁵⁷ we need to see them as part of a larger coherent whole, one that transcends a strict side-by-side comparison of individual assertions. At times, the particular needs of the communities to which Paul writes may require him to emphasize different aspects of an issue, which might stand in logical tension with one another.

How Paul deals with the similar themes of justification and the law in both Galatians and Romans presents a case in point. In Galatia, Paul responds to a state of emergency in which Gentile believers have come under the influence of "Judaizing" intruders. In light of Paul's concern to rescue the Galatians from impending disaster, it is hardly surprising that we do not find a carefully balanced and comprehensive theological discourse.⁵⁸ Instead, Paul launches into a highly polemical and passionate defense of the gospel, enlisting a whole series

⁵⁶I agree with Eduard Lohse that theories of major development in Paul's thought do not best account for theological differences among his letters. See E. Lohse, "Changes of Thought in Pauline Theology? Some Reflections on Paul's Ethical Teaching in the Context of His Theology," in *Theology and Ethics in Paul and His Interpreters: Essays in Honor of Victor Paul Furnish*, ed. E. H. Lovering Jr. and J. L. Sumney (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), pp. 146-60. Lohse points out that Paul was already a mature Christian teacher, with many years behind him to reflect on the gospel, by the time he wrote his first letter. Any major development in Paul's thought likely took place prior to that time, not after.

⁵⁷Finnish scholar Heikki Räisänen has in particular claimed that circumstances such as the conflict with Jewish Christian opponents in Galatia forced Paul into offering a whole array of circumstantial and self-contradictory arguments as he tried to explain the relationship between faith in Christ and the law (*Paul and the Law* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983]). Few scholars, however, have been willing to endorse Räisänen's portrait of a muddle-headed Paul.

⁵⁸See Cousar, *Letters of Paul*, p. 80.

of rhetorical and polemical arguments to demonstrate that the law cannot justify. In contrast, when Paul writes to the Romans, he communicates with a church he has never visited and that does not seem to be in crisis. The different circumstances of both Paul and his audience require a less combative treatment of the themes of righteousness and the law, along with more carefully constructed arguments. Whereas in Galatians Paul emphasizes the law's temporary validity and its primarily negative function in relation to righteousness (Gal 3:19-4:7),⁵⁹ Romans reveals a more balanced perspective and, overall, a more positive assessment of the role of the law. Although believers have died to the law (Rom 7:4) and the law functions to increase transgression (Rom 5:20; cf. 3:20; 4:15; 7:13), the law still remains holy, righteous and good (Rom 7:12). The gospel of Christ, far from invalidating the Torah, offers its true fulfillment (Rom 3:31; 8:4). In each case, Paul draws upon the language of righteousness by faith for all apart from the law, which represents something fundamental to his understanding of the gospel. The "facts on the ground," however, call for different yet complementary theological approaches.

Paul's eschatological teaching in 1 Thessalonians and Galatians gives us a second example of diversity within theological unity. In 1 Thessalonians, Paul stresses the future dimension of God's saving work, when Jesus returns in glory. Galatians, however, concentrates on the present liberating effects of the cross of Christ for believers. Explicit references to the "not yet" side of salvation are noticeably absent from this letter (but see Gal 5:5). This apparent theological disparity is no doubt due to the way that Paul interprets the one gospel story for two different contexts, not to any major shift in his eschatological understanding.⁶⁰ The Thessalonians needed to hear the consummation of the Christ story applied to their specific misunderstandings about the Day of the Lord (1 Thess 4:13-5:11), while the pressing issue in Galatia was to grasp how the death of Jesus had already guaranteed freedom from a yoke of slavery to circumcision and the law (Gal 5:1-13; 6:12-15). Paul brings out the particular dimension of God's saving work in Christ that was appropriate for the circumstances of his hearers.

These two brief examples suggest that apparent discrepancies in specific theological statements or perspectives may signal Paul's concern to emphasize one side of the equation or the other because of the contextual needs of the audiences

⁵⁹But cf. Galatians 6:2, where Paul speaks positively of Christians fulfilling the "law of Christ" (cf. Gal 5:14). For a valuable summary of Paul's contextual argument in Galatians, see Frank Thielman, *Paul and the Law: A Contextual Approach* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994), pp. 119-44.

⁶⁰See Hays, "Crucified with Christ," pp. 234-35.

he is addressing. Since Paul is often responding to imbalances and misunderstandings on the part of his churches, it is important that we try to grasp his specific persuasive strategies when he does theology.⁶¹ Charles B. Cousar suggests the analogy that "parents, acting out of a consistent love, know that each child warrants a particular treatment, often differing from that appropriate for his or her sibling."⁶² Yet behind all of Paul's varied, "parental" responses to specific pastoral needs stands the one gospel story of God's loving intervention in Christ.

Any adequate account of Paul's contextualizing activity in his letters, then, must recognize a coherent unity within a flexible diversity. It was part of Paul's genius that his thought could be contextual without becoming changeable, that his theological activity could be audience-sensitive without being audience-driven. Paul walks the via media, which avoids abstract formulas and generic theological solutions on the one hand and fickle pragmatism on the other. Inevitably, a tension emerges between the one gospel that cannot be compromised and demands obedience (Gal 1:6-9) and the versatility that enables the gospel to be interpreted in ways that address people on many levels within their life situations. Failure to do justice to one side of this tension or the other invariably leads to a misunderstanding of both Paul's gospel and his contextual way of doing theology.

CONCLUSION

Paul's letters reveal a complex conversation between the Christ-centered gospel and the diverse mission communities of the Mediterranean world to which it speaks. His writings bear witness to a process of creative and flexible theologizing that enables the abiding message of God's redeeming work in Christ to be contextualized in a variety of ways for ever-new settings. The conversation is guided by the constant gospel, not by ever-changing circumstances. Yet Paul's understanding of the coherence of the gospel was capable of expanding and deepening in light of the new challenges he faced. The goal of this process is not simply intellectual assent to a creed, but rather the total transformation of people within their circumstances, as they allow the story of Christ to rewrite their own scripts.

Today's missional church has the opportunity to embrace the same theological task of incarnating the gospel within the life worlds of contemporary people

⁶¹See J. Paul Sampley, "From Text to Thought World: The Route to Paul's Ways," in *Pauline Theology, Volume 1: Thessalonians, Philippians, Galatians, Philemon*, ed. J. M. Bassler (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), pp. 6-7.

⁶²Cousar, *Letters of Paul*, p. 80.

in transforming ways. We must partner with Paul in the theological dance between fidelity and innovation. Following Paul's lead, we must have a clear vision of the normative truth of the gospel, or else we take the risk that our theology will drift from its moorings. This has been a particular danger for many of the so-called contextual theologies that have emerged in recent decades from various global settings. There is much confusion about what constitutes the common faith and even if there is such a thing as a universally valid Christian message. Paul's confidence in the abiding "truth of the gospel" speaks with a clarion voice to such a state of affairs. And in a time when postmodern sensibilities in the West bristle at the very thought of an overarching metanarrative, we have no other course than to ground our theologizing in the one sacred story of what God has done "for us" in Christ.

At the same time, as Paul sensitively and respectfully engaged his world in all of its particularity, we must engage ours. Although Paul's ways of articulating the message, as Scripture, continue to carry foundational significance for God's people, we cannot be content merely to imitate his terminology or use identical images when we address our world. A contextualized gospel cannot be exclusively bound to the Greek vocabulary and thought forms that were meaningful to people in the first-century Greco-Roman world. If we would learn from Paul, we must seek forms of expressing the gospel, guided by the Spirit, that draw upon our own stories and cultural resources while remaining faithful to the witness of Scripture. Thus, Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf, doing theology out of the bitter ethnic conflict in the Balkan Peninsula, draws upon the powerful imagery of *exclusion* and *embrace*. These metaphors facilitate a fresh encounter between God's word and a fractured world. They point to the healing embrace of the crucified Christ, which enables us to open ourselves to enfold the other.⁶³ Or in settings where the community's relationship to ancestors is fundamental to peoples' worldviews, Christians might consider enlisting this discourse in order to clarify the role of Christ. Yet traditional beliefs must be challenged and language infused with new content, lest Jesus be reduced to one ancestor among many. Churches in affluent societies might co-opt images from the financial world in order to expose their cultures' worship of Mammon. The Pauline paradigm challenges every church in every place to enable the one gospel of Christ crucified to address and transform people within their life circumstances. Only then will we have a truly missional theology—one that motivates and sustains the church in its witness and service to the world.

⁶³Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996).

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Home > Vol 1, No 8 (2010) > **Hildreth**

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CONTEXTUALIZATION AND GREAT COMMISSION FAITHFULNESS

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INTRODUCTION

Among evangelicals, one can usually win friends by speaking or writing about missions. After all, the label *evangelicals* means, at the very least, identifying with those convinced that the gospel of Jesus Christ is the only hope for the salvation of the nations and therefore the eternal destiny of the masses is dependent on hearing and receiving this gospel message. However, these same friends may quickly become critics when the conversation shifts to the importance of contextualization. Recently a colleague confided, I know that it is important to help national believers develop their own faith, but the risk is just too great. I have seen it go horribly wrong, so I choose to stick with what I know. It is safer. Another missionary remarked, My orthodoxy just isn't that generous

Who among us can't identify with these brothers? Every cross-cultural worker feels the pressure of communicating the gospel in a way that is both orthodox and understandable. Indeed, the risk is great. In the following quote, Dean Gilliland captures this tension quite well:

Contextualization [is] a delicate enterprise if there ever was one the mission strategists stands on a razor's edge, aware that to fall off on either side has terrible consequences fall to the right and you end in obscurantism, so attached to your convention ways of practicing and teaching the faith that you veil its truth and power from those who are trying to see it through very different eyes. Slip to the left and you tumble into syncretism, so vulnerable to the impact of paganism in its multiplicity of forms that you compromise the uniqueness of Christ and concoct another gospel which is not a gospel.

The apostle Paul warned the Galatian Christians that preaching an altered gospel would leave the preacher accursed before God (Gal. 1:6-10). Who wants to struggle with the difficulties of learning languages, understanding culture, not to mention the daily struggles of living cross-culturally, and then allow careless evangelism to make twice as much a son of hell? (Matt. 23:15). This tension is enough to tempt the missionary to shrink into comfort and familiarity, choosing to preach from his own culture rather than working for a properly contextualized faith. However, in light of the commission given at the end of Matthew's gospel, timidity is not an option. Rather, obedience to the Great Commission requires contextualizing the Christian message for and with the people in a ministry field.

CONTEXTUALIZATION DEFINED

Before addressing specific concerns raised by the Great Commission, it is necessary to settle on a definition of contextualization. This is not a simple task, because it is nearly impossible to arrive at a definition that everyone is comfortable with and accepts. According to Moreau, the different definitions or the key distinctions of contextualization rest upon the emphasis one places on either scripture or cultural setting. David Clark labels contextualization that emphasizes culture above scripture mainline/liberal, while maintaining that "evangelical" contextualization takes place when the scriptures are prioritized. Even Bevan, in his important work describing different models of contextualization, does not stray too far from the distinctions provided by Clark and Moreau. In fact, he introduces the entire discussion by pointing out that contextualized theology has two basic orientations. The first he labels "creation centered" orientation. This position considers all of creation as sacramental, the place where God reveals Godself. Revelation comes in daily life, in ordinary words, through ordinary people. The second he labels "redemption centered orientation." This position is built on the conviction that culture and human experience are either in need of a radical transformation or in need of total replacement. The world is fallen and in need of redemption; therefore, God's revelation can only come through his special redemptive work in Christ and inspired scriptures. These orientations/emphases provide a reasonable scale upon which different definitions and models of contextualization can be measured or described.

The evangelical doctrine of the inspiration and sufficiency of scripture demands that the biblical text serve as the source of authority for life and ministry. VanRheenen describes how this doctrine affects evangelical contextualization:

Models emphasizing scripture usually define contextualization as the translation of biblical meanings into contemporary cultural contexts. Therefore, images, metaphors, rituals, and words that are current in the culture are used to make the message both understandable and impactful. This model "assigns control to Scripture but cherishes the contextualization rubric because it reminds us that the Bible must be thought about, translated into and preached in categories relevant to the particular cultural context."

Evangelical contextualization, then, becomes a form of translation. This is not a mere word-for-word correspondence of, say, doctrinal language of one culture into doctrinal language of another. Rather translating the meaning of doctrines into another cultural context - and this translation might make those doctrines look and sound quite different from their original formulations. The end result of good contextualization should contain all three of the following attributes:

Reaffirmation of the faith once for all delivered to the saints.

Rearticulation of this faith with forms, symbols, and language that communicate the message as it was intended to be understood.

Reapplication of Christian living in a way that is culturally appropriate.

The fulfillment of the missionary task, as described in the Great Commission, requires that local missionaries, along with local believers, be involved in this process of working toward a properly contextualized Christian faith that includes each of these attributes.

THE GREAT COMMISSION AS PRIMARY MISSIONARY TEXT

Christopher Wright has successfully argued that the Grand Biblical Narrative, rather than a single verse (or a string of verses), ought to shape missionary theology. However, this fact should not cause us to ignore the importance of single missionary passages (like the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19-20) as a primary missionary text. This verse has probably inspired, as well as instructed, more Christians toward the task of Global Missions than any other single text in scripture. William Carey drew from this verse in his influential tract *An Enquiry Into the Obligation of Christians to use Means for the Conversion of the Heathen* (1792) to shake the church of his day from its missionary slumber. David

Bosch notes that with the use of this verse, Wm. Carey was, in fact, one of the very first to have attempted to spell out [a biblical] foundation for the church's missionary mandate. Then most recently, The Global Missionary Consultation, *Tokyo 2010*, used this verse as its theme and mandate. Considering this passage, the delegates of this historic conference pledged to deploy 100,000 new missionaries and follow the mandate of the Great Commission by encouraging transformation at every level. These two examples can serve as a bracket for the modern missionary movement and speaks to the significance of this verse.

The Great Commission is not only important in the historical development of missions; it is also a key text for biblical interpretation. Kstenberger and OBrien have demonstrated that the commission should not be understood as an addendum at the end of the book or an afterthought by a redactor. Instead, this verse should serve as the key interpretative text for the entire book of Matthew. This passage is intricately interwoven with the gospel [Matthew] as a whole. Consequently, the Great Commission serves as a valuable interpretative key for understanding the entire gospel of Matthew. With this in mind, it would be impossible to overestimate the importance of the Great Commission in any discussion of the redemptive plan of God, including the OT prediction of the coming Son, his presentation in Matthew's gospel, and, finally, the proclamation of the message to the nations.

THE COMMAND OF THE COMMISSION

The main verb of the sentence that makes up Matthew 28:19-20 is μαθητεύσατε (make disciples), followed by descriptive phrases βαπτίζοντες αυτούς (baptizing them) and διδασκοντες αυτούς (teaching them). According to Blomberg this command calls for a kind of evangelism that does not stop after someone makes a profession of faith. The truly subordinate participles explain what making disciples involves. The first of these will be a once-for-all decisive initiation into Christian community. The second proves a perennially incomplete lifelong task. This includes coming to faith, identifying with the Christian community, and growing in faith throughout the life of the believer. Rengstorff notes that μαθητεύσατε always implies the existence of a personal attachment which shapes the whole life of the one described as μαθητής. These descriptions highlight that the command of the Great Commission is for followers of Jesus to introduce unbelievers to the faith; however, the work is not finished until the whole of life is affected.

Scores of books have been written on the subject of making disciples; for the most part, they are filled with modernized tips and techniques for selection and training. However, Bosch reminds us that the command to *make disciples* has to be interpreted against the backdrop of Matthew's gospel as a whole. One may assume that Matthew intended for the reader to recall the way that Jesus dealt with his own disciples. According to Rengstorff, Jesus' disciples were different from the other types of disciples in the NT (i.e. disciples of the Pharisees and John the Baptist); the latter were drawn to join a cause, while Jesus called his disciples to himself. This is a difference that should not be overlooked by modern missionaries. Again, Bosch notes, Discipleship is determined by the relationship to Christ himself, not by conformity to an impersonal ordinance. The context is not the classroom (where teaching usually takes place) nor even the church, but the world. With apologies to Walter Henryrichsen, the Great Commission calls for disciple-making that does not simply reproduce disciples after the disciple-makers' own kind. Rather, the missionary's challenge is to produce a disciple who is a follower of Christ within the specific and unique cultural location, a context that is always different from that of the missionary. Therefore the missionary must think through and work toward a properly contextualized faith.

CHRISTIANITY: A UNIVERSAL FAITH WITH LOCAL EXPRESSION

Timothy Tennent has written, The life blood of Christianity is found in its ability to translate itself across new cultural and geographic barriers. One dare not forget this important point when considering the mandate of the Great Commission. Unlike Islam and Hinduism, Christianity has proven, often

through fiery trials, that its message is both relevant and life-changing in every culture. The Great Commission serves as a reminder of two key features of Christianity; it is a universal message strengthened through local expressions of faith.

Universality of the Christian Faith

Post-modern thinkers are quick to reject Christianity's claim of universal truth in our meta-narrative. However, Stanley Grenz has warned Christians that we dare not fall into the same trap. We simply cannot allow Christianity to be relegated to the status of one more faith among others. The gospel is inherently an expansive missionary message. We believe not only that the biblical narrative makes sense for *us* but is also good news for *all*. This warning is especially important as we discuss the importance of contextualization and the Great Commission. It is easy to confuse talk about the necessity of a contextualized theology with postmodernism's rejection of a universal story. However, the call for contextualization is not an elevation of localized narratives above the Christian meta-narrative.

The Great Commission itself provides a clear indication that Jesus understood the Gospel was a universal message. This is why he commanded his followers to take the message to all nations. The message of Christ is universally applicable for all people in every culture. The new disciples are to be baptized into the name of the one God and instructed to obey the teachings of Jesus. It is impossible to miss this emphasis of the universality of the Christian. Continuing Grenz's quote, [The Gospel] provides the fulfillment of the longings and aspirations of all peoples. It embodies *the* truth - the truth of and for all humankind. The Christian message addresses universal issues and is universally true. However, it is greatly strengthened when it finds local expressions.

Importance of Local Expression

The command to make disciples of all nations requires that the followers of Jesus translate the message into other languages and guide new believers in living out and expressing the gospel within their cultural context. Anthropologists and linguists have demonstrated the role that language plays in the shaping of one's worldview. Translating the Christian message into another language involves decisions about word choice and emphases. These choices naturally produce expressions of Christianity that are rooted in local soil, thought forms, symbols, and stories. Linguistics notwithstanding, Paul Hiebert pointed out that failure to contextualize the faith, encouraging local expressions, can create two serious problems. First, the gospel is identified as an imported, foreign religion rather than the universal message which can speak to the local concerns. Second, lack of contextualization derails complete and proper obedience to the teachings of Jesus. According to Hiebert, Old beliefs and customs [don't] die out. Because they were not consciously dealt with, they [go] underground. In other words, failure to encourage believers to properly contextualize their faith with culturally appropriate expressions and applications of the faith may actually hinder obedience to the mandate of the Great Commission.

The Task for Great Commission, Cross-cultural Workers

As previously shown, it is vitally important to develop a properly contextualized form of Christianity which reaffirms the universal historic faith, while at the same time allowing for culturally appropriate expressions and applications of this message. It has also been demonstrated that obedience to the command of the Great Commission requires that the cross-cultural missionary should include this in his objectives as a way of engaging in cross-cultural disciple-making. However, the question remains, What should an outsider do to foster a contextualized faith? After all, contextualization must include contributions from those inside the culture. Timoteo Gener notes that contextualization is, Doing theology not having it done for them by others received and owned by the local people describes a two-way process...from *without* and from *within*. This being true, what should the outsider do in order to

both participate in contextualization as part of *making disciples* while at the same time releasing nationals to *do theology*?

Not only does obedience to the Great Commission require that the missionary not leave the development of a contextualized theology exclusively to the new church, but providing this measure of care also serves as a protection for new believers. Abdicating this responsibility might, by default, condemn the local church to repeat much of the 2000 years of theological development that has shaped the faith of the church. Heresy, theological debate, violence, and creeds of orthodoxy mark our Christian history. Some of these circumstances have contributed to a stronger faith, while others have not been so positive. Of course the new church will make mistakes, however it would be presumptuous to assume that a fledgling church would be able to avoid all of the missteps of previous generations. Guidance by the experienced missionary should prevent the new believers from accidentally drifting into issues that were addressed years ago. At the same time, contextualization is completed from within the local Christian community. It is this tension between the necessity of local church *doing theology* and the missionary mandate to *make disciples* that causes us to ask again, What can an outsider do to foster a contextualized faith?

Suggested Process

Several have offered proposals for a process of contextualization. It is not the purpose of this paper to suggest a wholly new venture but rather to build on what has already been proposed and relate it to the features of contextualization put forth earlier in this paper.

The first step to making disciples cross-culturally is for the missionary to present the gospel in both word and deed. He should give careful consideration to the way he expresses the message, being sensitive about the features of the presentation that are rooted in the home culture rather than the biblical message. According to Dyrness, What is commonly overlooked is that the impact comes often from the life as well as the message of the evangelist. To the degree the missionary can live a Christian life in a culturally appropriate manner, nationals will begin to see the message applied, and the process of contextualization will begin. In this way, the missionary is seeking to obey the command of the Great Commission, making disciples, but care is given to cultural nuances. The message, as well as his lifestyle, should both affirm the culture while at the same time challenge some of the socially accepted norms.

Next, as questions about the message and even the lifestyle of the missionary arise, he should guide the new believers to read the scriptures as the source of answers. According to Clark, these questions should be applied to the themes and texts from the biblical teachings. The goal is to achieve more culturally appropriate expressions or applications of the Christian faith without falling into syncretism or a version of the faith that simply copies that of the missionary. Hiebert recommends the pastor or missionary leads the church in a study of the scriptures [he or she] plays a major role, for this is the area of his or her expertise. However, it is at this point that the missionary should serve as a guide, not simply a teacher, often refusing to answer questions until nationals have discovered the answer first in scripture. This posture will allow the scriptures rather than the missionary to occupy the place of authority. Though the process might be long and complicated, the result of this is the initial step toward a contextualized faith. The church is doing theology and seeking to live obediently to its teachings, but not in isolation from the wider Christian community. The missionary is fulfilling the mandate of the Great Commission in making disciples of Jesus, not Western culture or himself. The result should be Christianity lived out and articulated differently than it has been received, but remaining faithful to the core elements of the faith.

As the missionary continues to engage the national believers, he will begin to serve as a friendly critic, offering correction and encouragement as necessary. Clark recommends, Christians in one culture discuss their findings with theologians in another culture, either in time or in space. It is in this phase that missionary serves as an external voice, pointing out where this newly contextualized faith is at odds

with scriptural or traditional norms of the faith. Again, great care must be taken, because the missionaries cultural sensitivities will be tested, and he must continually ask, Is this behavior (or teaching) really at odds with biblical teaching or my own cultural understandings and preferences? The answer, and response, to this question should cause both the missionary, along with the national church, to return to the scriptures, seeking greater insight.

CONCLUSION

This suggested process is, by necessity, loose and incomplete. However, it does provide some way forward for missionaries to fulfill the mandate of making disciples without neglecting the importance of contextualization and the necessity for local believers to actually *do theology for themselves*. To be sure, the process is fraught with pitfalls; it is not a safe or painless journey. At each turn, there is ample opportunity for mistakes. However, timidity is not an option; the vibrancy of the faith and the mandate of the Great Commission demand that missionaries intentionally strive for a contextualized faith.

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Where Would Civilization Be Without Christianity? The Gift of Mission

The act of translating and enculturating the gospel has been Christianity's greatest contribution to human civilization.

DALE T. IRVIN | DECEMBER 6, 1999

Early in the ninth century an anonymous poem known as the *Heiland* ("Savior") began to circulate among the Saxons of northern Europe. Two or three generations earlier these same Saxons had been brutally conquered by the Franks under Charlemagne. Forced to undergo baptism at the point of the sword, they hardly had experienced authentic evangelization. This was where the *Heiland* came in, for it translated the story of Christ into the Saxon language and cultural world. According to this poem, Jesus was the most powerful Chieftain ever born. The words Jesus used to teach and perform his mighty deeds of "magic" were called "God's Spell" (or gospel). His 12 companion foot soldiers, or thanes, came from among the sons of Saxony, and Jesus conducted his ministry throughout their lands. For instance, the wedding at Fort Cana was held in a Saxon drinking hall, and the liquor drawn from the stone vats was the best apple wine. No one hearing the poem could miss its point: Jesus Christ, who was mightier than Woden, Thor, and the rest of the ancient gods, was alone the true Saxon Savior.

Around the time the Saxons were first coming into contact with Jesus, a small Christian community on the other side of the world in the imperial capital of China was translating the message of Jesus Christ into the Chinese language and cultural idioms. A monument erected in 781 in their monastery in the city told how Christians from the Persian empire had first brought the "Luminous Religion" to the imperial capital more than a century before. There they had been welcomed by the Chinese emperor, who invited them to translate their Scriptures in the imperial library. Among their early efforts were a series of evangelistic texts written in Chinese in the style of Buddhist sutras. One of these, the Jesus-Messiah Sutra, actually uses the term "Buddha" to translate "God." Another employs the term "Shih-tsun," or "Lord of the Universe," as a Christological title—a term for one of the most important bodhisattvas, or historical savior figures, of the Buddhist religion. This monument included the basic tenets of orthodox Christian faith, making it clear that Christian teachings stood apart from other religions. As if to leave no doubt about the relationship of Christ to other faiths, at the top of the monument was the cross, standing over symbols of Chinese religion.

Both the Saxon *Heiland* and the Chinese monument are examples of Christianity translating the message of Jesus Christ into new languages and contexts. In the first instance, the Christian religion was already well on its way toward providing a new political and cultural synthesis that was soon to be called "Christendom" in the European north. In the second it was able to achieve only the most marginal of effects upon Chinese cultural life at the time, and the Christian community in China was soon to be eclipsed altogether by imperial edict.

Today we might refer to these historical moments as "enculturations" of the gospel. Through this ongoing process, the salvation that Jesus Christ in his historical incarnation embodied for the

women and men around him has continued to be brought close to others in new times and places on earth. Without a doubt the act of translating and enculturing the gospel of Jesus Christ has been Christianity's greatest contribution to human civilization over these past two millennia. Enculturation does two things. Translating the gospel message affirms and preserves the cultural world of those who have received the gospel. At the same time, enculturation makes new believers aware that they belong to a wider community of faith, thereby relativizing their own language and culture.

Examples of this relativizing aspect appear very early in the life of the Christian movement. Many educated people in the Greco-Roman world knew that there were other civilizations beyond their own, but for the most part considered those civilizations merely "barbarian." This was especially the case when the foreigners could not speak Greek. The early Christians in the Greco-Roman world uniquely sought community even with the "barbarian" nations of the earth. The gospel has within it an inherent boundary-breaking impulse that contradicts the tribalistic tendency of cultures. The effect has been to challenge each civilization's sense of absoluteness.

According to the "Letter to Diognetus," written by an unknown author in the second or third century: "Christians are distinguished from other people neither by land, nor language, nor customs; for they do not inhabit cities of their own, nor use a particular language, nor lead a life that is unusual. But inhabiting Greek as well as barbarian cities, according to each person's lot ... they display to us their wonderful and admittedly paradoxical way of life. They inhabit their home lands, but as strangers."

God redeems the world by becoming one with the powerless.

The realization that others from beyond one's own cultural or national horizon are now included within the horizon of divine redemption has often brought with it an openness and desire for fellowship with them. At their best moments Christians have experienced a commonality that cuts across the frontiers of natural human affiliation.

An early testimony to this is found in an inscription on a tombstone from the late second century at the ancient city of Hieropolis (in modern Turkey). The epitaph is written in partially veiled terms because Christianity was still an illegal religion under Roman law at the time. The tombstone belongs to one who was named Avircius Marcellus. In his life, the inscription says, he had travelled to Rome to meet the emperor, and to the plains of Syria all the way to the city of Nisibis, east of the Euphrates. Everywhere he had gone the faith had preceded him, and he had found persons with whom he could converse (a reference to Christian fellowship). In each place people had set before him the "fish," an early Christian symbol, and they had shared the bread and wine.

This Christian openness to other classes, cultures, and peoples lies at the very foundation of many of our deepest sentiments regarding the worth of all humanity. More importantly, Christianity has insisted upon the dignity and worth especially of those whom the rest of society oppresses, despises, or rejects. Israel insisted that the God who created heaven and earth sides in history with a lowly slave people who suffered abject oppression at the hands of the Egyptians. Christians universalized this insight by proclaiming that Jesus Christ, who was born, lived, and

died as a marginal person, is the Lord over all the earth. The message of the New Testament is clear: God does not redeem the world through the operations of human power, but redeems it by becoming one with the powerless in our midst. Christianity's contribution to human civilization is the witness that salvation comes from the margins of society and not from its center.

This is evident today in the explosive growth of Christianity in the so-called Two-Thirds World. The greatest vitality of Christian faith is being experienced in the continents and civilizations whose peoples have been rendered marginal by the modern global political system: in Asian churches, where Jesus is often numbered foremost among the ancient sages; in African churches, where Jesus is often considered chief among the ancestors; or in Latin American churches, where Jesus is often seen as being first among the poor—in each case the message of Christian faith is receiving new inspiration and expression.

Today, many in the churches have a healthy missionary consciousness of the need to cross cultural boundaries at a distance, but fail to match that with a similar consciousness about cultural boundaries close to home. The segregated and culturally isolated churches of American society threaten to betray the central message of the gospel that "all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). When we accommodate ourselves to the dominant patterns of racial and cultural separation in this nation, we fail to be fully converted to Christ and thus to make our own contribution to our civilization today. Still, that there are so many grassroot groups now working for reconciliation and justice tells me that the gospel is still at work transforming our culture.

Most global-minded Christians today are properly cautious about uncritically extolling the civilizing values of Christian mission apart from a more self-critical appraisal. Many of us who celebrate the value of "contextualizing the faith" in other parts of the world are uneasy about aspects of the contextualizations going on at home. The cultural accommodation of many Western churches looks to some of us to be nothing short of a sign of their bankruptcy. But then the Christian church has always stood on the edge of its own bankruptcy. Christians do not proclaim their own churches as the source of salvation. Rather, they proclaim Jesus Christ whom God raised from the dead. The power of the Christian gospel is found when we embrace our own death in order to experience the life of resurrection given to us in Jesus Christ. The death of Jesus Christ points us toward the edges of civilization, on the margins of our society, outside the gates of the city where we must journey if we are to join him (Heb. 13:12-13). But his resurrection assures us that the stone the builders of human cities have rejected is still the chief cornerstone of God's new civilization that is yet to come.

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