

ately taken (10:1-17), the details of which are obscure. The point, however, is clear: *teaching led to conviction and renewal.*

The importance of the teaching of God's word could hardly be more effectively taught. Its lessons are enduring. God has spoken in the Bible but it is very easy, even when we have received such mercy from God as these people (9:9), to forget its teaching or to fail to apply it to ourselves. Too easily we can fall into doing sinful things which undermine our own spiritual life and that of God's people. This is why the teaching of these two chapters is so relevant. *We need to be diligent Bible students and to seek good teaching from God's word since it is by this means that God, by his Spirit, brings his word force-*

fully upon our consciences, motivating us to remedial action. The Bible is the primary means that God has appointed for the conversion of sinners and the growth of his people. There is nothing so effective as a simple unfolding of the message and application of the Bible.

We need to rediscover this! We need to make time for our own study and to pray for our teachers that they are able to grasp and apply God's word to us. We, too, must be ready to come and to apply the Word. Ezra's ministry transformed individuals and a community. Unleashed, the Bible can do the same again today in you and me and those around us.

Gospel, Culture, and the public sphere: Perspectives from the New Testament

Paul Trebilco

KEYWORDS: Christology, pastoral epistles, appearances, epiphany, Nicolaitans, pagan worship, contextualisation, imperial cult, combat myth, lordship of Christ, heavenly citizenship, saviour, authority, harmony, humility, service, wisdom of God, Spirit

I have been asked to look at the range of interactions between the Gospel and culture in the early church.¹ I want to start by looking at the Gospel *in* culture, and then will discuss an example of the way that the Gospel can be lost in a culture. I will go on to look at using the tools provided by culture precisely against that culture in the name of the Gospel. Finally I want to look at how Christ is Lord over all, including the public sphere, and the challenge of speaking of Christ in that public sphere.

1. Gospel in the language of the culture: the Christology of the Pastoral Epistles

I firstly want to look at the way in which the Gospel is expressed in a particular culture. Several examples come to mind here. We could look at the way in which John's Gospel speaks of Jesus as the Logos – the Word – picking up a key concept for both Jewish and Gentile readers. We could look at Paul's sermon in Athens as presented in Acts 17. Here Paul translates his message into concepts that Athenian listeners can understand, and so builds a linguistic bridge of communication across which they can travel.

But I want to look at a less well-known but very significant example of the translation of the Gospel into the language of the Hellenistic world. This concerns the Christ-

ology of the Pastoral Epistles – 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus. I think this a helpful example of 'Gospel *in* culture' – of the language and thought forms of a culture being used as a vehicle for the expression of the Gospel.

I will call the author of the Pastorals 'the Pastor'. I think these books were written by a disciple of Paul who saw himself as in the Pauline tradition and was writing what Paul would have said, but for a new day. But the issue of authorship is not important for my discussion.² So how do the Pastorals express the Gospel in culture?

Epiphany Christology – translation of the Gospel into a new idiom

The Pastor uses the term *epiphaneia* – which means 'appearance, manifestation' – or the associated verb in seven places.³ For example, in 2 1:10 we read: 'this grace . . . has now been revealed through the appearing (*phanerotheisan*) of our Saviour Christ Jesus'. In 1 Timothy 6:14 we read: 'I charge you to keep the commandment without spot or blame *until the appearing (epiphaneias) of our Lord Jesus Christ.*'⁴

It is clear that the word 'epiphany' – 'appearance' – is a vital component of the author's Christology.⁵ 'Epiphany' is used of the first 'appearance' of Jesus,⁶ and also of the second 'appearance' of Jesus which is elsewhere called his *parousia*.⁷ Hence, for the Pastor, God's saving activity in Jesus is bracketed by two epiphanies with a period in between which stretches from the first epiphany to the second. Using the noun 'epiphany' (or 'appearance') and the verb 'appear', the Pastor speaks of Christ as a divine figure who is the manifestation in this world of the unseen and transcendent God (e.g. 1 Tim. 6:14-16).⁸

What can we say about the use of the concept of epiphany? Firstly, *epiphaneia* – appearance – occurs elsewhere in the NT with this sense only in 2 Thessalonians 2:8,

and the verb 'to appear' has a different sense in its other two occurrences.⁹ Secondly, while the verb is found the Greek translation of the OT and the noun in 2 and 3 Maccabees, and similar ideas are found in Jewish apocalyptic,¹⁰ the concept of 'epiphany' cannot be said to be important in Jewish literature.

By contrast, in Greco-Roman religion, epiphaneia is often used of the self-manifestation of a divine being in this world, with appropriate signs of majesty and power. It can refer to the appearance of a god, for example, during processions or to help people in time of need, or as the motivation for the foundation of a temple.¹¹ It can also be used to refer to the emperor. For example, both the noun and the verb are found in Ephesian inscriptions honouring Julius Caesar as 'the manifest (or appearing) god', or honouring Artemis as 'the most manifest goddess'.¹²

An architectural detail of the temple of Artemis in Ephesus is also significant here. It has been suggested that openings in the pediment of the temple were ritual doors or windows for Artemis's epiphany and that her followers would assemble in the court below, waiting for her epiphany or for a symbol of her divinity in the window. Evidence for this comes from some Ephesian coins which depict a female figure in the central doorway of the pediment; it has been suggested that the female figure is either Artemis or her priestess as her surrogate.¹³ It seems likely then that these doorways were places where it was believed the epiphany of Artemis occurred. As Stevenson notes, 'Their appearance on the coinage of Ephesus represents a symbolic expression of the deeply-held belief that the goddess is accessible and comes to the aid of her people.'¹⁴ That is, that she 'appears'.

It is significant then that the Pastor uses the concept of epiphany. Given the prominence of this concept in Hellenistic religions, and its comparative unimportance in Jewish literature, a strong case can be made that here the concept of epiphany, and the associated epiphany scheme, has been adopted from the sphere of Hellenistic religions and used by the author as a vehicle for the expression of his Christology.¹⁵ Accordingly, it is an example of the adoption of a concept and associated vocabulary from the wider milieu of the Greco-Roman world.

This then is an example of *adaptation* or *contextualization* – of the use of the particular language of a culture to express the Christian faith. As Newbigin reminds us, the gospel 'is always embodied in some cultural form'.¹⁶ Here we see the embodiment of a key feature of Christological belief in the language of the Greco-Roman world.

The question is whether this is saying the same thing about Christ that had been said earlier – but now saying it in different language – or saying something quite different. (I can only note here that in a thorough examination of this issue, Howard Marshall argues that the translation of Christology into the more Hellenistic language of epiphany has not changed the essential teaching of the older, traditional material about Christ.)¹⁷ He suggests that 'epiphany means the appearance of the previously hidden divine figure who already existed',¹⁸ and thus that epiphany Christology can be seen as equivalent to an incarnational Christology (found, for example, in Philippians 2:6-11). He also points out that the Christology of the Pastorals is in no way docetic, which may have been a risk with the development of epiphany

Christology.¹⁹ It is clear that the Pastor is referring to the real manifestation of the Saviour in human form. So here we see Gospel continuity – the same Gospel is being expressed in new language. This is genuinely the adaptation or contextualisation of the same gospel into a new culture.

It is an important example of the Gospel-culture interaction because it comes from the New Testament, and because we can see that in a new and strongly Gentile context, the earlier Pauline message is being faithfully translated by a slightly later Pauline disciple. And here we clearly see the concern to *address* that new context in relevant and meaningful ways, in this case concerning Christology. I suggest that it is a model for us.

2. The Gospel lost in culture through excessive cultural adaptation: the Nicolaitans

I turn now to the Nicolaitans, a group that we read of in Revelation 2. They provide a contrast to the Pastoral Epistles, and have a particular attitude to involvement in the wider society that provides a helpful warning here.

In Revelation 2:6, we read: 'Yet this is to your credit: you hate *the works of the Nicolaitans*, which I also hate.' Revelation 2:14-16 tells us more about the Nicolaitans:

But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the people of Israel, so that they would eat food sacrificed to idols and practise fornication. So you also have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Repent then.

Here the teaching of the Nicolaitans, equated with the teaching of Balaam, is said to have two dimensions – eating food sacrificed to idols and practising fornication.²⁰ Eating food sacrificed to idols clearly involved the purchase and consumption of meat which had been consecrated to an idol. 'Practising fornication' (porneusai) is almost certainly meant metaphorically;²¹ thus with strong OT precedent, John is using 'practising fornication' as a metaphor for committing idolatry.²² Since John also speaks of the Nicolaitans eating food sacrificed to idols, we can suggest that in speaking of 'practising fornication' with reference to idolatry, John is referring to other facets of pagan worship, probably including actual participation in pagan religious cults and festivals where meat offered to an idol was served.

The interesting point is that in Revelation John declares the Nicolaitans to be 'beyond the pale', for in Revelation 2:6 we read: 'Yet this is to your credit: you hate *the works of the Nicolaitans*, which I also hate.' Why? In John's view, they have been caught up in the worship of someone or something other than God. Thus, they have gone too far down the accommodationist path and have lost their Christian distinctiveness. For by eating food offered to idols and participating in pagan religious cults (or something similar) they had, in John's view, gone too far down the path of integrating with and accommodating to their culture. They had turned their backs on the living God and had come to be the allies of the beast in Revelation, for they were involved in idolatrous worship.²³

Different New Testament authors would draw the line in different places when it comes to eating meat offered to idols.

Not all would be quite as clear-cut as John in Revelation. But the Nicolaitans provide us with a cameo; in 'adaptation' one can go too far. In dialogue with society, one can become so *like* society that the Gospel is lost. Although we do not know enough about the Nicolaitans to be absolutely certain, it seems likely that they had accommodated society so much and had gone so far down the 'adaptation line', that they had, in John's view, ceased to be really 'Christian'. They had gone beyond contextualisation of the Gospel, beyond using the language of the culture as a vehicle for their faith, into actual denial of their faith by following their culture into the worship of other gods. They provide us with a warning then – as a result of excessive 'adaptation', there can be 'gospel discontinuity' and a resultant loss of the Gospel. There can be such a degree of accommodation to the wider society that 'Gospel difference' is not maintained and the Gospel is lost.

3. Using cultural tools against culture in the name of Gospel – the Book of Revelation

In the case of epiphany Christology in the Pastoral Epistles, we see a *translation* process with regard to the Gospel. We see that some early Christians were involved in using the language of the wider world to express their beliefs. But what about *applying* their faith to their *society*?

When we turn to the Book of Revelation, we see a vigorous 'polemical edge' against the environment in which the author lives. What we see here is John, the author of Revelation, speaking the language of the culture *against* that culture. From the perspective of the Gospel he is critiquing society – but doing so in the *language* of that culture.

The Imperial Cult (Revelation 4-5)

John's depiction of the ceremonies in the heavenly throne room in Revelation 4-5 and elsewhere has been significantly influenced by popular images of the ideas, ceremonies and activities associated with the Roman Imperial court.²⁴ For example, in Revelation 4:4 and 10 it is said that the twenty-four elders wear golden crowns on their heads, which they then cast before the throne, and are clothed in white.²⁵ As Aune notes, the presentation of gold crowns to a king was a well-known ceremony to the Romans and white was the sacred colour. He suggests: 'The heavenly scene of the twenty-four elders throwing down their crowns before the throne has *no* parallel in Israelite-Jewish literature and becomes comprehensible only in light of the ceremonial traditions of Hellenistic and Roman ruler worship.'²⁶

But there is a polemical edge to John's use of the ideas associated with the Roman imperial court. John is convinced that Jesus ranks above the Roman emperors, even if emperors like Gaius claimed divine authority. Thus, Aune argues that John *parodies* the ceremonies of the Imperial court and cult in order to show that the claims of Caesar and of Christ were antithetical, and that the claims of Christ were legitimate, whilst those of the emperor were not.²⁷ The parody can be seen, for example, when the twenty-four elders throw down their crowns before God's throne in Rev 4:10, a direct parody of a ceremony performed before the emperor. John's use of language from the Roman imperial court thus shows that (to quote David Aune) 'the sovereignty of God and the

Lamb have been elevated so far above all pretensions and claims of earthly rulers that the latter, upon comparison, become only pale, even diabolical imitations of the transcendent majesty of the King of kings and Lord of lords.'²⁸ Here then John uses his knowledge of culture and his acculturation – in this case his knowledge of the Roman imperial court – in order to launch a polemical attack on the pretensions of Rome. We thus see a vigorous, antagonistic attack on culture, but using that very culture as the key vehicle for the expression of that polemic.²⁹

The combat myth (Revelation 12)

Adela Yarbro Collins has shown that John makes significant use of the 'combat myth' in Revelation 12. This is an ancient myth of combat involving a struggle between two divine beings for universal kingship. Examples are the struggle between Apollo and Python in Greece, or Horus and Seth in Egypt.³⁰ John uses the myth in Revelation 12 in order to depict the struggle between the woman who gives birth to a son (who is the Messiah) and the red dragon. Although the combat myth is found in the OT, Yarbro Collins has shown that some key motifs in Revelation cannot be explained as derived from the OT or from Semitic mythology alone. The closest parallel for the dragon's attack on the woman in Revelation 12 is the myth of the dragon Python's attack on Leto at the time of the birth of her son Apollo.³¹ The striking similarities between the two stories indicate that Revelation 12 'at least in part, is an adaptation of the myth of the birth of Apollo'.³² It seems then that John was familiar with this Leto-Apollo myth, which was well-known in western Asia Minor in the first centuries BCE and CE,³³ and has adapted it for his purposes.

It seems likely that the myths reflected in Revelation 12 were *deliberately* adopted and rewritten by John to contradict their contemporary political application. The emperor is not the one who kills the dragon and embodies the triumph of order over chaos; rather Christ turns out to have the legitimate claim to this role and the emperor is seen to be 'one of the dragon's minions'.³⁴

In developing this idea, Yarbro Collins notes that the Emperor Augustus' rule was regarded as a golden age and that myths about Apollo were used as political propaganda in support of the empire during Augustus' rule.³⁵ Further, Nero later identified himself with Apollo, and Apollo myths and the Apollo cult were used during Nero's reign as Imperial propaganda. Against this background, it is significant that Revelation 12 is an adaptation of the myth of Apollo's birth. Yarbro Collins firstly discusses John's reinterpretation of the Jewish source which used the Apollo myth, and then goes on to suggest with regard to Revelation 12: 'By incorporating and reinterpreting the Jewish source which used the Apollo myth to depict the birth of the messiah, the author of Revelation formulated a further element in the antithesis of Christ and Nero. The claims of the Apollonian Nero are rejected by the depiction of Christ as the true bringer of order and light.'³⁶ Thus we see that John incorporates Greco-Roman and other myths and traditions in order to *polemicalise against* Greco-Roman culture and pagan worship. Since the Leto-Apollo myth was well-known in western Asia Minor, we can suggest that John expected at least some of his readers to

recognize the polemic against Greco-Roman culture in which he was engaged here.

Other examples could be given, but I hope enough has been said to show that in Revelation John incorporates elements of Greco-Roman culture and traditions in order to polemicise against that culture (both its practices and its ideas) and against pagan worship.³⁷ John uses his knowledge of society and of local culture in an oppositional way in order to polemicise against dimensions of his environment. Clearly, John did not regard the Gospel as 'private truth' only; for him it involved public truth. He did not pursue 'a purely personal and spiritual salvation'.³⁸ Although Newbigin is speaking of his hope of what we should do, rather than of the early church, his comment applies to John in Revelation: he calls for the church to 'witness to the kingship of Christ over all life – its political and economic no less than its personal and domestic morals'.³⁹ John embodies this. And John witnesses *to* Christ and against elements of Greco-Roman culture precisely in the language and mythology of that culture.

4. Christ is Lord over all, including the public sphere

I will turn now to an area that has been developed in the last few years in Pauline Studies. It has been argued strongly that we have often ignored what might be called 'the political Paul'.⁴⁰ It is noted that Paul is often seen 'as a social-political conservative strictly obedient to the empire'.⁴¹ But there is a growing body of opinion that argues that this is a misreading of Paul. Here, I want to highlight Paul's polemic against the Emperor in a Gentile context, and suggest ways in which this applies to the general topic of Gospel, Culture and the Public Sphere. As will be clear, in this I am particularly indebted to Peter Oakes's excellent book, *Philippians. From People to Letter*.⁴²

We should note firstly that imperial ideology was all-pervasive; it was to be found everywhere, including on coins (the 'mass media' of the day), in inscriptions, during festivals, and in the marketplace.⁴³ The imagery was as pervasive as images of 'the All Blacks' seem to be today! Here I will seek to show that in Philippians, the ideology of the emperor and the empire would have regularly been 'heard' by Paul's readers, and in ways that were polemical against the emperor. The public sphere belonged, not to the emperor, but to Christ.

The clearest place to begin is with Philippians 3:20-21:

But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.

This language gains a powerful polemical thrust when we realize some of the ways language was used in the imperial cult. This usage suggests that there is a comparison going on here between Christ and the emperor.

We note firstly that the Philippians belong to another state – and have another citizenship – for 'our citizenship is in heaven'. In the first century, this was *political* language.

Secondly, note the use of the title 'Saviour'. Oakes writes:

In 3:20, the [Saviour] is an eagerly awaited figure who comes, from the state to which his people belong [Paul writes 'our citizenship is in heaven'], to another state where [his people] are living, in order to rescue them. This must be an analogy with a military leader of a state. In the first-century Graeco-Roman context, the only such leader likely to be thought of was the Emperor.⁴⁴

Further, the emperor was often given the title of 'Saviour'. Julius Caesar was called 'the common saviour of human life', and Augustus was spoken of as 'a saviour who put an end to war and established all good things'.⁴⁵ Claudius was hailed as 'saviour of the world' and a 'god who is saviour and benefactor'.⁴⁶ Hence the title 'saviour' was clearly associated with politics, and with the emperor. But for Paul, the saviour was the Lord Jesus.

Thirdly, Philippians 3:21 speaks of the power of the Saviour, the Lord Jesus: he will transform our bodies 'by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself'. Similar things were said of the emperor, for we regularly read of the power of the emperor to save his people.⁴⁷ Oakes notes: 'In the first century AD, the one whom most people would see as saving in accordance with his power to subject all things to himself was the emperor'.⁴⁸

Thus Philippians 3:20-1 contains a clear polemic. The emperor claimed to be 'Saviour and Lord', and to have the *power* to save. But Paul is categorical that the true Saviour and Lord is Jesus Christ; he has power not only to transform our bodies, but also has 'the power that also enables him to make *all things* subject to himself'.⁴⁹ All things – the emperor included.

This contrast between the emperor and Christ is also clear in Philippians 2:6-11, the famous Christ-hymn. Again, this passage should be seen as having a powerful political dimension to it, for the Philippians would have heard in this passage a comparison being made between Christ and the emperor. Let me note some of the ways in which the passage would have been heard in Philippi.

Firstly, in Philippians 2:9-11 Christ is given 'the Name above every name', all knees are to bow to him, and every tongue is to confess him as Lord. People in Philippi would hear this as a comparison with the emperor, for the emperor claimed world authority. For example, on a coin Nero was said to be 'Lord of all the world',⁵⁰ and the emperor 'regarded every knee on earth as bowing to him'.⁵¹

By contrast, in Philippians 2:9-11, Paul writes that every knee – by implication, including the emperor's own – should bow and give homage to *the Lord Jesus*. Yet according to Philippians 2:10, Christ has a still wider sphere of authority:

under the earth and in heaven. Christ is an Imperial figure, but with far wider authority than the Roman emperor. The authority granted to the Lord Jesus far eclipses that given to the emperor.

Secondly, Philippians 2:9 speaks of God exalting Jesus. The concept is of Christ being given authority by God. In Imperial ideology, it was important that the emperors were not seen as usurping authority, but rather as having authority granted to them by the Senate, and then ratified by the people of Rome.⁵² The Philippians would recognize the con-

cept of Christ gaining authority – ‘therefore God highly exalted him’ – as an element in Imperial ideology. But, by contrast with the emperor, Christ had been granted authority by the one true God.

Thirdly, Philippians 2:10 speaks of universal homage to Jesus. This is to be compared with the ideology that the emperor brought harmony and peace to the empire. ‘It is this harmony that legitimates the emperor’s rule over the provinces.’⁵³ But for Paul, *Jesus* has brought harmony through universal submission – every knee shall bow, every tongue confess.⁵⁴ And Jesus has brought harmony for the whole cosmos.

Fourthly, in Philippians 2:9 we are told that Jesus is given ‘the name that is above every name’, and in 2:11 it is clear that this name is ‘Lord’, *kurios*. Emperors were given names too. ‘Augustus’ was a name given as part of the process of accession,⁵⁵ and although the name *kurios* reflects an OT background, where it is the name of God, in Roman political ideology, the ‘name above every name’ could belong only to the emperor. Further, the title *kurios* given to Jesus in 2:11 was a name used by the masses for the emperor. For example, in an inscription, Nero is called ‘Lord of all Lords’.⁵⁶ In Philippians 2:11 then, OT usage coincides with a term connected with the Emperor. But again the point is clear – the title ‘Lord’ can legitimately be claimed by one person only – the Lord Jesus, not the emperor.

So there is a clear ‘Imperial shape’⁵⁷ to the Philippian hymn. The one to whom universal submission and universal acclamation as Lord was due was *not* the emperor, but the Lord Jesus.

What does this passage mean? Clearly the Christ-hymn is deeply theological – it reveals a very developed Christology, in which Jesus, the pre-existent one, now comes to share the very name of God, because he has always shared the very *being* of God. And Christ is now the one through whom God is bringing the cosmos under its proper authority.

But the passage is also deeply *political*, although of course politics and religion were intertwined in the first century. Christ’s victory is not just over cosmic powers, but also over the emperor. The repeated contrast with the Emperor makes this clear. Oakes notes the passage speaks of Christ – and not the emperor – being granted universal authority. He goes on:

a Christ with universal authority relativises society’s imperatives. In any conflict between Christ’s imperatives and those of society, there can be no question about which carry more weight.⁵⁸

That Christ was the ‘Cosmic Emperor’⁵⁹ meant the imperatives for living each day were changed. Readers in Philippi will have ‘grown up thinking that following society’s imperatives is the right thing to do and the safe thing to do . . . the pressure of these social imperatives will be very great’. But by contrast, Paul presents ‘Christ as the one who outdoes the lord of the political and social sphere’.⁶⁰ Christ replaces the Emperor’s political and social lordship. To quote Oakes again:

If Christ has replaced the Emperor as the world’s decisive power then we are no longer in the established Graeco-Roman social world. Instead of a world under the high-status man, whose Roman Empire has com-

manded the hardening of an already stratified Mediterranean society into stone, the world is under a new lord whose command is [to be of the same mind – 2:2] and who enjoins humility – 2:3]. The lord even exemplifies these things. The whole basis of Graeco-Roman society is done away with.⁶¹

This leads to a new freedom in the social and political sphere for the Christian. Because there is a new authority – the Lord Jesus – there is freedom from being constrained by society, and hence freedom from social imperatives. This leads to a new confidence, for since Christ is the enthroned Lord, dangers, including social and economic dangers, become relativised. And the Christian community is ‘demarginalised’: ‘It is the community belonging to the one in authority. If it is seen by certain ‘authorities’ as a maverick group, and consequently frowned upon, then the ‘authorities’ who frown on it are at odds with the real authority.’⁶² But it is also crucial that we note that the lordship of Christ is exhibited in humility and servanthood – this turns concepts of authority and power on their head. The King is the Servant King.

Accordingly, realizing that Christ is above the Emperor affects areas of authority, freedom, confidence, and the Christian community’s perception of itself!⁶³ None of this is to lead to any form of triumphalism, or to a desire to return to Christendom! But, to put it most bluntly, Paul is saying: ‘To whom does the public sphere belong, Christ or Caesar?’ For Paul it belonged to Christ, who was Lord of all of life. This changed the public sphere, and the Christians’ way of involvement in the public sphere. Paul is claiming that his faith is equally as important in the Forum in Rome or Philippi, as it is in the house church.

5. The challenge of speaking of the Gospel of the crucified one in the public sphere

I want to conclude with some reflections from 1 Corinthians. For here I think we can gain an important additional perspective on our topic of the Gospel, Culture and the Public Sphere. I will develop some points from 1 Corinthians 1-2.

Paul notes in these chapters that his preaching is about Christ crucified. But he also notes the *opposition* between the wisdom of the world and the wisdom of God displayed in the message of the cross. In 1 Corinthians 1:18-25 we read:

For the message about the cross is foolishness 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, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called,

both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

At heart then, there is a *fundamental contradiction*, even *opposition*, between the Gospel and the world. The wisdom of the world operates on one set of principles – valuing the wisdom of the wise and the wisdom of the debater, and demanding signs. By contrast, the Gospel is of an entirely different order and operates from a quite different set of fundamental values; the Gospel is about the weakness of God, seen in the cross, which is yet the power of God for salvation!⁶⁴

Hence, the Gospel as public truth, the Gospel in the public sphere, is not an easy word to speak, for it goes against the grain, and operates from a different wisdom, in the light of which human wisdom is shown to be folly. As Richard Hays notes: 'The fundamental theological point is that if the cross itself is God's saving event, all human standards of evaluation are overturned.'⁶⁵

How then do we speak of this wisdom of the cross in the public sphere? Paul goes on in 1 Corinthians 2:7-13 to speak of the work of the Spirit. The Corinthians have received the Spirit, 'so that we may *understand* the gifts bestowed on us by God' (1 Cor 2:12). By ourselves, we are stuck within the 'wisdom of this age', and through this wisdom we cannot know God. The truth of the Gospel of the crucified one must be revealed to us by the Spirit; then and only then can we truly understand God's wisdom. Only then can we truly '*understand* the gifts bestowed on us by God'.

These 'gifts of God' refer to all the matters of salvation.⁶⁶ We can understand the ways of God through the gift of the Spirit.⁶⁷ Paul ends 1 Corinthians 2 with an amazing statement. In 1 Corinthians 2:15-16 we read:

Those who are spiritual⁶⁸ discern all things, and they are themselves subject to no one else's scrutiny.⁶⁹ 'For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?' But we have the mind of Christ.

The result of having the Spirit, is that we have the mind of Christ. It is through the Spirit, and with the resultant 'mind of Christ' that we can know the Gospel and speak public truth in the public sphere, that we can be involved in polemic against society, or can build bridges of engagement. Without the Spirit, and without the mind of Christ, we speak simply the wisdom of this age, which God has already made foolish through the cross.

To speak the Gospel – the wisdom of God into the public sphere, then, we need the Spirit and the mind of Christ. Then we can be part of the 'turning the world on its head' which has happened through the wisdom of God in the cross of Christ. But none of this should lead to triumphalism, or to arrogance. As Hays notes,

in order to understand rightly what it means to have the mind of Christ, we must remember who 'Christ' is for Paul: the crucified one. To have the mind of the Lord is to participate in the pattern of the cross (cf Phil. 2:1-11), for the wisdom of God is manifest definitively in the death of Jesus. Consequently, the privileged spiritual knowledge of which Paul speaks should result in

the renunciation of all privilege, all boasting and quarrelling.⁷⁰

In Christ, then, there has been a paradigm shift.⁷¹ God has been revealed in Christ, and through the Spirit we have come to know the wisdom of God in Christ and in his cross. Hence through the Spirit we can understand and speak of these things – and since Christ is Lord of all, including the Public Sphere – we must speak of God in Christ in the Public Sphere through the Spirit. Yet we speak of the crucified one, who leads us in the way of servanthood, of renunciation, and of humility.

Conclusions

We have seen that some early Christians were involved in a translation process – of translating the Gospel into a new idiom. This shows a concern to interact with the wider world, and to speak in a language others can comprehend. But in this translation or contextualisation process there was also a concern for *Gospel continuity* – to proclaim the truth of the gospel in new language and not to proclaim 'a different gospel'. I have suggested that the Nicolaitans were involved in the adaptation of the Gospel in their culture, but had gone *too far* in the adaptation process and lost sight of the Gospel. In the interaction with the wider world there are limits to the adaptability and the contextualisation of the Gospel – going down some roads means that the gospel itself is abandoned.

In the case of John in Revelation we have also seen the use of cultural tools from a society in the polemic against that society. Here we see the engagement of the language, imagery and mythology of a society in the name of Christ and the Gospel – to argue against that culture, for the Gospel. The Gospel calls for engagement *via critique* of society, for the (peaceable) denunciation of what is wrong or counter to the Gospel and an advocacy for Gospel values and frameworks, but the very tools of the culture can be crucial in doing this.

I have suggested that Paul's Gospel is thoroughly political and that his readers in Philippi would have heard him saying that not the emperor, but Christ was Lord of the public sphere. That Christ is above the emperor affects areas of authority, freedom, confidence, and the Christian community's perception of itself. Above all, it means Christ is Lord of the public sphere, whether of the forum in Philippi or Rome or Wellington!

Finally, I have suggested that engagement in the public sphere for the Gospel is not easy. The world does not know God through its own wisdom. The word of the Gospel is foolishness to the world, yet God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. But we are called to understand and speak of these things with humility through the Spirit, who gives us the mind of Christ. And as we seek to engage in the public sphere we do so as disciples of the crucified one – following in the way of servanthood, renunciation and humility.

Paul Trebilco is Professor of Theology in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Otago, New Zealand.

Notes

- 1 I have retained the basic format of the paper given to the Wellington Theological Consortium's 2005 Colloquium on *Gospel, Culture and Public Policy*.
- 2 For a discussion of the issue of authorship of the Pastorals, see I.H. Marshall, in collaboration with P.H.A. Towner, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Pastoral Epistles* (ICC. Edinburgh: T & T Clark; 1999), 57-92.
- 3 See 1 Tim. 6:14; 2 Tim. 1:10; 4:1,8; Tit. 2:13 and the associated verb 'to appear' in Tit. 2:11; 3:4.
- 4 The results of the first 'appearance' of Jesus are spoken of in Tit. 2:11 ('For the grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all people') and Tit. 3:4 ('but when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour appeared'). The second 'appearance' of Christ is spoken of in 1 Tim. 6:14 ('I charge you to keep the commandment without spot or blame until the manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ'), 2 Tim. 4:1 ('In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom'), 2 Tim. 4:8 ('From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing') and Tit. 2:12-13 ('training us to renounce impiety . . . while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ').
- 5 I.H. Marshall ('The Christology of the Pastoral Epistles', *Studien zum Neuen Testament und seiner Umwelt* 13 [1988]: 157-77, here 169) sees the concept of epiphany as 'the controlling factor in the christology of the Pastorals'. See also A.Y. Lau, *Manifest in Flesh. The Epiphany Christology of the Pastoral Epistles* (WUNT 2.86. Tubingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1996); Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 287-96.
- 6 See 2 Tim. 1:10, and Tit. 2:11. Marshall ('Christology', 171) notes in connection with these two verses that it is: 'the whole saving event inaugurated by the coming of Jesus and continuing in the witness of the church to individuals that is meant'. 2 Tim. 1:9-10 shows that God's grace and kindness are understood in personal terms as referring to Christ.
- 7 See 1 Tim. 6:14; 2 Tim. 4:1; 4:8; Tit. 2:13.
- 8 Marshall ('Christology', 170) notes 'Christ is seen as reflecting God and is understood in relation to God who thus occupies the central position.'
- 9 See Lk. 1:79 and Acts 27:20.
- 10 See Marshall, 'Christology', 169.
- 11 See Lau, *Manifest in Flesh*, 182-9; G. Stevenson, *Power and Place. Temple and Identity in the Book of Revelation* (BZNTW 107. Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter; 2001), 52-4.
- 12 This is important since the Pastorals were probably written in Ephesus. Both the noun 'appearance' and the verb 'to appear' are also found in Ephesian inscriptions. In 48 BCE the cities of Asia set up an inscription at Ephesus in which they honoured Julius Caesar as 'the manifest god descending from Ares and Aphrodite'; see SIG 760. An inscription of 104 CE speaks of a person's decision: 'to adorn and reverence the religious and public realms of your greatest and most notable city, for the honour and reverence of the most manifest goddess Artemis'; see IvEph 27, lines 384-5; translation from G.M. Rogers, *The Sacred Identity of Ephesus: Foundation Myths of a Roman City* (London and New York: Routledge; 1991), 173. An edict of 162-4 CE speaks of temples being founded and altars dedicated to her among both Greeks and barbarians 'because of the visible manifestations effected by her'; see IvEph 24B, lines 13-14; see also G.H.R. Horsley, *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity Volume 4. A Review of the Greek Inscriptions and Papyri Published in 1979* (Macquarie University: The Ancient History Documentary Research Centre, 1987), 75-6.
- 13 See M.J. Price, B.L. Trell, *Coins and Their Cities. Architecture on the ancient coins of Greece, Rome, and Palestine* (London: V.C. Vecchi and Sons, 1977), 129-30; Stevenson, *Power and Place*, 53-4. The pediments are given in B.L. Trell, *The Temple of Artemis at Ephesus* (Numismatic Notes and Monographs 107. New York: The American Numismatic Society; 1945), plates 1-3.
- 14 Stevenson, *Power and Place*, 54. Descriptions of epiphanies are not restricted to the use of the two terms we have been discussing (or Latin equivalents). For example, Pliny records an epiphany which occurred during the building of the Temple of Artemis in Ephesus; this occurred in the fourth century BCE, but the story had clearly been treasured. Chersiphron, the architect of the temple had been unable to set the lintel over the door of the temple correctly. Pliny writes: 'The architect was in anguish as he debated whether suicide should be his final decision. The story goes that in the course of his reflections he became weary, and that while he slept at night he saw before him the goddess for whom the temple was being built; she was urging him to live because, as she said, she herself had laid the stone. And on the next day this was seen to be the case.' (See Pliny, N.H. 36.97) This again shows that Artemis was believed to be a goddess who 'appeared' to her worshippers.
- 15 See Marshall 'Christology', 168-9. Marshall ('Sometimes Only Orthodox' - Is there more to the Pastoral Epistles?' *Epworth Review* 20, no. 3: 11-24, here 18) notes that the concept of epiphany 'is one which would have been particularly effective in the Hellenistic world. It is used to speak to new readers and it develops the concept that Jesus has appeared as god manifest and will reappear.'
- 16 L. Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (London: SPCK, 1986), 21.
- 17 See Marshall, 'Christology', 169-75.
- 18 Marshall, 'Christology', 173. He also notes (see 174) on the basis of Tit. 2:13, 2 Tim. 1:9f and 1 Tim. 3:16 that 'what we have is not an epiphany of a quality of God but of one who is identified in some way with God'.
- 19 Marshall, 'Christology', 173. Note for example 1 Tim 2:5. Docetism (from the Greek *Dokeo* 'to seem') was a second century heresy which held that Christ only 'appeared' in flesh, but was not actually incarnate because God cannot become enthralled in the world and suffer.
- 20 These two things are further listed as the teaching of the prophetess Jezebel at Thyatira in Rev 2:20 where we read: 'But I have this against you: you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and beguiling my servants to practise fornication and to eat food sacrificed to idols.' We have an equation then: the teaching of the Nicolaitans is further defined as the teaching of Balaam (2:14-15), and the prophetess Jezebel is also said to hold this same teaching (2:20). It is generally agreed then that Jezebel and her associates were Nicolaitans; see E. Schussler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgement* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press; 1985), 116; D.E. Aune, 'The Social Matrix of the Apocalypse of John'. *Biblical Research* 26 (1981): 16-32, here 27-8.
- 21 On every occasion but one outside of the passages we are

- considering, John uses the word and its cognates metaphorically with reference to idolatry, which suggests its metaphorical usage here; see 14:8; 17:2,4; 18:3, 9; 19:2; cf. Rev. 9:21, the only instance where it is probably used literally. See G.B. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine* (London: A & C Black, 1966), 39; A. Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 107 n.5.
- 22 Whilst either meaning is possible in 2:14, it is much more likely that the metaphorical meaning is in view in 2:20 (and hence in 2:14 also) since Jezebel, Ahab's wife, was never accused of 'committing fornication' in a literal sense, but rather of leading Israel away from the worship of Yahweh, that is, of 'committing fornication' in a metaphorical sense (see 2 Kings 9:22; Caird, *Commentary*, 39). A further indication is given by Rev. 2:22 in which both a 'bed' and 'those who commit adultery with' Jezebel are spoken of, and it seems most likely that both are meant metaphorically. So the reference is probably to Jezebel leading others into idolatry.
- 23 For a discussion of their motives and a discussion of what else we can say about the Nicolaitans, see P.R. Trebilco, *The Early Christians in Ephesus from Paul to Ignatius* (WUNT 166. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 319-335.
- 24 See D.E. Aune, 'The Influence of Roman Imperial Court Ceremonial on the Apocalypse of John'. *Biblical Research* 28 (1983): 5-26; see also P.W. Barnett, 'Polemical Parallelism: Some Further Reflections on the Apocalypse'. *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 35 (1989): 111-120, here 113-116; P.W. Borgen, 'Moses, Jesus, and the Roman Emperor: Observations in Philo's Writings and the Revelation of John'. *Novum Testamentum* 38 (1996): 145-59, here 146. For a discussion of titles used in the Imperial Cult and Revelation, see D. Cuss, *Imperial Cult and Honorary Terms in the New Testament* (Paradosis 23. Fribourg: Fribourg University Press), 53-74.
- 25 Rev 4:10, 'Around the throne are twenty four thrones, and seated on the thrones are twenty-four elders, dressed in white robes, with golden crowns on their heads . . . the twenty-four elders fall before the one who is seated on the throne and worship the one who lives forever and ever; they cast their crowns before the throne . . .'
- 26 Aune, 'Influence', 13. Aune ('Influence', 6-7) shows that residents of Asia Minor could have been aware of a combination of real and ideal images of the ceremonies of the Roman Imperial court.
- 27 See Aune, 'Influence', 5-26; see also D.E. Aune, 'The Apocalypse of John and Graeco-Roman Revelatory Magic', in *New Testament Studies* 33 (1987): 481-501, here 481; Borgen 'Moses', 158-9.
- 28 Aune, 'Influence', 22.
- 29 D.E. Aune, *Revelation 1-5* (WBC. Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1997) 126-9, notes that the seven proclamations in 2:1-3:22 are closest to the genre of royal or imperial edicts. He notes (*Revelation* 1-5, 129): 'The author's [i.e. John's] use of the royal / imperial edict form is part of his strategy to polarize God / Jesus and the Roman emperor, who is but a pale and diabolical imitation of God. In his role as the eternal sovereign and king of kings, Jesus is presented as issuing solemn and authoritative edicts befitting his status.' Thus, in 2:1-3:22 John is again using cultural tools and thus his acculturation in a polemical way, in this case, against the emperor.
- 30 On the myth see A. Yarbro Collins, *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation* (HTRHDR 9. Missoula, MN: Scholars Press; 1976), 57-100. There were a number of versions of the combat myth in circulation in the first century CE and they had a common pattern.
- 31 Particularly as it is found in Hyginus; see Yarbro Collins, *Combat Myth*, 188; see also S.R. Garrett, 'Revelation'. In *Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. C.A. Newsom, S.H. Ringe (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 469-74, here 471.
- 32 Yarbro Collins, *Combat Myth*, 67. This does not mean however that John has taken over the story unaltered. Unlike most of the other female figures in these combat myths, the woman of Rev. 12 does not fight the dragon, is not the ally of the hero and is not involved in his recovery or victory. Yarbro Collins (*Combat Myth*, 71-5) also argues that the description of the woman in Rev. 12:1 as 'Queen of Heaven' is probably influenced by the iconography of Isis. Thus in Rev. 12 we probably have a fusion of Leto and Isis traditions.
- 33 Yarbro Collins, *Combat Myth*, 70-1; see also Garrett, 'Revelation', 472.
- 34 Caird, *Commentary*, 148.
- 35 See Yarbro Collins, *Combat Myth*, 188.
- 36 Yarbro Collins, *Combat Myth*, 190.
- 37 Aune, 'The Apocalypse of John', 481 notes that John 'used pagan imagery and practices as part of a broad apologetic assault on Graeco-Roman culture itself'. See also Schussler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation*, 195-6.
- 38 Newbigin, *Foolishness*, 99.
- 39 Newbigin, *Foolishness*, 102.
- 40 For important contributions in this area (in addition to the work of Oakes, discussed below) see R.A. Horsley ed., *Paul and Empire. Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1997); R.A. Horsley ed., *Paul and Politics. Ekklesia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation. Essays in Honor of Krister Stendahl* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2000); N.T. Wright, 'Paul and Caesar: A New Reading of Romans', in C. Bartholomew, J. Chaplin, R. Song, A. Wolters, eds., *A Royal Priesthood? The Use of the Bible Ethically and Politically. A Dialogue with Oliver O'Donovan* (The Scripture and Hermeneutics Series 3. Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2002), 173-93; R.A. Horsley ed., *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2004).
- 41 See R.A. Horsley, 'Introduction: Krister Stendahl's Challenge to Pauline Studies' in Horsley ed., *Paul and Politics*, 1-16, here 11.
- 42 Peter Oakes *Philippians, From People to Letter* (Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 110. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
- 43 See H-J Klauck, *The Religious Context of Early Christianity. A Guide to Graeco-Roman Religions* (London: Continuum, 2000), 288-330; see also S.J. Friesen, *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John. Reading Revelation in the Ruins* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).
- 44 Oakes, 139.
- 45 See Oakes, 139, for both inscriptions, with references.
- 46 Oakes, 140.
- 47 This is clear, for example, at the time of the accession of Tiberius; see Oakes, 142.
- 48 Oakes, 145.
- 49 Wright comments with reference to Phil. 3:20-21: 'What was the immediate significance of this Jesus-and-Caesar contrast? It was a challenge to an alternative loyalty. Jesus was the reality, Caesar the parody. It was the legitimization of the Christian church as the true empire of the true Lord.' See

- N.T. Wright, 'Paul's Gospel and Caesar's Empire' in Horsley ed., *Paul and Politics*, 160-1 83, here 174.
- 50 Oakes, 149.
- 51 Oakes, 149.
- 52 See Oakes, 151.
- 53 Oakes, 165. On the Emperor bringing harmony and peace, see Oakes, 160-5.
- 54 See Oakes, 166-70 for this way of reading the use of Isa. 45:23 in Phil. 2:9-11.
- 55 Oakes, 170-1.
- 56 Oakes, 172.
- 57 Oakes, 174.
- 58 Oakes, 204.
- 59 Oakes, 202.
- 60 Oakes, 205.
- 61 Oakes, 206.
- 62 Oakes, 207.
- 63 Oakes, 207.
- 64 For a discussion of these themes see for example V.P. Furnish, *The Theology of the First Letter to the Corinthians* (Cambridge: CUP, 1999), 37-46.
- 65 R. B. Hays, *First Corinthians* (Interpretation. Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997), 30.
- 66 See Hays, *First Corinthians*, 45.
- 67 And not only does the Spirit give understanding, but the Spirit gives the very words with which we can speak of God's ways with us and the world – for Paul goes on, 'And we speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit' (1 Corinthians 2:13). The very words we speak are not discerned through human wisdom, but are taught by the Spirit. As we receive these words from the Spirit we are called to speak them forth.
- 68 That is, those who have the Spirit.
- 69 This verse is easily misunderstood. Hays, *First Corinthians*, 46 notes Paul means 'that the person who has received God's Spirit has a privileged understanding of reality: she "discerns (*anakrinei*) all things but is herself discerned (*anakrinetai*) by no one.' In other words, we understand what is going on in the world, but the world cannot understand us.'
- 70 Hays, *First Corinthians*, 47.
- 71 See Newbigin, *Foolishness*, 64.

What language shall I borrow?: The bilingual dilemma of public theology

Colin Marshall

KEYWORDS: ethics, religion, morality, faith, culture, theology, Christian thinking, civil society, lordship of Christ, autonomy, secularism, democracy, credibility, sources, focus, faith, eschatology, perspective, revelation, reason, shared truth, natural law, consensus, prudential, redemptive love, missiological, duplicity, truth-claims, centrality, monopoly, moral consensus, vernacular, common grace, integrated, praxis, faith-story

I begin this discussion with two immediate disclaimers. The first is that I am not a specialist in public theology. Although I have an abiding interest in the social and ethical dimensions of Christian faith, I am not a public theologian or a social ethicist in the professional sense of the term, and I am certainly no expert in the intricacies of public policy or political theory. Public theology is a discipline or sub-discipline in its own right, with conventions and customs that are somewhat removed from those of my own primary field of interest, which is New Testament theology and ethics. I speak today therefore very much as an amateur!

The second disclaimer is that this paper does not pretend to cut new ground. In agreeing to address the colloquium, I did so on the condition that it would be a modest effort indeed. My goal would simply be to identify one of the quandaries that confronts Christian actors in the public square, not to provide definitive answers or fresh perspectives on the problem.

The quandary to which I refer is this: What language should religious believers use when they engage in public debate? Do they use the language of faith? Or do they adopt the secular language of mainstream political discourse? Can the Christian ethic be translated, without loss, into a general ethic incumbent on all people, irrespective of personal belief? Or is every attempt at such translation, however well-intentioned, already an admission that Christian faith is essentially superfluous to public life? Behind this question lies the much deeper philosophical question of the relationship between religion and morality, and between faith and culture in general.¹ Is there any such thing as a distinctively Christian ethics?² Or is every assertion of ethical obligation necessarily universal in scope?³ These are all difficult matters. Before offering some reflections on them, let me set the scene with some general observations on the task and complexities of public theology.

What is public theology?

At its simplest, public theology is the attempt to address matters of common or public concern in the community in light of the special truth-claims and insights of Christian belief. Duncan Forrester offers a more detailed definition:

Public theology, as I understand it . . . is theology which seeks the welfare of the city before protecting the interests of the Church . . . [It] seeks to offer distinctive and constructive insights from the treasury of faith to help in the building of a decent society, the