Midwestern Journal of Theology 11.2 (2012): 15-30

Lecture 2: Contextualizing the Power of the Gospel: Unleashing God's Power by Communicating the Biblical Gospel

DAVID J. HESSELGRAVE

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the Power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek (Rom. 1:16 ESV).

Two reminders may be in order as we begin this second lecture on contextualizing Great Commission fundamentals. First, I am approaching the subject autobiographically as well as analytically. That's a safety measure. At one and the same time I am taking advantage of seventy years in Christian ministry while also chalking up likely *faux pa* to old age.

Secondly, we are considering of Great Commission fundamentals and the rudiments of communication theory. We can think of contextualization as that which the speaker (source) contributes to make the biblical text meaningful by virtue of self identification and acceptance, message determination and delivery, and audience recognition and accommodation. This would be very much in accordance with classical rhetorical theory. The prominence—even predominance—accorded culture in contextualization theory is a very recent development.

Now in this second lecture we are focusing on contextualizing the power of the gospel.

D. A. Carson writes:

> We tend to overlook how often the gospel of Christ crucified is described as 'power.' Paul is not ashamed of the gospel, he declares, 'because it is the *power* of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes' (Rom. 1:16). Writing to the Corinthians, Paul insists that 'the message of the cross is foolishness to those

> who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is *the power of God"* (1 Cor 1:18). He takes painstaking care not to corrupt the gospel with cheap tricks like manipulative rhetoric, what he dismissively sets aside as 'words of human wisdom'—'lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its *power'* (1:17). The 'incomparably great power' that is working in those who believe is tied to the exercise of God's mighty strength when He raised Jesus from the dead (Eph 1:19-20).[1]

We will return to Carson before we finish, but first I will rehearse just a few of those requirements that, rightly or wrongly, I was advised very early on and have been proposed more recently are most needful to success in communicating the power of the gospel. Then we will turn to what I understand to be the biblical requirements for such a daunting task. Finally, in conclusion, we will consider two cases in point and their significance.

REQUIREMENTS FOR MINISTERING AND MISSIONIZING EFFECTIVELY: ONLY PERCEIVED OR REALLY REAL?

In my case, the missionary call was an outgrowth of a deep-seated early conviction and periodic confirmation that the Lord wanted me to serve in some area of Christian ministry. Early on I thought that I might be an evangelist. That changed over the years. But what has not changed over the years and right down to the present hour is a continuous flow of suggestions as to the essentials of effective gospel communication. In retrospect you will likely be familiar with most—perhaps all—of these suggestions. Some pertain to the minister/missionary himself/herself as message source; some to the message that is to be proclaimed; and some to audience/respondent expectations.

Pertaining to the Source

My parents were converted to Christ when they first heard the biblical gospel preached by a protégé of the then well known Chicago evangelist, Paul Rader. Accordingly, they joined one of the "gospel tabernacles" erected in the likeness of Rader's Chicago Gospel Tabernacle. My childhood was spent in two different "gospel tabernacle" churches in

---

[1] D. A. Carson, "Conclusion: Ongoing Imperative for World Mission" in *The Great Commission: Evangelicals and the History of World Missions* (eds. Martin I. Klauber & Scott M. Manetsch; Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2008), 193.

Southern Wisconsin. It was during my teenage years that our particular gospel tabernacle church joined the Assemblies of God denomination. At that time and as best as I can recall, I was led to believe that there are at least two prerequisites for effective gospel ministry: the baptism of the Holy Spirit and the "unction" of the Holy Spirit.

1. The baptism of the Holy Spirit evidenced by speaking in tongues. This I sought with all my heart. But in spite of the prayers and encouragement of church elder, I never spoke in tongues. In fact, as far as I can recall, I never even came close. That was deeply disappointing at the time.

2. A special unction of the Holy Spirit. This, I understood, could come later and in various manifestations. But it was modeled and made especially important and attractive by successful ministers of the gospel, some of the finest of them being Pentecostal leaders from Assembly leaders from their headquarters in Springfield, Illinois. However, due to a series of events, I enrolled in Trinity (then the Free Church Bible Institute and Seminary) in Chicago instead of the Assemblies of God Bible School in Springfield. Both Trinity and the Evangelical Free Church of America were small and of Scandinavian origin, but matriculation at Trinity brought me into contact with the larger evangelical movement. In that context, proposed "essentials for ministering the gospel" were destined to undergo almost continuous change, although not completely so.

Pertaining to the Message

Beginning with seminary and right on through university training, mission field experience, and academic involvement, emphases on what is important and even necessary to effective ministry have tended to shift from the source to the message and respondents, and from the experiential to the cognitive. I am not saying that this is either completely so or entirely good. It is not. Nevertheless it has been a tendency and I will offer several examples of what I have in mind.

1. Dynamic equivalence translation and contextualization. This is the label that Eugene Nida first applied to meaning-based or thought-based (as opposed to word-based) Bible translation. The approach was more or less pioneered by J. B. Phillips in the 1950s. I deal with some of its complexities and limitations in *Paradigms and Conflict*[2]. It has yielded numerous and profoundly varied colloquial versions of the New Testament especially. It has also yielded numerous and, at times, profoundly mis-

[2] See my *Paradigms in Conflict: 10 Key Questions in Christian Missions Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic & Professional, 2005), 243-78.

leading approaches to contextualization. One that was most prominent in our seminary discussions in the 1980s and 90s, was that of anthropologist Charles Kraft who, in his *magnum opus, Christianity and Culture,* proposed that the Bible is like an ocean with supra-cultural truths floating around on it. It is potentially the Word of God but not propositionally the Word of God. Accordingly it is the task of the anthropologically and linguistically equipped translator-contextualizer to make the gospel message "impact-full," meaningful and relevant to respondents of various cultures.[3] This approach led to adventurous contextualizations that were unacceptable even to some of Kraft's former national co-workers in Nigeria.

2. Holism and Kingdom of God missiology. My long time friend and colleague, Ralph Winter, countered the kind of holism proposed at Lausanne in 1974 by championing the priority of reaching unreached peoples with the gospel. After the conclusion of the effort to reach unreached peoples and complete the Great Commission by the year 2000 (and beyond), however, he embraced a holistic interpretation of the Great Commission. He indicated that the phrase "Teaching them to obey all that I have commanded" made "Kingdom Mission" essential by requiring good works of all kinds and opposing Satanic evil by efforts such as research designed to eradicate evil microbes that cause disease and death. For several years until his death Winter and I discussed these subjects. I argued that the resurrection of Christ is God's conclusive evidence for the truth and dynamic of the biblical gospel. But to the very end Winter argued that Kingdom Mission vindicates the gospel, lends credibility to the Christian mission, and glorifies God.

In the past few years one or another type of Kingdom-oriented good works/social justice message and mission have come to dominate much of evangelical missionary thinking and practice. I believe that approach to be less than biblical. At best it takes a portion of what the Great Commission may require and makes it out to be the Great Commission priority.

Pertaining to the Respondents

There has been and still remains yet another and somewhat subtle approach to obeying the Great Commission and contextualizing the gospel. It is perhaps implicit in proposals already considered but it explicitly calls for contextualization based on respondent interests and expectations of one kind or another. It can lead to something as simple as audience

---

[3] See Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979).

manipulation. But it can also lead to far more significant forms of audience accommodation—legitimate and illegitimate.

1. Contextualization as "prophetic accommodation." The origin of the neologism "contextualization" is usually associated with a consultation "Dogmatic or Contextual Theology" held in Bossey, Switzerland in 1971 at which Bishop Nikos Nissiotis presided. It is also associated with the Third (Reform) Mandate Program (1970-77) of the Theological Education Fund sponsored by the World Council of Churches and its director, Shoki Coe. Coe wrote,

> . . . in using the word *contextualization,* we try to convey all that is implied in the familiar term *indigenization,* yet press beyond for a more dynamic concept which is open to change and also future-oriented.
>
> Contextuality . . . is that critical assessment of what makes the context really significant in the light of the *missio Dei.* It is the missiological discernment of the signs of the times, seeing where God is at work and calling us to participate in it.[4]

The basic idea was that, in our day, God is working in special ways among adherents of the various religions of the world and among the poor of the world. Out of the former matrix came contextualized theologies such as "Third-eye theology," "Waterbuffalo theology," and "Yin-Yang theology." Out of the latter matrix came "Black theology" and "Liberation theology" in a variety of forms. During the years of and immediately following the Third Mandate Program a number of evangelical scholars expressed deep reservations with this approach. My reservations were expressed in various writings, perhaps most completely in a volume co-authored with my colleague, Edward Rommen, and titled *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods and Models.*[5]

2. Power encounter as a missionary strategy. From almost the very first, anthropologist-missiologist Alan Tippett was closely allied with Donald McGavran in forwarding the Church Growth Movement. Tippett coined the term "power encounter" to refer to the strategy of actively confronting the power of local spirits and ancestral deities with the power of the Christian God resulting in a victory that would be evident to all. The method has biblical precedent and therefore legitimacy—to a point. However, if its limitations were not obvious previously they became so

---

[4] Shoki Coe, "Contextualizing Theology," in *Mission Trends No. 3: Third World Theologies* (eds. G. H. Anderson & T. F. Stransky; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans / New York: Paulist, 1976), 21-22.

[5] Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1989.

when C. Peter Wagner supplemented power encounter with "territorial spirits" theology and practice. His idea was that "territorial spirits" have taken over the rulership of the various target areas and peoples. Those spirits must be overcome and expelled before evangelization can be effective. Controversy reached the point where leaders deemed it best to take up these matters at an annual meeting of the Evangelical Missiological Society. Wagner's approach did not fare well, but Tippett's power encounter strategy itself was not similarly examined.

As is the case with many if not most of these strategies, there is some truth to power encounter. We know that from Scripture. But we also know that what it pleases God to do in certain times and circumstances may not be what pleases him to do in all circumstances. Because God sent fire in Elijah's case does not mean that he will do so in ours. It is not God's will to do everything that his power would allow him to do. The Jews sought certain signs but Jesus would not comply. The Greeks sought a kind of wisdom upon which Paul would not rely. He preached Christ crucified, "a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1:22-24).

PREREQUISITES TO EFFECTIVE CONTEXTUALIZATION OF THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL

Readers will be aware that the foregoing does little more than illustrate some of the parameters of recent thinking concerning requirements for contextualizing and communicating the power of the gospel. There can be little doubt that most of these proposals are imaginative and creative. But that is not the question. The question is, "Are they valid?" And the answer to that question must be *"They are valid only to the degree that they square with biblical prerequisites to gospel communication in general.* There are at least four such.

The Verbal-Plenary Inspiration of Scripture

Revelation and inspiration go together. As is well known, "revelation" comes from the Greek word "*apokalupsis*" which literally means "unveiling" or "making visible." Most often it is used metaphorically and refers to making truth known either " . . . in propositional form, or . . . in the form of an experience from which propositional truth may be inferred." [6]

---

[6] J. Oliver Buswell, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion, Vol.1* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1962), 183.

The critical importance of this for contextualization merits elaboration. We will remember that the Lord Jesus answered Satan's ruse "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread" by quoting Moses: "Man shall not live by bread alone but by *every word that comes from the mouth of God*" (Matt. 4:3-4). On another occasion, Christ Jesus also said, "For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished" (Matt. 5:18). But in classic evangelical theology the passage most usually elaborated in regard to verbal-plenary inspiration is from the Apostle Paul: "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training for righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16-17). With reference to the latter passage I would make four important points.[7]

1. The Bible is identified in three ways in this passage. It is identified as "Sacred Writings" (*hiera grammata*); as "Scripture" (*graphe*); and, as "the Word" (*to logos*). Mahayana Buddhists often speak of a "meaning" or "word beneath the letter" of Buddhist sacred books. Paul's teaching admits of no special word or meaning beneath, above or beyond the actual words or letter of the Bible. All three of Paul's identifiers refer to one and the same Word of God written.

2. Scripture is the product of the "creative breath of God." According to Warfield, the Greek word *theopneustos* ("God-breathed") does not mean "breathed into by God" nor does it refer to the product of "in-breathing" into human authors. The meaning is that Scripture is the product of the "creative breath of God." In other words, the Scriptures are a divine product without any indication of how God operated in producing them. Warfield insists that no term could more clearly and emphatically assert Divine production because in the Bible "breath of God" is a symbol of God's mighty power and creative word.[8]

3. The biblical text is without error in the autographs. With the above in mind, we should approach Scripture with the very strong presumption that the autographs contain no errors, not with the idea that we must examine all the "facts" before we can entertain the doctrine of inerrancy. We believe this doctrine on the basis of the witness of the apostles and prophets and the Lord Jesus himself. Therefore the biblical text itself must be considered to be as trustworthy as any of its "rules of faith and

---

[7] Quoted from my *Paradigms in Conflict: 10 Key Questions in Christian Missions Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic & Professional, 2005), 247-48.

[8] Benjamin Breckenridge Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1967), 133.

practice."[9] This being the case, Warfield's title for one of his chapters is "'It Says'; 'Scripture Says'; 'God Says'" by which he implies that what Scripture says, God says.[10]

4. Scripture both "makes wise for salvation" and is "profitable" for spiritual growth. Grammatically and contextually, *theopneustos* in this passage can be understood as either part of the subject or part of the predicate. That is, one could correctly translate the phrase as either "All Scripture God-breathed is . . ." or "All Scripture is God-breathed." The latter reading is found in most translations and is the preferred reading of most conservative evangelicals. Warfield himself thought it to be a matter of indifference. He interpreted the phrase to mean that Scripture is of divine origin, so that "Every Scripture, seeing that it is God-breathed, is profitable" [11] Scripture (note that the Old Testament is in view here and that the gospel, therefore, is in the Old Testament as well as the New) is able to make one "wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:15). More than that, Scripture is "profitable (*ophelimos*, i.e., beneficial, useful, advantageous) for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16)

The relevance and importance of the foregoing for both the defining and doing of verbal Christian contextualization cannot be overstated.

BIBLICAL PRIORITIES IN THE INTERPRETATION OF GOSPEL AND MISSION

The socio-political interpretation of gospel and mission currently popular among evangelicals is nothing new. Already in 1976 Stephen Neill wrote that it had become so dominant among ecumenists that the centerpiece report on "Confessing Christ Today" at the Nairobi Assembly in 1975 "probably saved the World Council of Churches from disintegration"[12] Subsequent history has proved that kind of "salvation" to be both temporary and partial.

Apart from a resurgence of the priority of the spiritual and eternal in our understanding of the gospel and of world evangelization in Christian mission, evangelicals now run the same risk. D. A. Carson gets close to the heart of the matter when he labels "the sheer power of the gospel of

---

[9]Ibid, 215, 406-7.

[10]Ibid, 299.

[11] Ibid, 134.

[12] Stephen Neill, *Salvation Tomorrow: The Originality of Jesus Christ and the World's Religions* (Guildford & London: Lutterworth / Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1976), x, quoted in James A. Scherer, *Gospel, Church, & Kingdom: Comparative Studies in World Mission Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1987), 129.

Christ crucified" to be one of the fundamentals of the Great Commission. I want to pick up on that again later, but at this point I want to emphasize something with which I am quite certain Carson would agree. Namely, that while the cross is certainly a centerpiece of the biblical gospel, so is the empty tomb. In fact, as the apostles press forward in obedience to the Great Commission (more accurately "Holy Spirit-inspired obedience to the Great Commission") in the Acts of the Apostles, the overriding theme of their message is the resurrection of Christ. And there is still more to the gospel. Paul makes that clear when he reminds the Corinthians of "the gospel I preached to you" and includes not only the crucifixion and resurrection but also the burial of Christ's crucified body and the appearances of his resurrected body (1 Cor. 15:1-11). At first that may seem strange. But upon closer examination it is not at all strange. If, as some said, Christ's dead body was spirited away and not actually buried, how could it be shown that he was actually dead? And if after his burial he was never seen, how could it be shown that he was resurrected bodily?

Of course, there is still more to the gospel. Though the gospel can be defined very simply and poignantly in the words employed by the Lord Jesus in John 3:16 and also in the words of the Apostle Paul in First Corinthians 15:1-11, in its completeness it can only be described in terms of the sum total of divine revelation from Genesis 1:1 to Revelation 22:21. Insofar as we can grasp and articulate that *gospel* we must be true to all of it in our interpretations, declarations and contextualizations.

A DEFINITION OF CONTEXTUALIZATION THAT ENABLES BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING

Ralph Winter is correct when he says that "contextualization" is a dangerous word"[13] First, it is used with relationship to non-verbal as well as verbal communication—music, lifestyle, strategy and so on. Second, even when applied basically to verbal communication, contextualization has been defined very differently depending (mainly but not solely) upon the theological interests and commitments of the contextualizer. From very early on in contextualization discussions there were significant differences in definitions of the word even among evangelicals.

---

[13] Ralph D. Winter, "The Theology of the Law of God" in *Foundations of Global Civilization: Semester One. Mentors Handbook* (Pasadena, CA: Institute of International Studies/ U.S. Center for World Mission, 1993), 27.1.

1. **Byang Kato:** "We understand the term to mean making concepts or ideals relevant to the situation." [14]

2. **Bruce J. Nicholls:** "[Contextualization is] the translation of the unchanging content of the Gospel of the kingdom into verbal form meaningful to the peoples in their separate culture and within their particular existential situations."[15]

3. **George Peters:** "Contextualization properly applied means to discover the *legitimate implications* of the gospel in a given situation. It goes deeper than application. Application I can make or need not make without doing injustice to the text. Implication is *demanded* by a proper interpretation of the text."[16]

4. **Harvie M. Conn:** "Contextualization is the process of *conscientization* of the whole people of God to the hermeneutical claims of the gospel.[17]

All four of these definitions—and various others that could be cited—are, of course, stipulated definitions. As far as I know none of them has outlived its author. So until something approaching a dictionary definition is determined there will be a good deal of difference in the ways in which even evangelicals view contextualization. Nevertheless, the strength of these particular definitions is that all four of them emanate from a solid commitment to the full authority of the biblical text. Since the biblical gospel itself is intrinsically powerful, the preeminent task of the contextualizer will be to do what must be done to make the text *meaningful* to respondents. And that is the way in which I believe that contextualization should be both defined and enjoined.

THE INVOCATION OF HOLY SPIRIT CONVICTION IN RESPONDENTS

The Apostle Paul reminded Corinthian believers that he,

---

[14] Byang H. Kato, "The Gospel, Cultural Context, and Religious Syncretism," in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice* (ed. J. D. Douglas; Minneapolis, MN: World Wide, 1975), 1217.

[15] Bruce J. Nicholls, "Theological Education and Evangelization," in ibid., 647.

[16] George W. Peters, "Issues Confronting Evangelical Missions," in *Evangelical Missions Tomorrow* (ed. Wade T. Coggins & E. L. Frizen, Jr.; Pasadena, CA.: William Carey Library, 1977), 169.

[17] Harvie Conn, "Contextualization: A New Dimension for Cross-Cultural Hermeneutics," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 14 (Jan.1978): 44-45.

> did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God (1 Cor. 2:1-5).

Most of us are inclined to interpret "demonstration of the Spirit and power" in line with our own theological commitments, but whatever may be included it certainly involves that kind of Holy Spirit conviction prophesied by Jesus when, before his ascension, he promised his disciples that he would send the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, he said, would do two things. First, he would bring to their remembrance that which Christ Jesus had taught them. That is the basis of the inspiration of Scripture. Second, he would convict (*elengxei,* convince, reprove, rebuke) the world concerning sin, righteousness and judgment. Note that carefully. Of what sin? Of the sin of unbelief in Jesus, the one sin most difficult to convince people of. And why righteousness? Because the one person of all history who personified righteousness was Jesus Christ, and he would no longer be personally present as a standard of comparison. Of judgment, but which judgment? The judgment of the god of this age, Satan, whose judgment occurred at the cross! Satan may be very active, but he is not in control. Jesus is Lord! So where is this kind of power? In the gospel of Christ. And who has the power to convict men and women of its truth? The Third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit.

TWO CONTEXTUALIZATIONS OF THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL

Before concluding we take note once more that D. A. Carson's Great Commission fundamental is "the sheer power of the gospel of Christ *crucified.*" In commenting on this he adds,

> There is a superb irony in all this, of course. When Jesus was executed in the first century, the cross had no positive religious overtones. The Romans had three methods of capital punishment, and crucifixion was the most painful and the most shameful. Yet here were the Christians, their leader executed as a

damned malefactor, talking about Him with gleeful irony as if He were reigning from the cross.[18]

When Ed Rommen and I collaborated in writing *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods and Models*[19] we decided to include some examples of contextualization drawn from our respective respondent cultures—Germany and Japan. Some readers judged that exercise in one way and some in another, but resultant discussions did, I think, prove helpful. So, I will attempt the same kind of exercise here. The common thread in these two examples is that both have to do with the cross of Christ—its wisdom and its power. One contextualization is directed to and Americans audience; the other to our Japanese friends. One is more exegetical while the other is more existential. Both examples are quite intensely personal, especially my sermon "The Polyhedrous Cross." But perhaps I can be forgiven for including it because my purpose is not to point to it as a model sermon but for a very different reason. Namely, to emphasize once again that the biblical text itself is a contextualization *par excellence* when it comes to fashioning divine messages relevant to distinct cultures and subcultures but, even more importantly, relevant to the entire human race.

"THE POLYHEDROUS CROSS"—A SERMON BASED ON 1 CORINTHIANS 1:19-31

The sermon for which I provide a summary-outline below was prepared in somewhat unique circumstances—circumstances that were at once frustrating and challenging. A change in academic policy at the University of Minnesota back in the 1960s allowed doctoral students to replace an academic minor in any one discipline with an equal number of credits in advanced seminars of any discipline provided that those seminars made significant contributions to the student's primary research. I happened to be one of the first to take advantage of this new arrangement. As a consequence I ended up taking advanced seminars in philosophy, sociology, psychology and political science in addition to seminars in rhetoric/communication (cross-cultural communication). I found it to be at once exhilarating and frustrating to be exposed to so much of the world's advanced knowledge in these disciplines. It was exhilarating because scholars were constantly undertaking new research, exploring new ideas, and proposing new theories. It was frustrating because these inquiries were almost completely devoid of any attention whatsoever to the

[18] Carson, "Conclusion," 193.

[19] Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1989.

revealed wisdom and knowledge of God. Paul's words in First Corinthians chapters 1 and 2 came to my mind over and over again.

About that time a major Christian magazine—I believe it was *Christianity Today*—announced a sermon contest. Entries were to be judged mainly on the bases of fidelity to the biblical text and relevance to the contemporary culture. Invited to speak in a local church one Sunday I was impressed to prepare a sermon based on First Corinthians 1:19-31 and then enter it into the contest. Probably like hundreds of other such sermons of the time, it was preached a local congregation (actually, in this case, to several congregations) but was never submitted to the contest. If it has merit, that merit lies in the relevance of a Holy Spirit-inspired first century message not only appropriate to first century Corinth, but to twentieth century Minneapolis-St. Paul as well. It's in the hope that readers will capture or recapture some of that relevance that I recover and review the sermon here.

"The Polyhedrous Cross"
Text: 1 Corinthians 1:19-31.

Introduction: Under the Romans, first century Corinth was a flourishing, cosmopolitan city. It was known for commerce and wealth. It was also known for its logomachies—wordy disputes and disputes about words. And it was also known for its profligacy—"to corinthianise" meant to live an immoral life. Cultural traits such as these had infected the fledgling church. Paul begins a letter designed to counter and correct this state of affairs by insisting on certain fundamentals of the gospel and of God's dealings with mankind. Paul speaks clearly and boldly, "the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." Then he presents five fundamental "antidotes" to Corinthian thinking and lifestyle—antidotes that lend themselves to a five, four, three, two, one numerical arrangement although I adhere to the order of the text.

I. A Threefold Recrimination—vss. 20-21

From almost the very first it has been man's intention to somehow arrive at truth without divine aid. Satan said, "You will be as gods; your eyes will be opened; and you will know good and evil." Adam and Eve made the attempt and it failed miserably. That epitomizes humankind's intellectual history—an interminable grasping after truth, not on the basis of God's revelation but on the basis of human speculation. Our culture still grasps for it, but will never come to grips with it until we embrace the Christian gospel.

II. A Twofold Predilection—vss. 22-25

Paul says, "Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom." History shows this to be the case also. When Jesus presented himself as the promised Messiah to his fellow Jews, their response was "Show us a sign." When Paul approached the Athenians, they were spending their time in "nothing except telling or hearing something new." And so it is with people today. People tend to seek out professed providers (whether gurus or drugs) of life with a capital "L" on the one hand, or proposers of new insights and information (whether esoteric or scientific) on the other. But Christ is both the power of God and the wisdom of God. God's "foolishness" is wiser than men, and his "weakness" is stronger than men.

III. A Fivefold Selection—vss. 26-29

Now the Apostle Paul invites his readers to reconsider their divine calling. God's way of selecting people who will make up Christ's church is diametrically different than the way Caesar chooses people who will make up his court. Not exclusively but ordinarily, God chooses that which is foolish (Balaam's donkey), weak (David's sling), base (Samson's jawbone), despised (Gideon's army), and even "things that are not" (the "army" that routed the Syrians). Though there are good and valid reasons for believing the gospel and trusting Christ, in the final analysis it will not be our knowledge or wisdom that does so, but God's. Why? To meet human needs and, at the same time, eliminate boasting.

IV. A Fourfold Provision—vs. 30

Count them. As frail, erring humans we know that we have numberless needs. But it seems to take a lifetime to learn which ones are most important. Unless we learn from divine revelation, that is. But God knows and he has made provision for those needs in the person of Christ whom he has made to be the wisdom, righteousness, sanctification and redemption of those who believe.

V. A Single Intention—vss. 29, 31

Finally, why has God ordained it to be this way and only this way? For one reason, so that when men and women boast they will boast in the Lord. Reportedly, St. Francis of Assissi was once asked how it was that

he could accomplish so much. He answered, "It must be that the Lord looked down from heaven and said, 'Where can I find the weakest, littlest, meanest man on earth?' Then he saw me and said, 'I've found him. He won't be proud of it. He'll see that I am using him because of his insignificance.' Only when Christ is Lord will God be God. And only when God is God will all be right with the world.

THE FESTIVAL OF *OBON*—CROSSES IN BUDDHISM AND THE CROSS OF CHRIST

I had been in Japan but a brief two or three weeks when one night I came upon a celebration that featured loud native music and graceful dancing but also considerable merriment and excessive drinking. When I inquired as to the reason for the celebration I was simply told that it was the annual *Obon* festival celebrating the memory of dead family members.

It must have been about a year later when we invited a Japanese evangelist who was very conversant with Japanese religions, Rev. Hashimoto, as speaker in an evangelistic campaign held in our gospel hall in Urawa. I am reasonably sure that it did not occur to me that the campaign had been scheduled for the time of *Obon.* The significance of that timing was not overlooked by Hashimoto *Sensei* however. In any event, an American missionary was destined to learn the real meaning of *Obon* while a Japanese audience was destined to learn the true meaning of Calvary's cross—many of them for the very first time.

In one of his sermons, Hashimoto first dealt with the profound difference between the Buddhist gods and bodhisattvas on the one hand and the God of the Bible on the other; the distinctions between karma in Buddhism and sin in the Bible; God's hatred of, and judgment on, sin; and the significance of Christ's Cross and Resurrection. He then retold the story of Mokuren and the Buddha; the background of *Obon*; and concluded as follows:

> My friends, do you know the story behind *Obon*? Many do not so let me tell it to you. After his mother died, one of the Buddha's disciples by the name of Mokuren made an earnest plea to be able to see how his mother was faring in the netherworld. Finally, in answer to his repeated implorations, the Buddha withdrew the veil and allowed Mokuren to see his mother suffering in the agony of being crucified upside down! Mokuren secured a temporary reprieve for his mother after which she was obliged to return to her cross in the netherworld. That's what the word *Obon* really means. It means to be crucified upside down.

My friends, the truth is that on that day almost 2000 years ago on a Cross, outside Jerusalem in Palestine, the Son of God, Jesus Christ, suffered far more than physical pain. Bearing your sin and mine, he also bore the wrath of God the Father against sin and evil, and suffered the separation from the Father that holiness and justice required.

The sad thing about *Obon* is that, after a short time of respite and celebration with dead parents and loved ones, our Buddhist friends must escort them back to their grave where they will hang upside down on a cruel cross for another year. What a cruel thing to do to one's loved ones! But that is what Buddhism teaches and that is what it requires.

Friends, the truth is much different. The Bible teaches us that Jesus Christ was crucified and rose again so that you and your loved ones need never suffer either crucifixion or separation from God—neither in time nor in eternity. That is what we Christians call the "Gospel"—Good News. And that, indeed, is what it is.

CONCLUSION

We err if we think that it is up to us to make the gospel relevant and effectual by means of human devices of any kind whatsoever. Of course, we must do all that we can to make the gospel interesting and compelling, appealing and persuasive, and—above all—understanding and meaningful. But, inspired and infused by the Holy Spirit, it is the "sheer power of the gospel of Christ crucified" itself that is essential to Great Commission mission. It is the power of God for salvation to everyone that believes. It is to be proclaimed fully and faithfully, passionately and persuasively. It is to be proclaimed to Jews and Gentiles, to Americans and Japanese—to the peoples of the whole world, each in the context of their national boundary and each in the context of the worldview in which they live and move and have their being.