

Loaded Language: Missiological Considerations for Appropriating Political Rhetoric

by Alan Howell and Jessica Markwood

A few years ago, I (Alan) was preaching at a Makua-Metto church in rural Mozambique. The topic was how God can radically transform lives and as an illustration I used the story of Jesus' encounter with a man possessed by a host of demons (Mark 5:1–20). Because demon possession is such a common phenomenon in this context, our Mozambican friends readily identified with this story. After emphasizing the way this man's life was powerfully changed by Christ, I switched from speaking the Makua-Metto language to Portuguese, Mozambique's national language, to proclaim Jesus as the *Força da Mudança* (the Force of Change). While some church members seemed to miss this reference, I noticed other people sitting up a little straighter as knowing smiles appeared on a few faces in the small crowd. I had borrowed the slogan from Mozambique's governing political party and applied it to Jesus of Nazareth. Was it helpful to use such potentially loaded language? Was it wise to use political rhetoric in cross-cultural Christian discourse in that way?

In our training, we (Jessica and Alan) were taught the importance not only of learning the local language, but also of taking advantage of powerful phrases or concepts for use in our communication. We learned that this is part of "taking every thought captive to Christ" (2 Cor. 10:5). Hijacking words, concepts, or phrases from normal life that are loaded with meaning is an important part of effective Christian discourse. But what about borrowing language loaded with political meaning? There are certainly risks involved in using that type of speech, especially when speaking as a guest in the culture. How should cross-cultural workers use this type of rhetoric? What principles should be used for navigating this sensitive issue?

In this article, we will look first at the Apostle Paul's usage of politically charged rhetoric¹ in his missionary communication to churches in Macedonia (Thessalonica and Philippi). We will explore his appropriation of theo-political language to call people to life in the Kingdom of God.² Then we will turn to our ministry context in northern Mozambique and share the input

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gathered from interviews with local church leaders. That research has shaped the missiological considerations and principles we've outlined at the end of this paper—how modern day cross-cultural Christian communicators can wisely appropriate political rhetoric.

Paul's Use of Theo-Political Language with Macedonian Churches

As Augustus rose to power and inaugurated the era of *Pax Romana*, Roman emperors encouraged loyalty of their subjects by promising protection and threatening destruction. Allegiance was shown through worship, not merely through submissiveness to the administration. By the time of Jesus' birth, emperor deification was commonplace.³ The reign of Augustus, which ushered in a new age of alleged stability, also cemented this practice throughout Rome. The many copies of the Priene Calendar Inscription declare Rome's hero as

... Savior who has ended war, setting things right in peace, and since Caesar when revealed surpassed the hopes of all who had anticipated the good news [*euangelia*], not only going beyond the benefits of those who had preceded him, but rather leaving no hope of surpassing him for those who will come, because of him the birthday of God began good news [*euangelia*] for the world.⁴

The deceased emperors who followed were declared *divus* (divine) and their decedents *divus filius* (son of divine), so that the royal lineage would be sacred, one that maintained the peace, security, and dominion of Rome forever.⁵

By the time the New Testament texts were written, the imperial *cultus* had infiltrated society far beyond religious spheres. It had reached the point that no community network was disconnected from the divine arm of the emperor.⁶ This was the milieu into which Paul brought a new *euangelion*. While Paul never calls Christians to arms, his theo-political language calls Christian

communities to de-center Rome in favor of Lord Jesus. For Paul, the good news of the coming Lord had socio-political implications in the present, with each advance of the eternal reign of Christ insinuating the inferiority of Rome and other worldly powers. This tension is particularly seen in Paul's letters to two Roman strongholds in Macedonia: Philippi and Thessalonica.

The Roman colony of Philippi was inhabited primarily by Roman citizens living under Roman law.⁷ Luke's account in Acts 16 implies that they adhered to Rome's religious expectations; he records that Philippian residents charged Paul and Silas with "advocating customs that are not



lawful for us" (v. 21). Paul's acts of power in the name of Jesus warranted beating and imprisonment—violations of their rights as Roman citizens (vv. 22–24, 37). It is to the church in this context that Paul writes regarding a new citizenship.

Paul begins his letter by encouraging the church to *politeuomai* (1:27–30), to participate as a citizen of a free state.⁸ He calls these Romans to be worthy of the citizenship of a new kingdom and to take on the difficult obligations of their new community.⁹ They must fight together for faith in the *euangelion* of Jesus, because true salvation comes from God. But Paul was not calling for a holy war which would imitate imperial

seizures of power by force. Instead, he advocated a far more demeaning, humiliating route. He exhorted them to follow in the path of their new lord—the path of selfless service and suffering.

In chapter two of Philippians, Paul pays homage to his lord with the inclusion of a piece of poetic prose, which perhaps followed the hymn format often used to venerate leaders in Hellenistic and Roman periods.¹⁰ Though there is no certainty as to this passage's genre, Paul's poetic style implicitly usurps the emperor, filling the passage with royal accolades to remind his audience that Jesus, the lowly crucified servant, is Lord (*kyrios*) over all.¹¹

The cross was the instrument that Rome utilized to "terrorize subjected peoples into submission to imperial rule" and deter slaves and political opponents from rebelling against the state.¹² Josephus calls this method of execution "the most unwanted of deaths," not only because of its physical, agonizing torture, but because of the grave dishonor associated with enduring death "in the form of a slave."¹³ Yet, this is exactly the path that Paul upholds for citizens of the new kingdom. Elliott and Reasoner note,

For Paul to have proclaimed as a deliverer one who had been subjected to so humiliating and debasing a death... was on its face both scandalous and incomprehensible.¹⁴

Yet this very scandal and shame is what God "has highly exalted." Before this wounded servant, "every knee should bow . . . and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord" (2:9–11)—even the emperor. A new kingdom had arisen and had begun to conquer through the cross—Rome's most despised instrument of oppression. Rome's greatest fear—a slave rebellion—had already begun in Jesus the crucified Lord.

Paul closes the body of his letter with a second invitation to take up citizenship in this universal kingdom. He

calls on the Philippians not to be distracted by “enemies of the cross of Christ,” whose “end is destruction,” but rather to remember that the Philippian church is among the colonies of heaven, “and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ,” who will “subject all things to himself” (3:18–21). The imperial gods and their fear-based power mongering were fading away. The crucified Lord with his revolutionary community would be taking power forever.

The Thessalonian church emerged in a situation similar to Philippi, in a city loyal to the imperial administration, but free from direct colonial rule. As the capital of Macedonia and host of Olympic and Pythian games, Thessalonica was entrenched in the imperial cult.¹⁵ Cult propaganda was ubiquitous by the mid-first century BCE. The Thessalonian aristocracy frequently engraved their coins and monuments with images of “saviors” and liberators, reminding citizens of the imperial benefactors who had brought them peace and security.¹⁶

“Peace” and “security” were buzzwords of the empire, signatures of Rome’s blessings to a helpless people. Pompey, an early military leader, brought “peace and security” to the land after his military victory over Troy.¹⁷ It was asserted that Augustus’ *Pax Romana* had ended war and inaugurated an era of peace.¹⁸ Monuments declared him the securer of peace, his face often engraved alongside images of a sword-wielding goddess Pax with the inscription CAESAR DIVI F(ILIIUS) meaning Caesar, Son of a God.¹⁹ Depictions of Tiberius were also engraved alongside those of Pax holding an olive branch and a scepter, which symbolized the peace achieved through Roman military might.²⁰ Even Nero’s inscriptions proclaimed “universal peace.”²¹ Caligula’s numismatic legacy is associated with the goddess Securitas, or Security, and was passed on in the currency used during the reign of Nero and his successors.²²

Paul’s rhetoric about a new rule, a transcendent empire of love and service, was powerful enough to warrant his death by a “peaceful” Empire.

Paul’s conviction that salvation, peace, and security could be found in Jesus stood in direct opposition to what most Thessalonians believed would maintain their economic and social stability. Acts 17 records an angry mob attacking community members because their compliance with Paul’s teachings had “turned the world upside down” by “acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus” (vv. 6–8). Paul struck a nerve in the city by revealing that the façade of peace they knew was not so secure.

This new order was being brought by a different divine Son and a different Lord. Paul called on the Thessalonians to be subversive, to turn away from idols to serve the true liberator (1 Thess. 1:9–10). They were in need of deliverance from the current social conflict and the wrath to come, a reality not in line with Rome’s promised peace and security (1 Thess. 2:2). Paul urged the church to live quietly and “walk properly before outsiders” so that the Christian community might be a testimony to the *euangelion* of Christ (1 Thess. 4:11–12).

Paul critiqued the imperial image: “While people are saying, ‘There is peace and security,’ then sudden destruction will come upon them . . .” (1 Thess. 5:3–4). Peace and security would not come to those whose faith is in the militant empire. Instead, those who wore “the breastplate of faith and love” and “a helmet [of] the hope of salvation” obtained “through our Lord Jesus Christ” would be those who would dwell in safety (1 Thess. 5:8–10). For Paul, it was not brute force and economic stimulus that would bring stability and warrant loyalty. Instead Paul invited the Thessalonians into a different community of Spirit-led diligence, encouragement,

rejoicing, prayer, thankfulness, and truth, constructed by “the God of peace,” until “the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess. 5:12–23). Paul did not put his trust in the violent kingdom of Rome, but a loving community eternally led by the Lord Jesus.

Throughout Paul’s communication with the churches in Macedonia, political language is inherently theological language. To claim the true good news that Jesus is Lord is to defy the Empire’s claim on absolute authority. To proclaim that a crucified slave will be exalted over all powers is an insult to imperial rule. To teach that Jesus is the incarnate Son of God who brings salvific peace and security is loaded language, and blasphemous to the Roman gods. Paul never called for a militant rebellion against Rome, but instead encouraged Christians to be harmonious citizens. Even so, his rhetoric about a new rule, a transcendent empire of love and service, was powerful—powerful enough to warrant his death at the hands of the “peaceful” Empire. Paul’s vision of peace was not maintained by the violence of Rome, but by the love of the Crucified Jesus who called all Roman subjects into a community of true peace and security.

Appropriate Use of Theological language with Mozambican Churches

Mozambique has experienced great suffering, conflict, and political violence. After almost five centuries of Portuguese colonial rule, the nation achieved autonomy in 1975 following the war of independence, only to be launched into a protracted struggle to consolidate national power. The province of Cabo Delgado, where most of the Makua-Metto people are located, is one of the country’s more

complicated political regions. Along with the neighboring province of Niassa, Cabo Delgado “suffered the worst excesses of the Portuguese military onslaught,”²³ hosted most of the country’s re-education camps,²⁴ and was the location of the government’s highest concentration of communist experiments.²⁵ National conflict erupted between military forces and continued until, in the 1990s, they were reformed into Mozambique’s opposing political parties. More recently, in northeast Cabo Delgado, an ongoing local conflict arose, and has been attributed to Islamic-related acts of terrorism. This is the complicated milieu in which the Makua-Metto church is situated.

As cross-cultural missionaries, how do we follow the Apostle Paul’s example? Should we even consider using well-known (politicized) rhetoric in the task of reconciliation in our already politically-charged context?²⁶ To discern how to do that effectively, we began by asking questions and by listening to believers in the churches of Cabo Delgado. We started our interviews by summarizing Paul’s use of Roman Imperial rhetoric. The challenge of using politically loaded language today was illustrated by telling the story of the sermon on Mark 5 (referred to earlier). We went through a list of politically loaded phrases or terms collected from slogans, signs, speeches, and written histories of Mozambique, and asked whether or not they would feel comfortable using these phrases in sermons. Additionally, we discussed the extra difficulties when these politically-loaded terms might be used by foreigners. After conducting qualitative interviews on appropriating political rhetoric in Christian communication and triangulating the principles gleaned from the data in small groups,²⁷ we found that church leaders were only willing to use this type of discourse when certain conditions were met.

Participants typically evaluated the usefulness of politically loaded phrases over against the risk of misunderstanding. One interviewee referenced Paul’s statement, “everything is permissible but not everything is beneficial” (1 Cor. 10:23), to say that the ability to use political rhetoric does not imply that it would necessarily be advantageous. After collating the interviewees’ responses, we found that their counsel for ensuring the effectiveness of appropriating political rhetoric today meant cultivating an awareness of three different contexts:

First, one needs to consider the context of the phrase within the speaker’s discourse or sermon. As one pastor noted, “to the political, all things are political.”



Since it is easy for some people to misunderstand the speaker’s intent, one suggested strategy was to always link the political reference to a biblical text in the sermon. Interviewees noted in various ways that there is a need for caution and, while there is only so much one can do to avoid misunderstandings, clearly connecting what you are saying to Scripture provides a direct defense in case people question the speaker’s intent. One pastor suggested stating, “I’m using this phrase in a different sense or a spiritual sense” or following Jesus’ formula from the Sermon on the Mount: “you have heard it said . . . , but I tell you . . .” Four of the interviewees observed that saying positive things about the current condition of Mozambique

earlier in the sermon could provide the cover for safely appropriating political rhetoric later in the discourse.

Second, interviewees suggested considering the congregational context. As Jesus’ original disciples included both zealots and tax collectors, Mozambican church leaders believed that his followers today should reflect political diversity as well. One church leader noted the importance of respecting the full political spectrum within a local congregation as there may be a variety of political perspectives represented. To use a phrase or slogan from one group may imply support for that party and make others feel isolated or slighted.

Third, Christian communicators should consider the local context. Church leaders need to be aware of non-members in hearing distance and how they could perceive the message, as well as the political dynamics in that particular community. While participants affirmed that political rhetoric should be used in a way that concentrates on addressing church-related matters and being a disciple of Jesus, only one church leader was willing to use this rhetoric as an open critique of the ruling powers. When I asked if Christian communicators should be “equal opportunity,” and borrow rhetoric from the minority political parties as well, the interviewees felt that it was too risky because it could be seen as elevating the status of their rhetoric to be on par with the rhetoric of the dominant party.

Phrases approved by all ten interviewees under the right circumstances:

1. *Nova família* (new family) was used by the government to refer to a redenomination of the currency in 2006. Interviewees agreed that this phrase can be appropriated because it was national rhetoric and not affiliated with a specific political party.
2. *Unidos na luta contra a pobreza* (united in the fight against poverty) can be appropriately

changed to, *unidos na luta contra o pecado, Satanás, morte, etc.* (united in the fight against sin, Satan, and death, etc.).

3. *Homem novo* (new man) was a key theme in the political discourse of the first President of independent Mozambique, Samora Machel,²⁸ and was deemed appropriate since this language fits well with passages like Ephesians 4:26.
4. *Pensamento único* (single thought)

Other phrases/terms were approved by all but one or two of the interviewees under the right circumstances:

1. *A Força da Mudança* (Force of Change)
2. *FRELIMO é que fez, FRELIMO é que faz* (FRELIMO is the one that did it, FRELIMO is the one that will do it), is a slogan from FRELIMO, the governing political party, that can accurately refer to God.
3. *A luta continua* (the battle continues) can be used or adjusted to *a festa continua* (the party continues)
4. *Camarada* (comrade)
5. *Assimilado* (assimilated) was a colonial-era term to refer to Africans with the same status as the Portuguese and could be appropriately adapted to talk about a transfer of allegiance to the kingdom of God.
6. *Congresso do partido* (party meeting) can be changed to *Congresso do Céu* (meeting of heaven) to refer to a gathering of members of different groups because it does not address the content of the meetings.
7. *Abaixo . . .* (Down with . . .)
8. *Viva . . .* (Long live . . .)
9. *Venceremos!* (We shall overcome!)

One phrase was rejected under all circumstances by all ten interviewees:

1. *A linha política do partido* (the political line of the party) is not useful because it is not adaptable.

That which was true in first century Macedonia remains true in Mozambique today: the choice to live by faith is an inherently political decision.

One pastor interviewed was extremely hesitant about using loaded language because “Christians need to be careful in this political climate.” This leader said that appropriating political rhetoric could be useful in working with mature believers, but one must be extra cautious with new believers and new church communities. He argued for “saying what Paul said” in his context, but was not in favor of “doing what Paul did” in today’s Mozambican context. When we dialogued about this, he asserted that it is “not the right time to appropriate political rhetoric” in Cabo Delgado, and that according to church history Paul was jailed and beheaded, so if we use his methods we need to be prepared to suffer the same consequences. All the other interviewees, though, were much more willing to borrow political rhetoric for use in Christian communication.

When I asked about additional considerations for intercultural missionaries serving in Cabo Delgado, some interviewees mentioned the way our mission team typically teaches in the Makua-Metto language, while Portuguese is the language of political rhetoric. They suggested that might give us some flexibility in the way these terms are heard and processed by a Mozambican audience. They affirmed the need for foreigners to be courteous and respectful in these matters since we are guests. Our mission team has suffered from lies and misinformation by others who used political suspicion to cause problems for us, so most of the interviewees reaffirmed the need to do due diligence to avoid misunderstandings. In one interview we talked about how language is not static, with connotations ebbing and flowing over

time, so a meaning in one season may be different than another.

Conclusion

What was true in first century Macedonia remains true in twenty-first century Mozambique: the choice to live by faith is an inherently political decision. From the time of Jesus’ birth, his kingdom caused a disturbance among the powers, and still today God calls communities to an ethic that supersedes any political party agenda. Yet Christians are simultaneously called to live harmoniously and lovingly, seasoning their powerful claims with salt. Paul’s rhetoric is marked by direct and indirect theo-political language, but the advice from Mozambican colleagues and friends echoes Jesus’ instruction to be “wise as serpents and as innocent as doves” (Matt. 10:16). Many interviewees echoed sentiments that loaded language could be helpful, but it could also be foolish. From a missiological perspective, teachers must be discerning in appropriating political rhetoric, remembering both the importance of proclaiming the new kingdom, and the fates of Jesus, Paul and others. Our research revealed that using theo-political language can make communication more robust and effective as long as it is done respectfully and responsibly. The interviewees’ counsel on missiological considerations and principles makes it clear that intercultural missionaries should be aware of their contexts (at the discourse, congregational, and local levels) to make wise use of loaded language. The *missio Dei* is radically political, but that is not its end. Radical reconciliation is the greater goal, creating a new community united under the leadership of a humble king who rules in love. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ For a helpful introduction to the debate surrounding the impact of political discourse on the New Testament and whether it was specifically aimed at countering imperial powers or merely using the best language available at the time see Scot McKnight and Joseph B. Modica, eds., *Jesus is Lord, Caesar is Not: Evaluating Empire in New Testament Studies* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013).

² The proper “term for the Jewish and Greco-Roman language that Paul uses is theo-political—that which is inextricably both religious (theological) and political.” Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul’s Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 352.

³ Earliest reports of deification of a living person in the Western world originate in the fifth-century BCE when Spartan general Lysander was blessed with divine honors upon his triumphant return to Samos. This was a commonly accepted practice by the time of Alexander the Great (356–323 BCE), who was often worshiped by those whom he overtook. This grassroots movement of imperial deification spread from the eastern provinces toward Rome as local peoples began to place their faith in human leaders as well as traditional gods. See Nicholas Perrin, “The Imperial Cult,” in *The World of the New Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts*, ed. Joel B. Green and Lee Martin McDonald (Ada, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 124–134.

⁴ Neil Elliott and Mark Reasoner, *Documents and Images for the Study of Paul* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 35.

⁵ Lawrence Keppie, *Understanding Roman Inscriptions* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 43.

⁶ Judy Diehl, “Empire and Epistles: Anti-Roman Rhetoric in the New Testament Epistles,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 10, no. 2 (2012): 223.

⁷ Diehl, “Empire and Epistles,” 245.

⁸ Bruno Blumenfeld, *The Political Paul: Democracy and Kingship in Paul’s Thought* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 296.

⁹ Blumenfeld, *The Political Paul*, 295.

¹⁰ “In the Hellenistic and Roman periods, prose hymns to deities became more and more important and the responsibility for composing them was assigned to those possessing the office or honorary position of *theologos*. . . . A decade or two before Paul wrote to the Philippians, the imperial cult in a city of Asia Minor included the services

of a *sebastologos*, one who composed prose hymns in honor of the emperor. Later on, the term *theologos* was used for such officials in the imperial cults in Pergamon, Ephesus, and Smyrna. Since Paul spent an extended period of time in Ephesus, it is likely that he was familiar with the writing of prose hymns or encomia in honor of the emperor. The Philippians were probably familiar with the practice as well.” Adela Yarbro Collins, “Psalms, Philippians 2:6–11, and the Origins of Christology,” *Biblical Interpretation* 11, no. 3 (2002): 371.

¹¹ Diehl, “Empire and Epistles,” 246. It is at this time impossible to know with certainty that Paul is referencing or has written a hymn. For more on this issue see these recent studies: Michael Wade Martin and Bryan A. Nash, “Philippians 2:6–11 as Subversive *Hymnos*: A Study in Light of Ancient Rhetorical Theory,” *The Journal of Theological Studies* 66.1 (2015): 90–138; and Ben Edsall and Jennifer Strawbridge, “The Songs We Used to Sing? Hymn ‘Traditions’ and Reception in Pauline Letters,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 37.3 (2015): 290–311.

¹² Diehl, “Empire and Epistles,” 223; Elliott & Reasoner, *Documents and Images for the Study of Paul*, 102.

¹³ Flavius Josephus and Henry St. John Thackeray, *The Jewish War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 7:203; Elliott & Reasoner, *Documents and Images for the Study of Paul*, 103.

¹⁴ Elliott & Reasoner, *Documents and Images for the Study of Paul*, 103.

¹⁵ Diehl, “Empire and Epistles,” 250.

¹⁶ Metellus, C. Servilius Caepio, Antony, Julius, and Augustus were all declared saviors and bringers of “liberation” on monuments and currency prevalent in Thessalonica. Abraham Smith, “Unmasking the Powers,” in *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order*, ed. Richard A. Horsley (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2004), 57.

¹⁷ Jeffrey A. D. Weima, “Peace and Security’ (1 Thess. 5:3): Prophetic Warning or Political Propaganda?” in *New Testament Studies* 58 (2012): 341.

¹⁸ Elliott & Reasoner, *Documents and Images for the Study of Paul*, 35.

¹⁹ Weima, “Peace and Security,” 334.

²⁰ Weima, “Peace and Security,” 336.

²¹ Weima, “Peace and Security,” 339.

²² Weima, “Peace and Security,” 340.

²³ Sarah LeFanu, *S is for Samora: A Lexical Biography of Samora Machel and the Mozambican Dream* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 172.

²⁴ LeFanu, *S is for Samora*, 220–221. These also ended up being camps where people were sent for punishment.

²⁵ LeFanu, *S is for Samora*, 6.

²⁶ For more on conflict and reconciliation at the civic level in Mozambique relating to the social context of Paul’s ministry, see Alan Howell, “Romans, Reconciliation, and Role-playing in Mozambique: Benefiting from the ‘New Perspectives on Paul’” *Missio Dei: A Journal of Missional Theology and Practice* 9, no. 1 (Winter–Spring 2018).

²⁷ I (Alan) did long interviews (30–45 minutes) with ten church leaders and then discussed these findings with small groups or classes (over 50 participants total).

²⁸ LeFanu, *S is for Samora*, 85.

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