

COMPLETE IN CHRIST

COLOSSIANS 1:24-29

# THE DANGER OF CULTURE-SHAPED GOSPEL SERVICE



---

**FIRST BYRON CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH**

DAVID MURRAY  
FEBRUARY 16, 2020 (AM)

---

# INTRODUCTION

## Problem

You've been blessed as a congregation to have had twenty-plus years of faithful Gospel service from Pastor Tom. Hard though it is, you're now beginning to think of a replacement. When you've had such a faithful Gospel minister for such a long time, it's easy to think that every Gospel minister is like Pastor Tom, and you then call someone who is actually nothing like Pastor Tom.

Sadly, many churches have taken a wrong turn after a long faithful pastor. Complacency, naivety, and over-confidence often result in rushed and ill-considered calls. Churches frequently end up calling someone who is shaped more by the culture than by the Word of God.

Why is culture-shaped (rather than Bible-shaped) Gospel service so dangerous? My answer is going to consider Gospel ministry in particular. However, the same principles apply to Christian service in general. All Christians are in Gospel service and therefore all Christians are at risk of culture-shaped Gospel service.

## Effects

So, what happens when ministers are shaped by the culture more than by the Word of God:

- They have wrong expectations.
- They have the wrong message.
- They have the wrong aims.
- They have the wrong power source.

## Solution?

That's an awful picture, isn't it? It's awful not just for the ministers, but for the people they minister to. Culture-shaped service does a lot of damage not just to the servant but to those they serve. There is, though, a much better model of ministry. It's Bible-shaped not culture-shaped, and it's a blessing both to ministers and the people they minister to, the servants and the served.

Let's look at Bible-shaped Gospel service so that we can identify the right expectations, the right message, the right aims, and the right power. We can do that by turning to Colossians 1:24-29, and examining the Apostle Paul's model of Gospel service.

# CONTEXT

## Background

The small young Colossian church had been infiltrated by Gnostic heretics. Paul wrote his letter to the Colossians to help them stand against the Gnostics and stand up for the Gospel.

We've already seen a number of ways in which the Apostle opposes them in this letter. Now we come to another.

## Chapter

In the previous few verses (21-23), the Apostle gave the Colossians Gospel motives for Gospel perseverance. He did that because of the pressure they were under to give in and give up in the face of the Gnostics' false teaching.

He now gives a further reason to persevere by describing his own Bible-shaped service. Though it's not explicit, he is implicitly contrasting himself with the culture-shaped Gnostics.



**What does Bible-shaped Gospel service look like?  
First, a Gospel servant suffers like Christ.**



---

# 1. A GOSPEL SERVANT SUFFERS LIKE CHRIST (24)

*(24) I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of his body, which is the church.*

## Paul's sufferings fill up Christ's sufferings

I “fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ,” says Paul. The word for “afflictions” here is a Greek word that is never used for Christ’s atoning sufferings. So, whatever these sufferings are, they are not sufferings that put away sin. There is nothing lacking in Christ’s sufferings in the place of sinners.

Rather, Paul is referring to his sufferings in the place of Christ. He is filling up, or experiencing, more of the affliction that would be experienced by Christ were he here (Gal. 6:17; 2 Cor. 4:10). What’s “lacking” or missing is the in-person representation of Christ’s sufferings to the people for whom he died. Paul says he fills that gap, providing what is missing with his exemplary demonstration of what Christ suffered in the service of others. Paul’s suffering provides a visible re-enactment of the sufferings of Christ so that they will have a better idea of Christ’s love for them. God wants the afflictions of Christ to be presented to the world through the afflictions of his people. We’re not just to tell of Christ’s sufferings but embody them.

## Paul's sufferings are for the church

They are “for the sake of his body, which is the church.” Again, this cannot mean his sufferings were in the place of the church or provided an atonement for the church. No, Christ’s atoning sacrifice was offered once, perfectly, and is finished. “For the church” means for the benefit of the church; to edify it, not redeem it.

## Paul's sufferings result in joy

“I rejoice in my sufferings for you.” Paul does not enjoy pain. He does not rejoice in his sufferings *per se*. He rejoices in what they accomplish. He reframes his sufferings as being a vivid visual example of Christ’s loving suffering which edifies the church (2 Cor. 11:6-22). He’s in a Roman prison as he writes this but he’s not ashamed of his sufferings. He rejoices in them because of who they exhibit and what they accomplish

## APPLICATION

♥ Here is what a Gospel servant should expect to one degree or another. Suffering for Christ should not take him by surprise. Suffering should not be avoided. We will not suffer to the same degree as the Apostle, but all Gospel service has a cost to some degree—loss of status, income, comfort, reputation, friends, etc.

♥ Gospel suffering should be re-framed as what Christ would suffer were he here and doing the same thing. We then get closer to Christ in our suffering and bring Christ closer to others in our suffering. In that sense they should bring us joy

♥ I hope you are not someone who inflicts suffering on Gospel servants. God can use it for good, but that doesn’t make it good.

**CULTURE-SHAPED SERVICE REJOICES IN COMFORT,  
BUT BIBLE-SHAPED SERVICE REJOICES IN SUFFERING.**



**That doesn't sound like a very attractive job description. Any positives?  
Yes, look at the message Gospel servants carry.**



---

## 2. A GOSPEL SERVANT SPEAKS THE HOPE OF CHRIST (25-27)

### Paul presents the full Word

*(25)...of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God which was given to me for you, to fulfill the word of God.*

God commissioned Paul and gave him a stewardship, a responsibility to “fulfill the Word of God” [NIV “the word of God in its fullness”]. This means to fully present the full Word. All the Word to all the people. When a Gospel servant does that with the Word, a mystery is revealed.

### Paul reveals a long mystery

*(26) ...the mystery which has been hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed to his saints.*

“Mystery” in Paul’s writing was not some riddle or puzzle to be solved. Paul used the word to refer to what was partially hidden before but now has been fully uncovered and fully made known. The Gospel in the Old Testament was hidden in shadows, in external forms, and in the Jewish nation. But now it has been fully revealed to the whole world. Directly or indirectly, the Apostle is denying the Gnostics’ (Know-it-alls) claim that they had special hidden knowledge. No, says, Paul, God’s truth is now out in the open for everyone.

### Paul preaches a rich Christ

*(27) To them God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.*

This mystery is unveiled in two stages: **Stage 1: Christ is for the Gentiles.** God reveals the glory of the Gospel not just to the Jews, but to the Gentiles. **Stage 2: Christ is in the Gentiles.** The Gospel is not just revealed to a much wider audience, it’s revealed in much greater depth and detail. It is “Christ in you, the hope of glory,” or “the glorious hope.”

Paul is reminding us that Christ is for the Gentiles and Christ is in the Gentiles. That is glory now, and our hope of glory hereafter.

## APPLICATION

This hope has four components:

- **Possession:** If Christ is in you, you have hope of heavenly glory.
- **Experience:** Christ in you creates the experience of hoping for heavenly glory.

- **Assurance:** Christ in you gives confidence that you are bound for heavenly glory.

- **Communication:** Christ in you communicates hope of heavenly glory to others.

If you don’t have that hope today, it is available to you. The Gospel is held out to you in the arms of Christ.

CULTURE-SHAPED SERVICE IS HOPE IN YOU,  
BUT BIBLE-SHAPED HOPE IS CHRIST IN YOU



That does sound like an amazing subject. But what does it accomplish?  
It has the highest possible aim.



---

## 3. A GOSPEL SERVANT AIMS AT LIKENESS TO CHRIST (28)

Paul preaches Christ in various ways

*(28) Him we preach, warning every man and teaching everyman in all wisdom.*

The Gospel servant is preaching as widely as possible, declaring the hope of “Christ in you” to Jew and Gentile, religious and irreligious. He does this in various ways as this verse details. It’s sometimes heralding, sometimes warning, and sometimes teaching. He seeks wisdom from above to know what kind of message his congregation needs. It’s always Christ-centered, but the tone and temperature varies.

Paul aims at perfection in Christ

*(28)...that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus.*

Whatever tone or method he uses, the aim is always the same. It’s not popularity or numbers (Gal. 1:10). It’s perfection in Christ [“fully mature in Christ” NIV]. The word for “perfection” or “fully mature” here is one of the words that the Know-it-alls used for full initiation through their rituals. No, says Paul, the preaching of the Word is all the initiation you need. It can perfect you in Christ.

### APPLICATION

♥ Whatever the Gospel servant is doing—preparing sermons, preaching, visiting, meetings, counseling, teaching—he’s aiming at perfection in Christ. He’s aiming at the likeness of Christ in you and thinking of what you will look like at the last day when you will indeed be perfect in Christ. That’s what motivates and drives him.

♥ If you are engaged in Gospel service, you can often lose sight of the great ultimate aim in the midst of all the stresses and strains of serving. Try to keep the future perfection of the people you are serving in your view. Don’t aim at popularity or numbers. Aim at Christ-likeness. Use this song to do that, to imagine what Christ and his people will be like.

#### I Can Only Imagine

I can only imagine when that day comes  
When I find myself standing in the Son  
I can only imagine when all I would do is forever  
Forever worship You  
I can only imagine  
I can only imagine

Surrounded by Your glory  
What will my heart feel  
Will I dance for You, Jesus  
Or in awe of you be still  
Will I stand in your presence  
Or to my knees will I fall  
Will I sing hallelujah  
Will I be able to speak at all  
I can only imagine.

**CULTURE-SHAPED SERVICE AIMS AT CULTURAL NORMS  
BUT BIBLE-SHAPED SERVICE AIMS AT CHRIST-LIKENESS.**



**The expectation is suffering, the message is Christ, and the aim is Christ's likeness.  
How can I ever accomplish this? There is great power available.**



---

## 4. A GOSPEL SERVANT SERVES BY THE POWER OF CHRIST (29)

*(29) To this end I also labor, striving according to His working which works in me mightily*

### Paul works extremely hard

He realizes this is no easy task. But it doesn't make him give up. Instead it makes him "strenuously contend" [NIV]. The end is so great, it's worth giving his all to it.

### Paul works by the power of Christ

But it's not his own effort. He strenuously contends "with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me" [NIV]. The best test of whether we are working in our own strength or Christ's is this: "How much do you pray?"

## APPLICATION

♥ Thank God for pastors who are shaped by the Bible not the culture. Pray for more of them. Especially pray for a hardworking Gospel minister at First Byron. You don't want someone who's looking for an easy job. You want someone who will sweat for souls, someone who will give it everything. But you also want him to get his energy and power from Christ not himself.

♥ "Lord empower me to serve you. At times I am ready to give up in my Gospel service. Give me new momentum and new motivation. Work in me, so that I can work out for others."

♥ **NB:** Although we don't want Gospel service shaped by our culture's values, we do want pastors who are aware of the culture's trends and ideas, who answer the culture's questions, and who address the culture's opposition.

### Yet not I, but through Christ in Me

With every breath I long to follow Jesus  
For He has said that He will bring me home  
And day by day I know He will renew me  
Until I stand with joy before the throne

To this I hold, my hope is only Jesus  
All the glory evermore to Him  
When the race is complete, still my lips shall repeat  
Yet not I, but through Christ in me!

CULTURE-SHAPED SERVICE IS SELF-POWERED,  
BUT BIBLE-SHAPED SERVICE IS CHRIST-POWERED.

There's a biblical model of ministry. What a contrast to the culture's model of ministry. 



# CONCLUSION



## FURTHER STUDY

### Online Articles

- [God's purposes for suffering in Ministry](#) (Part 1)
- [God's purposes for suffering in Ministry](#) (Part 2)
- [Why we Must Emphasize a Pastor's Character over his Skill](#) by Tim Challies.
- [Four Ways to Fight Laziness in Ministry](#) by Eric Geiger
- [Resources for your Pastoral Search Committee](#) by Kevin DeYoung

### Books

- [When the Word Leads Your Pastoral Search: Biblical Principles and Practices to Guide Your Search](#) by Chris Brauns
- [Search: The Pastoral Search Committee Handbook](#) by William Vanderbloemen

### Discussion Questions

- How does the culture shape expectations in Gospel ministry? Also, how does it shape our message and aims?
- In what other ways does the culture shape Gospel service? In what ways do you find the culture shaping and forming your Christian service?
- What other ways are there to resist and reverse cultural pressures?
- How can you reframe your sufferings for Christ to give you joy?
- There were four components to "Christ in you." In what ways can you increase each of these?
- What's your aim in ministry? Teaching Sunday school? Raising your children?
- How does heaven shape your ministry?

First Byron Christian Reformed Church  
8541 Byron Center Ave SW, Byron Center, MI 49315  
Phone: (616) 878-9768  
[www.firstbyroncrc.org](http://www.firstbyroncrc.org)

Dr. David Murray  
[www.HeadHeartHand.org](http://www.HeadHeartHand.org)  
[www.ChristianManAcademy.com](http://www.ChristianManAcademy.com)  
[www.prts.edu](http://www.prts.edu)

## COMPLETE IN CHRIST

COLOSSIANS 1:24-29

# THE DANGER OF CULTURE-SHAPED GOSPEL SERVICE



Shape the culture like Paul  
by suffering like Christ,  
speaking hope like Christ,  
aiming at likeness to Christ,  
and serving by the power of Christ.

TO THIS I HOLD, MY HOPE IS ONLY JESUS  
ALL THE GLORY EVERMORE TO HIM  
WHEN THE RACE IS COMPLETE,  
STILL MY LIPS SHALL REPEAT  
YET NOT I, BUT THROUGH CHRIST IN ME.



### Culture-shaped Service

- Wrong expectations.
- Wrong message.
- Wrong aims.
- Wrong power source.

### Biblical answer?

### Gospel servant suffers like Christ

- Fills up Christ's sufferings
- For the church
- Results in joy

CULTURE-SHAPED SERVICE REJOICES IN COMFORT, BUT BIBLE-SHAPED SERVICE REJOICES IN SUFFERING.

Any positives?

### Gospel servant speaks hope like Christ

- Presents full Word
- Reveals long mystery
- Preaches a rich Christ

CULTURE-SHAPED SERVICE IS HOPE IN YOU, BUT BIBLE-SHAPED HOPE IS CHRIST IN YOU

What is the aim?

### Gospel servant aims at likeness to Christ

- Preaches Christ in various ways
- Aims at perfection in Christ

CULTURE-SHAPED SERVICE AIMS AT CULTURAL NORMS, BUT BIBLE-SHAPED SERVICE AIMS AT CHRIST-LIKENESS

Power available?

### Gospel servant serves by power of Christ

- Paul works very hard
- Paul works by Christ's power

CULTURE-SHAPED SERVICE IS SELF-POWERED, BUT BIBLE-SHAPED SERVICE IS CHRIST-POWERED

Action?