

ST PAUL'S THEOLOGY OF MISSIONS IN CONTRAST WITH THE INSIDER MOVEMENT

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Abstract

Following World War II, Evangelicals held congresses and consultations to address plans for Christian missions in the new post-colonial era. Unfortunately, some began with the presupposition that Christian missions in Muslim lands have failed, for lack of contextualizing the Gospel. It was a misleading evaluation of a work that had begun early in the 19th century, and had accomplished great things throughout the Middle East.¹

Having spent thirty-six years in broadcasting the Gospel in Arabic over several international radio stations, and communicating with tens of thousands of Muslim listeners, I found it quite strange

¹ John R. W. Stott and Robert Coote, Eds., *Down to Earth: Studies in Christianity and Culture*, Eerdmans, 1980, p. viii. Again, the Stott influence on the Lausanne Continuation Committee has been manifest in subsequent Lausanne-sponsored consultations and conferences. He served, for example, as Chairman of the 1978 Willowbank Consultation on "The Gospel and Culture" which fully endorsed the contextualized approach to the Gospel proclamation. Indeed, in his Foreword to the Willowbank papers he states: The above quotation is taken from a paper, "Neo-Evangelicalism and Its Impact on Missions: An Historical Overview" that was read by the late Dr. Fredrick W. Evans, Jr. at a meeting of some concerned Evangelicals who met at Four Brooks Conference Center, Bucks County, Pennsylvania, between July 9 and 11, 1985. The meeting was called to discuss the spread of a new theory of missions known as Contextualization. At the end of the meeting, A STATEMENT OF MISSIONARY CONCERN was adopted. Because of the brevity of the STATEMENT, Dr. Evans was asked by the signers of this document to write a fuller explanation of its purpose and interpretation of its contents. More than two decades have passed since the issuing of this STATEMENT, but its relevance has not diminished. Rather than pay full attention to the Biblical givens regarding missions and the role of the Holy Spirit in conversion, certain voices are still clamoring for some type of contextualizing the Christian message in order to facilitate conversions of non-Christians, especially of Muslims.
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to hear the claims of the Contextualization Movement assuring us that if only missionaries would adopt their methodologies, some if not all the obstacles to missions in the Muslim world would disappear!

However, by studying these novel missions theories that have been advanced lately, I've come to the conclusion that missiology has lost its connection with the older theological disciplines. So it should not be surprising that an extreme form of contextualization has morphed into the Insider Movement.

St Paul's Theology of Missions: in Contrast with the Insider Movement

The basic *motif* or impulse of the Insider Movement is to facilitate the conversion of Muslims to the Christian faith. To that end some within it support the translation of the Bible into Islamic languages with changes in those terms considered to be offensive to Muslims. Such words as "Father" when associated with God, or referring to Jesus Christ as the "Son of God," are no longer found in these Muslim-friendly translations [also known as "MIT": Muslim-idiom Translations] with substitute terms considered acceptable to Muslim sensibilities being used.

As much as one may laud the purpose of Christians engaged in the difficult task of missions to Muslims, there are certain Biblical principles which must not be ignored. It is evident that the Insider Movement has located the difficulty in converting Muslims in the inspired nomenclature of the Bible, and not in the Muslim mind and tradition. This goes against some important Biblical principles which are part and parcel of the Pauline missionary tradition.

When Paul and Barnabas were sent by the Church in Antioch with the blessing of the Holy Spirit, they were properly prepared for their missionary task. Paul was born in Tarsus Cilicia, Asia Minor, where he received his early education in the Hellenistic culture. His parents, being devout Jews, sent him to Jerusalem to complete his formation at the school of Gamaliel, where he became an expert in Rabbinic Judaism. Barnabas, a native of Cyprus, was at home in

Greek culture, and was equally equipped to deal with Jewish and Gentile objections to the Gospel of the Cross.

Paul and Barnabas preached the Gospel without any dilution or compromise. For example, in the First Epistle to the Corinthians, Paul reminds the new believers in Corinth (who were of Jewish or Gentile backgrounds) that he had made no concessions to their prejudices when he first came to their city to proclaim the Good News.

For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, ^{but} to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men." (I Corinthians 1:18-25) ESV

"And I, when I came to you, brothers I 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, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God. (I Corinthians 2: 1-5) ESV

"The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. 'For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?' But we have the mind of Christ." (I Corinthians 2:14-16) ESV

It is evident from the above quotations that Paul, with full awareness of the Jewish and Greek objections to his message, did not hesitate for one moment to declare the saving message of a crucified and risen Messiah. As a former Pharisee, he had believed in the ability of being right with God, by fulfilling the demands of the Law. And being familiar with the Hellenic mind, he knew that the *kerygma* sounded like nonsense to the Greeks. Still, he brought to Corinth exactly what they needed, and not what they wanted. The real problem existed in the Rabbinical and Hellenistic minds, and not in the core of his message!

In 2 Corinthians 3, Paul returned to discuss the subject of the receptivity of the Gospel, by explaining why the Jews missed the meaning of the Messianic passages of the Old Testament:

Since we have such a hope, we are very bold, not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not gaze at the outcome of what was being brought to an end. But their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.” (2 Corinthians 3: 12-18) ESV

The Old Testament Scriptures’ main emphasis was on the saving message that was first proclaimed by God in the Garden of Eden to our first parents, Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:15). This promise was made specific to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and reiterated to David. Unfortunately, even though the Prophets like Isaiah and the Psalms spoke of the coming Messiah as a redeemer from sin, Rabbinical Judaism, as it developed during the Intertestamental era, formulated the doctrine of salvation by observing the deeds of the Law. This doctrine became a “veil” over the minds of the religious leaders in Israel that prevented them from welcoming the Redeemer Messiah. Equally, it became the firm belief of the Jews in the Diaspora, which

explains why many of them did not welcome Paul's message. They expected a political Messiah who would liberate their nation from Roman imperialism.

Thus far, I have dealt with the objections to the message of the Gospel, by both Jews and Greeks, during the time of Paul. My point has been to show that the impediment to the reception of the Gospel resided in the minds of the Jewish and Greek receptors, and not in the vocabulary used by Paul. However, I was not implying that there was no hope or way to convert Jews and Gentiles, seeing that their minds had insurmountable obstacles to the message of the Good News. My purpose was to show that God had, in fact, provided a way to overcome their resistance to the Gospel offer. Paul put it this way in I Cor. 1:21: "*For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.*" ESV

The expression "*the folly of what we preach*" refers to an important formula that summarized the essence of the apostolic proclamation known in Greek as the **κηρυγματος**. In God's plan, the instrumental cause of salvation is the proclamation of the Gospel, while the efficient cause of salvation is the death of Jesus Christ on the cross and his resurrection, as actualized by the work of the Holy Spirit.

This Pauline teaching about faith in Christ occurring within the context of hearing the proclamation of the Gospel is taught in Romans 10. Paul's heart yearned for the salvation of his people. He acknowledged their tremendous "zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes." (2-4) ESV

This attempt to establish one's own righteousness has remained the major obstacle to the reception of the Gospel, to Jews and Muslims alike. Both systems of belief are thoroughly legalistic. Man, in Rabbinical Judaism and in Islam, possesses the ability to please God by doing the deeds prescribed by the Law!

Furthermore, notwithstanding the strong criticisms that have been levelled by Muslims against the Bible's authenticity, the Trini-

Trinity, the deity of Jesus Christ, and His crucifixion, their greatest objection is to Biblical anthropology. Whereas the Christian view of man's predicament is marked by recognition of the drastic results of the Fall, the Muslim view of man's present condition is very optimistic. It may be described as a thoroughly Pelagian point of view. This was articulated well in a 1959 article appearing in the quarterly *The Muslim World* in which the Islamic doctrine of man was discussed. It contained a quotation from a paper read by a Muslim professor in 1957, at a gathering of some Christian and Muslim scholars that was held in Morocco. The Muslim professor said:

"The possibility of man's deliverance and the way to follow have been indicated by the Qur'an in its address to sinners, fathers of the human race: 'Go forth all of you from hence and if there comes to you guidance from Me then he who follows my guidance shall have nothing to fear, nor shall they know distress.'" (Surah 2:38) By this solemn affirmation God Himself takes action for the salvation of man in the path of right. Islamic tradition then has the means to lead man to final perfection, the effect of which is liberation from the fear and from the sadness which prevent man from attaining the eternal blessedness which is life in God and for God."

In commenting on the paper, Edwin Calverley, the then editor of *The Muslim World* wrote:

[This] exposition of Muslim theology and its concepts of man and his salvation raises several deep questions. The Christian must always be perplexed about its ready confidence that **"to know is to do," that man's salvation happens under purely revelatory auspices and that through the law given in the Divine communication is the path that man will follow once he knows and sees it.** The whole mystery of human recalcitrance and "hardness of heart" seems to be overlooked.' [Emphasis mine]

The true way of salvation is by faith in Jesus Christ. Paul continued to expound the way people are saved, regardless of their religious background, in verses 5-17:

For Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them. But the righteousness based on faith says, 'Do not say in your heart, "Who will

ascend into heaven?” (that is, to bring Christ down) ‘or “Who will descend into the abyss?”’ (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. For the Scripture says, “Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.” For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!” But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?” So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ. ESV

In this passage, Paul repeats what he has taught in I Corinthians about how saving faith is born: So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ. In the Greek original it reads: “*ἀρα η πιστις εξ ακοης η δε ακοη δια ρηματος χριστου*” “The Word of Christ” may be translated as “the Preaching of Christ,” which is equivalent to the term *κηρυγματος* used in I Corinthians 1: 21:

You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by believing what you heard?

Have you experienced so much in vain—if it really was in vain? So again I ask, does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you by the works of the law, or by your believing what you heard? So also Abraham “believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” Galatians 3:1-6 NIV

O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed among you as crucified? This only I want to learn from you: Did you receive

the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh? Have you suffered so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain?

Therefore He who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you, does He do it by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?—just as Abraham “believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.” 3:1-6 NKJ

O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith— just as Abraham “believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”? 3:1-6 ESV

This emphasis on the role of preaching the Kerygma as a means of salvation is found in Paul’s polemical Letter to the Churches of Galatia. In remonstrating with the new believers in Galatia, he contrasted “salvation by works,” with “the hearing of faith” or “hearing with faith” or “believing what you heard.” In the Greek original, it reads: *τουτο μονον θελω μαθειν αφ υμων εξ εργαων νομου το πνευμα ελαβετε η εξ ακοης πιστεως. ο ουν επιχορηγων υμιν το πνευμα και ενεργων δυναμεις εν υμιν εξ εργαων νομου η εξ ακοης πιστεως.*

The Greek term “*εξ ακοης πιστεως*” (literally, the hearing of faith) originates from Isaiah 53, where the prophet began the section of his prophecy dealing with the suffering and death of the Messiah with two questions:

Who has believed what he has heard from us? (Or who has believed what we have heard?) And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? ESV

The message of “*what we have heard*” is none other than the message of the Gospel; it is not mere news, it is Good News that originates from God’s eternal plan of salvation; therefore it is accompa-

nied by God's dynamic power in the third person of the Trinity that eventuates with the salvation of the hearers.

The Insider Movement that substitutes God-breathed words of the Bible with "inoffensive" terms to Muslims fails to listen to the teachings of the Bible regarding the conversion of unbelievers to Christ. The offence, or obstacle, is not in Biblical vocabulary, but in the hearts of unbelievers. To overcome this obstacle, God has ordained the proclamation of the Gospel as the way of salvation.

By minimizing the importance of this proclamation/teaching/preaching process, those in the IM movement promoting "Muslim-idiom Translations", place too much emphasis on their proponents' well-intentioned desire to simplify human communication; yet this crosses the line by removing an essential pillar of our faith. The Fatherhood of God and the Sonship of Christ may be a "*skandelon*" for our Muslim neighbors, but a robust faith in the power of the Holy Spirit to bring *metanoia*, is the remedy.

We must never forget that the Lord Jesus Christ gave the missionary mandate to His Church. As we have noticed earlier, it was the church in Antioch that commissioned Paul and Barnabas, to preach the Gospel throughout the Roman Empire. After they had finished their First Missionary journey (Acts 13 & 14), they returned to Antioch and gave a report to the assembled church, about the Lord's blessing on their labors. When disputes arose about Gentile converts and their submission to the Mosaic Law, the problem was resolved at an official church assembly as recorded in Acts 15. The Bible and the Church belong together in missions, as well as in the life of established churches. Bible translation agencies need the cooperation and the blessing of the church, and must not ignore the long tradition of Bible translations down through the ages: from the Peshitta, the Vulgate, Wycliffe, Tyndale, the King James, all the way to the present day.

It is my fervent hope that Christians desiring the conversion of Muslims heed the Words of the Scriptures, rather than listening to the wisdom of cultural anthropologists, or linguistic specialists who have not submitted their minds to the Mind of Christ!