

Apologizing FOR Public Theology

PART 1 · CHAPTER 4

What is the “Theology” in Public Theology?

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Theology is a word used in a confusing variety of ways, ranging from everyday reflection on God and his relationship with us to rigorous systematic theology, a discipline within the constellation of academic disciplines, such as biblical studies, church history, practical theology, missiology, etc., that make up what is also broadly called theology! Clearly, we need to elaborate on what we mean by public *theology*.

All forms of theology reflect on God and his relationship to us and the world. Unlike in many university disciplines, we cannot put God under the microscope and study him. Our only hope of knowing God and of knowing about him is if he chooses to reveal himself to us. Revelation is essential if we are to know about God. The truly good news is that utterly central to the Bible is the fact that God has indeed chosen to reveal himself to us and that his revelation of himself climaxes in Jesus Christ, the Word become flesh (see John 1).

Where do we find Jesus? Of course, we find him, or he finds us, in and through conversion, as the Spirit opens us up to him, and we repent and believe the good news. Conversion ushers us into a living relationship with God through Jesus, but the authoritative testimony about Jesus is found in the Bible. We honour the Bible as God's

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Word written because it bears authoritative, trustworthy testimony to Jesus and thus to the Father, Son and the Spirit. I like to think of the Bible as the field in which the pearl of great price is hidden. As we dig in that field, again and again, we hear God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, speaking,

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It has always intrigued me that the early converts in Acts “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching” (Acts 2:42). Why? Because the apostles were the *eyewitnesses* of Jesus, it was in and through their teaching that the converts could find Jesus, learn more



James Smetham, *Christ Preaching to the Multitudes*

about him, and feed on him. We find the apostles' teaching in the Gospels in particular, which, in one way or another, is a reduction of the apostolic witness to writing. Take Mark's Gospel, for example. Mark was not one of the original twelve disciples, but it is highly likely that underlying Mark's Gospel is the testimony of the Apostle Peter. The teaching of the apostles backs us into the OT as authoritative and opens out onto the rest of the NT writings as well. If we are to reflect on God, his relationship with us and the world, then it is to the Bible that we must turn.

Conversion involves far more, but never less, than thinking. Conversion transforms our inner core and opens us up to God, but it never disengages the mind. On the contrary, what we now discover is so massive and life-changing that the mind becomes, or should become, fully engaged, reflecting on God, Christ, ourselves and the world. We do not think about these things from a neutral standpoint or from nowhere, but as Paul might say, from "in Christ." Indeed, the second article in this series makes clear that the gospel we believe in carries a profound view of the world, which we at KLC like to call a *worldview*.

Mike Goheen and I define a worldview as "an articulation of the basic beliefs embedded in a shared grand story that is rooted in a faith commitment and that gives shape and direction to the whole of our

individual and corporate lives."¹ Review the second article in this series on, "What is the Gospel, and How Does it Relate to Public Theology?" and you will soon see that the gospel carries with it all the key elements of a worldview. Standing "in Christ," there is nothing more natural than hard reflection on this good news that has captivated us and brought us into a whole new view of the world. In one real sense, this is theology, and it includes the whole of creation and all areas of public life in its purview.

In this sense, the Bible is chock full of theology. OT Israel was situated at the crossroads of the great empires, and her beliefs were hammered out time and again in response to the beliefs of surrounding nations. Jesus, let us not forget, was fully God and *fully man*; he would have known the OT intimately and thought long and hard about his mission. We find the result of that thinking in the four Gospels. And, of course, the apostles' minds were fully engaged as they travelled with Jesus and then lived through his death, resurrection, ascension and Pentecost. Letters like that of Romans and Hebrews exemplify sustained, hard, prayerful reflection on the Christ event, unpacked at length in two very different but complementary ways.

¹ Michael W. Goheen and Craig G. Bartholomew, *Living at the Crossroads: An Introduction to Christian Worldview* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 23.

However, it is important to note that there are *different types of theology*. With time, the early church recognised the need for *creeds* such as the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed, succinct statements of core Christian belief that were invaluable in protecting the church against heresy. And also, with time, church fathers began writing systematic defences of the Christian faith. Later, especially after the Reformation, churches developed *Confessions*, which are far more detailed than creeds. Eventually, we arrive at systematic theology, which seeks to examine the core Christian beliefs, or what are called *loci*, in a logical and systematic fashion to take note of how Christians have done this over the centuries and to explain how such beliefs relate to the intellectual currents of our day. Systematic theologians attend to the great core beliefs of the Christian faith and write tomes on topics like the doctrine of God, the doctrine of humankind, the doctrine of creation, the person and work of Christ, and so on.

Thus, when it comes to theology, we do well to think of multiple types of reflection on the good news as found in the Bible. These can be listed as follows:

- Theology in the gospel
- Theology in the Bible
- Theology in the Creeds
- Theology in the Confessions
- Systematic theology

All of these are valuable and, if done through the lens of the gospel, will cast their light on the whole creation and all areas of public life. Alas, too much theology often works with a small and narrow view of the gospel, hence the importance of our article on "What is the Gospel?" Wonderfully, many great theologians down through the ages have not presupposed such a narrow view of the gospel. One thinks, for example, of luminaries like Irenaeus, Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck and Colin Gunton, to mention only a few. Their work helps us identify and understand the core elements of the gospel and to see how these elements illuminate all of life. If we want our public theology to be Christian and biblical, then such work is clearly invaluable.

However, at a *foundational* level, public theology requires more than theology. Once one gets into the granular realities of societal life, for example, one will find oneself needing an understanding of how society works, namely needing a *philosophy of society*. Indeed, Christian philosophy is a crucial and foundational element of public theology. How does theology differ from philosophy? Both, if they are Christian, approach

their analysis through the lens of the gospel, but whereas theology focuses on God's revelation in the Bible, philosophy looks outward to the nature of the world, how we know it truly, what it means to be human, and so on. Any attempt to move from the Bible to the public dimensions of contemporary life will soon foreground the need for philosophy as questions emerge, such as, how do we know truly? (epistemology), what is the structure of the world in which we live? (ontology), what are the norms for societal and national life (philosophy of society and political philosophy)? and so on.

In my view, systematic theology and Christian philosophy are both foundational disciplines for public theology. Indeed, the more systematic theology becomes, the more it builds philosophical presuppositions into its fabric, and it needs to make sure these emerge from the gospel. Similarly, philosophy needs to ensure that its work operates through the lens of the gospel, from its worldview and basic beliefs, and good theology will be invaluable here.

To answer the question of this article, the "theology" in "public theology" means that all exploration of the public dimensions of life is done in the light of the core beliefs enshrined in the gospel. On such a journey, great theology in all its varieties, including systematic theology, will be indispensable. However, so will robust Christian philosophy, and it should be noted that insights from many other disciplines are needed. Engage in analysis of the public dimensions of our lives, and you will soon discover that public theology is inherently interdisciplinary. But that is a story for another article!

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Denys Calvaert, *The Conversion of Saint Paul* (1570)