

# Apologizing FOR Public Theology

Paul Klee, *Dry Cooler Garden* (1921)

PART 2 • CHAPTER 11

## Public Theology and Place (and Good Placemaking)

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The role of *place* in public theology is often underappreciated. Place is essential because the spaces we inhabit are meaningful, they are headed toward a climactic eschatological conclusion at the return of Christ, and placemaking represents the grand mission of humanity in the Christian canon.

### Time and Place

Time, one of the pillars of reality, was explored at length by Augustine, and he was deeply perplexed over a definition for it: "What then is time? If no one asks me [to define it], I know [what time is]: if I wish to explain it to one that asks, I know not."<sup>1</sup> Paul Ricoeur said, "time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal existence."<sup>2</sup> The concept of time is difficult to pin down.

Mircea Eliade argued that ancient Judaism was the

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first to break from the established ancient Greek and Near Eastern view that time was cyclical. According to Eliade, Judaism considered time as linear, as heading toward a great (eschatological) climax.<sup>3</sup> Most scholars

today concede that biblical time has a linear, purposeful element. The same can be said of place.

### The Goal of Place

According to the Christian canon, place and time share a common eschatological goal, climaxing at the time of Christ's return when the world is finally the utopian home of God.<sup>4</sup>

As with time, the definition of place is challenging.

3 Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, trans by Willard R. Trask, Bollingen Series 46 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954). Nowadays, biblical time is generally viewed as both cyclical and linear. For a summary of Eliade's concepts, along with current scholarly assessment of them, see Christine Barth, "In Illo Tempore, at the Center of the World: Mircea Eliade and Religious Studies' Concepts of Sacred Time and Space," *Historical Social Research* 38 (2013): 3: 59–75.

4 For a fascinating analysis of biblical time, see Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, trans by David Pellauer (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 167–80.

1 Augustine, *Confessions*, Book 11, Chp 14.

2 Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, 3 Vols (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 1: 3.

One knows place when one experiences it, but what exactly is place? Place is the combination of three components: a *location*, the *contents* in that location (the *locale*), and (especially important because it is often overlooked) the *experience* that one associates with that place.

Consider your home as a place. A home is more than the physical address of a house. It is also more than the itemized contents in and around that house. A home includes the people who share the house with you, and thus it includes the feelings and memories that you have of that home—is it a good home? A hurtful home? Does the home trigger memories of mom/dad, of your favorite chair, of the times when you and your brother ate cookies that Grandma had just baked? A place is more than a site on a map or a list of contents for an insurance company's record.

Using this definition, let's consider a biblical view of place, especially how the place of God relates to our "placemaking."<sup>5</sup>

### Placemaking: The Human Mission for the World

To assess the quality that any place has at any season in time, one needs a method, and several methods have been suggested.<sup>6</sup> Whichever method one uses, to assess progress in placemaking as a place heads toward its canonical, eschatological goal, one needs to assess any place *missionally*. How well are people doing in their mission to fashion the place of God on earth? How well is placemaking progressing?

Placemaking is a grand mission in the Bible.<sup>7</sup> This mission entails the production of the place of God on earth, and it is a task given to humans, according to Genesis 1:26–28. Furthermore, viewed canonically, this mission starts and ends the storyline of the Bible, and it influences everything in between.

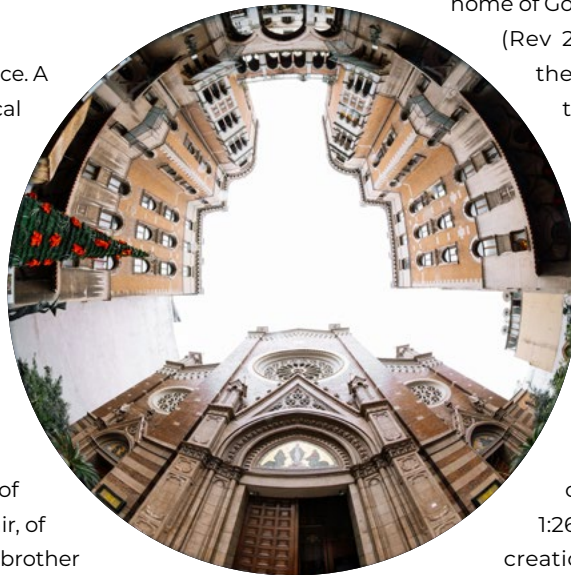
The mission itself appears immediately in the Bible with God's own activity in Genesis 1–2. God creates and fashions an inchoate place that has a "good" locale, and a sense of place that God really, really liked (Gen 1:31). Fast

forwarding to the end of the canon, one finds the home of God completed, existing on earth (Rev 21–22). However, in between these two temporal endpoints in the Bible, the production is in progress, some of which is not good at all, since the world is now a contested place.

So, returning to the human mission that appears in Genesis 1, what exactly does the humans' task entail? Contextually humans had just been created with *imago Dei* (Gen 1:26–27) at the end of six days of creation, and the text implies that *imago Dei* equips them for this specific

human mission (Gen 1:28). *Imago Dei* is what the humans will need to continue building onto the inchoate place of God (in Hebrew, 'eret, "earth, land") that God had just completed.<sup>8</sup> "Be fruitful, multiply, and fill 'eret. Subdue her and rule over all of her living residents." Thus, the humans' task was to continue making placial changes to 'eret, to build upon what God had done in a manner that pleases God, and with the goal in mind that this place is to become the home of God on the earth, as envisioned in Rev 21–22.<sup>9</sup>

Viewed in this light, missional success is measured by the good placial changes that humans will make to the homeland of God.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, in light of the magnitude of the earth's locale and in light of the rest of the canon's story about human sin, this command to "be fruitful, multiply, and fill" will require more and more good placemakers (an evangelistic task) who are trained to think and act creatively as Christians (a discipleship task), so that the placial changes please God (Eph 5:10). And, of course, these human placemakers will benefit from good pastoral oversight to guide them in the mission (a church-life task). And this is where public theology enters the conversation.



5 David Larsen, *The Place of God at the Bookends of the Bible: The Rest of the Whole Story* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2023).

6 For an analysis of human implacement, displacement, and re-implacement, see Craig Bartholomew, *Where Mortals Dwell: A Christian View of Place for Today* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011). For a discussion of the Christian adaptation of Sojan trialectics, see Larsen, *The Place of God*, 47–61.

7 Larsen, *The Place of God*, chps 3–11.

8 Richard Briggs, "Humans in the Image of God and Other Things Genesis Does Not Make Clear," *JTI* 4 (2010):1:111–26.

9 See also, for example, the classic covenant formula in Ex 29:45 and Ezek 37:27.

10 For detailed theology of work based on Gen 1–26–28, see Darrell Cosden, *A Theology of Work: Work and the New Creation*, Paternoster Theological Monographs (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2004).



## Public Theology and Place

The human mission has yet to be fulfilled and it has never been rescinded. There is thus no area of life – no area of human knowledge, no aspect of our relationships, no involvement in systems, economics, and politics, no contribution of culture-making, and so on – that escapes the jurisdiction of biblical placemaking and avoids the oversight of our public theology. As long as Genesis 1:26–28 serves to provide a clear statement of the human mission, and as long

as we humans bear the image of God and can perform this task, and until Revelation 21–22 comes to pass (and even after that, if resurrected humans remain in the image of God), we ought to remain committed to apologizing for public theology.

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