

The Apostle Paul And Culture

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Other biblical writers besides Paul guide our theological thinking regarding the relationship between Christ and culture. In the Old Testament, the book of Genesis reminds us that this world, though marred by sin, is still God's good creation. In the New Testament, we learn through John that Jesus sees his disciples as not being "of the world." No longer are they under its control. Nevertheless Jesus will not allow his own to stand aloof from others who are still trapped within a worldly mindset. Rather, as the Father had sent him, so also Jesus sends his disciples "into the world" (John 17:14, 18). From what John was permitted to see in Revelation, we receive a clearer vision of the war that will continue to rage between the kingdoms of this world and the kingdom of God until that day when Christ our King brings us ultimate victory.

Besides John, the other holy writers each have their gifts to give to enrich our understanding of this subject. We might recall a powerful pair of descriptors Peter and the writer to the Hebrews use to help us grasp the relationship between ourselves and the things of this world. Using an Old Testament phrase, they teach us to view ourselves as "aliens and strangers" in the world (Hebrews 11:13; 1 Peter 2:11). No matter what our earthly address, we'll never find our true home here.

Still, whenever we want to think through matters of Christ and culture, we must turn to Paul. Why? Our Lord himself chose this "Hebrew of Hebrews" to be his special emissary to the Gentile world. In carrying out his mission, Paul constantly had to grapple with questions of custom and culture. In a very important sense, he had to detach himself from his own culture in order to do so. What used to form the motivating center of his worldview prior to his conversion was replaced with Christ. In that transformation, Paul came to see all things new. From that place of freedom in Christ, he was able to become all things to all people without losing his gospel integrity.

Now whenever I think about culture, I have always found the following three statements, coined by Dr. William Kessel, to be extremely helpful:

1. Everybody is like all other people (human commonality)
2. Everybody is like some other people (human culture)
3. Each person is utterly unique (human individuality)

This same basic outline will serve us well as we consider Paul and culture.

Paul was like all other people

Paul's theology is simply filled with thoughts about human commonality. However unique we may be as individuals, however much we may differ from culture to culture, we are still the same in some fundamentally important ways.

In his monumental letter to the Romans, for example, Paul makes it clear that his gospel is the saving power "for everyone who believes, first for the Jew, then for the Gentile" (Romans 1:16). Everyone needs the radical rescue this gospel provides because, "the wrath of God is being revealed...against all the godlessness and wickedness of men" (ἀνθρώπων—1:18).

No race or tribe is free from this threat. Gentiles misused and perverted the natural knowledge they had of God (1:19-25). They misused and perverted the natural relations they had with each another (1:26-27). Because of their perversity, God "gave them up" (1:24, 26, 28). That is to say: in judgment he let them go on their less-than-merry way, piling sin upon sin and suffering the penalties due.

The Jew, too, was under this same condemnation. If any one culture could be said to be God-ordained, his culture surely could. The Jew knew and worshipped the one, true God (2:17). He had the "embodiment of knowledge and truth in the Torah" (2:20). Yet he had perverted the law's moral instructions. He would use them to condemn others' behavior, but he could not see that they condemned his own (2:21-24).

Paul's mighty conclusion? We may have different languages and customs. The Jews may have had a special advantage in being direct recipients of God's revelation. But Jew and Gentile are alike in that neither will have a thing to say when brought before God's judgment seat. Instead "every mouth [is] silenced and the whole world held accountable to God" (3:20) since "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (3:23).

Likewise all are "justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus" (3:24). While God was and is completely serious about his threats against every human being because of sin, God was equally determined to rescue humanity from its wretched state through Christ. In fact, "in Christ the tribes of Adam boast more blessings than their father lost."

Paul places Adam and Christ side by side in Romans 5 as individuals whose actions had universal consequences. Because of Adam, all were condemned. Because of Christ, all were declared righteous. But there is always a plus side to grace. Because of Adam, all human beings were under the sway of sin and death. But because of Christ, those who receive the grace he won for all become "royally alive" over sin and every evil. Believers transcend this sinful, dying world and rule in Christ over all (5:15-17). But more of what believers are in relationship to culture will be discussed later.

Two important aspects of Paul's thinking on the subject of human commonality need to be considered. They are especially important to keep in mind when it comes to intercultural communication. God chose Israel to be the recipient of his law in a written form. God determined to reveal through Israel the Savior of the world. But while this specific knowledge was not common to all, every human being on earth can know that there is a Creator-God simply by observing the things he created (Romans 1:20). Furthermore, every human being is born with a sense of right and wrong, as witnessed by the fact that he is conscious of thoughts that accuse him when he does wrong and that commend him when he does right (Romans 2:14-15).

The natural knowledge of God and natural law, terms our theologians give to these concepts, provide the basis for intercultural communication. Far from each group being lost inside its own linguistic and cultural black hole, all the children of Adam possess this basic knowledge. Although different tribes may search after God and worship him in different ways, "There has never been a nation so wicked that it did not establish and maintain some sort of worship" (LC). Although there are moral blind spots as well as moral emphases that differ from culture to culture, all people have some sense of right and wrong. With these things in common, we can communicate. We're not trying to talk to dolphins; we're speaking with fellow human beings.

Paul was utterly unique

While it might be more elegant to stick to Dr. Kessel's order, there's a better progression in my own outline if I flip numbers 2 and 3 (human culture and human individuality). That's because, for the purpose of this presentation, the most interesting aspect of St. Paul's writings come to the fore when we consider what his life and writings have to teach us about culture.

At the same time, it's good to remind ourselves that when we speak about a group's culture, we're speaking in generalities, not all of which are true for every member of that group. I remember an exercise I used to make my Minority Cultures class at MLC endure every year. I would ask them to distinguish between a generalization about a certain group's culture and the concept of stereotyping. They had a hard time with seeing a great difference. As do I.

Perhaps the key matter is one's attitude. Clearly we're on the wrong track if we see generalizations about a certain group's culture as a set of ready-made labels we can paste on the head of every individual member of that group. Clearly we're wrongheaded if we think that reading a few books about a certain culture gives us the right to opine as experts in the presence of people from that culture ("Here's what your people are like..."). What generalizations can do for us is to give us a start and help us ask questions of people in areas we might not

have thought of by ourselves. They do not free us from the need to conduct our own interviews and to listen carefully to what people might say. And they dare not blind us to the uniqueness of each individual.

Paul was remarkable in many ways, but according to his own self-description (Galatians 1:13-14; Acts 22:3; Philippians 3:6), what distinguished him the most from his contemporaries was his zeal. If we're looking for a modern-day equivalent of that word, we might use the word "passion," although considering what Paul the Zealot was willing to do and endure for the sake of his beliefs, that word seems far too tame. Paul was the kind of man who would follow whatever road he was on to its logical conclusions. Jesus couldn't be Messiah since he had hung on a tree. His followers, therefore, were a threat to the true religion. They had to be wiped out. Not for him the half measures and open-minded approach of his famous teacher, Gamaliel (see Acts 5:33-39). Paul saw clearly that, when it came to followers of "the Way," either they were to be crushed or the tradition of the fathers would be lost.

In this connection, I find illuminating a remark of Luther's:

Grace does not entirely change nature but uses nature as it finds it. So if somebody is kind when converted through faith, he becomes a gentle preacher like Master Hausmann. If he is by nature irascible and severe, like Cordatus, he preaches after this fashion. On the other hand, if he is fitted by nature with some slyness, intelligence, and power of reason, like Philip, he uses these qualities for the benefit of mankind. (*LW* 54: 24)

No doubt it was this same zeal, now energized by the gospel, that we see expressed in his words, "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some" (1 Corinthians 9:22).

Paul was like some other people

Paul was a Diaspora Jew, growing up in one of the Hellenistic *πολεῖς* of the Roman Empire. Today we might call him a bicultural kid, since he most likely grew up speaking both Greek and Hebrew (Acts 21:37-40).¹ As a Diaspora Jew, he must have been very conscious that his people existed as a much smaller (and often threatened) subculture within the vast sea of *τὰ ἔθνη*, the (heathen) nations.

Paul was also a Pharisee. Maintaining his identity as such was extremely important to him. Prior to his conversion, allegiance to the Torah and keeping the Torah formed the driving center of his life. In addition he used to be "extremely zealous for the tradition of [his] fathers" (Galatians 1:14). This "tradition" he mentions is probably a reference to the oral Torah—the traditional teachings, judgments, comments, and practices Pharisees had developed through the years in order to explain and apply the Torah.

We get a sense of Pharisaic concerns from such New Testament passages as Mark 7:3-5:

³The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. ⁴When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.) ⁵So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, "Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with 'unclean' hands?"

Pharisees took very seriously God's declaration in Exodus 19:6, "You will be...a kingdom of priests." That's why, to resist the trend to assimilate to the dominant Hellenistic culture, a trend which would end up with Jews losing their identity, Pharisees wanted to apply priestly standards of purity to all the pious. Loyalty to God meant strict observance of the law. Loyalty to God, therefore, required firm cultural boundaries between themselves and *τὰ ἔθνη*.

Just to be a Pharisee among Diaspora Jews marked Paul out already as a member of a more select club within Judaism. What's more, Paul grew up in a strictly observant, Hebrew or Aramaic-speaking household. As a Pharisee himself (Acts 23:6), Paul's father naturally would have wanted his son to get his Torah training in the

¹ Martin Hengel, *The Pre-Christian Paul*. Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, p.34-37.

one land where it was possible "to observe the Torah in the strict sense."² So in his youth it seems likely the family—or a part of it—must have moved from Tarsus to Jerusalem (Acts 23:16).

Prior to his conversion, then, it is clear that loyalty to his people, their laws, their traditions, and their culture was central to Paul's worldview. Listen to his own voice once more on the matter:

If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless (Philippians 3:4-6).

All this changes in the bright, blaze of Shekinah glory, and an arresting, unavoidable voice, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting" (Acts 9:5; 2 Corinthians 4:6).

What happens to a person when his thought-world is turned upside-down like this? When he suddenly becomes convinced that the fundamental "truths" on which he'd built his life are absolutely wrong? That his former way of life is "rubbish"—σκύβαλα (Philippians 3:8)? That precisely *there* where you're convinced you are being the most righteous, you are in fact being the most wicked? That when you think you are fighting for God, you are in fact fighting against him and in the most blasphemous way possible? You are opposing your own Messiah and King!

What happened to Paul was a death and a resurrection. He died to his old way of life, his old—law-centered—thought patterns, his old value system. By the power of Christ's call and through the washing of Holy Baptism, he rose up a new man in Christ (Acts 22:16; Romans 6:3-4; Colossians 2:12; Colossians 2:20-3:4).

By turning him around that day, Christ shattered the core belief around which Paul's old life used to revolve. In its place, Christ planted in Paul a new faith that changed how he perceived everything. As he was later to write, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" (2 Corinthians 5:17). Now he would look out at the same old world in a whole new way.

Paul saw very clearly that being in Christ by faith decisively altered a person's spiritual relationship to everything in this earthly existence: to law, to death, to the created world and all its orders—including all elements of culture.³ Christ has set us free—to live free in our spirits (Galatians 5:1). The new human in Christ stands above all such matters that pertain alone to this earthly existence. By faith my life is really located σὺν τῷ Χριστῷ ἔν τῷ θεῷ (Colossians 3:3), not in any empirical reality I find here in this world.

The following paradox, I believe, captures Paul's thinking about the relationship between a Christian and culture.

1) In Christ, culture doesn't matter.

Paul writes: "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, ²⁷for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:26-29).

2) In communicating Christ, culture matters a great deal.

Paul writes: "Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings" (1 Corinthians 9:19-23).

Let's explore these thoughts a little further.

² Hengel, p. 31-34.

³ It's not too much of a stretch to call culture part of τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου to which Paul refers in Galatians 4:3 and Colossians 2:20. Certainly if undergoing a death frees us from the God-given law, it also puts us beyond the reach of any human culture.

In Christ, culture doesn't matter. (We are spiritually free.)

Paul's writings are filled with expressions such as we find in Galatians 3 above. For Christians, there are really only two tribes. There are those who belong to Christ Jesus and those who do not. Yes, God chose Abraham and his descendants to be the recipients of his revelation and the physical ancestors of the Messiah. In these respects the Jews had a pivotal role to play in salvation history.

But being a member of the Jewish culture gives one no spiritually superior status over against anyone else so far as one's personal relationship to God is concerned. In Christ we are all one. By faith in Jesus, I am just as much a child of Abraham as anyone who can claim a physical descent from him. In fact, "A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God" (Romans 2:28-29).

In Christ, a person's race, tribe, language, and specific culture all become indifferent matters, so far as our relationship to God is concerned (see Paul's conclusion to his "reasons for confidence in the flesh" in Philippians 3:7-9). God's Son has set us free. Having found ourselves in Christ, we transcend culture.⁴

These are not meant to be mere pious musings that have no real impact on how we regard life and live life in the here and now. In urging the Corinthians to grasp the freedom that is theirs in Christ, he says:

The time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none; those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away (1 Corinthians 7:29-31).

What we have for this life, we have and receive as God's good gift as long as this life endures. But we are attached to none of these things (and must resist becoming attached to any of them), as if they represented our ultimate, final, or enduring good. We do not think that lasting happiness depends on getting and spending. We do not mourn as those who have no hope. We do not buy and sell as those who have not "insured all their treasure in Christ's name." We hold (*χράομαι*); we don't clutch (*καταχράομαι*). Whatever good we have pertaining to this life—including what is good in our culture—is only a provisional good. It is God's gift to us *for now*.

That much is clear when Paul can speak even of marriage as a *provisional* good to one who looks out at the world from the perspective of the *καινή κτίσις* (2 Corinthians 5:17). Though God designed Adam and Eve for marriage, though marriage is seen by all cultures as basic for the well-being of society, though God regulated marriage in the Decalogue, it is neither the ultimate fulfillment of our purpose as human beings, nor is it meant to last forever.

So with hearts free in Christ we gladly receive with grateful hands all the good things that pertain to this life. They are God's gift to us *for the present*. But since by faith we are *καινή κτίσις*, we don't hold on to the gifts of this dying planet for dear life. For the sake of the gospel and in order to serve our neighbor, we are willing to let them go.

This is far easier said than done. Because we are sinners, we are constantly tempted to elevate our own cultural understandings, practices, and preferences as being the "only right way" for all. We are constantly tempted to regard the beauty and the gifts of another culture as inferior to our own. Anthropologists label this bias for one's own culture as "ethnocentrism." More biblically we might call it a lack of neighborly love. As

⁴ Obviously I do not mean here that a Christian is free from God's moral will in the sense that he no longer delights to "run the path of God's commands" (Psalm 119:32).

As Paul says elsewhere, "I am not free from God's law, but am under Christ's law" (1 Corinthians 9:21). Love for God and one's neighbor is never a matter of indifference for the Christian.

Martin Luther once said (defining the corruption of original sin) "*Homo incurvatus in se est*—human beings are turned in upon themselves."

As a practical matter at this conference, we have been asking questions about how our own culture and worldview have had an impact on how we train church leaders and pastors on our mission fields. To put it another way, how many hidden assumptions exist in our theological curricula? In our practical methods of training? Do our homiletics and worship courses, for instance, reflect more the bias of a missionary's birth culture than they do the poetry, music, and communicative style of the host culture? Do our doctrinal statements reflect more the concerns of the visible church in its Western context than they do the church militant as it confesses the unchanging truth in a way relevant to the issues and concerns of, for example, South America, Africa, and Asia?

Do not misunderstand these questions. I do not mean to suggest by them that we can deal with cross-cultural mission work in some romantic way, acting as if each new culture had to be a blank slate on which we should start over from the beginning and create an entirely new theology and practice. We will "remember our leaders who spoke the word of God to us" (Hebrews 13:7), and we will pass on to others the doctrinal heritage they have entrusted to us. Much less do I mean that we can dispense with God's unchanging gospel truth "once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3). Sin and grace are relevant to every culture. Furthermore, gifts we have received from our home culture are gifts God has given us to share in partnership. Judaic ways of thinking, writing, and communicating permeate Paul's letters, for example, as scholars have long recognized. To the end of his days Paul remained a "Hebrew of Hebrews." Well-known, too, is the fact that much of early Christian worship grew out of the synagogue.

What I do mean to say is this: in Christ we have found a place to stand that transcends all human culture. Since we are spiritually free in this way, we are also free to take a bead on that sinful bias we all have for our own home culture, a bias that runs so deep we might not always be aware of it in ourselves. That means we are free to ask the questions above. We are free to probe the issue of whether we have been more bound to the culture we came from than been concerned about the culture we're preaching to. God's truth is the be-all and the end-all, not our culture, not our history, not our own way of doing things, however sublime it may seem to us. In Christ, culture doesn't matter.

In communicating Christ, culture matters a great deal.

(We are spiritually driven.)

We are free, yet we willingly make ourselves slaves to our neighbor for the sake of Christ. Our interest is to communicate the gospel, and to put no unnecessary stumbling blocks in its path. As Paul puts it, "I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible" (1 Corinthians 9:19).

For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. (2 Corinthians 5:14-15).

A heart that lives by the spiritual freedom found in Christ's love for sinners has realized something very basic about culture: "It took a love without limit to reach me. And because that love is unbounded, I can only erect human barriers to it at the cost of grieving the Spirit of Christ within me." Only in that realization do Paul's stirring words about becoming "all things to all people" make sense.

What matters are not my own cultural preferences, nor even my group's cultural preferences. Love lets the neighbor's need set the context for communicating the gospel. And the neighbor here is not the one "inside" my group. He's the one who's not yet become a Christian. If he needs me to be a Jew to him, I will be a Jew. If he needs me to observe his scruples so that he remains at ease, that's fine with me. "For in Christ Jesus what matters is not whether you're a Jew or a Gentile; what matters is faith working in love (Galatians 5:6).

Paul adapted himself to his cultural context. In Corinth, for example, Paul was conscious of the fact that many sophists and "truth" peddlers were criss-crossing Greece, selling their services for money. Paul stoutly

refused to accept monetary gifts from the Corinthians—even though he had a perfect right to do so—because he did not want to be associated with people like that in the minds of his members (1 Corinthians 9:1-12; 2 Corinthians 2:17). Another example of his willingness to adapt is found in Acts 21. There we read that, at James' request, Paul went to the temple with others to fulfill a vow. Despite the great danger that existed for him personally, Paul wanted to remove any stumbling block that might prevent Jews from accepting the gospel (Acts 21:20-24).

Paul also adapted the content and the style of his speaking to suit his audience. At the synagogue in Antioch in Pisidia (Acts 13), we hear Paul preaching to an audience familiar with the Old Testament, working from a shared knowledge of the Old Testament. He retells the story of Israel in such a way as to make the point that Jesus of Nazareth is Israel's Messiah. In Athens, however, Paul preaches to a pagan audience familiar with ideas from various philosophical schools. Paul preaches on the basis of the shared natural knowledge of God. He works from the known to the unknown, adapting concepts from Greek poets and philosophers that were in harmony with the Scripture's message while correcting those that were not.

In all of this, Paul was not a cross-cultural salesman, pandering to his listeners by telling them only what they wanted to hear. He was willing to adapt his style and content so that no unnecessary stumbling blocks were put in the way of his audience's understanding. But sin and grace, Christ and him crucified, the resurrection of the dead, the last judgment—these matters for Paul were non-negotiable, as was his call for both Jew and Greek to repent. Paul knew that you could not schmooze people into the Kingdom of God (2 Corinthians 4:1-5).

In fact Paul was constantly re-mapping people's thought-worlds. He wanted believers to see everything new in the light of the gospel. I read a lovely illustration of this process recently from the writings of C. S. Lewis. In his "Meditation in a Tool Shed," he speaks of being in a dark tool shed illuminated through a single crack by one brilliant beam of sunlight. When he looked directly at the beam, all he could see was the beam itself and bits of dust floating around in it. He comments:

I was seeing the beam, not seeing things by it. Then I moved, so that the beam fell on my eyes. Instantly the whole previous picture vanished. I saw no tool shed, and (above all) no beam. Instead I saw, framed in the irregular cranny at the top of the door, green leaves moving in the branches of a tree outside and beyond that, 90 odd million miles away, the sun. Looking along the beam, and looking at the beam are very different experiences.

In remapping his listeners' worldviews, Paul was teaching them to look along the beam of the gospel. By framing everything in Christ, he was transforming their minds (Romans 12:1-2), teaching them to see the "things that really matter" (τὰ διαφέροντα, Philippians 1:10).

For example, in Philippians Paul teaches these citizens of a colony of Rome to see themselves as citizens of heaven (1:27; 3:20). Things that might be viewed in a worldly way, he teaches them to regard differently, in the light of the gospel. His imprisonment doesn't hinder the gospel, it advances it (1:12-14). Death is not the dreaded end, but a going to be with Christ "which is better by far" (1:21-23). Suffering is not simply an evil to be endured, but a gift that God grants (1:29). Humility is not for the lowly and the servile, those incapable of standing up for themselves. It is the keynote of Christ's love for us, of him who was "in the form of God" (2:6). Those who are truly circumcised are not those who cut their physical flesh, but those who believe in Jesus Christ (3:1-4).

What does this mean for us who want to communicate the gospel cross-culturally? As those who wish to communicate the message of the Scriptures, we don't enjoy all the advantages Paul did by birth and upbringing. Neither Greek nor Hebrew is our native tongue. Learning those languages to understand and communicate biblical truth is another debt of love we will gladly pay. We also have to grapple with the differences that exist between our present cultural context and the culture(s) of the Bible. As we study the Scriptures we will learn all we can about the times and the circumstances under which God inspired his holy writers.

Moving from one cultural context to the next is also somewhat harder for us than it was for Paul. As a bicultural kid and a citizen of Rome, Paul was able to move quite easily between the Hellenistic world and the Jewish world. He didn't have to learn a new language in order to communicate. Greek was the *lingua franca* of

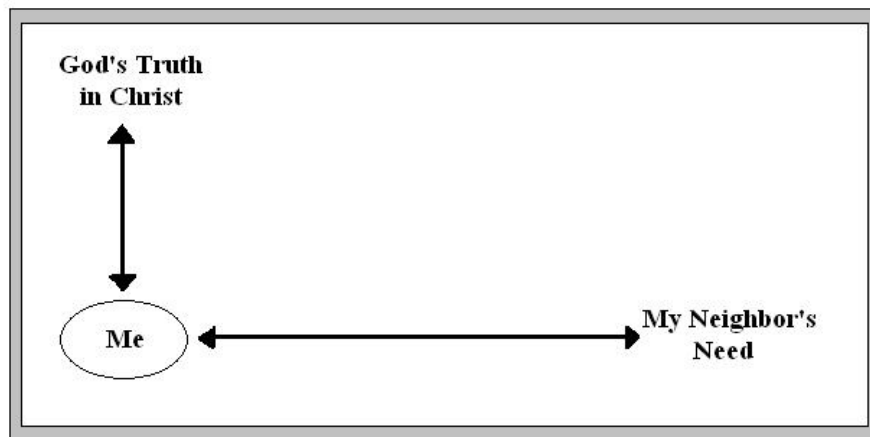
the Roman world in his day. For someone without these advantages, learning a new culture in order to communicate the gospel is truly a labor of love. It requires time, commitment, and patience.

Yet even in this respect, however, Paul has something to teach us about cross-cultural ministry. Whatever else Paul was, he was not a loner. Wherever he worked, he worked with others. Just consider that list of co-workers familiar to us from his letters: Timothy, Titus, Luke, Barnabus, Tychicus, Sosthenes, Silas, Epaphroditus, Onesiphorus, Clement, Phoebe—to mention just some. One of the most rewarding aspects of cross-cultural ministry is the opportunity to forge partnerships in the gospel.

You all know how enriching it is. The give and take of mutual learning and encouragement, the give and take as we discuss the Scriptures from our differing cultural perspectives—these are priceless spiritual gifts God gives through this kind of ministry. In writing to the Romans Paul says, "I long to see you that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong." Then he immediately corrects a possible misunderstanding of his words by saying, "That is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith" (Ro 1:11-12). From his own rich experience as a cross cultural missionary, Paul knew that sharing the gospel could never be a one-way street.

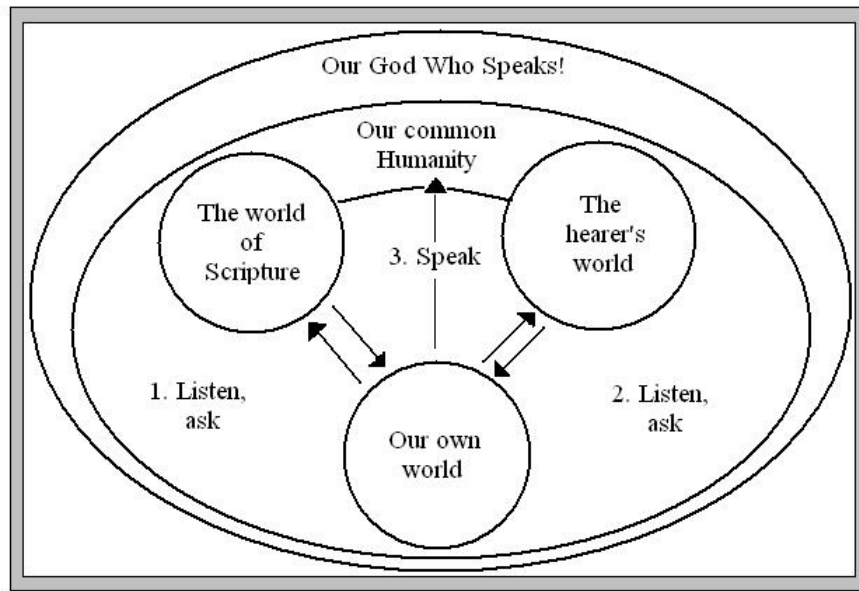
In summarizing this section, I might offer two diagrams of what I believe Paul has to teach us about communicating Christ across cultures:

A Twin Orientation



Human Commonality and Cultural Differences⁵

⁵ Adapted (with apologies) from Dr. E. R. Wendland.



Culture is hugely important when it comes to communicating Christ in a way that our listeners can understand. We want to do everything we can to remove stumbling blocks to the truth, and so we will adapt our message, as did Paul. That means we will adapt, wherever possible, our forms of communication (story, speech, song) so that they are congenial to the host culture. We will make use of those rich deposits of natural law and the natural knowledge of God found in every culture to build bridges of understanding. Paul felt free to quote Greek poets. We are free to use their appropriate cultural equivalent in our own communicative context.

Yet we will remain true to the message of sin and grace. We will not dilute the word of truth. We will not hold back from saying, "Repent!" Working in genuine partnership with leaders from the host culture, we will use the gospel to frame all issues that arise. Also in partnership, we will remap worlds so that people truly see their world anew, with minds transformed, in Christ. And we will expect to be mutually encouraged in this process by each other's faith.

Conclusion

"As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" (John 20:21). A good commentary on those words might be Paul's description of the mission of Christ in Philippians 2. Though he was God's own Son, God himself, Jesus willingly came into a world made alien to him by sin. Filled with love for us and a humble desire to serve us in our needs, he willingly gave up everything for our sake, to the point of suffering death on a cross.

This same gospel love drives us on to serve others as he has served us, to love others as he has loved us, and to give to others as he has given to us. Considering what he has given to us, what good gift do we have that we can withhold from those in need? Considering his willingness to remove our sin, what stumbling block can we refuse to remove that stands in the way of another's understanding?

Next to Christ himself, no greater example of gospel love and mission zeal can be seen than that offered by the Apostle Paul. He was not exaggerating when he said, "For his sake, I have lost all things" (Philippians 3:8). But of course it didn't matter because he hadn't really lost a thing. In finding Christ, he found all that he really needed. By his inspired words, by his gospel-driven life, Paul teaches us what we need to know about the Christian and culture.