

Global Missions

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[0 : 00] Well, last week we looked at Jesus as the model for our mission endeavor, examining the pattern of his incarnate life and drawing out implications for our missionary practice.

! And this morning, in our companion study, if you will, we turn to the Apostle Paul with the same ambition. How is the Apostle a model for us in our missionary lives?

Now, in some circles, when one moves from Jesus to Paul, it is often contrasts which are asserted, suggesting that Paul somehow strikes off on his own path, even departing from the patterns laid out by our Lord.

It is therefore worthwhile to commence our consideration of Paul by asking how, if at all, the Apostle took up the pattern established by Jesus, or did he depart from it in any way?

Do we find contrast, as is commonly alleged, or do we, in fact, see correspondence and continuum? Now, in our study of Jesus last week, we drew our portrait from the Father's sending of the Son incarnationally, drawing out features from that astounding fact.

[1 : 22] We observed that this involved a great going out, first of all. The Son did not remain in heaven, but went out into the far country of humanity, seeking out the lost.

The gospel narratives, again and again, of Jesus are filled with a phrase, and he went out, and he went out, and he went out. Well, I ask you, could there be a more faithful and fervent follower of this model than the Apostle Paul going out to the far-flung Gentiles?

As he told the Romans, I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, but to those who have never been told of him, Romans 15, 20.

And among his animating ambitions was to herald the gospel in Spain, which geographically would have been the end of the earth from him. So no divergence from Jesus here.

We also observed of the Son's incarnation that he came in person. His mission brought him face-to-face with those that he sought, involving a deep personal engagement.

[2 : 33] And what of Paul's missionary practice? Well, the phrase face-to-face is repeated again and again in his correspondence, and not just as a formulaic expression, but as a principled commitment.

Given his familiarity with the inside of jails, he was at times kept from this desire, torn away from you, brothers and sisters, for a short time, in person but not in heart, as he described it to the Thessalonians.

But such separation was to him an anguish. And he, quote, endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire, as he told them, to see you face-to-face. First Thessalonians 2.

If he did have freedom, he preferred prolonged stays to passing ones. For, as he told the young Corinthian believers, I do not want to see you just in passing.

I hope to spend time with you, if the Lord permits. First Corinthians 16. And as with the Master, his personal engagement was thick, deep, rich, and devoted.

[3 : 43] Being so affectionately desirous of you, he tells the Thessalonians, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God, but also our very own lives, because you had become so very dear to us.

First Thessalonians 2.8. He likens his relationship, in that same verse, to them as that of a nursing mother taking care of her own children.

Surely this reflects faithful correspondence to the pattern of the Master. Paul loses no marks here. We also noticed in the incarnation of the Son, a deep identification with those to whom he came, making himself like them in everything but their sin.

So how was the Apostle on following this particular melody? To the Corinthians, he explained that he sought to identify with and adapt to those that he sought to reach in every possible way.

I have become all things to all people. Now, since we will shortly comment further on this commitment, as pretty much the compact articulation of his *modus operandi*, we'll say no more at present, but that Paul here embodies the pattern of Christ in excelsis.

[5 : 04] We further noticed that the mission of Christ was marked by a pattern of consistent and conspicuous self-emptying. Was the Apostle a stranger to this?

Well, to the young believers in Philippi, he describes his missional life as one great continued pouring out, and compared it to a drink offering being poured out on the sacrificial offering of the Philippians' faith.

In other words, his life was a poured out libation to enhance the Philippians' offering of their lives to God. Philippians 2.17. And finally, we observed that the son's incarnational mission was marked by a stupendous costliness.

His life was that grain of wheat that fell to the ground and died to bring forth much fruit. Well, do we catch an echo here in the missionary labors of the Apostle?

Well, as Paul explained to the Corinthians, without the slightest trace of self-pity, rather recognizing it as precisely the pattern of Christ and the purpose of God, he writes, So death works in me, but life in you.

[6 : 23] 2 Corinthians 4.12. The spiritual life that came to the Corinthians came at a cost. It cost the life of the Apostle, the slow dying of the missionary.

In this, his missionary life is the perfect correspondence to the pattern of Christ. So, when Paul described the Thessalonians as having become, quote, imitators of us and of the Lord, 1 Thess 1.6, he was not offering two divergent paths or models.

For the Apostle's missionary life was simply a reiteration of our Lord's missionary pattern. He merely contextualized in its different settings the life of his Lord.

As he told the Corinthians, imitate me as I imitate Christ, 1 Corinthians 11.1. So, I think the conclusion, unavertible, Paul's missionary model does not diverge from Christ's.

Christ was the very inspiration and exemplar for Paul. Important to start with that because so often in the literature, you see an emphasis of the contrast between the Apostle and Jesus.

[7 : 46] But, far from this correspondence, making Paul's model of missions merely reiterative, the Apostle brings a singular theological acumen in both his articulation and application of Christ's incarnational-shaped mission.

And that's where we want to go. Well, I'll just, as an illustration, let's just take the last considered feature, the stupendous costliness of the incarnate mission of the Son.

Okay, how does Paul develop this? How, in Paul's mind, are Christ's disciples to follow in Christ's footsteps in regard to our Savior's suffering?

So, just an example of how he does theological development here. There is theologically developed continuity, but also contrast.

Paul tells the Corinthians, we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings. 2 Corinthians 1.5. Now, this phrase, the sufferings of Christ, or Messiah, Christ simply Greek for Messiah, is part of a broader understanding, sometimes referred to as the Messianic woes.

[9 : 12] Okay, this notion of the Messianic woes was distilled from Old Testament prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Hosea, Micah.

I can't develop that now, but it was developed by Jewish teaching and held that the triumphal Messianic age would be preceded by woes.

In the Hebrew word, it was basically birth pangs, akin to the birth pangs that a woman would suffer in labor. Okay, and here's the interesting thing.

These Messianic woes, this suffering would be endured not by the Messiah himself, but rather would be born by those associated with him.

It's fascinating. Now, the New Testament writers, including Paul, took this up, a suffering intense, but of fixed duration and even fixed quantity, which would be the lot of Messiah's people, that is, Christ's disciples.

[10 : 26] Christ's death and resurrection had inaugurated the Messianic age and his people, living now in these last days, were called to endure tribulation in fulfillment of the scriptures and in fulfillment of Jesus' own words until the full measure of this appointed suffering was complete and Christ returned.

Now, it's in this conceptual backdrop that we have illuminated Paul's otherwise cryptic statement to the Colossians. Do you remember that in Colossians 1:24 where Paul writes, I do my share of filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions?

There's Colossians 1:24 if you want to look there. Now, he is speaking of these sufferings of the Messiah or these Messianic woes.

Now, notice significantly, he says, filling up. Now, a filling up implies that there is a fixed amount. He's referring to the fixed measure of the intense sufferings that must be endured by Christ's disciples before Christ returns.

[11 : 56] So, what is the sum of suffering that is to be endured? Well, it is the sum of what it will cost to deliver, declare, and display the gospel through the ends of the earth, both near and far.

As Jesus told his disciples, the gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a witness to all the nations and then the end shall come. Matthew 24, 14.

As Paul explains again to the Colossians, I fill up what is lacking in Christ's sufferings, verse 24, by, he continues, by filling up or fully carrying out, same word in the Greek, by fully carrying out the preaching of the gospel, verse 25.

Do you see that link? See that link? The way we fill up the afflictions of the Messiah, the messianic woes, is by fully carrying out the preaching of the gospel.

This is a wonderful theological articulation. You see, according to Paul, according to his insight and understanding, as disciples, we enter into a partnership in suffering with the Master.

[13 : 32] That is indeed what fellowship means. It's partnership in a cause. The cause is redemption. And the disciple partners with the Master in paying the cost of redemption.

redemption. Now, we need to be really, really careful here and nuanced because I don't want you to misunderstand. Both Christ and his disciples suffer to reconcile the world to God, to bring many sons and daughters to glory.

We suffer in the same cause as the Savior, but our suffering is not of the same character.

This is really, really important or we can kind of go off the rails here. The suffering our Lord endured to bring many to glory none but he could bear.

He must tread the wine press alone as Isaiah says in Isaiah 63.3. He alone took the cup of the Father's wrath. So, his sufferings were propitiatory.

[14 : 56] The disciples are propagatory. His, the cost of atoning. Ours is but the cost of announcing.

His, the procuring of a great salvation. Ours, merely the proclaiming and parading that great salvation to the ends of the earth.

And yet, our part two bears a very real cost. And it is so fundamental for our discipleship, for the disciple to take up that call that Paul can unpack it, what it means as simply knowing Christ is to have fellowship in his sufferings.

That I might know him, Christ, he writes to the Philippians, Philippians 3.10, that is the fellowship of his sufferings. So, this then is the call of the disciple, fundamentally.

The call to partnership in Christ's sufferings. The call to take up a share of the messianic woes, the painful birth pangs that are bringing his return through helping fully to carry out our gospel mission.

[16 : 25] It is the mortification of mission. Whatever pain and suffering comes to us in faithfully prosecuting the gospel mission.

Is that not marvelously illuminating? Is that not wonderfully clarifying? Thank you, Paul. These are so helpful.

So, even though there's perfect continuity and continuum with Paul's pattern and Jesus' pattern, he articulates it and he applies it so, so helpfully.

So, there's an example. But, I want to focus on another element of model missions the apostle offers us. Paul is the master of what we might call the creative contextualization of the gospel.

That's what I want us to focus on. So, let's first observe his practice of contextualization, then clarify the principle behind the practice, and then finally, note some of the perfect but precarious balance it achieves that plots a course between two perilous pitfalls.

[17 : 46] apostles. So, that's where we're going. Okay. So, first, the apostle's practice of creative contextualization. The apostle, his adept contextualization could be illustrated from any number of gospel encounters that the narrative of Acts supplies.

I mean, I wish we had a whole month to do this. But, perhaps Acts 17 serves superlatively to show how Paul adapts his gospel message to his audiences.

So, Acts 17. You probably know it pretty well. You can open it if you'd like. Now, Paul would be the first to insist that there is only one gospel.

You recall his vehement assertion to the Galatians when astounded that they had so quickly defected to, quote, a different gospel, not that there is another one.

Galatians 1, 6, and 7. Now, notice, contained in that statement is the insistence that anything different from the one and only gospel is no gospel at all.

[18 : 55] Okay, so there's just one gospel. Let that be our bedrock as we build our understanding of contextualization. There is but one gospel, and yet, the one and only gospel can be articulated in different ways, and indeed may well need to be articulated in different ways if it is to gain a hearing across diverse audiences.

So Acts 17, the chapter, opens with the apostle declaring the gospel to a Jewish or Jewish adjacent, maybe some God-fearers, Gentile God-fearers, Jewish-adjacent audience.

in the setting of a synagogue. So how does his gospel presentation unfold there in that context?

Well, Luke recounts, he reasoned with them from the scriptures, from the Jewish scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer, the Messiah to suffer, and to rise from the dead, and saying, this Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Messiah, is the Christ. verses one and two. In the synagogue setting, the identity of the Messiah was a burning question. And if you wanted to make your case credible and compelling in a synagogue, you would have to base it on the acknowledged authority, the scriptures, the Jewish scriptures.

And Paul had become quite skilled in this approach, and it proved persuasive to many, as Luke tells us. But, when he travels on to Athens, he finds himself in a very different setting.

[20 : 36] Not a Jewish synagogue, but a pagan temple. And as well-versed as Paul surely was in his synagogue evangelism, he couldn't just show up and then press play.

Men of Athens, let us take up the burning question of the identity of the Messiah. As you well know, Psalm 110 states, no. No, this would have been utter gibberish to the Athenians.

The Greek word for Messiah meant simply smeared one. And what is this writing he is referring to?

No, his audience is coming from such a different framework that when he speaks of Jesus and the resurrection, they think he's speaking about two deities.

Because in their world, usually deities would show up in twos. The major deity in his consort. Jesus and Anastasia, resurrection.

Just thought it was the name of his concert. Chrysostom makes this observation in his writings. And the clue is given, he seems to be a preacher of foreign deities, plural, in verse 18.

[21 : 48] That's how garbled, they're a completely different framework. Now, Paul, if he hopes to be comprehended or even given a hearing, he has to adapt to his audience and recontextualize his gospel presentation.

He has to connect with something that they care about, something native to their interests, something expressed in their vernacular.

And this is precisely what he does. The cultural portal he finds for the gospel is the aspiration in Athenian culture of having a comprehensive catalog of all the deities.

You didn't want to run any risk of leaving anybody out because they might zap you with ill fortune.

So they have to have a complete catalog. Now, picking, I mean, it's remarkable how deft a contextualization he performs.

I mean, this aspiration that he latches onto, this aspiration engages with what was culturally pervasive. It reflected no eccentric pocket of interest.

[22 : 59] Rather, as he says, as Luke tells us, the city was full of idols. So he's connecting with something really pervasive. Neither was it for the Athenians a matter of tepid indifference.

As Paul observed, they were very religious, verse 22. Further, it was a matter around which they had acknowledged and unresolved questions. As the inscription read, to the unknown God.

They had real questions about this. That's a good way to connect. And he connected with deep streams for it contained their objects of worship.

Anytime we can figure out what the culture worships, we are deeply connecting. So this weaves a rich fabric of cultural recontextualization to embed the gospel in matters.

So when we try to do this, we want to try to embed the gospel in matters that are to our hearers, pervasive, prominent, passion-laden, puzzling, and prized.

[24 : 13] Those are the things that we want to connect with. And if we fail to recontextualize the gospel, connecting it to matters that matter to our hearers, we will simply, and fatally, reinforce a sense, perhaps even a suspicion or a prejudice on their part, that our message is utterly irrelevant to them.

Well, there's so much more contextualizing skill and wisdom to be culled from Paul's practice in Athens. You know, you just go, there's so much. For instance, he makes his case citing their poets and their philosophers, all kinds of, but we must turn to consider to the principle behind the practice. The principle behind the practice. His principle involves motive, aim, and means. Motive, aim, and means. All unfolded in 1 Corinthians 9.

1 Corinthians 9. Paul's general governing principle at the fountainhead of his practice is stated in verse 23. I do all for the sake of the gospel.

There's the motive. That could well serve as the apostle's motto inscribed on his missionary travel trunk. I do all for the sake of the gospel.

[25 : 38] And for the sake of the gospel, he has made himself, he says, the servant of all. Verse 19. And this universal servanthood is in the service of his aim.

verse 19. To win more to Christ. To win more to Christ. And having identified his aim to win as many as possible to Christ, how does he hope to serve them in order to win them?

What means does he deploy? Verse 20. The next verse. To the Jews, I became as a Jew to win Jews. To those outside the law, Gentiles, as one outside the law, like a Gentile, that I might win more of them.

To the weak, I became weak, that I might win the weak. That is, Paul serves them by becoming like those he seeks to win.

That's how he serves them. He adapts himself to them by showing sensitivity and versatility. Sensitivity and versatility. Sensitivity.

[26 : 53] What might seem unnecessarily alien and off-putting to those I seek to win? When I'm with the Jews, I don't order the pork chop.

I keep kosher. That's sensitivity. When I'm with the Gentiles and they offer me a pork chop, I receive it with thanks. If the pork chop has been offered to an idol and I happen to be with one who is of tender conscience, I turn it down so as not to be a stumbling block.

And Corinthians expounds on this. Paul wants to be aware of any and all obstacles that could be a barrier to their hearing and embracing the message of Christ.

He doesn't want to weigh the gospel down, with a host of cultural trappings. He doesn't want it to appear or be felt to be more alien than it must be.

And not only is he sensitive, aware, he's also versatile, adaptable. And not only in his person as messenger, standing with his hearers in solidarity, in alignment with kosher or non-kosher, Hebrew or Greek, the same way that Hudson Taylor, you know, pigtailed and platform shoes in China, just going to blend in in everything that I can.

[28 : 26] Not only in his person, but even in the message itself, not just the messenger, but the message itself, adapting it to the need of his hearers so that it will connect and not confuse, as we saw demonstrated in Athens so marvelously.

Paul sits loose to the cultural trappings as they are not fundamental, merely functional for him. Not fundamental, merely functional.

He can present Jesus as the expected Messiah in the synagogue or as the unknown God at the Necropolis. Also, is there not something strange about the phrase, to the Jews, I became a Jew? Wait a minute, Paul. What do you mean became a Jew? You are a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews. Yes, but that's not fundamental to me.

I can emphasize or de-emphasize that, like a cosmopolitan can his boyhood accent. Sometimes it's useful in my setting, sometimes it's not.

[29 : 48] What I am most fundamentally is new creation. 2 Corinthians 5, 17. That is my identity.

The Jew or Gentile bit is largely my adaptability for the sake of the gospel. But of course, just because these cultural accessories are not fundamental doesn't mean that they're to be despised. Paul does not relegate to worthless cultural matters. He simply relativizes them to their missional usefulness. He asks, what value do they have as to my aim for winning more to Christ?

So, for example, though he refused to circumcise Titus, in Galatians 2, 3, in order to clarify the gospel, he thought it useful to circumcise Timothy to open doors for the gospel, Acts 16, 1. He states his principle tersely in verse 22 of 1 Corinthians 9, I have become all things to all that by all means I might save some.

[31 : 08] All things, Paul? That sounds a rather boundless adaptability. Well, we notice that he feels free to set aside the Jewish law, but he clarifies that is, it is not the case that nothing governs me.

I am not outside the law of God, but I'm under the law of Christ, verse 21. So, what bounds this? What bounds this adaptability?

We, as sensitive and adaptive missionaries, are under the standards of our Savior. Paul does what he does and how he does it according to the pattern of Christ and his gospel.

He will not, nor can we, for the sake of the gospel, abandon the gospel pattern of constraints. Can't do that. Like Christ's own incarnational identification with us, it is in all things except our sinfulness. Can't adapt to that. And so, in seeking to win the lost, Paul can say, to the Jew I became as a Jew, to those without the law, as without the law, to the weak, weak, but he cannot say, to the drunk I became a drunkard, to the philanderer I became a philanderer, to the idolater I became an idolater.

[32 : 40] Do you see the difference here? Critical that we get that. In our zeal to identify fully with those we seek to win to the gospel, we may not betray the gospel itself.

So, when Paul declares, I have become all things to all people that by any means I might save some, it's clear that he means by all permissible means, any gospel and cross conforming means. Is that clear? Pretty important. Okay, good, good, good, good. Well, to further refine our grasp and application of Paul's contextualizing principle, let's consider one final passage which shows how its course is cross-pressured and sails between a fateful scylla and a fatal charybdis.

So, let us finally observe three, the vital balance in contextualization. The vital balance in contextualization. 1 Corinthians 1.

You might want to turn there. 1 Corinthians 1. It's Paul's master class in the subtleties and sand traps of gospel contextualization.

[34 : 09] We find Paul having done the thoughtful cultural analysis required of a skilled missionary.

He has observed and reflected upon the culture of those he seeks to reach, and he's identified some of their principal values and governing concerns.

and these will direct and inflect how he will preach the gospel to them. Here is the differentiating sensitivity and adaptability that we've observed.

So, verse 22, notice, he's got his cultural analysis. Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom. Two different things, different culture. Sophia, wisdom, and semion, sign. Sophia and semion. The Greeks seek an explanation of the world.

[35 : 22] The Jews, God's intervention in it. The Greeks, they seek the world's pervading principle of rational meaning.

The Jews, a mighty demonstration of God's saving power in the world. Get these nasty Romans off our back. Now, the apostle knows, and I'm sure you know, we know, that Jesus is the answer to both.

He is the logos, the very word that the Greeks use for the primal and pervading rational principle of the cosmos. I mean, think John 1. This is why so many Stoics came to Christ.

Oh, my goodness, the logos is personal. We never thought of that. Jesus is also, as Isaiah wrote, the arm of the Lord.

That is, the acting, saving power of God come into the world. Jesus is both. Oh, wow, there we go.

[36 : 32] One might have thought, after that analysis and seeing, oh, I see where I can go, you would have thought the apostle would dive right in and show Christ as the fulfillment of both of these longings, wherever they were contextualized.

Clear skies, all clear sailing ahead. And yet, if you have the text in front of you, you'll notice the next word in our text is but, but, all right?

And the sentence reads, but, we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and a folly to the Greeks.

Verse 23, if you're following. Whoa, whoa, whoa. Is the apostle backing away from his cultural contextualization practice? might appear that way.

No, I do not believe so. Notice that the very next word is a further but. Okay?

[37 : 38] Verse 24, and the sentence reads, but, to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ, the power of God, and the wisdom of God.

Aha! Here again are those resonant categories of this cultural analysis. Do you see that? What's going on?

The answer is, Christ is the fulfillment of these cultural longings, but, these cultural aspirations have been warped by sin and twisted into flesh-serving idols.

And Paul will lovingly serve his fellows. Remember, I make myself servant to all. He will lovingly serve his fellows by confronting their idols.

And confront them he must. They must be confronted for we are in our idols' grip. The reason why the idols have such power in culture is that they are functioning as cultural saviors.

[39 : 01] gods. But that's a role that they can't fulfill. They are so puiisive, so powerful because these cultural godlets, it's a great word of Nietzsche's, these little gods, these seeming gods, these godlets, they are so powerful because they're knock-offs of God's originals.

They are, to use a metaphor, they are cracked and broken casts off the true divine power and divine wisdom for which our hearts long.

These broken casts need to be subverted for they shall never save us and must be seen within their culture to be impotent imitations and usurpers.

These godlets will fail us and they will fail the culture. Sought as saviors, they become our undertakers. To subvert these cultural idols, Paul preaches Christ crucified.

Now, how does the cross subvert our cultural idols? It shows that these godlets can never deliver on their promises.

[40 : 26] God these godlets for all their worldly popularity and acclaim can never bring us to God, can never reconcile us to Him who alone is the source, the substance, and the summit of all of our confused, chaotic, and convulsive longings.

God has to come down for us and our salvation. The logos come in the flesh to die in our place. grace. So the cross engenders both humility and hope. The grace of the cross means that no flesh may boast, for Christ has paid the debt.

And the cross means that all humbled flesh may hope, for Christ has paid the debt. here, in the cross, is divine power and divine wisdom displayed.

Our heart longings that we have desperately and mistakenly enthroned in our culture, these usurpers, these longings springing up from the ineradicable image of God within, are actually fulfilled when brought to Christ, who became to us wisdom, became to us power, and righteousness, and sanctification, etc.

[42 : 08] And so it is that our longings have, by the gospel, been subversively fulfilled.

Subversively fulfilled. It's a useful phrase to kind of capture this idea that Paul has, this method of contextualization. Subversive fulfillment.

The gospel contextualized is both the confrontation and contradiction, but finally in Christ, the consummation of our human hopes.

Do you see those together? it's so important. Subversive fulfillment. For you historians here, the first use of this term, I'm pretty sure, is of subversive fulfillment, is by the Dutch missiologist Hendrik Kramer in a 1939 essay called Continuity and Discontinuity at a massive missions conference where he writes, only an attentive study of the Bible can open the eyes to the fact that Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God, stands in contradiction to the power and wisdom of man. Perhaps, in some respects, it is proper to speak of contradictive or subversive fulfillment. So, that's where it came from.

[43 : 47] That's just historical interest. So, contextualization requires both connection and confrontation.

It must be appealing by cultural resonance, must be appealing to our hearers by cultural resonance, but also appeal to gospel repentance.

So, appealing to resonance, but appeal to repentance. When Jesus and his gospel does not bring any sign of contradiction, Luke 2, 34, Jesus comes as a sign of contradiction, the culture is simply affirmed and the gospel is domesticated or absorbed into the cultural idolatries.

If the new patch does not tear the old cloth, nor the new wine burst the old wineskins, it's not Christ and his gospel. The effect of the attempted fusion is simply syncretism.

You see that? Just syncretism. Alternatively, if the gospel is not translated into the cultural vernacular and the idioms of its aspirations and anguishes, it will make no connection.
[45 : 11] So, like a spacecraft attempting re-entry at an impossible trajectory, it will glance off the cultural atmosphere and make no penetration at all.

The gospel will be dismissed as incomprehensible and inapplicable. So, the model the apostle gives to us for our missionary gospel contextualization is vitally balanced. He steers a subtle, discerning, principled course between dual dangers. The scylla of syncretism that fails to confront the culture and the charybdis of irrelevancy that fails to connect to culture. So, may God make us wise and skilled by his spirit in our contextualization, carefully and joyfully imitating the apostle and the one whom he imitates, our very Lord. So, let me, yeah, I'll end there and open it up for any questions. I think we've got a good ten minutes. Yes, Richard, I jump in. So, to begin at the end, since the beginning is harder for me to remember, no doubt.

[46 : 34] Which do you think in church history has been the greater pitfall? The irrelevance or the syncretism? Right. Oh, my.

Well, you know, Luther says, we as Christians, it's like we're a drunk trying to stay on a horse. We seem to just fall off on one side and think, oh, that was terrible, I'm going to lean the other way, and then we, he says, we fall off on the other side, you know, all the time.

So interestingly, if you go through church history, that would be another marvelous lesson to just go through and look at all the ways in which it's as if people fall off on one side and think, whoa, we really burned our hand on that, didn't we?

and then we go over here and then you go from the frying pan to the fire, frying pan to the fire. So we just seem to careen back and forth. Hopefully it's somewhat, it's somewhat instructional and corrective as we do, but it's really hard to judge.

It's not as one as if a big danger, and this is, you know, I use the metaphor of Scylla and Charybdis, and this in Greek mythology, you know, oh, you know, do we, do we, do we pass the, you know, the rocks that will sink our ship for sure, or do we go with a maelstrom and sink down, you know, and be sucked down?

[47 : 50] They're both equally fatal. Whoa, let's make sure we go right down the middle on this. So, it, it, so, syncretism happens all the time in the history of the church.

You can come to the Goths and you can tell them, look, so Boniface, I'll take the, this, this used to be St. Boniface. We have this wonderful stained glass window of Boniface, the first missionary to the Goths, okay, and, and he comes in and he claims, Jesus is more powerful than Thor and Woden and your gods.

So he goes to the sacred oak of Donner, thunder and lightning, that represented their god, the shrine to their god. And he goes up to one of these burly Goths and he wrenches the axe from his hand and says, watch this.

And he raises it up, about to strike the sacred oak of Donner. All these Goths step way back, sure that their god is going to respond by lightning, his modus.

And Boniface hacks that thing and hacks and hacks and there's no lightning. And these Goths think, whoa, maybe Jesus is more powerful than Woden.

[49 : 09] Wouldn't this be incredibly useful to have on our side? Then we could really clobber our enemies with this kind of power. Now, if you communicate the gospel like that, you just connect the gospel to this fleshly distorted aspiration that they have for power.

Is power a good thing? Yes, but as sin distorts it and twists it, if we just connect the gospel up to that, we're never really challenging that fleshly distortion.

And the gospel is just being assimilated and it becomes syncretism. See, because every culture is an amalgam of the image of God and the twistedness of sin.

So, every sort of cultural feature is going to have some sort of positive imago Dei or image of God aspect to it. These heart longings.

Augustine says, the heart is restless until we find a rest in him. The heart stretches for justice, for beauty, for intimacy, all these good things. But there are all these distortions of it through sin.

[50 : 30] So, what we need to do is we want to connect the gospel to some of those imago Dei, these image of God stirrings and not connect the gospel to the fleshly distortions.

That's a historical one, but more recently, there are those who would say, look, what do you really want?

Ah, I want a big bank account, I want two cars in my garage, the white picket fence, cute dog, the American life, and lots of golf.

Well, you know what? Jesus can do that for you. He can give you your best life now. Well, that's true, he can give you the best life now, but if you don't clarify and challenge the worldly distorted view of their best life now, and just connect up, say, Christ can give you the best life now, what's your best life now?

It's the very thing you're thinking. Two cars in the garage, the bank out, the fun dog. That never contradicts or challenges and it becomes syncretism. So, those are some examples of how we have failed in making it just syncretism.

[51 : 54] We have not challenged. but we can equally, okay, I can, and here's the beautiful thing, Richard, God can use even our paltry, pathetic, misguided, misdirected, mismotivated attempts.

Paul says as much in Philippians, he says, hey, some people are preaching Christ just to bring me more agony here. You know what? As long as Christ is preached, I rejoice and God can use these things.

But, have you ever seen gospel presentations where it just doesn't seem to connect? Maybe you take a bullhorn and you go on Beinecke Plaza and say, repent for the end is near or have you been washed in the blood of the Nazarene carpenter or whatever it might be.

One time I saw on a New York subway, I kid you not, someone, I guess an evangelist or someone who wanted to do, had wrote Jesus saves and somebody had scrawled under it, what?

Stamps? Coins? So, it doesn't really connect to the questions they're asking. And in order, you look at gospel tracts, the history of gospel tracts, the good ones actually present Jesus as an answer to a question that the people are asking.

[53 : 28] sometimes have you there are some tracts that say something like how might you be just before the bar of God?

Well, maybe people aren't asking that question. they don't really have any sort of sense of God as judge or as bar. No, that's a place that I kind of like to get out. It just doesn't communicate.

So, we always need to translate into some sort of question that is being asked. Christ. Yeah, yeah. Just real quick. Sure. When you're talking about the messianic woes, Christ's sufferings were propitiuous.

Well, propitiatory. Yes, and ours were propagatory. His was atoning, ours merely announcing. Yes? Yes.

[54 : 46] Right, right. So, one of the things that I think is so important is, it is not a, the gospel, can make, can make its home in any and every culture.

So, it's not a matter of saying, hey, you need to change all these cultural trappings and become like this other culture. No, no, no. We want to see the gospel in the soil of another culture and see how it grows out.

Now, even though the gospel and its glorious can make its home in every culture, it is never perfectly at home, at home, in any culture.

There is always going to be, there's an indigenizing principle, but there's always a pilgrimizing principle. It calls us away from some things because we're ultimately citizens of the kingdom of God.

But, our, our gospel identity will be inflected in a glorious, beautiful way by our very culture.

[55 : 47] culture. So, what the gospel does is it comes in and it gives the possibility of that culture being a more beautiful, wonderful, full expression of all that God had for that particular culture to express the gospel.

And it will inflect it in some way. This is what Isaiah talks about, the wealth of the nations coming in and bringing all, all of their glories of their culture. Yeah, the Midianites bring their camels and we might say the Swiss bring their cuckoo clocks and, you know, everybody's got their own cultural contribution that's going to reflect certain things.

So, there's not going to be in any way a monotony. It's every tongue, tribe, and nation. So, there will be these cultural expressions, but, but every turning away from something in their culture that the gospel calls them to is actually a purification of that very beauty of that culture.

It's taking away the things that are distorting, that are disfiguring of that culture. So, no, no, no, we want you to come into the true glorious self that only the gospel and your right restored relationship to God can really bring out and fuel.

So, it's not an utter repudiation, it's a reclamation of your culture. So, that would be some of the things that I would emphasize. Yes, yes, Susan. Thank you so much for interviewing today.

[57 : 11] What are some ways in the current cultural context that you see the church can bring the gospel and appeal the gospel to it? Yeah, well, I think we go and we try to figure out what are the questions that they have?

What are the things that consume them? And, you know, maybe it's we want to have freedom. Freedom is such a big thing. I never want to restrict my choices. I only want to have as many choices as I can.

I don't want to commit myself to anything. And yet, at the same time, I want to have a sense of community. I have a deep longing to belong. So, I want my freedom, but I want belonging.

Ho, cross-purpose. How does that happen? So, we go in and we take up questions that they naturally have.

How's that going for you? Listen to where they see, and then we can show how the gospel is good news at the very point of their greatest concerns. So, that's why.

[58 : 09] Oh, I'm realizing we probably need to leave. But, thank you, team. Next week, this will continue. I think, I didn't do a whole lot of applications except at the end.

And, we're going to continue for a few more weeks. Matt, Matt will, I believe. Thank you.