

Apologizing FOR Public Theology

PART 2 • CHAPTER 9

Wisdom's Way in Public Theology

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Public theology is a discipline that arose in opposition to emergent secularism and sectarian Christianity. It regards every corner of creation as under the Lordship of Christ.¹ Biblical wisdom literature is similarly concerned with good, practical living in the real world, and so its implications for public theology are manifold. Here are four that emerge from the intersection of wisdom and public theology.

Public Theology Begins with the Fear of the Lord

In his work, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places; A Conversation in Spiritual Theology*, Eugene Peterson reflects on “cultivating the fear of the Lord” in all three major sections of the book, including creation, history and community. In brief, Peterson considers “fear of the Lord” as the “stock biblical phrase for the way of life that is lived responsively and appropriately before who God

is, who he is as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”² His keen attention to the relationship between “fear of the Lord” and our way of life is integral to public theology in at least three ways.

First, the fear of the Lord functions as the fundamental *confession* of God's people. As Elijah declared in his public defeat of the prophets of Baal, “The Lord, he is God, the Lord, he is God!” God's people today must remain rooted firmly in this confession. By nature, confessions affirm a particular narrative about the world and the nature of things that frames one's view of reality. In the case of Christian public theology, part of our confession that “the Lord, he is God” means trusting that Scripture tells us the *true story of the world*. In Scripture, God declares our world – things seen

1 Bruce R. Ashford, “What is Public Theology?” *Apologizing for Public Theology* 1.1.

2 Eugene H. Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places; A Conversation in Spiritual Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 40.

Gustav Klimt, *L'Arbre de Vie* (1905-1909)



and unseen – “very good” from the beginning; Scripture presents it as broken and misdirected by sin, redeemed by the death and resurrection of Jesus, and awaiting restoration at Jesus’ second coming.

Second, the fear of the Lord establishes the fundamental *posture* of God’s people. Any athlete or musician can attest to the importance of posture for proper execution of the skill required. Proper posture both precedes and breeds proper action. Once we are planted in the confession of the fear of the Lord, we are called to attend to a posture that befits the calling of public witness – a posture of reverence and humility in anticipation of active love for God and neighbor.

Third, the fear of the Lord concerns the *actions* of God’s people in the world. While the confession of the fear of the Lord offers the *proper starting point* for right living and action in the world, and while posture *prepares us* for right action formed by proper spirituality, action concerns the *direction* of our way in the world. For Christians, such action yields the fruit of the Spirit and accords with our Lord’s double love toward God and neighbor – the “more excellent way” of life in God’s world (1 Cor 12:31).

Public Theology Recognizes the Two Ways of Wisdom and Folly

The “two ways” of wisdom and folly, righteousness and unrighteousness, runs throughout Scripture from beginning to end. One might say that it does so from “tree to tree”: from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in Genesis 2 to the tree of life in Revelation 22. These two ways are especially accentuated in the wisdom literature, including wisdom psalms such as Psalm 1 (further tree imagery!), which concludes, “For the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.” As Andrew Errington rightly remarks;

Wisdom enables good action in that it opens up good paths – not, that is to say, that it equips one to make good paths, or to carve them out, but wisdom allows one to appreciate good paths for what they are, and to take them. The paths metaphor reminds us that wisdom is something that involves the world as well as the subject. *It rests upon the hospitality of the world to good action. Wisdom involves a relation, a kind of correspondence between action and the moral reality of the world.*³

In brief, the way of the righteous is the way of the Lord, the way of flourishing and blessedness. And, we do well to recognize the canonical connections from

³ Andrew Errington, *Every Good Path: Wisdom and Practical Reason in Christian Ethics and the Book of Proverbs* (London: T&T Clark, 2019), 116 (emphasis added).



John Singer Sargent, *A Street in Venice* (c. 1880–82)

the blessedness of Psalm 1 to the blessedness of the beatitudes in Matthew 5. Further, in John’s Gospel, Jesus declares himself to be “the way” (14:6). He is not merely the way to the Father concerning our eternal salvation, but also the way of the good, true, and beautiful life today. God’s people are called to walk in his way, that is the way of Jesus, in every time and place, and in every dimension – including public life.

Proverbs 9 personifies the two ways of wisdom and folly with two women – Lady Wisdom and Lady Folly. The chapter opens with Lady Wisdom at work, preparing a place and a meal for her disciples. Once the table is set, she sends out her young women to the “highest places in the town,” calling out to the simpletons to come and feast at her table – that is, to learn the way of wisdom (Prov. 9:1-6).

The “highest places in the town” signals the public dimension of this way of life. When Lady Wisdom begins teaching in proverbial form in 9:7-12, the application of this wisdom is not limited merely to the private or *spiritual* sphere. It is whole-life wisdom, an all-encompassing way of life that begins with the fear of the Lord that is as applicable at work as it is at church or in our daily devotions. Christians do well to attend to wisdom’s public dimension rather than reducing wisdom to one’s private spirituality. Christians have long been zealous for evangelism and mission efforts, and this zeal must be extended to the *whole* of life. Wisdom

urges the same zeal and intentionality toward work, community, and family life. There is an opportunity – indeed, an imperative – to manifest the way of wisdom in every relationship, in our quality of work, in our leadership, in our hopes, desires and loves. And this is evident publicly, privately, politically and institutionally – at every time and every place.

Public Theology Resides with the Poor, Grieving, and Suffering

At least three brief reflections must be considered here. First, the way of wisdom cannot be captured in a formula for personal “success” by the world’s standards. Despite the audacity of prosperity-gospel proponents who pluck proverbs out of context to support the claim of guaranteed wealth given enough faith, this is foolishness by Proverbs’ standards. Proverbs are thought-provoking generalizations, not promises, and God’s people are never guaranteed wealth. In Scripture, wealth is not universally good and poverty is not universally blameworthy.⁴ Worse still, these teachers invariably gain their own wealth by coercing donations from their followers. The prosperity gospel is dishonest and exploits the poor.

To take advantage of the poor is particularly dangerous, for it is an insult to God Himself, as Proverbs 14:31 declares. Wisdom resides with the poor, grieving, and broken-hearted – those conditions in life wherein we are reminded that the world is broken and in need of the Creator’s healing power; and that God is the Creator and we are creatures (Eccl 5:2). Like Job’s confession when he declared, “Therefore, I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know” (Job 42:3b); we join our confession to Job’s that the Lord gives and the Lord takes away, blessed be the name of the Lord (Job 1:21).

Second, wisdom speaks both to material and spiritual poverty. Proverbs asks the Lord, “Give me neither poverty nor riches” (Prov 30:8b), for either extreme may lead us toward sin. However, Jesus, the Wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:24), declares, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 5:3). To be poor in spirit precedes that latter beatitude of “pure in heart” for both speak to a simplicity of the soul that is committed to one thing – in this case, one person, the Lord Christ, the Wisdom of God. Such poverty of spirit and purity of heart guarantees not the temporary here-and-now wealth of the prosperity gospel but the future eternal inheritance of the kingdom of heaven.

4 For example, Proverbs 13:22 speaks of a “sinner’s wealth” and 13:23 offers a scenario in which certain poor people wouldn’t have been poor if it weren’t for unjust people exploiting them. Proverbs is well aware of the righteous poor and the wealthy wicked.

Third, regardless of cultural status and net worth, those who walk the way of wisdom find solidarity with the poor and marginalized. For our interior poverty sympathizes with those in need, especially orphans and widows. This breeds external charity toward those who bear the image of their Maker, and we look upon them not with contempt or superiority but in solidarity as fellow imagers of God. Here we remember our Savior who became poor for us, who forsook all to suffer for us, who had “nowhere to lay his head,” and who insisted that caring for the “least of these” is caring for him. This is precisely where the way of wisdom displays a most proper public theology.

Public Theology is Centered on Jesus, the King, and the Gospel

In 1 Corinthians 1:24, Paul identifies Jesus, the eternal Son, as the “power of God and the wisdom of God.” Moreover, in Jesus, the wisdom of God, the whole of creation finds its Maker, and by him, it is held together (Col 1:15-17), in him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Col 2:3), and in him, wisdom takes on flesh and dwells among us. In his flesh, he restores our way to the Father, heals our brokenness, rescues us from sin, reorders our love, and gives us hope. He is wisdom, he is our wisdom, wisdom is our way, and wisdom is our end in every time and place, not least in the public sphere.

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Odilon Redon, *Veil ange* (1840-1916)