

Apologizing FOR Public Theology

PART 2 • CHAPTER 16

The Church and Public Theology

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“The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come,
and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land.”

(SONG OF SOLOMON 2:12)

A constant vision throughout the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures is that God’s “very good” creation (Gen 1:31), groaning from the effects of human rebellion (Rom 8:22-26), will be fully restored so that all things might joyfully flourish (Rev 21:1).

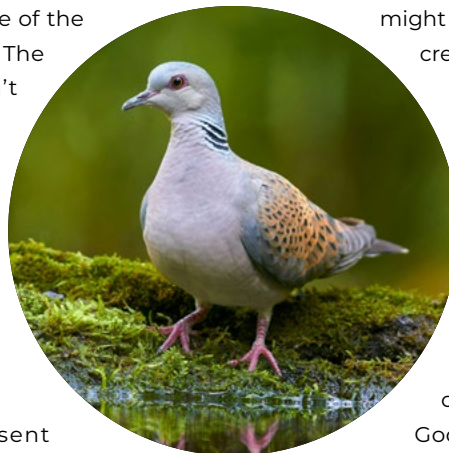
The Song of Solomon envisions this state of *shalom* as one in which “the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land.” The voice of the turtledove doesn’t have much hope of being heard where guns are firing, bombs are exploding, neighbourhoods are polluted, or children are wailing from hunger and disease. Flowers, singing and the voice of the turtledove are evidence of life, rather than death, reigning.

This gap between our present circumstances and the prophetic vision of the Bible causes one to wonder what the church’s role is in addressing public issues. How ought one

to conceive of theology’s relationship with what’s destroying the world?

Renewing Humanity

The “big story” of Scripture’s narrative arc is that God renews the human person-in-community so they might be for the world what humanity was created to be.



In the Old Testament, this took the shape of key figures such as Abraham, Moses and David being called to particular acts of service. In the New Testament, Jesus passes his spirit to the community of his disciples and followers. In both, there is a creation of a new community through which God intends his people to act for the good of the world.

When the New Testament authors needed a word for

this group of Jesus' friends, they selected the Greek term "ekklesia," which we translate into English as "church." In the ancient Roman world, the "ekklesia" was the public gathering of local citizens to decide on matters of common interest. The early church didn't conceive of itself as a private club of personal spirituality or even as a religious cult withdrawn from the complex issues of the day. They could have chosen well-known words for those kinds of arrangements. Instead, they selected a term with public and common-good significance.

Even in the Acts of the Apostles, when Paul was arguing his case before senior Roman officials, he said that his ministry was "not done in a corner" (Acts 26:26). Jesus and the disciples had earlier said the same thing when the authorities had questioned them.

From the earliest days, therefore, the church has been understood as a *public* community, instead of merely a congregation of like-minded people – a group concerned with matters of common interest, seeking the welfare and flourishing of all. According to Oliver O'Donovan (*The Desire of Nations*, 1999), this all-embracing impulse moved the 4th-century church to adopt various public administrative roles that were abandoned during the fall of the Roman Empire. That same impulse causes churches today to meet the food and shelter needs of refugees and those living at street level. The church is that initial part ("the firstfruits for salvation," 2 Thes 2:13) of the whole of humanity that is being renewed out in the open.

Institution and Organism

So, how do the "firstfruits" of the church relate to the whole of humanity? From the mid-19th to the early 20th century, the Reformed theologian Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920) devoted significant attention to *how* the church engages in its public-service ministry in a diverse world. This was both a theoretical and a deeply personal question because he was both a pastor and a politician, serving as the Dutch Prime Minister from 1901-1904.

Kuyper saw in the New Testament that "church" can refer to either an institution within society or a movement of people within a culture. On the one hand, the institutional church has a gathered and organised form with a building, official leadership and publicised worship services. In this way, it exists separate from and alongside other civic institutions like schools and businesses.

On the other hand, what he called the organic mode of the church is the dispersal of Christian believers and Christian groups/organisations within a local culture. In this way, the church exists within and around the everyday life of a place.

For Kuyper, God has called the institutional church to *announce* the good news of God's renewing love in Jesus Christ. It does this, he argued, in four ways: preaching, sacraments, discipleship and diaconal acts of service and mercy. On the other hand, God has called the organic church – the church of everyday Christian





faithfulness – to *embody* the good news of God's love in Jesus Christ in every sphere of human activity.

For example, the institutional church is called to announce Jesus' message that is the means of renewing the whole human person before God and re-orienting them to their neighbour in love and service. In this mode, while relevantly addressed to its context, the church's public announcement must remain free from all ideology, partisanship or policy-level specificity. It simply lacks the insight or the divine authority to proclaim on such matters, despite the personal or professional competence church representatives may have.

But for the Christian who leaves the pew on Sunday for the pavement on Monday, it is now their calling to profoundly inhabit the world at the everyday level of neighbourhood or career. Here they wrestle to discern how best to live and work for human and creational renewal and flourishing, bringing all their education, training, experience and insight to their task. Every Christian should envision themselves as called to a holy (and, at times, prophetic) service for God and neighbour through every calling and career.

Church as Sacrament

Where Kuyper turned to "institution/organism" to understand the church's bimodal public presence in the world, Vatican Council II used the concept of "sacrament." A sacrament is a *sign* of God's grace as a present reality as well as an *instrument* for administering and advancing God's grace. So it is with the church. The church is a *sign* that God's grace is at work in the world. The church is also the *means* by which God's grace is extended in the world. In this way, Vatican II (*Lumen Gentium*) called the church the "universal sacrament" because all other forms of grace flow to God's people and the world from this central font.

Seen in this way, God gifts and calls the church to announce and embody a *public* theology: in every part of creation, the church lives before the gracious face of God and announces the Jesus message, which reconciles the world to God and neighbour and is for the "healing of the nations" (Rev 22:2).

Eugene Peterson's *The Message* captures this same vision when paraphrasing Romans 12:1: "Take your everyday, ordinary life – your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life – and place it before God as an offering." It is the church's gift and calling to occupy this public place in God's creation: to announce and embody this message, which is the means of achieving God's purposes for all creation, until that day when "every square inch of creation" (Abraham Kuyper) can hear the voice of the turtledove, can see the beauty of the growing flowers, and can behold with awe the singing of all things in their creational majesty.

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