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**“CULTURAL CHAMELEON:”
CONTEXTUALIZATION FROM A PAULINE PERSPECTIVE
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The Apostle Paul and a New Phase of Redemptive History

In Pisidian Antioch, Paul recounted the history of Israel up to the time of Jesus and highlighted His resurrection as a point of transition to a new phase in redemptive history.¹ “Through [Jesus],” he said, “everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses” (Acts 13:39). The apostle demonstrated to the Galatians how the Mosaic Law was in effect only until “the Seed” referred to in the Abrahamic covenant arrived (Gal. 3:6-9). The “old” covenant had been a glorious one, but “what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory” of the new covenant (3:10).

The Romans were informed that in this new phase, the Jewish people were no longer the focal point of God’s redemptive plan, for “Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles come in” (11:25). Under these new conditions, the Gentiles “... who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ ... [whose] purpose was to create in Himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross ...” (2:13-16). Thus a converted Gentile does not remain a Gentile, since he or she takes on a whole new identity in Christ, but neither does he or she become a Jew.

By the same token, the descendants of Abraham who bow to Jesus as Lord do not remain Jews, since Christ is creating a “new man,” one who is neither Jew nor Gentile (2:15). Paul told the Philippians that his Jewish background was no longer of any significance (3:4-8), and the Colossians were taught that the Jewish dietary restrictions, religious festivals, holy celebrations, and sabbatarianism were only “shadows of the things that were to come” (2:16-17). The letter to

the Hebrews contains the most complete explication of Paul's conviction that "by calling this covenant 'new,' [God] has made the first one obsolete, and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear" (8:13).

Paul was thus to become the quintessential apostle of a new era, a period during which two major shifts occurred.

First Shift: The Move Westward

Through divine providence, the nation of Israel had been strategically located at the juncture of the three great land masses of the ancient world. Such a location was ideal because the centripetalist philosophy of ministry which characterized the Old Testament era required the conversion of non-Jews to the Jewish religion in order to be accounted righteous before God.

But this entire system came to a halt in the year 70 CE with the destruction of Jerusalem by the armies of Titus. The Temple was destroyed, the priesthood disbanded, the sacrifices ended and the Jewish people dispersed. Under Johanan ben Zakkai and his school of refugees in Jabneh, the Israelites who had rejected Jesus' Messianic claims developed a new form of religion which might be termed a "portable" Judaism. The Jewish canon was determined and the groundwork laid for what would eventually become the Talmud. The Jews moved from a focus on sacred *space* to an emphasis upon sacred *time*, continuing the celebration of holidays and festivals in hope of a future redemption.

Christians, however, were motivated by a completely different agenda. The centripetal strategy of the Old Covenant was replaced with a centrifugal approach and the primary focus of the Christian faith became internal and personal as opposed to the externalism and institutionalism of the Old Covenant. No longer was it necessary to convert to Judaism, adopt the Mosaic rituals as one's own, undergo circumcision, offer sacrifices, and eat a restricted diet.

All of the above were revealed as nothing more than “shadows” of a reality which was fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus (Hebrews 9-10 *passim*).

But it would be erroneous to disconnect Christianity completely from any and all geographical contexts. The new faith became deeply rooted in “Western” culture, remaining so to the present day. And despite the cult of “political correctness” which demands apologies for this fact, biblically speaking it is difficult to maintain otherwise than that this development was in accordance with the divine plan of God.

In Acts 16: 6-10, Luke presents indications of divine guidance with regard to the direction of Paul’s second journey. The apostle and his companions had attempted to preach in the province of Asia, but were “prevented by the Holy Spirit” from speaking there. They turned northeast and attempted next to enter Bithynia, but again “the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to.” They ended up in Troas, where Paul received a vision of a man begging him to come to Macedonia. Crossing the Aegean Sea, leaving Asia behind and entering Europe, Paul and his companions were leaving the Semitic foundations of Old Testament religion and were now establishing a new base of operations: the West.²

Paul’s adaptation to the Western context is clearly seen when he reaches Athens. In his sermon on the Areopagus, Semitic thinking was almost entirely absent from his remarks. His description of God was generic, ideas from the Cretan poet Epimenides were brought into the discussion, and the Cilician poet Aratus was quoted (17:22-31). Events recorded in Genesis relating to the Babel narrative were telescoped, paraphrased, and changed from an account of divine judgment upon the rebelliousness of humankind to a divine plan designed to bring all humans into a state of insecurity, frustration and loneliness so that they would seek God and—perhaps—find Him.

Several other aspects of westernization are noteworthy. Farrar analyzes the apostle's usage of the Greek language and demonstrates how it is possible to trace his knowledge of Western jurisprudence in the epistle to the Galatians.³ It is also in Galatians that Paul speaks of a merging of Christ's identity with his own (see 2:20), and Scott comments that the apostle was reflecting here the aim of the mystery religions to unite the worshipper with the object of his worship and the initiation ceremonies which signified this union.⁴

In Romans 7:14-25 Paul discusses the struggle between man's higher and lower natures and posits a connection between evil and the physical body. This teaching differs radically from the Semitic view of the human being and demonstrates the influence of Greek dualism. 1 Corinthians 8:6 is believed by some to reflect Stoic thinking, as does the passage in Romans 1 which presupposes a universal human capacity to know natural laws and obey them. The list of the "fruit of the Spirit" in Galatians 5:22-23 is similar to recitations of virtues in first century Stoic writings,⁵ and an adherent of this philosophy would have been impressed with the physical and mental endurance portrayed in 2 Corinthians 11:23-32, the attitude toward the body revealed in 1 Corinthians 9:25-27, and the contentedness in any and all situations celebrated in Philippians 4:11-13.

Paul was thus the quintessential bridge figure between the Old Covenant and the New. One can maintain that he *himself* was a form of "contextualization," for through his influence the message of God to humankind attained a new foundational form. From this time on, Christian missionary agents would not be the bearers of a message that was essentially Semitic and Jewish in form, but one that was Western and Christian. Instead of the ethnocentrism of the Old Testament Hebrew constructs, Christians were impelled by a faith rooted in Roman and Hellenistic internationalism.

Second Shift: Reversing the Direction of Adaptation

While God’s “search and rescue operation” has always encompassed all peoples (cf. Genesis 12:3), Old Testament Judaism was never required to undergo alterations to make itself understandable or attractive to outsiders. There was no idea that Israelites were to “move,” culturally-speaking, in the direction of a target audience in order to make their message more palatable. The opposite was true: Gentiles who wished to come under God’s covenant of mercy were required to “move” in the direction of Israel. The Gentile proselyte thus became a Jew in nearly every possible way, and technically this same process is still required today, with necessary modifications.

With the introduction of the New Covenant, one finds that the direction of adaptation was reversed. Christianity does not have external requirements for conversion since its focus is upon a *spiritual* rebirth and a *spiritual* baptism—both of which are internal and personal phenomena. Baptism in water and participation in the Lord’s Supper are privileges of the believer and may even serve as outward evidences of one’s inner state, but, biblically speaking, they are not required for salvation. Christians do not define themselves in accordance with a specific cultural model but adapt and accommodate themselves to whatever cultural trappings surround them at any given point in time.⁶ The New Testament makes it clear that this was to have been true not only with respect to Christian lifestyle in general but also to missiological strategy.

Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 9 are considered by many to be the foundational source upon which current theories of “contextualization” are grounded. Note, however, that Paul never speaks in this passage of the contextualization of a *message*, a *theology*, an *ethical system*, or a *church structure*. What he addresses is the contextualization of *himself* as a *messenger*. He appears never to have engaged people in a discussion of an abstract system of ideas, a set of

theological constructs, a moral standard or a series of religious rituals. He sought instead to attract others to a personal model; a living example that could be observed and copied at the level of the street. “Be imitators of me,” he said to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 4:16). “You know how we lived among you for your sake,” he remarked to the Thessalonians. “You became imitators of us and of the Lord” (1 Thess. 1:5-6). And he requested of the Philippians that they join with others in following his example (3:17). Thus the apostle’s contextualization may be broken down into the following components.

1. *Adapting to a specific cultural context by immersion into it.* Paul was not an “armchair missiologist.” He was a practitioner characterized by an itinerant lifestyle, traveling throughout the Greco-Roman world and spending time in such diverse places as Jerusalem, Syrian Antioch, Ephesus, Corinth, Rome, and (according to tradition) Spain. In these places he cultivated the air of an *insider* rather than that of a visitor. He took the people into his heart, lived with them, plied his trade with them, shared meals with them, and conversed long hours with them. When Paul was in a place, he was truly *there*, not desiring to be elsewhere, and not remaining aloof from the inhabitants.
2. *Adapting one’s manner of thinking, speaking, and acting to a specific context.* Paul became like a Jew; he *became* like those without the Mosaic Law; he *became* weak; he *became* “all things to all people.” He deliberately changed his thoughts, speech, and manner of living; he abandoned old customs and habits and adopted new ones. He made it clear that his intention was to reduce the cultural distance between himself and his target audience to as near zero as possible.
3. *Demonstrating to one’s audience what a Christ-centered life would look like in their cultural context.* In Paul’s form of contextualization, a fully immersed person will *himself* be

contextualized, and thus his thoughts, speech and actions will automatically be contextualized. Just as when one learns a new language he eventually finds himself choosing the right word or phrase automatically, when one has immersed himself into and adapted his lifestyle to a specific cultural context, he will begin to *know* what the appropriate thought, word, or action will be for a Christian in any specific situation. Deliberate cultural adaptation, knowledge of the revealed Word of God, and the dynamic internal working of the Holy Spirit together produce a “contextualized” individual.

Such adaptation does not occur in a day or a week. But the relative brevity of Paul’s missionary stints seems to indicate that it may not be as long a process as some think. Successful contextualization appears to depend not so much on an extended length of time as it does on acquiring the mindset that Paul attained. This mindset is indicated in 1 Corinthians 9:19 and involves a self-identity characterized by a dynamic tension.

Paul’s view of himself was as an utterly free human being. His conversion and new birth had liberated him from the subconscious bondages which plague nearly all humans to a greater or lesser extent. The apostle was no longer trying to live up to his parents’ expectations, his Pharisaical colleagues’ traditions, or his teachers’ precepts and training. His sole purpose was to please God, and thus every other relationship had become strictly incidental.

But such psychological freedom did not make him a hermit, for he free-willingly gave up his liberty and adopted the identity of a universal slave. In his innermost being he *knew* that such was not his true status; he was an adopted son of God. But an inner awareness of this fact was enough for him; he felt no need to externalize it. Secure in the knowledge of who he *really* was, he could become a “cultural chameleon.”

What Pauline Contextualization Was Not

Paul's *message* and *theology* were essentially the same wherever he went. "We preach Christ crucified," he stated, "A stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles ..." (1 Cor. 1:23). He deliberately avoided couching the Gospel in "the eloquence of superior wisdom," but instead resolved to "know nothing except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). Christ's resurrection was highlighted as well, for without this event the faith of anyone was futile (1 Cor. 15:3-4). Consequently, if one were to measure Paul's practice of contextualization by the *message* he preached, he must be regarded as a failure, for that message produced reactions that a missionary agent would *least* want to arouse (i.e., being considered a stumbling block and foolish). But for the apostle, the Gospel was an instrument used by God to create a three-fold division among humankind. There would be Jews, in whom the message would arouse a fierce anger; Gentiles, for whom it would be absurd; and "the called"—both Jew and Gentile—for whom it would be the power and wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:22-24). To change the message, or adapt it in such a way so as to make it more palatable. To do so would weaken or destroy the Gospel's ability to perform the function for which it was intended.

Some point to Paul's sermons in Acts 13, 14, and 17 as examples of a deliberate contextualization of his message to various audiences.⁷ But in each of these cases Paul is speaking extemporaneously. He could not have known that the synagogue rulers would call on him to speak in Pisidian Antioch, could not have predicted that the Lystrans would worship him and Barnabas as gods, and could not have guessed that the Athenian philosophers would give him a public hearing. He had no time to think carefully about what he would say or how he might adapt his speech to fit into the appropriate cultural context. He only had time to *become* like his audiences, and thus in Acts 13 he becomes "a Jew to the Jews," addressing the audience as his "brothers" and appealing to the Scriptures with which they were familiar. In Lystra (Acts

14:8ff) he became “to those not under law as one not under law” by dealing with these pagans at the basic level of humanity. “Fellow humans” he called them and appealed to the created order which surrounded them as evidence for the existence of a transcendent God. In Athens, he became a “philosopher to the philosophers,” but included remarks regarding the resurrection, which he must have known would elicit the derision that it did (Acts 17:32). Himself he would change, but his message he would not.

The apostle accommodated the world of his day in the areas of politics, economics, the judiciary, and social life, and he was able to do so with a remarkable amount of consistency and shrewdness. Politically, he celebrated his Roman citizenship, making use of this status on several occasions when threatened with persecution (see, for instance, Acts 16:37-39 and 22:25-29). He required of his followers unwavering obedience to the ruling officials of the Empire (Rom. 13:1-5). In Jewish contexts he was respectful, adhering to the Law’s dictates regarding “not speaking evil of the ruler of the people” (Exodus 22:28) even after being struck in a manner which violated the Law (Acts 23:1-5). He realized that the Kingdom of God is an “underground” Kingdom, carried internally by the followers of Christ, and therefore an external conformity to the political environment was a pragmatic necessity to maintain one’s freedom. “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s,” Jesus had taught—and Paul would have added “so that he will leave you alone.”⁸

The apostle commanded Christians to pay their taxes to the Roman government—no questions asked (Rom. 13:6-7). Believers were also to “work with their hands” so that their “daily lives might win the respect of outsiders and ... not be dependent on anyone” (1 Thess. 4:11-12). Christians were never to be considered lazy, naïve, or impractical shirkers of earthly responsibility. Paul himself, who had the “right” to live upon the proceeds of his preaching,

chose to pursue his tentmaking trade while ministering to others (1 Cor. 9:3-15). Nor did he expect the secular government to provide for the physical needs of the Kingdom's citizens. The support of church leaders was to be provided by the persons to whom they ministered (1 Tim. 5:17-18), widows and orphans were to be cared for by the Church (1 Tim. 5:3-16), and Christians in the midst of famine or other disasters were to receive aid from fellow believers (1 Cor. 16:1-4).

Judicially, when presenting his case before Felix the governor and Agrippa the king, Paul "gladly" made his defense (Acts 24:10) and considered himself "fortunate" (26:2). He refused a change of venue offered by Festus (the successor to Felix), and then availed himself of the ultimate privilege of any Roman citizen by appealing to Caesar (24:11). As a prisoner Paul was exemplary, becoming the *de facto* captain of the ship taking him to Rome when it was lost off the coast of Malta. In this situation, and in the two years which followed, there must have existed numerous opportunities to escape, but he made no such attempt, convinced that he was to play out his role in accordance with the plan of God.

Socially, the apostle is found in the synagogues of Asia Minor, speaking with the working class Jewish population, and in the same towns addressing crowds of pagans who worshipped the Greek gods. He made tents with other craftsmen, and served the chief official of the island of Malta. Although his standards for the churches appear strict to the point of ruthlessness, he had little to say about changing conditions in society at large. The Master had left no model for a "Christian" political, economic, judicial, or social system; and Paul did not seek to introduce one either.⁹ Slaves, for instance, were to make the best of their situation (1 Cor. 7:17-24), and while the Church was to "remember the poor," there was never any mention

of a program to eradicate poverty. The world was as it was because of the sinfulness of humankind, and nothing would change this state of affairs but the return of Jesus Himself.¹⁰

There was one area in which Paul most decidedly did *not* “become all things to all people,” and this was with regard to the competing religious systems of his day. In no way did he ever become “a pagan to pagans” or “a worshiper of the Greek and Roman gods” to the “worshippers of Greek and Roman gods.” In Lystra he told those who sought to worship him and Barnabas to “turn from these worthless things” (Acts 14:15). In Athens he attributed the worship of idols to “ignorance” (Acts 17:30). He informed the Corinthians that sacrifices offered to idols are in actuality offerings to demonic spirits (1 Cor. 10:19-22), and told Timothy that the doctrines of pagan religions were to be considered “doctrines of demons” (1 Tim. 4:1). The Romans learned that those who exchange the glory of God for earthly images are “fools” who are given over by God to the worst forms of human depravity (Rom. 1:22-32). Only in the area of Judaism was he willing to make concessions, but even here he had no patience with the current forms this religion had assumed (see, for instance, Phil. 3:2-3 and Gal. 5:1-12).

Conclusions

Evidence has been presented that God intended the New Covenant phase of His redemptive plan to operate from a Western base. The selection of Paul as a bridge figure indicates a specific strategy and agenda. It is admittedly problematic that some Christians have wrongly equated Western Civilization with the Kingdom of God in a *political* sense, and the consequences of this equation have often been sub-biblical. But contemporary Christians must not yield to the siren call of “political correctness” and proceed to reject all of Christianity’s Western trappings. This would be a dangerous mistake. Those who are intent upon accusing Western missionaries of “destroying foreign cultures” need to be reminded that the work of these

agents of redemption has led to the abandonment by many peoples of the slave trade, prostitution, widow-burning, footbinding, misogyny, female circumcision, internecine warfare, cannibalism, poor hygiene and nutrition, dangerous medical practices, illiteracy and the like. Would Christianity's detractors prefer that the world at large had retained these characteristics and practices into the present?

Instead of wholesale criticism, what is needed today is a thoughtful examination by Christians of Western civilization from a biblical rather than a social science perspective. Those aspects of the West which have historically proven to be of value to humankind—when measured against biblical ethics—should be defended, maintained and recommended for other peoples. Those aspects which have led to lifestyles and worldviews that clearly violate biblical principles should be discarded by all—Christians and non-Christians alike.

It has also been shown that the shift to a new phase in redemption history left the people of God without a substantive model for an institutional outworking of the Kingdom of God. In the absence of such a model, missionary agents are charged to accomplish the transformation of individual *persons* rather than societal structures. In order to achieve this task they are to follow the example of Paul and contextualize themselves as messengers. Members of the Church who are reaching across cultural barriers must accommodate themselves to the political, economic, judicial, linguistic and social structures which are the norms of the people that surround them. This is not to say that they will necessarily approve of these structures. They may seek to introduce change at individual and local levels, although they should never succumb to the belief that they are in some physical sense “building the Kingdom of Heaven.” Christians must seek to enter society at the “basic level of humanity”—the level of family, neighbor, work, marketplace and local community relationships. It is important to note that in so doing, they may not

accommodate themselves to competing religious structures, and they are not permitted to adopt general cultural practices which are either absolutely (in accordance with the Bible) or relatively (in accordance with a specific culture) immoral.

If a proper contextualization of the messenger has occurred, a missionary agent will have taken on many of the cultural traits and ideas of the target audience and will be able to communicate biblical principles through words and deeds. The Gospel message may then be preached in its simplest form (“Christ crucified and resurrected”), and issues of theology, ethics and the like may be worked out in a cooperative effort of dialogue.

It is certain that Paul would require contemporary Christians to maintain the Gospel message as a supra-cultural communication from God valid at all times, in all places, and for all peoples. For even as we become “all things to all people,” we “preach Christ crucified and resurrected.” From the perspective of the apostle, that is all that Christians really need to do—for that is all that really matters.

Notes

¹ One can trace at least three and possibly four distinct phases in God’s redemptive history. The first was from the Fall to the Babel incident (Gen. 3-11) and involved “Individuals Reaching Individuals.” Personages such as Enoch (Jude 14-15) and Noah (2 Pet. 2:5) were able to communicate God’s message to all via means of a common language and culture. Phase 2 began at the division of the peoples into “nations.” Abraham was chosen to be the progenitor of “A Nation to Reach the Nations,” and this era focused on Israel as the people of God through whom “all the nations of the earth will be blessed.” Phase 3 began with Jesus’ Great Commission for “The Church to Reach the Nations,” the era which is the subject of this essay. For pre-millennialists, a fourth phase follows Jesus’ return, during which the “Kingdom Will Reach the Nations.”

² Ramsey takes pains to describe the uniqueness of this passage in Acts, speaking of “the rapid sweep of narrative, hurrying on from country to country” which brought Paul finally to Troas and his vision. Ramsey notes that of all the visions and direct guidance of Paul, this is the only one that Luke records, thereby signifying its supreme importance. While he doubts that Luke was aware of the significance of the crossing from Asia to Europe, his conclusion is that “the idea seems to clothe itself in the natural words.” W.M. Ramsey, *St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1949), pp. 197-200. Kee et. al. also recognize the importance of this event, and even find significance in Paul’s first European convert: Lydia, a woman who was a Jew with a Greek name. See Howard Clark Kee et. al., *Christianity: A Social and Cultural History (Second Edition)* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1998), p. 38.

³ F.W. Farrar, *The Life and Work of St. Paul* (New York: E.P. Dutton and Company, 1880), p. 696, 699.

⁴ Ernest F. Scott, “Difficulties in Paul’s Religion,” in *Contemporary Thinking About Paul*, edited by Thomas S. Kepler (New York: Abingdon and Cokesbury Press, 1950), p. 357.

⁵ See Kee et.al., *Christianity*, p. 35.

⁶ H. Richard Niebuhr is helpful here, noting how the early Christians “seemed to be content to let state and economic life—with slavery in the one case and social stratification in the other—continue relatively unchanged.” See H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper-Colophon Books, 1951), p. 188.

⁷ See, for instance, Don N. Howell, Jr., “Mission in Paul’s Epistles: Genesis, Pattern, and Dynamics,” in *Mission in the New Testament: An Evangelical Approach*, edited by William J. Larkin, Jr. and Joel F. Williams (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), p. 72.

⁸ For more on this somewhat novel interpretation, see Vernard Eller, *Christian Anarchy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1987).

⁹ Joseph Klausner, a Jewish scholar, understood this lack of a cultural model in his statement that “Judaism is a more practical faith than Christianity, it is more capable of realization in actual life ... therefore, it is not to be supposed that Judaism could accept the teaching of Paul, with its phantasms and mysteries, and with its asceticism and abandonment of life ...” Joseph Klausner, “What is Paul for the Jews?” in Kepler, *Thinking*, p. 373.

¹⁰ “In a double sense the encounter with God in Christ had relativized for Paul all cultural institutions and distinctions, all the works of man. They were all included under sin; in all of them men were open to the divine ingression of the grace of the Lord. Whether men were by culture Jews or pagans, barbarians or Greeks, they stood on the same level of sinful humanity before the wrath of God ...” Niebuhr, *Culture*, pp. 160-161.