

Here Is Love

William Rees (st. 1 and 2; 1802–1883); tr. by William Edwards (1848–1929); William Williams (st. 3; 1717–1791)

Here is love, vast as the ocean,
Loving-kindness as the flood,
When the Prince of Life, our Ransom,
Shed for us His precious blood.
Who His love will not remember?
Who can cease to sing His praise?
He can never be forgotten
Throughout heav'n's eternal days.

On the mount of crucifixion
Fountains opened deep and wide;
Through the floodgates of God's mercy
Flowed a vast and gracious tide.
Grace and love, like mighty rivers,
Poured incessant from above,
And heav'n's peace and perfect justice
Kissed a guilty world in love.

In Thy truth Thou dost direct me
By Thy Spirit through Thy Word;
And Thy grace my need is meeting
As I trust in Thee, my Lord.
Of Thy fullness Thou art pouring
Thy great love and pow'r on me,
Without measure, full and boundless,
Drawing out my heart to Thee.

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

Paul Against the Contextualizers

Michael Riley

Central Seminary hosted its annual MacDonald Lectures last February. Dr. Paul Hartog of Faith Baptist Bible College and Theological Seminary of Ankeny, Iowa, delivered four addresses. All four are posted on the seminary's website and are worth your time.

His opening lecture took issue with the popular interpretation of Paul's pronouncement, "I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some" (1 Cor 9:22). The common understanding of this verse is that while the content of the gospel is vital, the form is a matter of indifference. Accordingly, mature devotion to the mission of Christ is demonstrated by our willingness to abandon our preferred forms of ministry to adopt those of the people we are trying to reach.

While Dr. Hartog's argument was wide-ranging, he offered a piece of evidence against the common understanding that is both concise and convincing. In the very same book in which Paul says he has become all things to all people, he tells us back in chapter 2 that "when I came to you, brothers, [I] did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom" (1 Cor 2:1).

The implication is clear: Paul knew how best to contextualize the gospel for the Corinthian audience: to deliver it according to the rules of Greek rhetoric. A competent use of the expected rhetorical forms would certainly have gained a broad hearing for the gospel in Corinth. And yet Paul intentionally avoided conforming to his audience's preferences, choosing rather "to know nothing among [them] except Jesus Christ and him crucified." In this case, he refused to contextualize the message.

Paul's motive is that the Corinthians' "faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God" (1 Cor 2:5). Had Paul preached Christ in the manner of an expert rhetorician, he may well have gained a bigger audience. Indeed, there may have been more professions of faith than Paul saw by his ministry in "weakness and in fear and much trembling." But Paul's confidence was rooted firmly in the message rather than the method. Additional results gained through his own brilliance would be, by definition, spurious.



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I find Dr. Hartog's argument compelling. Whatever we take "all things to all men" to mean, it must not contradict Paul's resolute refusal to contextualize his message in the way we might expect.

But we can go a step further in this line of argumentation. Earlier in the same letter, Paul writes, "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.... For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor 1:18-25).

Trace Paul's thought here. He sets before us two audiences for the gospel: the Jews and the Greeks. The Jews, Paul says, seek *signs*. The signs they seek are the very ones that Jesus offered, the signs which vindicate his claims of Messiahship. Despite seeing those signs, the Jews (through their leaders) rejected Jesus's call to "repent, for the kingdom is at hand." The crucifixion became the peak of scandal for those whose only expectation was that Messiah would come to reign in power. For those who desire signs of power, the cross is inexplicable weakness.

Paul's second audience was the Greeks (often taken broadly as *Gentiles*, but here likely the civilized Greeks), whose measure of status was wisdom. Their prizing of wisdom endures as a stereotype: to think about Greeks is to think about the philosophy of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. We have already seen that their standard of evaluation was rhetorical excellence and incisive philosophy.

Paul knows what his audience values. And this point is crucial: Christ is indeed power and wisdom. For Paul to preach Christ as power to the Jews and wisdom to the Greeks would not be an abandonment of biblical orthodoxy. Paul could contextualize his message to his audiences and not say anything untrue.

And yet not only does Paul not contextualize his message in the obvious way, he does the very opposite. Knowing that the Jews seek signs and the Greeks seek wisdom, he purposefully emphasizes Christ's crucifixion. To those who seek signs and power, he preaches Christ as weakness. To those who seek wisdom, he preaches Christ as folly.

Why would Paul so flagrantly defy our expected application of "all things to all men"? The truth of the matter is that the form and content of the gospel are not so separable as we are led to believe. There are approaches to contextualizing the gospel that must inevitably alter the message.

To gain a hearing for the gospel, our inclination is to ask, "What problems do people have, and how can we present Jesus as the answer to those problems?" But when we attempt to provoke interest in Christ by changing the

problem that the gospel solves, we change the gospel. Instead of insisting that our hearers turn "to God from idols to serve the living and true God" (1 Thess 1:9), we make Christ the servant of their idols. This is high scandal in ministry. It is a dereliction of our proper duty as ministers.

Paul tells us what the Jews and the Greeks seek. What do the Americans seek? Family stability. Financial peace. Can Jesus be the answer to those things? Indeed, he can. Are they proper subjects for discipling the people of God? Surely, they are.

But for the unbelieving American, these things are his idols, just as surely as wisdom was to the Greeks and signs were to the Jews. In such a case, to preach Christ as the answer to the longings of the unbelieving heart is to warp the gospel. Such contextualization enthrones idols instead of casting them down. Here, Paul's example would lead us to preach Christ as the one who has "not come to bring peace, but a sword," who has "come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law" (Matt 10:34-36). Rather than preaching Christ as a financial counselor, we proclaim him as the one who insists we must forsake all to follow him.

The concern with such an approach is that we will discourage people from coming to Christ. But I know this: while I have seen scores and scores of false professions of faith in my life, I have never known anyone foreknown by the Father who was not justified. When the gospel is preached clearly and faithfully (and we must preach it to all!), the sheep will hear the Shepherd's voice and come.

In every way, we must embrace the scandal of the gospel. The unbeliever's problem is not what he thinks it is. His problem is that he is condemned in the sight of God, and that he is helpless to rescue himself. We preach the gospel when we proclaim Jesus as the solution to that problem.

To be sure, there are good and necessary forms of contextualization. The gospel should be preached in the language of those we wish to reach, not in Greek. We should indeed adopt restrictions on our own personal liberties in Christ for the sake of reaching those who would be otherwise scandalized. But biblical vigilance demands that we learn to keep watch over our best intentions.



This essay is by Michael P. Riley, pastor of Calvary Baptist Church of Wakefield, Michigan. Since 2011, he has served Central Seminary as managing editor of *In the Nick of Time*. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
