

# DP5.05 Preaching in the Australian Context: The Good Drover or the Good Shepherd?

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Contextualisation: it's a buzzword in evangelism these days, but is it as important as it sounds? How important are cultural factors in evangelism and to what extent should we let them influence and shape the gospel we preach? Does it make any difference to the word of God if we call Christ 'the Good Seal-keeper' when preaching to Eskimos, or 'the Good Drover' in the Land of Oz?

The Scriptures are not as preoccupied with these multi-cultural concerns as we perhaps are. However, there are some texts which give us principles for thinking about the gospel as it relates to human culture.

### Liberty Requires Understanding

In Galatians 2, for example, we find a rare incident of conflict between the apostles. Paul confronts Peter in Antioch, and the issue of tension seems to be what food to eat, when to eat it and with whom. However, Paul recognizes that there is more than sweet and sour pork at stake here. The issue behind Paul's reprimand is the "truth of the gospel" (Gal 2:14). He understands that Peter's action jeopardizes the salvation of the Gentiles. While Peter was now free to eat whatever he wished, he was acting as if food laws were an essential aspect of our relationship in Christ. By his actions, he was denying the liberty that is ours in the gospel.

In much the same way, 1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1 talks about the gospel, liberty and food. But here it is not the Jew/Gentile question that is causing confusion; the problem

Paul addresses is what to do with food which has been offered to idols. This time, Paul is in a primarily Gentile context. He comes to three conclusions:

1. Do everything for the glory of God. Any action which is not for the glory of God is inappropriate (10:31).
2. Do nothing that will cause anyone else to stumble (10:32).
3. Please everybody in every way (10:33).

This third recommendation seems rather hard to implement, but it is still Paul's aim. Paul is willing, in all circumstances, to put himself out for the other person, for the sake of Christ. Paul knew that the doctrine of Christian liberty is essential for the preservation of the gospel. Anyone who enforces secondary issues upon Christian consciences is in danger of denying the gospel's truth. To take a secondary issue – the food you eat, for example – and make it primary in Christian fellowship is to compromise that truth.

The doctrine of Christian liberty, then, means that we must put ourselves out for other people's salvation. We have to reject our own personal sub-culture in order to become like the people we seek to serve with the gospel.

We must demonstrate our commitment to the unchanging truths of the gospel by our willingness to change anything and everything else. In doing this we are like Christ, who did not suit himself

but died for the salvation of others (1 Cor 11:1). Paul's position is radical: "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means, I might save some" (1 Cor 9:22b). Christian liberty is not an optional extra. We must remove any and every 'non-gospel' stumbling block between us and our audience.

## Difficult in Practice

Before we chide Peter for his short-sightedness in Antioch, consider how difficult it can be to separate the gospel from culture in practice. We are, by and large, more like Peter than Paul, because most of us love the word of God (as both Peter and Paul did), but have been converted within our own Christianized culture. Australian culture still bears the marks of its Christian past. Its social and religious structures are derived from the Bible and, like Peter, we find it a little hard to see clearly where the truth of the gospel ends and where secondary, cultural elements begin. We seek to be 'all things to all men' (we even know to replace 'men' with 'people') because we wish to keep in step with the Scriptures, but we have only ever had to understand this within our own cultural context.

Paul, on the other hand, was converted by the total dismantling of his culture (Phil 3).

His fiercely held beliefs were knocked down and, amidst the rubble; he came to clearly see the foundation of the gospel. The nature of his conversion radically changed his approach to his own culture, and he wouldn't carry his 'Hebrew of Hebrews' cultural baggage into his mission to the Gentiles.

It is easy to blame Peter and applaud Paul, but we often find ourselves in the shoes of the fisherman. Let us take some examples. If you were conducting university evangelism, how much would you encourage, support or participate in a team of students taking part in a pub-crawl, in order to reach the unbelieving participants? Or what would you make of the beach mission team that goes to the local bingo night with the campers, in order to build relationships by which they can share the gospel?

These are complex questions.

All would acknowledge that to spread the gospel, we must declare it in a language that our hearers can understand. To this end, we print our Bibles in English and preach in English to our contemporaries. But do we really speak the language of our contemporaries? And how much should we? Ephesians 5 tells us that our speech should be distinct from the coarse talk of the world – but most Australians swear. We are told to adapt, to be like our audience, but where will we draw the line?

It's all very well to proclaim our pledge, 'all things to all men', but in the nitty-gritty of social situations, there are many difficulties to be worked out. At what point do we say, "I can't be like this" or "I can't do that"?

## Understanding the Australian Context

To make this task even more difficult, our own Australian context is changing rapidly. With the diversity of background amongst immigrants in the past forty years, there has also been a huge shift away from the Christianized, mono-cultural society. We live now in a multi-cultural society,

where Christian influence has diversified with the arrival of the Eastern Orthodox as well as Roman Catholics from non-Irish backgrounds.

We are also experiencing new influences from Muslims and Buddhists, as well as a growing number of people who profess no religious background at all. Australia has become so diverse that there is no real single culture to speak of, but hundreds of cultures existing side-by-side and intermingled.

It seems that the more we think about reaching twenty-first century cosmopolitan Australia, the harder the task becomes. Do we need to be cultural chameleons, able to adapt to any and every cultural context? How can we possibly do this? Where can we get the information we need about the multitude of different contexts and cultural value systems to which we want to preach?

For many of us, the whole process is fairly instinctive or intuitive. We observe our audience and follow hunches about the kinds of people who are present. We talk to them, we listen to them and begin to understand them. That is why most of us are best as evangelists in our own street, our own suburb, or in our own social class or group. We already have some insight into what our audience is like.

However, as the perceived complexity of reaching multi-cultural Australia has grown, there has also been an increasing pressure for churches and ministries to employ statisticians, pollsters, sociologists, psychologists, historians, media-watchers and (especially) computers in order to understand the context in which we are preaching. Through these experts, we supposedly come to know about human nature and human culture, and can then express the gospel in those terms.

These methodologies are fraught with danger. They are dangerous because of the very nature of the disciplines. Anthropology, for example, consistently misreads human nature, because it has no place in its theoretical framework for God, and thus no place for sin (which is one of the few truly universal characteristics of mankind). Alternatively, if we depend on psychology, we wind up understanding people in terms of fulfilment and personal significance. It is true that fulfilment and significance are found in Jesus, but that is not the gospel. We end up with a diluted, piecemeal gospel of 'pop psychology' that has been badly Christianized. It has great appeal to our comprehensively-surveyed audience and it really scratches people where they itch—but it doesn't convert them. We can end up changing the gospel but not the hearers.

## The Challenge to think Biblically

The growing influence of this kind of 'contextualisation' can affect us in numerous ways. It invades our evangelism, and we start to view people according to the survey results, rather than according to the Bible.

For example, the university campus is supposed to be infested by atheists. However, Romans 1:18 assures us that what can be known about God is plain to all people. They turn to other religions and to various forms of idolatry as a way of escaping the knowledge that they already have about God. Psalms 14 and 53 tell us that atheism is not an intellectual position, but a moral one. People reject God because of their immorality. Ecclesiastes teaches that people cannot know God by human wisdom, because God in his wisdom has chosen not to be known that way.

However, despite knowing this from the Bible, we are still tempted to feel that everybody is an

atheist and that we must use clever arguments for God's existence. But the Bible tells us to assume that they all know that God is there and not to waste time at that end of the apologetic spectrum. Rather, speak about what God requires of us and trust that those who are denying him are doing so to avoid the moral implications.

Arguing about the resurrection is another example of the challenge to turn first to God's word. In Luke 16, Jesus assures us that people who do not listen to Moses and the prophets will not believe, even if someone rises from the dead. Yet we keep trying to use the resurrection of the dead as proof of the existence of God. The Word of God tells us that people will not be persuaded this way.

There is no need to be opposed to apologetics or to apologetic evangelism, nor to resist reasoning, discussing, arguing, and answering questions from history or from evidence. We are not compelled to be fideists who just say 'Believe!'. Paul clearly used reason and argument in his evangelism in Acts. However, our arguing should be carried out biblically. The nature of our approach to the whole subject should come out of our biblical understanding of human nature. If we want to understand people, we must start with what the Bible says about people.

When we do so, we will discover that, in spiritual terms, the cultural differences between people are quite small. The gospel addresses the fundamentals of human nature, not the peripherals. What are these fundamentals?

## All we need to Know

The Bible tells me all I really need to know about Australians and how to be an effective evangelist in Australia. The Bible tells me that Australians know that God exists, that they do not want to acknowledge him and are running away from him (Rom 1, 3). It tells me that they are religious, but that their religion is an excuse, and that they are not really seeking God that way.

It tells me that they are sinful and that the guilt of that sin will lead them to deny God, to avoid the truth, to hate both the light and the preachers of the light (Jn 3). It tells me to expect persecution, if I desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus (2 Tim 3). It tells me to expect that people will choose the broad road which is easy and leads to damnation (Matt 7).

The Bible tells me that Australians are captives of the ruler of the air, that they are dead in their sins and have the spirit of evil working in them. By nature, they will do things which are in opposition to God (Eph 2). They have a conscience that testifies to them of right and wrong and they have a feeling that the world makes sense, but they can't make sense of the world (Rom 2). They long for relationship, because they can't live alone, but they adopt lifestyles which militate against satisfactory relationships.

They love family life, but they just don't know how to run it. The Bible also tells me that God's Spirit can bring Australians to new life, even those who are thoroughly dead in sin. It tells me of the value God has placed on people. It tells me that he sent his son Jesus to die on the cross for Australians.

We must study our Bibles to understand our context properly. That is the key to effective mission. The Bible is concerned with the fundamental issues that convert people. The peripherals are not going to keep them out or bring them in. To spend our time studying the peripherals in great

detail is evangelistically useless. More and more books and conferences on evangelism are pushing us in this direction, and it is a mistake.

## The Paradox

This leads us finally to something of a paradox. We have seen from 1 Corinthians 10-11 (and elsewhere) that to preach the gospel accurately, we have to free ourselves from cultural baggage – our own and that of our audience. To do this, we will need to have a clear understanding of what is cultural baggage and what is the unchanging gospel.

On the other hand, to preach the gospel accurately, we shouldn't be overly distracted by detailed cultural analysis, because the Bible is our trustworthy guide to human nature. By dedicating ourselves to pursuing God's mind in Scripture, we come to a profound understanding of the true nature of humanity. We will always learn most about our audience by listening carefully to their Maker.

This article was adapted by James Wackett, Greg Clarke and Tony Payne from an address given at the Australian Forum on Evangelism.