

## Review

Matt W. Lee, *Cultural Contextualization of Apologetics: Exploration and Application of the Apostle Paul's Model*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2022. ISBN 9781666731989 (paperback); 9781666725162 (hardcover).

By Jeehoon Kim, PhD

Written by Matt W. Lee, *Cultural Contextualization of Apologetics* is a helpful and timely book that promotes a type of apologetics that is biblical and culturally sensitive. It seeks a contribution for the post-modern context in which reliance on human reason and intellectuality has lost its appeal in presenting the Christian faith. To accommodate those living in this day and age, Lee offers a fresh way for apologetics by examining how the apostle Paul engaged with his context in presenting the gospel message. Lee argues that Paul models a cultural contextualization of apologetics by establishing cultural connections through cultural points of contact, encultured communication method, and cultural solidarity, and also by offering responses to cultural objections through presenting the virtue of Christian life and proclamation of Christ's resurrection. This model, for Lee, has more relevance for today than ever.

In chapter 1, Lee outlines the shortcomings of the type of apologetics that predominately relied on appeal to human reason during modernity. While those approaches had their merits for their time, the limitations of those approaches for a post-modern audience are apparent. Post-modernity, as Lee points out, appeals to images, stories, and finds rationalism as problematic. This new reality requires change in how one engages the audience with apologetics. Lee therefore presents a model for apologetics that is culturally contextualized, that is rooted in the apostle Paul.

Lee argues in the second chapter that Paul made significant cultural connections with his audience in two ways: using non-canonical quotations and employing Greco-Roman rhetoric. For Lee, the so-called non-canonical quotations created a "cultural point of contact" that would have been well-known to Paul's audience. This "point of contact," as defined by Lee, "denotes both a common ground shared through an innate knowledge of God generated by cultural cues, as well as that ground formed by a uniform conviction or experience from a culture" (16). Here Acts 17:28, 1 Corinthians 15:33 and Titus 1:12 are examined and insightfully explicated. Another way Paul makes a cultural connection is by his use of Greco-Roman rhetoric. Lee convincingly delineates shared elements between Paul's speeches and typical Greco-Roman rhetoric which can be viewed as "enculturated communication." This term is defined as a "process that aims to speak in a way that

relates to the cultural and social setting in which communication is carried out” (36). According to Lee, the gospel message is better received by Paul’s listeners through this way of speaking.

In chapter 3, Lee investigates how Paul established the cultural solidarity that made his message effective. By examining the philosophical discourses of sages in Greco-Roman culture and in Hellenistic royal courses, Lee opines that Paul made a significant cultural connection with his recipients. Taking the vantage point of the audience to see how Paul was perceived to them, Lee contends that Paul functioned as a wisdom figure. While this may not have been Paul’s intention, he nevertheless was understood as a philosopher to the gentiles and a sage to the believers. This gave Paul legitimacy to speak with an authority that was well received by his listeners.

An anticipated part of this book is found in chapter 4, where Paul’s speeches in the book of Acts are analyzed (Acts 14:15-18; 17:22-31; 24:10b-21; 26:2-23, 25-27, 29). These “apologetical speeches,” Lee argues, are indeed culturally contextualized apologetics that responded to the objections to the Christian faith. He also delineates elements of Paul’s speeches which are “cultural connection, cultural solidarity, a defense of the Christian faith from cultural objection by presenting the virtue of the Christian life, and the exposition of the resurrection” (84).

Chapter 5 examines the apologists that came after Paul. Lee shows that the apologetics of Aristides, Athenagoras, Justin Martyr, Tatian, Melito of Sardis, and the Epistle of Diognetus track closely to Paul’s. Following the same methodology presented in the previous discussions, this chapter outlines the ways in which areas of Greco-Roman culture and philosophy functioned as a point of contact that would resonate with the receptor people. The detailed discussions are a welcome part in this book and provide useful information about these resources.

The final chapter summarizes the previous chapters but also considers the author’s arguments in light of preaching. Taking a more practical viewpoint, Lee argues that “apologetics preaching” is something that can be modeled after Paul who is the “apologetics preaching exemplar” (162). The chapter examines four models of apologetics preaching, namely classical, evidential, presuppositional, and fideistic that are represented by contemporary preachers like Richard Charles Buck, Tim Keller, and Craig Loscalzo, respectively. Lee contends that these models of apologetics is found in Paul as well. Finally, Lee concludes that engaging in cultural contextualization of apologetics enhances responses from the receptors.

Every culture has its own history and traditions that will allow certain expressions of the Christian message to resonate more and at times less. This book effectively shows a sensitivity to that reality and that Christian apologists have an excellent example in Paul. As Lee argues, the apostle Paul shows sensibility to the surrounding context and presents the gospel in a way that listeners were accustomed to. As a result, the Christian message was promoted.

Some specific aspects of the book are worth mentioning. First, a discussion that is appreciated is found in chapter 2. Lee's research on how quotations and wisdom sayings are repurposed for point of contact is insightful and convincing. Lee contends that well-known quotations were often re-applied in a new context, regardless of how they were used in their original context, to appeal to the listeners. While some specific examples outside of the New Testament would have been helpful, I would agree with this understanding of the use of quotations. The same method can also be found in wisdom sayings in the Old Testament such as Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, as they are typically re-purposed for varying contexts.

Particularly valuable are Lee's discussions in chapter 5 on the church fathers. Here Lee argues that the church fathers followed the way in which Paul contextualized his apologetics. The analyses and reading of the primary texts are impressive. For example, after taking note of the historical critical problem with Aristides's *Apology*, Lee discusses the cultural context of Aristides as he spoke to the emperor. The discussions regarding Aristides' use of categories of people and the way in which he spoke contribute to the idea of cultural connections being made. Here Lee offers a good synthesis of the primary text and finds apt elements that relate to his argument. The same applies to other church fathers he discusses in this chapter.

In some places, a detailed exegetical discussion would have buttressed Lee's argument. In the discussion of Paul's use of *peristasenkataloge*, the "suffering list," Lee argues that Paul's suffering played a significant part in forming cultural solidarity. Because the audience was familiar with the idea of a suffering virtuous sage, listing his experience of the hardships points to his legitimacy as an apostle. In this discussion, the author relies on various biblical scholars but it would have been helpful to see if those assertions were indeed present in the biblical texts through a thorough exegetical discussion. The discussion of the speeches in Acts in chapter 4, presumably the meat of the book, also would have benefited from a detailed exegesis on the given texts.

In the last chapter of Lee's book, the analyses on the four types of apologetical sermons—classical, evidential, presuppositional, and fideistic—are helpful. However, in the discussion of the contemporary preachers, it would have been beneficial to see specific examples of their preaching that would suggest such categorizations. I would have also liked to see a specific example of an apologetical sermon that is culturally contextualized as the author purports. Nevertheless, there are appeals to culturally contextualized apologetics through point of contact *via* social media and pop-culture references that are instructive.

One minor issue to note is found in the footnotes. Perhaps this is a personal preference of this reader, but it would have been helpful to know the date of publications noted in the footnotes, especially in the first chapter as the book shows

the shortcomings of the modern apologists. Specific years of publications would help to emphasize the contemporary significance of Lee's arguments.

Finally, the book would have also benefited from more explorations. I would be keen to see more of the author's thoughts on some of the issues presented as Lee represents an important voice regarding issues of culture and apologetics. Nevertheless, the book is clearly articulated and well-argued. Lee makes use of a wide range of resources in a formidable way that strengthens his argument.

As this book sits within the intersection of apologetics, biblical studies, and cultural studies which has implications for homiletics, it comprises a wealth of knowledge for students, scholars, and practitioners who work in these areas. Not only will this book serve those who are interested in defending the Christian message who live in the post-modern era, it can also be useful for those who are working in cross-cultural ministry contexts. The book presents a strong biblical foundation for contextualized apologetics in Paul's writings. As such, those who pursue cross-cultural studies will have a valuable resource in this book.

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