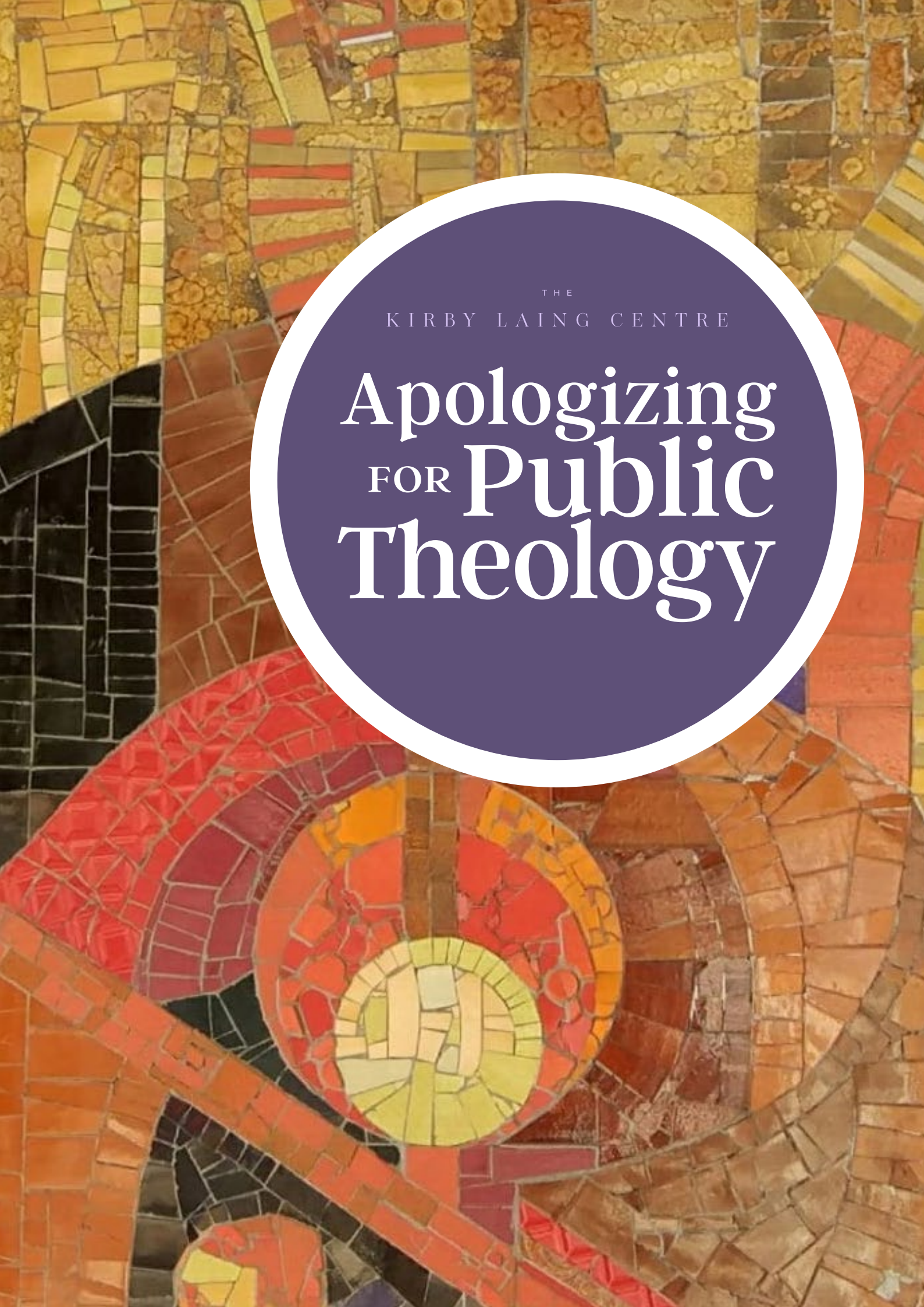

THE

KIRBY LAING CENTRE

Apologizing for Public Theology

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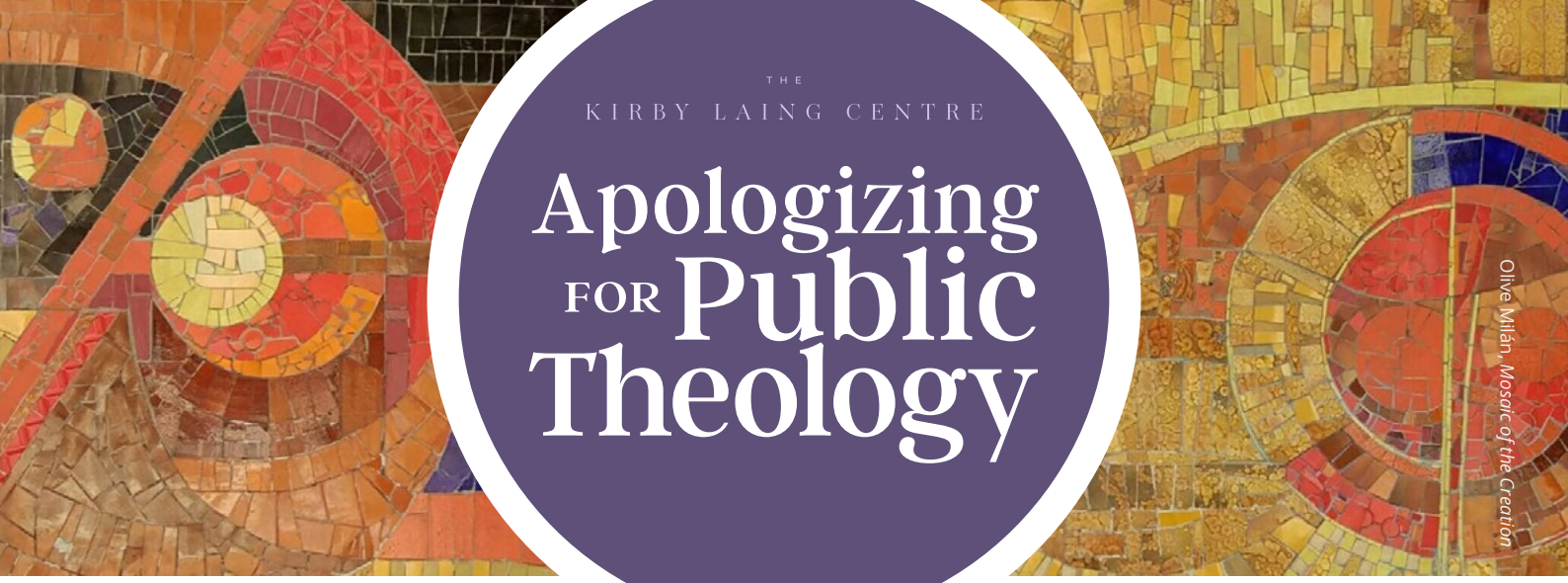

Olive Milán, *Mosaic of the Creation*

PART 1 • CHAPTER 1

What is Public Theology?

BRUCE RILEY ASHFORD

The late modern era of Western civilization has brought about a radical secularizing of the social order, unprecedented in world history. Observing this phenomenon during the mid-twentieth century, Dietrich Bonhoeffer spoke of a "world come of age" in which Westerners have discarded the idea of God and now manage their lives without any transcendent reference point.[1] Decades after Bonhoeffer, American sociologist Philip Rieff described it as one in which society has severed itself from sacred order, leaving itself without a transcendent matrix of meaning or a normative code for morality.[2] Still more recently, Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor refers to the West as a society that lives entirely within the "immanent frame."[3]

With the Judeo-Christian worldview thus displaced from the default position and Christianity perceived as just one "take" among many, an implausible one at that, everyday Christians have reached for biblical texts and themes to make sense of their lives in a secular public square. What, if anything, does the Bible have to say about gender and sexuality, politics and economics, or art and entertainment? Likewise, Christian scholars have drawn upon Scripture and doctrine to reflect upon, interpret and critique public realities, and from this exercise has emerged the discipline now known as public theology.[4]

This is not to say that public theology is new. Throughout Scripture, we see the people of God engaging in public theology: think of Daniel's interface with the Babylonian Empire or Esther's with the Medes and Persians, Jesus' life and teaching amid Jewish and Roman persecution, or Augustine's book-length exposition of the Roman Empire in light of the biblical narrative.[5] Yet, the contemporary academic discipline of public theology is new, emerging only recently from a millennia-long tradition of God's people reflecting theologically upon matters of public import.

Although there is no consensual definition of public theology, it may be summarized as a discipline that arose in opposition to emergent secularism, on the one hand,

1 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Letter to Eberhard Bethge (June 8, 1944)," in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 8 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 425–27.
2 Philip Rieff, *My Life among the Deathworks* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006), 1–44.
3 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap, 2007), 13–15; 542–557.
4 For a concise overview of public theology's emergence in relation to its cousin disciplines, see Daniel M. Bell, Jr., "State and Civil Society," in Peter Scott and William T. Cavanaugh, eds., *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 423–38; for an extended exploration of the rise and development of public theology, see: Sebastian Kim and Katie Day, eds., *A Companion to Public Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2017).
5 Augustine, *City of God*, abridged ed. (New York: Image, 1958).

and sectarian Christianity, on the other. Recognizing that Christianity can and should speak to public matters and that broad questions about public life cannot be fully addressed through any one discipline (e.g., theology, philosophy, ethics) or concerning any one sphere of culture (e.g., politics, science, art), it draws upon multiple theological disciplines to address a broad range of issues and questions from a Christian point of view. God is the Lord over every square inch of creation; thus, his self-revelation scales every height and plumbs every depth of the created order.

Public theology is undertaken from various denominational traditions, across a broad spectrum of approaches, and through diverse media. Yet despite its variation in theory and practice, certain familiar features can be identified from the best forms of public theology. Among these "family resemblances," seven are especially noteworthy.

The Gospel as Public Truth

Public theology proceeds from the premise that the gospel is a public truth; thus, Christian engagement with the world must be total. Resisting the modern impulse to relegate faith to the private realm, it calls the Church to "enter vigorously into the struggle for truth in the public domain … to publish it, to put it at risk in the encounter with other faiths and ideologies in open debate and argument, and in the risky business of discovering what Christian obedience means in radically new circumstances and radically human cultures."[6] Jesus is Lord over all creation, and we are that part of creation whom he has equipped with the power to know and love the truth and speak his praise to all of creation. Thus, public theologians embrace the challenge of discerning God's design for each dimension of life, identifying how sin corrupted and misdirected it and suggesting how it can be redirected toward Christ.

6 Lesslie Newbigin, *Truth to Tell* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 59.

Christian Rohlfs, *Sermon on the Mount* (1916)

A Public, rather than Merely Political, Purview

Public theology recognizes that the broad questions about public life cannot be adequately addressed by focusing exclusively on ethical, political or church-and-state topics. As a discipline, therefore, it differs from political theology, which tends to see government and politics as "the comprehending institution of society and the primary manifestation and guarantor of public justice,"[7] by expanding its focus beyond politics to every sector of society and sphere of culture. God designed the world as a magnificent unity in diversity; our interface with public life must, therefore, address creation and culture in its totality.

The Bidirectionality of Exegesis

Public theology is a fundamentally exegetical discipline, with its exegetical focus directed in equal parts toward Scripture and culture. It seeks to hear the word of the Lord while listening attentively also to the world and its many voices. In other words, "the interpretive flow" in public theology runs from scriptural reflection to public application and from public realities toward Scripture and theology.[8] Thus, public theology has an interdisciplinary nature and an impulse to pair biblical-theological studies with theoretical reflection on art, science, politics, education and more. It is precisely at the intersection of scriptural exegesis and cultural interpretation that public theology finds its traction.

The Necessity of Critique and Preference for Persuasion

Public theology presupposes that Christian faithfulness entails a willingness to speak the truth to power. Satan's antithetical agenda corrupts and misdirects God's good world in myriad ways, butting across every sector of society and sphere of culture – corrupting not only the religious sphere but also the artistic, educational and political spheres, among others. Thus, public theologians go beyond mere reflection on the principalities and

7 Max Stackhouse, "Civil Religion, Political theology and Public Theology: What's the Difference?" in *Political Theology* 5.3 (2004): 288, 289.

8 Matthew Kaemingk, "Introduction," in Matthew Kaemingk, *Reformed Public Theology: A Global Vision for Life in the World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 4.

powers, publicly exposing and confronting them as well. Moreover, in tandem with prophetic critique, public theologians attempt to persuade various publics by setting theologically informed arguments attuned to a given society's contextual challenges and plausibility structures.

The Common Good of Christianity

Public theology is bound to the public good. Unlike dogmatics, which is concerned primarily with the city of God, public theology concerns itself with the common good of all humanity. Whereas dogmatic theologians rightly focus on *koinonia*, a bond that can only be achieved when a people draw upon a shared love for God to achieve a common goal, public theologians seek to foster a more limited *sunosia* (being-together); the church can achieve a common good that society cannot, but that does not mean that society cannot achieve a common good.[9] Therefore, a hallmark of public theology is concern for the multivalent flourishing of society and its attendant cultural institutions.

The church can achieve a common good that society cannot, but that does not mean that society cannot achieve a common good.

A Reversal of the Direction of Conformity

Public theology rejects modern theology's capitulation to modernity through cultural accommodation. Seeking to reverse the direction of conformity, it redescribes reality within a biblical-theological framework rather than revisioning it to fit within modern plausibility structures.[10] The point of its cultural exegesis is to lead society back to the biblical text rather than away from it. Although we live in a society in which Christian categories and language are gibberish at best and offensive at worst, public theologians are determined to speak their native (Christian) language and employ theological categories for the good of the world in a way that renders them plausible and even attractive to the world.

A Preference for Reformation over Revolution

Public theology seeks social and cultural renewal through reformation rather than revolution. Since the dawn of modernity, secular movements have wielded a false anthropology that blames institutions, rather than persons, for the origin of evil and subsequently called for revolutionary measures that purportedly will help humanity take a great leap forward morally. Certain Christian movements, such as Liberation Theology, likewise propose revolutionary measures. Public theologians, however, recognize a quintessential feature of God's interaction with creation, which is his preference for reform over revolution; he works with what he had already made rather than clearing the decks and starting over. In conformity with God's preference, public theologians work with what is given, seeking to bend it toward God's design for human flourishing. A public theologian's posture is reformational.

Conclusion

In John's Gospel, Jesus commissions his disciples with the simple impartation, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you" (John 20:21). Perhaps this brief utterance is the best encapsulation of public theology's *telos*. Public theology is at its best when it seeks the peace of the city by following Jesus' pattern of public interface. Our work will be *prophetic*, declaring that Jesus is Lord and Caesar is not, challenging the *cultus publicus* of our society; *sacrificial* in its willingness to serve predominantly secular societies from a position of weakness rather than power, and in the face of disapproval instead of applause; *humbly confident*, knowing that the realm of politics will one day be raised to life, made to bow to the King. Since Jesus will gain victory and restore the earth, we remain confident. And since it will be his victory, we remain humble.

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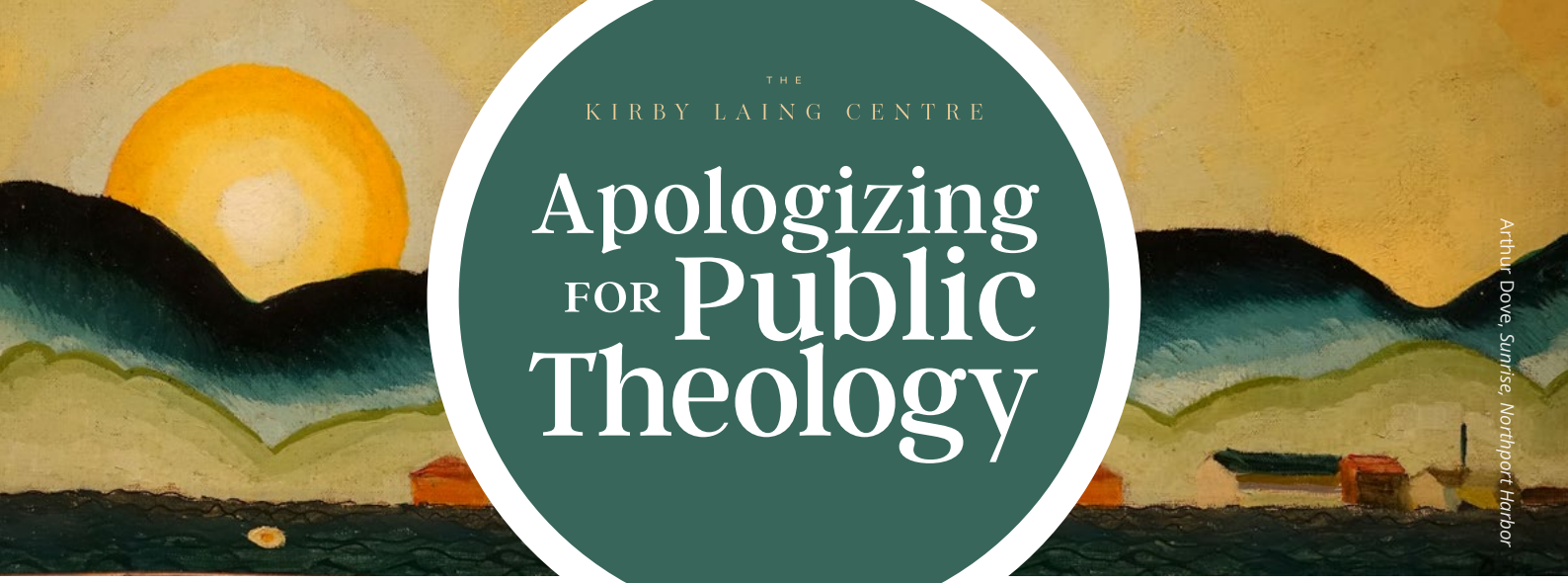
Birger Carlstedt, *La Création du Monde*

9 Klaas Schilder, *Christ and Culture*, trans. G. van Rongen and W. Helder (Winnipeg: Premier Printing, 1977), 55.

10 Nicholas P. Wolterstorff, "What New Haven and Grand Rapids Have to Say to Each Other" in *Seeking Understanding: The Stob Lectures, 1986-1998*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 256.



THE KIRBY LAING CENTRE

Apologizing FOR Public Theology

PART 1 • CHAPTER 2

What is the Gospel, and How Does it Relate to Public Theology?

CRAIG G. BARTHOLOMEW

It is hard to think of a more important question since "the gospel" summarises the message of Jesus (Mark 1:14), and is the message with which the church is entrusted (cf. 1 Tim 1:11: "in accordance with the gospel of the glory of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted").[1] In the ESV translation of the Bible, "gospel" occurs 93 times in the NT. The gospel is right at the heart of the Bible and thus of biblical Christianity. Surprisingly, therefore, although Christians bandy the word around a lot, few seem to stop and ask, what exactly is the gospel?

Mark begins his Gospel as follows, "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (Mark 1:1). In 1:14–15, Mark has a pithy summary of the message of Jesus, of the major themes that we would have heard Jesus preaching on again and again if, like his disciples, we had travelled around with him.

> 14 Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee,
> proclaiming the gospel of God, 15 and saying, "The time is
> fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and
> believe in the gospel."

1 The ESV translation of the Bible is used throughout.

In the original Greek the noun for gospel is εὐαγγέλιον (*euangelion*), and there is also a verbal form of the word, εὐαγγελίζομαι (*euangelizomai*), meaning to proclaim the gospel. "Gospel" is commonly translated as "good news," and it is certainly that, but "good news" easily downplays the enormity of what God is doing in and through Jesus. There are two important ways to unpack the dynamite of the gospel. The one is to pay close attention to how it is unpacked in Mark 1:15 (see above) and the other is to attend to its background in the OT.

Cyprián Majerník, *Refugees*

The Old Testament Background

Isaiah 40–66 is particularly important in terms of the OT background. The word בָּשַׂר (*bāśar*), meaning to proclaim good news, is found in Isaiah 40:9; 52:7 and 61:1. Intriguingly, when the OT was translated into Greek, *euangelizomai* is used to translate *bāśar*. In Isaiah 40–66 the prophet comforts Israel explaining that she will return from exile – a geopolitical occurrence, it should be noted – as God returns to her. However, as is typical of much OT prophecy these chapters also look far beyond Israel's return from exile to what God will do in Jesus. In the NT, for example, the voice crying in the wilderness in Isaiah 40:3 is identified with John the Baptist's ministry. We also find several of the Servant Songs in these chapters (42:1–4; 49:1–6; 50:4–11; 52:13–53:12; 61:1–3). For our purposes, what is noteworthy is that the good news proclaimed in Isaiah 40–66 extends to the whole creation and includes major aspects of public theology. The Servant Song of Isaiah 42:1–6, for example, is all about the Servant bringing *justice* to all the nations. Isaiah 40:9 is followed by a long exposition of God as the creator and the ruler over all nations. Isaiah 52:7 is that beautiful verse that we often sing about:

> How beautiful upon the mountains
> are the feet of him who brings good news,
> who publishes peace,
> who brings good news of happiness,
> who publishes salvation,
> who says to Zion, "Your God reigns."

József Egry, *Poor Man's Soup*

> The good news extends to all areas of created life, to all public dimensions of human existence, extending to the ends of the earth as far as the curse is found.

Isaiah 52:7 is clear that God's action will be witnessed by the very ends of the earth. The words "peace" and "salvation" are comprehensive words related to all of life as God has made it and not just to our individual emotions. Furthermore nothing is more comprehensive than the declaration that "Your God reigns."

The final Servant Song in Isaiah 61:1–3 is perhaps the most interesting because Jesus relates it to his ministry in what is called his Nazareth Manifesto (Luke 4:16–30). Jesus brings good news to the poor, binds up the broken hearted, proclaims liberty to captives, and releases prisoners from jail. The "poor" certainly includes those who are poor in spirit but cannot and must not be spiritualised and thus restricted to spiritual individuals. Jesus' ministry relates to the entire brokenness of the human condition and is indeed good news to the *materially* poor.

Clearly this OT background is crucial for understanding what the gospel means on the lips of Jesus and in the NT. It certainly includes personal salvation but cannot be restricted to that. It extends to all the public dimensions of life such as exile, prisons, healing, nationhood, etc. The good news extends to all areas of created life, to all public dimensions of human existence, extending to the ends of the earth as far as the curse is found.

Mark 1:15

This verse unpacks what Jesus meant by "the gospel." It alerts us unequivocally that the gospel involves far more than mere good news. The OT looks forward to that time when God will act decisively to recover his purposes for his entire creation and bring it all actively under his reign. The good news is that, with the coming of Jesus, that time of fulfilment has arrived. God, in Jesus, has broken decisively *into history*, setting in motion the events that will lead the whole creation in all its dimensions out of its exile in sin and judgement into God's glorious new heavens and new earth. This is not just good news, it is phenomenal news, epochal news, news after which nothing will ever be the same again.

Christ Healing the Lepers

Jesus' coming and his message signal the centre point of history around which all revolves. No part of life is left untouched by the Christ event; it includes all of creation and every dimension of public life.

The kingdom of God is a central theme of Jesus' teaching.[2] It refers to the reign of God, not just over our individual lives although it certainly includes that, but over the entire creation. Early in the twentieth century the view crept into NT scholarship that kingdom referred to reign, and not to realm. As many have come to see this is a false and misleading dichotomy. Kingdom is certainly about *God's* reign but also about *the realm* over which he reigns, and while this includes at its heart the church it extends way beyond that to the entire creation. Little wonder that in Revelation 11:15, in words immortalised in Handel's *Messiah*, at which the audience stands, we read,

> there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "*The kingdom of the world* has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever."

God's reign includes all the public dimensions of life as we know them, and it is impossible to join with the loud voices in heaven or sing this section of Handel's *Messiah*, without taking public theology seriously.

It is important to note that Jesus says that the kingdom of God is *at hand* or has drawn near. The Jews of Jesus' day were looking for one major intervention by God to set things right. Jesus bifurcates this coming of God into two separate stages with an important time between them.[3] The first stage is his coming, largely incognito, which inaugurates the kingdom and sets things in motion, heading irrevocably towards the end. The second and final stage is when he will return again in glory, when every knee will bow and every tongue confess that he is Lord. The in-between time is that great act of the drama of Scripture in which we live, the era of mission, in which the good news is to be proclaimed to the ends of the earth.

The gospel has to be proclaimed in word and deed with all the overtones unpacked above. If we do not embody it in all areas of our lives, our words will ring hollow. It certainly, and wonderfully, includes personal reconciliation with God, but if we limit it to that or involvement in the institutional church, it will not be seen as the extraordinary news it is for all of life. Thus, the gospel has everything to do with public life and thus public theology. To separate the two is to subvert the gospel.

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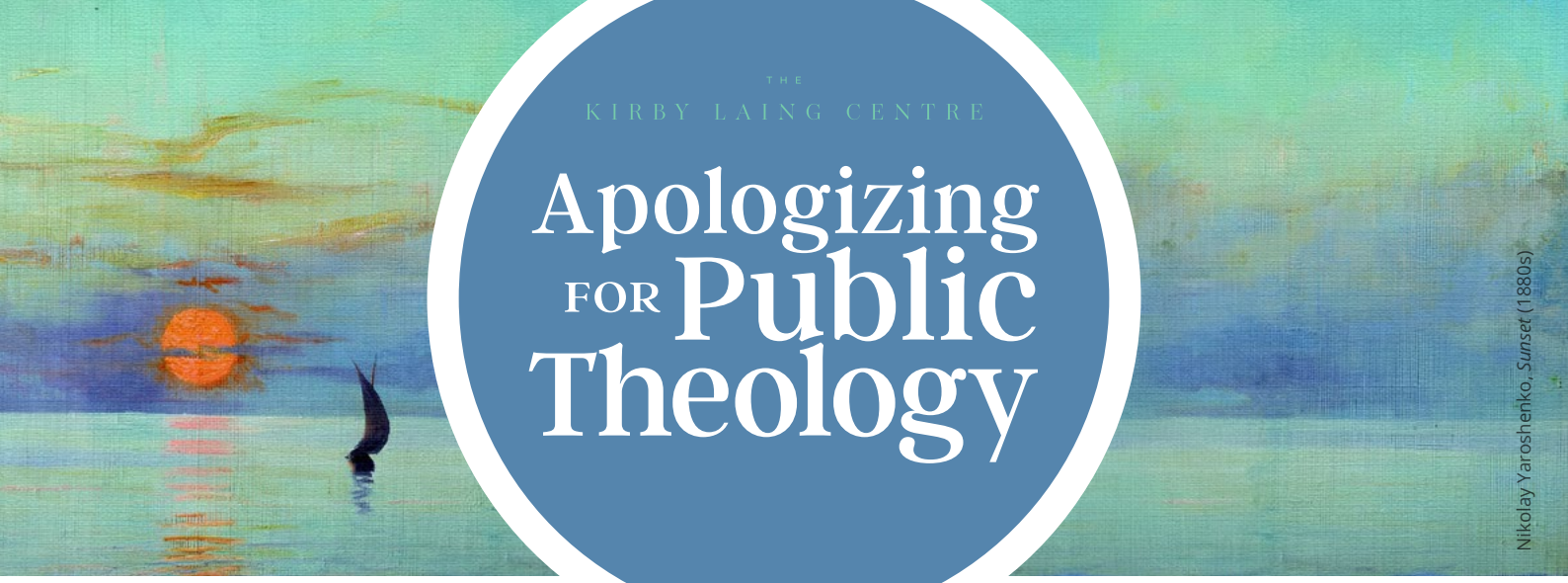
2 Readers are referred to the separate article on this topic.

3 See the article on the kingdom of God and public theology.



Nikolay Yaroshenko, *Sunset* (1880s)

PART 1 • CHAPTER 3

What is the "Public" in Public Theology?

MICHAEL GOHEEN

Public theology is concerned with theoretical reflection on how to relate the gospel to all areas of life, including the realms of politics, economics, scholarship, education, the judiciary, technology, art and more. In effect, public theology takes seriously the famous statement of Abraham Kuyper that "There is not a square inch [thumb's breadth] of the entire domain of human life of which Christ the Sovereign does not say 'Mine!'"[1] Or C. S. Lewis's similar comment that no neutral ground is to be found in the universe. God claims every inch and every second and these are counterclaimed by Satan.[2] If Christ is the Creator of and Lord over every human culture, then every aspect of human life is his by right. His followers may not withdraw into the private realm but must press his rightful claims into the public world of culture. The complexity of bringing the gospel to bear on the many areas of cultural and social life demands rigorous and interdisciplinary reflection that connects Scripture to the public world of culture. This is the task of public theology.

The question is, why employ the term "*public theology*" to denote this? Kuyper borrowed the term "worldview" from continental philosophy to articulate a set of beliefs that underlie all thought and action, including the public square. It was missionally strategic, addressing the day's urgent missional need to protect the gospel's comprehensive scope. Today, it seems the word "public" to describe Christian theological reflection on cultural issues may play a similar role.

All missionaries know that language is deeply shaped by a culture's religious vision. To communicate the Christian faith, one must employ terms laden with religious meaning. Key terms function like suitcases, containing a cohesive set of foundational beliefs formed by a long cultural story. This is how the New Testament writers communicated the gospel.[3] John, for example, seizes the term *logos* and challenges the whole idolatrous worldview carried by that word (John 1:1–14).

Yet to utilize such key words carries both great danger and significant opportunity. The danger is that you may accommodate your reflection to the idolatry that shapes the terminology. This certainly happened with some early church fathers, for example, who employed *logos*

1 Abraham Kuyper, *Souvereinteit in Eigen Kring* (Amsterdam: Kruyt, 1880), 32. This famous statement by Kuyper has been paraphrased in many ways. His comment in Dutch reads: "Geen duimbreed is er op heel 't erf van ons menschelijk leven, waarvan de Christus, die àller Souverein is, niet roept: 'Mijn!'."

2 C. S. Lewis, *Christian Reflections* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 33.

3 Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (Downers Grove, ILL: IVP Academic, 2005).

Tarsila do Amaral, *Workers*

in their theology.[4] The significant opportunity is that it has the power to challenge deep assumptions that have remained below the surface level of consciousness. It can invite others to unpack their suitcases to see what is hidden in them. Taking words that carry a culture's worldview and filling them with new meaning challenges the tacit worldview and invites the curious to ponder why.

The primary reason the word "public" may be missionally appropriate today is that there lies a dichotomy at the very religious heart of Western culture that has excluded the gospel from the public realm, relegating it to the private sphere and individual salvation. The assumption that there is a public and private realm and that the gospel belongs to the latter is pervasively assumed. The language of "public," when applied to theology, is an arresting designation that seems initially to express an oxymoron. To say public theology is to do today what the Hungarian scientist Michael Polanyi did in 1958 when he challenged the presumed objectivity of science with the language of "personal knowledge."[5] Both "public theology" and "personal knowledge" bring together spheres held apart by the religious assumptions of the culture. Breaking the hermetic seal between the two spheres challenges the fundamental dualistic assumption of our culture.

While present in Greek culture, the public-private dichotomy has become firmly entrenched in Western culture with the religious and cultural conversion that took place during the Enlightenment. Before this period, the Bible and the Christian faith carried some authority within the public square as it addressed government, business, courts and other public institutions. However, with the conversion of Western culture to the scientific humanist religious vision, the ultimate authority of methodological reason began its reign in the public square. All truth claims admitted to public discourse must be adjudicated by the neutral judge of scientific rationality.

At least two series of events in European history led to this state of affairs. The first was the rise of modern science in the 16th and 17th centuries, which began to unify divergent views of the natural world. As the church, first among Protestants and then by the more powerful Roman Catholic church, challenged the new science, the

4 Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *Christian Philosophy: A Systematic and Narrative Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 65.

5 Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Toward a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

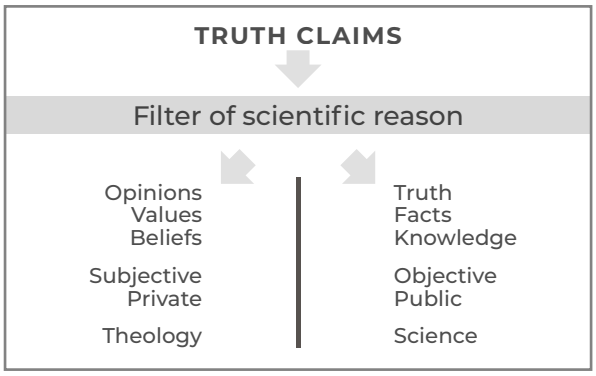
Edvard Munch, *Workers Returning Home* (1920)

Bible increasingly lost credibility among the educated classes of Europe.

The second was the religious wars of the same period between the various confessional factions of the Christian faith. As Europe was soaked with the blood of Christians killing one another over their differing beliefs, many were sickened by the violent spectacle and turned away from the gospel as a message that could provide a unifying centre for public life. As the scientific community was being united by methodological reason, the hope was held that perhaps it could fulfil the same role in the public life of European society. Moreover, one way to avert religious warfare was to relegate the Christian faith to the private square where it could not incite violent claims on public life.

The convergence of these two trends led to growing certainty in the public authority of scientific reason and the loss of confidence in the public authority of biblical faith. The public Christian faith of Christendom gave way to the private Christian faith of the Enlightenment. Scientific rationality no longer remained within the boundary of empirical analysis but was now tasked to create a new world. Out of this soil grew the public-private dichotomy. And the language of public carries the deep religious meaning of this dualism.

Perhaps this dichotomy can be diagrammed as follows. All truth claims about the world must be filtered by scientific reason. Those claims that can "pass through" this filter are considered to be objectively true for all people and, therefore, facts that can play a role in shaping public life (right column in diagram below). Such facts are accorded the high epistemological status of knowledge. All the natural and social sciences find their place here. However, all truth claims that cannot be so justified are considered to be subjective opinions that a person might personally value (left column in diagram below). Such opinions cannot be admitted to public discourse but are rightly confined to the private realm. This is simply what we believe, not what we know. Theology is located here.



Caspar David Friedrich, *The Monk by the Sea*

This dichotomy is rooted in the idolatry of scientism. In this religious vision, the gospel and the Bible, and all theological reflection on it, are, from the outset, banished from public discourse. They may play no role in forming a just and peaceful society. I may believe what I want about God and the man Jesus, about the world as created by God and human rebellion as the problem, about the nature of human life and culture, about the order of creation and meaning of salvation, and all else the Bible reveals. But these beliefs are to remain firmly locked within my own private life and have no legitimate place in medicine, labour negotiations, public policy or the public school curriculum.

The language of "public" challenges this dichotomy and the religious vision of scientific humanism that upholds it. It says that God is the creator of all things, that he gave the creation mandate and governs the course of cultural development in history, that conforming our cultural and societal development to the wisdom of his created order brings blessing, and that sin is at root idolatry that creates unjust systems which shape all of public life, and that the good news is about God's restoration of the whole of human life, including the public square, from human idolatry. If true, all of this, and much more, has important implications for public life. If the gospel is true, our mission must be to proclaim and embody the public claims of Jesus even amidst a hostile world with contrary assumptions. Public theology can be a significant ally in equipping and enabling the church to fulfil its task.

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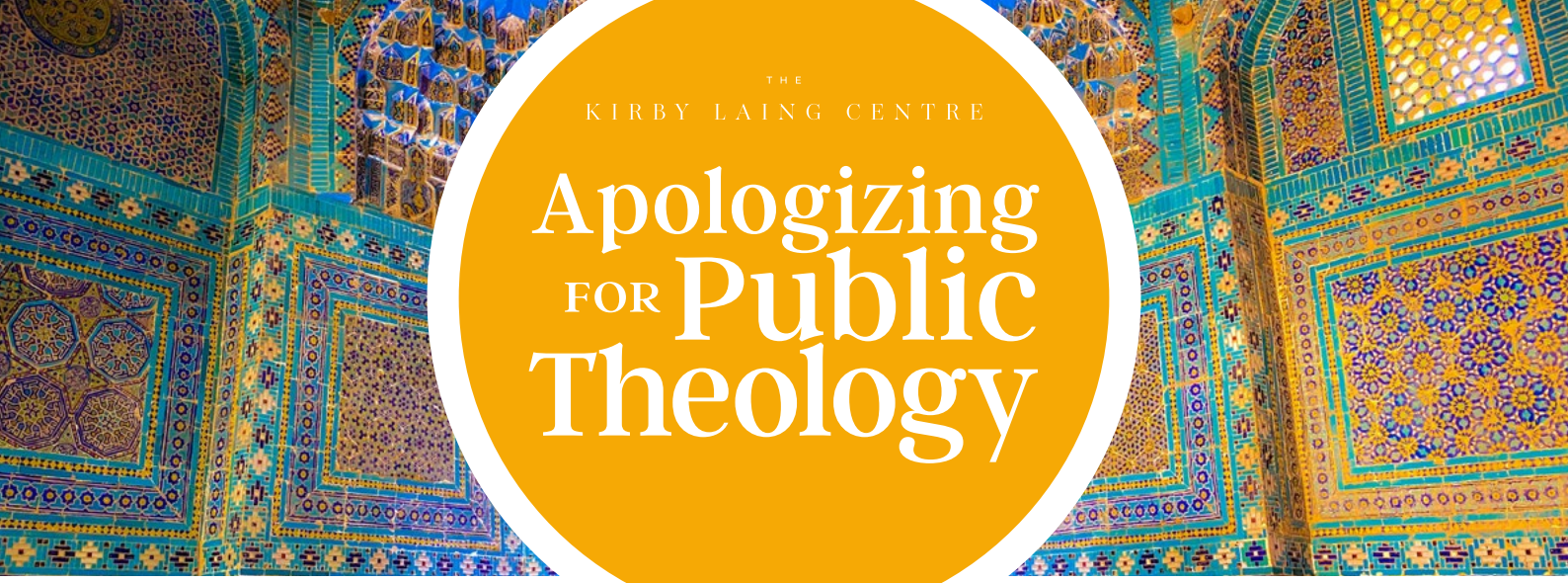

THE KIRBY LAING CENTRE

Apologizing for Public Theology

PART 1 • CHAPTER 4

What is the "Theology" in Public Theology?

CRAIG G. BARTHOLOMEW

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 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, offering himself to us, teaching and instructing us, and sending us out into his world to bear witness to him.

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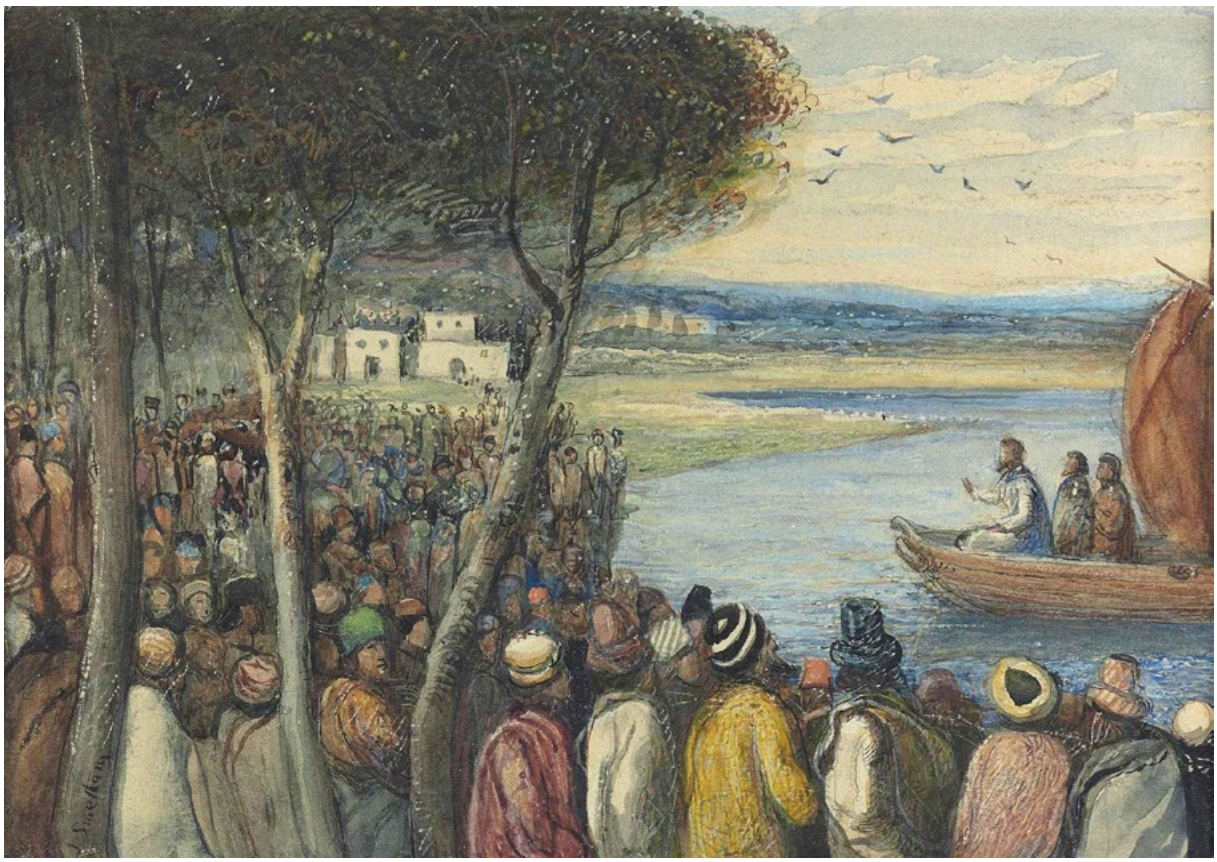
It has always intrigued me that the early converts in Acts "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching" (Acts 2:42). Why? Because the apostles were the *eyewitnesses* of Jesus, it was in and through their teaching that the converts could find Jesus, learn more



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!

Craig Bartholomew is the Director of the Kirby Laing Centre for Public Theology.

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

THE
KIRBY LAING CENTRE
Apologizing FOR Public Theology

PART 1 • CHAPTER 5

What is the Relationship of Public Theology to Philosophy and History?

CRAIG G. BARTHOLOMEW

The title of this article will scare some readers, but there is no reason to be afraid. When I taught philosophy, I encouraged my students to keep a "washing machine list" of big scary words in philosophy, just like "washing machine"! Every discipline has its particular technical vocabulary, and philosophy is no different. Central to any list of important philosophical terms is the word "philosophy" itself. There are many different definitions of philosophy, but, following Kalsbeek, I conceive of philosophy as a discipline that discerns the structure of creation and describes systematically, that is, in logical order, what is subject to that structure.[1]

In this definition, the word "creation" signals that we are approaching philosophy from a Christian perspective, and this makes all the difference in the world. Indeed, in the 20th century, we witnessed and are heirs to a remarkable renaissance of Christian philosophy, including figures like Herman Dooyeweerd, Dirk Vollenhoven, Elaine Botha, Calvin Seerveld, Alvin Plantinga, Nicholas Wolterstorff, C. Stephen Evans, Bill Alston, etc. Other Christian scholars who have done remarkable work in philosophy are Anthony Thiselton, Charles Taylor, Paul Ricoeur and many others. Recent decades have also witnessed a noteworthy flourishing of French Catholic phenomenology, which wonderfully ranges across exegesis (Bible), theology, and philosophy.[2] Key figures here have been Jean Louis Chrétien,

Ivan Albright, *The Philosopher* (1922)

1 L. Kalsbeek, *Contours of a Christian Philosophy*. Readers should note that there is a variety among Christian philosophers. I am consciously using a reformational definition which is the approach to Christian philosophy I find most helpful, although I draw on all such work.

2 See Bruce R. Ashford and Craig G. Bartholomew, *The Doctrine of Creation: A Constructive Kuyperian Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020), 90–93, for an introduction to these thinkers.

Jacob Jordaens, *The Thinker*

Jean Yves Lacoste, Jean Luc Marion and Emmanuel Falque. Central to each of these thinkers is their intentional foregrounding of Christian vocabulary and structures of thought. For example, when I taught philosophy of language, I would use Chrétien's extraordinary book, *The Ark of Speech*, in which the title "ark" refers not to arc, i.e., trajectory, but to Noah's ark! Thus, when it comes to Christian philosophy, the reader nowadays is spoilt for choice. But what does this development in *philosophy* have to do with public theology?

As a discipline, the best efforts in public theology draw upon both Christian theology and Christian philosophy. One without the other yields a reductionist approach that stunts and distorts one's exploration. The importance of theology is evident. But what about philosophy? Consider that, as soon as one engages in public theology, one inevitably encounters inherently philosophical questions such as: What is a society? What are its main components? How do societies develop? In other words, one encounters the need for a philosophy of society, i.e., a sense of the structures and God-given norms for society in the creation. In addition, as one engages in public theology, one confronts the question of how we know about such things so that we can trust the results of our knowing process, the central question of a philosophical subdiscipline known as *epistemology*. One will also need a detailed understanding of what it means to be human, what in philosophy is known as *anthropology*. There are many aspects to philosophy, but these three are central, namely:

The best efforts in public theology draw upon both Christian theology and Christian philosophy. One without the other yields a reductionist approach that stunts and distorts one's exploration.

- *Ontology* is the nature of the world around us.
- *Epistemology* is how we know the world so that we can trust the results of our knowing process.
- *Anthropology* is the nature of human beings.

Any serious examination of the public dimensions of our lives will need insights into these three areas. If one doesn't consciously reflect philosophically on these elements, one will unwittingly adopt some regnant secular conception, a path that, alas, far too many scholars follow.

It is important to note that we are here talking about *Christian* philosophy and its importance for public theology. A moment's reflection will alert the reader that the gospel has a significant influence on how we view the world around us, how we know the world truly, and our view of what it means to be human. Thus, if public theology is to be Christian, it is vital to draw on or develop Christian insight in these foundational areas.

What is the relationship between such philosophy and theology? Both are foundational disciplines in public theology. "In Christ" theology focuses on the gospel and the revelation of God in the Bible, whereas "In Christ" philosophy looks outward, focusing on the nature of the world as God's creation. If public theology is to be faithfully Christian, it will need theology to ensure that it operates out of the gospel and the beliefs central to it. At the same time, it will require the insights of philosophy as it immerses itself in the granular nature of public life again and again. A theological way of explaining this would be to say that theology attends to *special revelation* especially, whereas philosophy attends to *general revelation*, God's revelation of himself in his world. Public theology, therefore, draws upon both disciplines, yielding richly textured patterns and conclusions.

The reader may well ask, but what about other subjects? Will not public theology also need subjects like sociology, psychology, economics, history, and so on? The answer is yes, indeed. Public theology is inherently interdisciplinary and will need to draw from a range of

William Holman Hunt, *The Finding of the Saviour in the Temple*

different subjects and specialisations. However, some disciplines are *foundational,* whereas others are not. We have argued that theology and philosophy are foundational disciplines for public theology. Another foundational discipline is *history*.

I remember well when Mike Goheen and I wrote our *Living at the Crossroads: An Introduction to Christian Worldview*. The final chapter has a series of short discussions on what a Christian worldview looks like in different areas of life – such as business, politics, sports, art, scholarship, education and the home. What struck me when writing these is that you cannot do so without history. Imagine, for example, if you are writing about the significance of *the home*. The ways in which family life, domesticity and the home operate have developed in many different ways in various cultures over thousands of years. When we explore Christian teachings about the home, we will make all sorts of mistakes if we assume that a home in the Bible is precisely the same as it is today. Because we live in God's creation, there will be important continuity, but there will also be differences, and good public theology will need to know the difference and be able to work out positive and distorted developments of the home. Or take business as another example. How we conduct business differs radically from those of the agrarian communities in which the Bible came into existence. We live on the other side of the Industrial Revolution and now amidst the communications revolution. One cannot begin to approach a Christian perspective on business today without a sense of the changes that have taken place.

When we are able to grasp the history of any given dimension of public theology, we gain insight into various ways that dimension has been corrupted or misdirected by idolatrous ideologies or practices. With such cautionary knowledge in hand, we can go back and find healthy historic models and develop those models forward for the present.

Indeed, no matter what area of public life we are attending to, an indispensable component will be the ability to tell the story of its development, i.e., of its *history*. And it should be noted such a telling will not be neutral. It will back one into, at a deep level, one's view of history and God's providence, and in business and economics, for example, one will need to track *and evaluate* the Industrial Revolution, capitalism and socialism, and the Artificial Intelligence revolution we are undergoing today.

Thus, the best public theology operates out of the fruitful interplay of theology, philosophy and history. Moreover, as a multidisciplinary discipline and practice, the challenges are immense. In order to bear fruit worthy of the gospel, we must collaborate with one another to address matters of import in public life today. The challenge is to collaborate with *integrality*, deeply and genuinely bearing witness to Christ in the way in which we operate. This will inevitably be the way of the cross, but it will also be the way of glory and a wonderful way of serving our neighbours.

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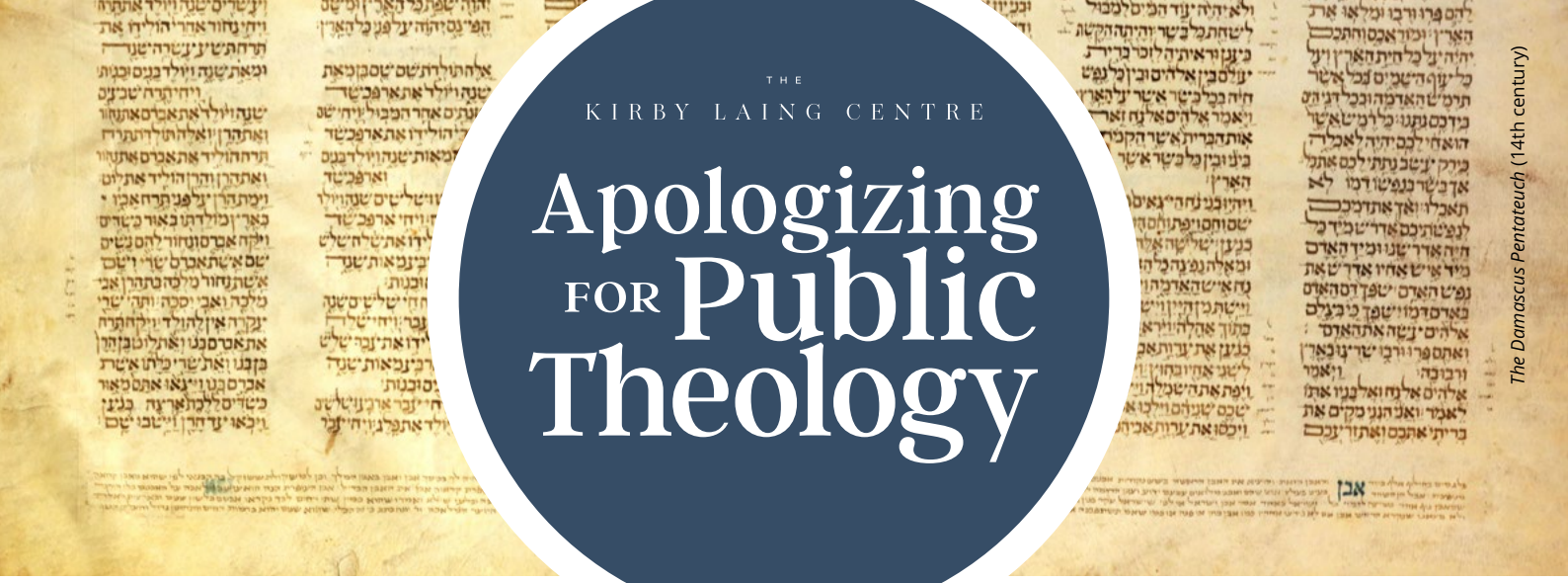

The Damascus Pentateuch (14th century)

THE KIRBY LAING CENTRE

Apologizing FOR Public Theology

PART 2 • CHAPTER 6

How Does the Pentateuch Inform Public Theology?

A. J. CULP

Some will wonder how the Pentateuch could contribute to public theology. After all, these first five books of the Bible – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus Numbers and Deuteronomy – contain some of the strangest and most ancient parts of Scripture. Are we to believe that texts containing things such as talking donkeys, genealogies and rituals are the basis for speaking into contemporary issues such as medical ethics, artificial intelligence and identity politics? Perhaps surprisingly, the answer is a resounding "yes!" The Pentateuch is, in fact, fundamental to the rest of the Bible and, therefore, fundamental to the Christian worldview as well. It does nothing less than set out the origins and destiny of humanity.

Key to understanding the Pentateuch's contribution to public theology is what might be called the two "Rs": humanity's *relationship* with God and its *role* in creation. Genesis 1–2 paints a beautiful picture of how these interact. To begin with, all of creation is depicted as God's sanctuary. The Garden of Eden is the inner sanctum, the holy of holies, of creation, and Adam and Eve, God's image, are placed there with the charge to "guard" and "keep" it (Gen 2:15). This language is distinctly priestly; it is used elsewhere in the Bible to describe the priests' role in caring for the tabernacle space (e.g., Num 3:7–8).

> The Pentateuch ... does nothing less than set out the origins and destiny of humanity.

The language is also royal. Outside of the Bible, typically, only kings were considered the image of gods. They were given special status and charged with extending a god's presence through the kingdom. This meant spreading divine dominion throughout the land by embodying the characteristics of the particular god. Generally speaking, the Bible shares this view. Humans, as God's image bearers, are responsible for spreading his life-giving presence. We find this clearly in the call for humanity to "fill and subdue" the earth and "rule over" its creatures (Gen 1:28). This is unmistakably royal language.

Yet the Bible also differs in fundamental ways. For one thing, the biblical view represents a "democratization" of the image of God.[1] Instead of one man, the king, serving as God's representative on earth, all people serve in this capacity: men and women, old and young, rich and poor, able-bodied and disabled.

1 J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2005), 121.

Unknown Artist, *Adam Naming Animals* (Meteora)

All people have a part to play in imaging God in creation. Furthermore, it is not just a local kingdom in view but all of creation. All people image God throughout all creation. And finally, this ruling and subduing is done as artisans or craftsmen rather than warriors. Since human rule is done in imitation of divine rule, it is vital to observe how cultures depict their gods establishing order. Here the Bible stands alone in the ancient world. In place of creation accounts in which the gods are depicted as warriors conquering chaos through violence, we find the biblical account, where God is pictured as a "craftsman or artisan"[2] who brings order through craftsmanship.

In imitating God, then, humans are called to rule over creation as artisans. This has been called the "cultural mandate,"[3] for it envisions humans incarnating the character of God by creating culture: "Embedded in this human activity is (at least in germ form) the development of agriculture, the arts, economics, family dynamics, and everything that contributes to human flourishing, to the glory of God."[4] Or as Herman Bavinck said, "And this dominion of the earth includes not only the most ancient callings of men, such as hunting and fishing, agriculture and stock-raising but also the trade and commerce, finance and credit, the exploitation of mines and mountains, science and art."[5] As image-bearers, the human vocation is one of "culture making,"[6] of cultivating "secondary environments" in creation, which reflect the goodness of the creator.[7] We find this impulse already in Genesis 4–11, where people participate in activities such as city building (4:17; 11:1–9), livestock herding (4:20), music making (4:21), metallurgy (4:22) and technological innovation (11:3).

This calling, however, is corrupted in the fall of Genesis 3, the first moment when humans choose to disobey their creator. When this happens, the twin strands of image bearing – the priestly and the kingly – become bent and twisted. St. Augustine captured the idea well when he said that, from Genesis 3 onwards, human love is directed inwards rather than upwards to God and outwards towards creation, and the desire to rule becomes the desire to dominate rather than to guard and keep. In Church history, these ideas were expressed elegantly in the Latin phrases *homo incurvatus* (the inward-curved human) and *libido domanandi* (the lust for domination).

From Genesis 3 onwards, humans continue to carry out the priestly-kingly calling, but now in ways that extend crookedly into creation. Instead of worshipping and mediating the one true God, humans now mediate the versions of false gods they hold in their hearts; and instead of ruling over creation like the artisanal God, they rule like tyrants.

Yet God does not abandon his creation or his representatives. Instead, he doubles down on his

2 Middleton, *Liberating Image*, 266.

3 For a brief, helpful introduction, see N. Gray Sutanto, "Cultural Mandate and the Image of God: Human Vocation under Creation, Fall, and Redemption," *Themelios* 48.3. Accessible here: https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/cultural-mandate-and-the-image-of-god/.

4 William Edgar, *Created and Creating: A Biblical Theology of Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016), 168.

5 Herman Bavinck, *Wonderful Works of God*, trans. Henry Zylstra (Glenside, PA: Westminster Seminary Press, 2019), 189.

6 See Andy Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008).

7 Henry R. van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: P&R Publishing, 1972), 7.

intentions. With humanity having gone astray as a species, God now sets apart a select group of people to serve as model image-bearers. To these, he will bind himself in covenant and reveal his ways so that they might bear witness to him and bless his broken creation. This begins in earnest in Genesis 12 with the promise to Abraham, and it continues throughout not only the Pentateuch but the whole of Scripture.

What we find in the Pentateuch, then, is the foundation for public theology, for it outlines three essential elements: the original intentions for humanity (to serve as priest-kings who mediate and rule), the way in which the fall corrupted these intentions (the mediation of false gods and ruling by domination), and how now God intends for his people, as ideal image-bearers, to live before him in this world. The Pentateuch, therefore, sets two realities in contrast: God's intended mediation and ruling of creation and the warped versions of these created by fallible humans. And, as such, it also invites commentary on the gap between these, which is where public theology can make a significant contribution.

Public theology is, therefore, a valuable tool in at least two ways: 1) in discerning the extent to which current cultural practices reflect the divine intentions and 2) in developing practices and perspectives that are closer to the mark. This is true in both the so-called secular *and* sacred domains. Christian organizations and institutions, like secular ones, are governed by humans who also bear the scars of the fall, which is to say, who also tend towards embodying false images of God and misusing power. Everything touched by humanity bears the marks of the fall, and everything ought, therefore, to come under the light of the biblical witness.

The realm of education provides a helpful case study. Across the West, education is now seen as a public good, a resource owed to all people. Because of this, immense funds are devoted to schools and universities, and people spend much time and energy debating the kinds of education that are best. What has been largely lost, however, is the fact that the very idea of public education comes from the Judeo-Christian tradition, indeed from the Pentateuch itself.

It grows from the place where two revolutionary ideas converge:[8] firstly, that all of humanity is made in the image of God and tasked with representing him in

8 See Jeremiah Unterman, *Justice for All: How the Jewish Bible Revolutionized Ethics* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2017), 15–40.

Maurycy Gottlieb, *Jews Praying in the Synagogue on Yom Kippur*

Christian Dietrich, *Jesus Teaching in the Temple*

creation, and, secondly, that all of humanity, therefore, ought to be educated (for lack of a better term) to know and imitate God. This is why the Pentateuch is also known as Torah, which literally means "instruction," for it is God's curriculum to form fallen creatures into fitting image bearers. In other words, the Pentateuch is meant *to form the image of God for the mission of God*.

Fundamental to this is the fact that pedagogy grows out of anthropology. That is, every model of education (pedagogy) grows out of a particular vision of humanity (anthropology) – what humans are *for*. In the biblical view, humans are meant to mediate God truly (as priests) and rule over creation by cultivating environments of flourishing (as kings). Since all people are made in God's image, all people ought to be educated in his ways. Indeed, it was this very idea that led John Amos Comenius, Bishop of the Unity of the Brethren in Moravia (modern-day Czech Republic), to advocate for educational reform in the 1600s. Heavily influenced by the Pentateuch, he argued that all children, not just the elite, should have access to education since all children share in the vocation of being a "royal priesthood" in creation (Exod 19:6).[9] Comenius's ideas would go on to revolutionize education for good, imprinting upon society the idea that education is for all people. For this reason, Comenius is now considered the father of modern education.

Over time, Comenius's vision of education (pedagogy) would remain while his motivation (anthropology) faded away. And this created what we now find in education today, which is to say models of education – both secular and sacred – severed from their roots. In the secular realm, we need to look no further than the university. While the Church is the mother of the university, today's university barely tolerates its mother, relegating her to the corners of its campus in the form of clubs and societies. Beyond the ouster of theology and religion from the university's core curriculum, Western society has gone to great lengths to sideline the humanities in general. This much was made clear in Australia in 2020, for instance, when the government introduced a fee structure prioritizing "job-relevant" degrees. The effect was that the cost of a humanities degree more than doubled, while that of programmes such as agriculture and nursing were slashed. While people might differ on the benefits of such moves, one thing is undeniable: those who specialize in understanding humanity now have little, if any, voice in shaping education. Of course, this is not to say that education is no longer driven by a particular view of humanity, but rather that this view is set by pragmatics. In the case of Australia, the message is clear: what humans are *for* is economic production, and what education does, therefore, is prepare them for such production.

In the sacred realm, the situation is not dissimilar. Consider K–12 education in private Christian schools. At first glance, things appear to be different, with the language of academic excellence surrounded by that of Christian character, spirituality, and worldview. However, upon further investigation, it becomes clear that the curriculum is driven by the same forces that drive the university. We know this because the primary promise of such schools is that their education will provide students access to the best universities and best jobs. If this is their chief promise to parents, then ultimately the prayers, devotionals, chapel services, and Bible classes all orbit around this, not vice versa. For all the good that such Christian elements accomplish, they are, educationally speaking, still serving a view of the human person that is more economic than biblical.

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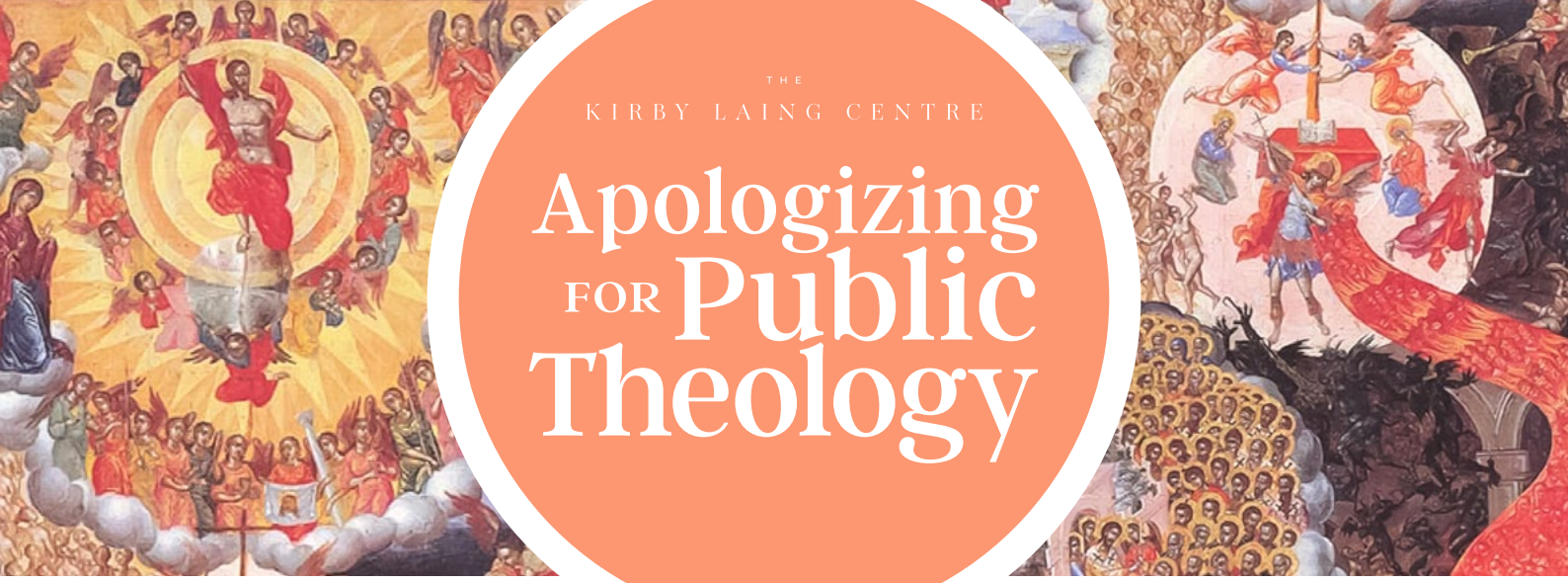
James Rusthoven, *Cathedral at Bayonne*

9 Comenius, *The Great Didactic* (Latin: *Didactica magna*; 1633–1638), esp. Chapter 9, pp. 66–69, and Chapter 25, 231–248.



THE KIRBY LAING CENTRE

Apologizing FOR Public Theology

Leos Moskos, *The Last Judgement* (1653)

PART 2 • CHAPTER 7

Lesslie Newbigin as Public Theologian

KRISH KANDIAH

Lesslie Newbigin was born in 1909 in Northumbria, England, the son of a Presbyterian businessman. His academic studies took him to Cambridge University to study Geography and Economics, and it was at the end of his first year there that he had a conversion experience:

> As I lay awake a vision came to mind … a vision of the cross, but it was the cross spanning the space between heaven and earth, between ideals and present realities, and with arms that embraced the whole world.[1]

This vision shaped not only Newbigin's understanding of the atonement but also his life work. For the next forty years, he served as a missionary, initially on university campuses, then in India in various roles. On his retirement from the Bishopric of Madras in 1974, Newbigin was awarded the honour of Companion of the British Empire.

Then, with only two suitcases and a rucksack,[2] Newbigin returned to England in 1974 to take up a lectureship at the Selly Oak Colleges in Birmingham. The return to England was more difficult than expected. Newbigin writes that the re-immersion experience was:

> much harder than anything I met in India. There is a cold contempt for the Gospel which is harder to face than any opposition … England is a pagan society and the development of a truly missionary encounter with this very tough form of paganism is the greatest intellectual and practical task facing the Church."[3]

This reverse culture shock prompted Newbigin, at the age of 65, to undertake his most significant theological and missiological project – the "Gospel and Our Culture" (GOC) programme. At the same time, he took up an unsalaried position as the United Reformed Church minister of a declining congregation in a deprived area of Birmingham. He served there for eight years and then retired to London, but he was still an active speaker and author for the GOC movement. It was in this advanced stage of his life that Newbigin articulated his approach to public theology.

Bishop Lesslie Newbigin

1 Lesslie J. Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda: an Autobiography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 11.
2 Dan Beeby, "Obituary: The Right Rev Lesslie Newbigin" in *The Independent*, (4 February 1998), https://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/obituary-the-right-rev-lesslie-newbigin-1142813.html.

3 Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, 249.

Three aspects of Newbigin's public theology are uniquely crucial for our cultural moment: the epistemological basis for proclaiming the gospel as public truth, the ecclesiological reality undergirding the gospel's proclamation as public truth and the eschatological credibility of preaching the gospel as public truth. A brief exploration of these aspects reveals Newbigin's distinctive public theology.

The Epistemological Basis of the Gospel as Public Truth

The first aspect to note is the epistemological basis for proclaiming the gospel as public truth. In a programmatic essay, "Can the West be Converted?"[4] Newbigin set forth the contours for a missional engagement between the gospel and Western culture. He pointed out that the critical area of contention in this engagement is the nature of religious belief, specifically the bifurcation between the public world of facts and the private world of values. This observation is significant in Newbigin's missiological project in general and his public theology in particular.[5]

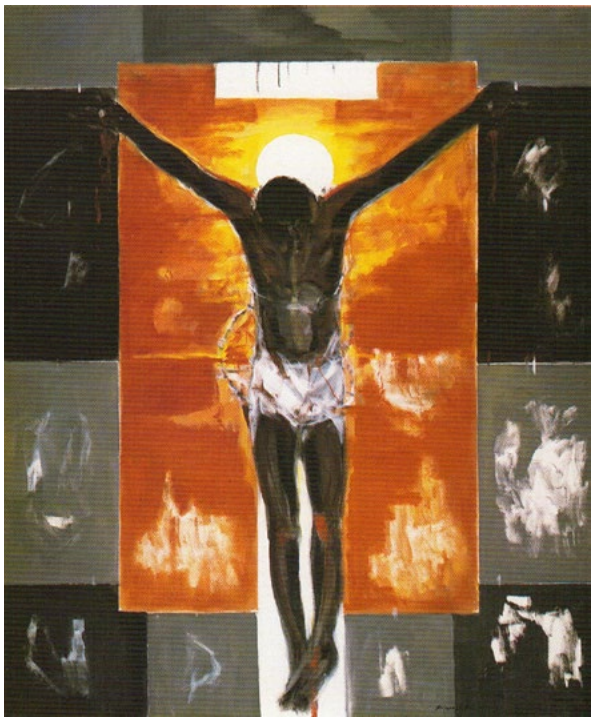
Newbigin rejects the truth/values dichotomy in modernity, arguing that the gospel belongs to the public realm of truth, not the privatised realm of values. Newbigin uses Polanyi's epistemological framework to argue for the universal truthfulness of the gospel, recognising that understanding and justification of a belief is fallible and incomplete and nevertheless holding that if true, it should be adopted by everyone. Newbigin humbly admits that the gospel has not been finally proved according to any modernist conception of objective proof and is therefore open to refutation. However, he also suggests that the gospel is the means through which humans tacitly approach the world. Because of the historical veracity of the resurrection, it can be used quite fruitfully as a heuristic device to explore the world, and it is judged by its winsomeness, coherence and consistency in explaining the world around us.

The Ecclesiastical Reality of the Gospel as Public Truth

The second aspect is the ecclesiastical reality undergirding the gospel's proclamation as public truth. Unlike many evangelical apologists, Newbigin grounds his epistemological defence of the gospel as public truth in his commitment to the church's missional centrality. He does this through biblical exposition and dialogue with philosophy.

4 Lesslie Newbigin, "Can the West be Converted?" in *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 6(1) (1985): 25–37.

5 Newbigin, "Can the West be Converted?," 30.



Ruizanglada, *CristoNegro* (1995)

From his earliest writings, Newbigin argued against an overly individualistic understanding of witness and evangelism.[6] In his more mature work, Newbigin continues this theme, offering the local congregation as the crucial place[7] where men and women live out their faith and thereby impact public life. He writes:

> How is it possible that the gospel should be credible, that people should come to believe that the power which has the last word in human affairs is represented by a man hanging on a cross? I am suggesting that the only answer, the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it. I am of course, not denying the importance of the many activities by which we seek to challenge public life with the gospel – evangelistic campaigns, distribution of Bibles and Christian literature, conferences and even books such as this one. But I am saying that these are all secondary, and that they have their power to accomplish their purpose only as they are rooted in and lead back to a believing community.[8]

In later writings, Newbigin goes on to show the importance of the church's involvement in social issues at a global and local level and criticises those who make the church the end rather than the means of mission.[9] He sees the church as a sign of the coming kingdom of God, with a prophetic calling to reveal in its life and

6 Lesslie Newbigin, "The Duty and Authority of the Church to Preach the Gospel" in *The Church's Witness to God's Design*, Amsterdam Assembly Series 2 (NY: Harper, 1948), 32.

7 Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (London: SPCK, 1989), 227.

8 Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 227.

9 Newbigin, *Sign of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 42.

preach the kingly reign of Christ over the totality of life. This has not only private implications but also public, national, and even international scope.

The Eschatological credibility of the Gospel as Public Truth

The third aspect is the eschatological credibility of proclaiming the gospel as public truth. Newbigin is emphatic that the church must be "a sign of the kingdom in the same sense in which Jesus was a sign of the kingdom."[10] This means the church must be willing to emulate Christ in challenging the powers of evil and accepting total solidarity with those who are their victims.[11]

Newbigin sees the eschatological role of the church as revealing now in its life and actions the coming reign of God. The church should not be content with privatised religion but must be involved in public life. The local congregation is a visible embodiment of the age to come, but its message also calls people towards the new order God will bring about.

Newbigin writes that "the church is only properly itself when it calls people to conversion,"[12] which is to leave the old way of life and to submit to the coming reign of God in the new creation. It is evident for Newbigin that the church can only be understood "in a perspective that is at once eschatological and missionary, the perspective of the end of the world and the ends of the earth."[13]

Conclusion

Without epistemic recognition of the nature of Christian truth, we risk losing the gospel in a sea of relativism. Without the ecclesial foundation of the witness of the church, we risk losing the gospel in a consumer-based individualism. Without the eschatological ambition of the church's witness, we risk losing the gospel in a hopeless nihilism of much of our cultural moment. Therefore, these three components of public theology – the epistemological justification of the gospel as public truth, the ecclesiological location of the public truth of the gospel embodied in the life and proclamation of the church and the eschatological vocation of the church to be the sign of the coming kingdom of God, Newbigin argued, must coalesce to underpin any contemporary understanding of Christian public theology.

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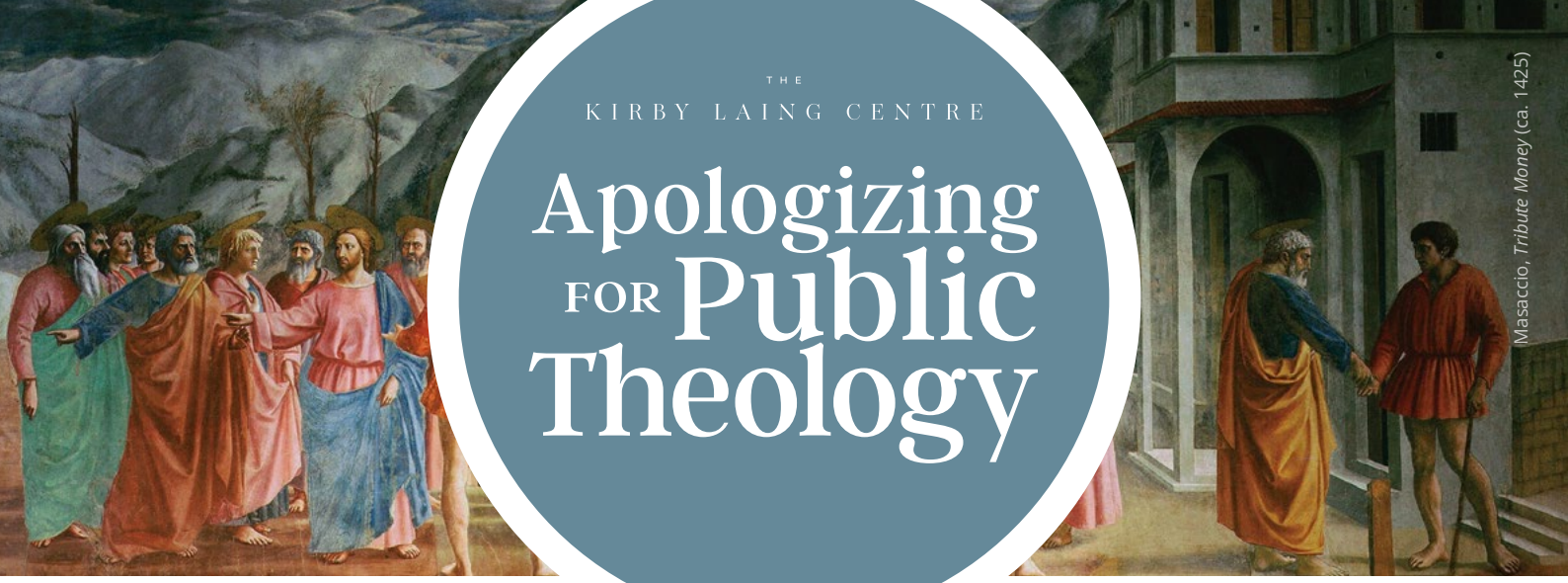
10 Newbigin, *Sign of the Kingdom*, 45.
11 Newbigin, *Sign of the Kingdom*, 51.
12 Newbigin *Sign of the Kingdom*, 68.
13 Newbigin, *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church* (London: SCM Press, 1953), ix.

Ruizanglada, *Piedad Humana* (1995)

Ruizanglada, *Ascension* (1995)



THE KIRBY LAING CENTRE

Apologizing FOR Public Theology

PART 2 • CHAPTER 8

Public Theology and Politics

TOM KENDALL AND ROSS HENDRY

Public theology and politics are a seemingly incompatible pairing. To contemporary eyes, the relationship between theology and politics is neither self-evident, necessary, nor good. The secular sentiment of our age has moved far beyond the Christian notion of the secular, that is that we live in the in-between period between Christ's first coming and his return, to a far more rigid conception of the secular that is preoccupied with the immanent; scientific rationalism and emotivism govern the policy-making conscience.

Even within the church, this view of public life has taken root. Nervous of being seen as overstepping our place, imposing our views, or even being deemed a little odd, the church has been reluctant to embrace a vision for politics in which public theology is to play any meaningful or distinctive role. Instead, our engagement with political questions has often been neutered by the secular liberal paradigm in which we operate. It is not a given that Christians would even embrace a fellow believer engaged in political activity. As Tim Farron MP discovered, it is simply too much of a "mucky business" for some believers.[1] What often seems like a more faithful vision for Christian living in the modern world can instead be a blunted one. Far from challenging the secular character of public life, this represents an abdication of Christian responsibility and witness.

At the other end of the spectrum, there is a prominent and oft-seen belief that we simply need more Christians in public life. The optimism is laudable, but a robust public theology demands not simply that we show up but that our character and content be transformed, renewed, and characterised by the gospel. The secular has little problem with believers being present, but it cannot handle an approach to public life animated by

Raphael, *St Paul Preaching in Athens* (1515)

1 Tim Farron, et al., *A Mucky Business: Why Christians Should Get Involved in Politics* (London: InterVarsity Press, 2022).

the gospel.[2] Whilst this approach is in many ways more welcome than a withdrawal from public life, it gives little spiritual direction to one's political activity or character, leaving believers vulnerable to being captured by the ideologies of the day and the vast array of temptations in political life, with both progressive and conservative bents on display in public life today.

Any Christian engagement with politics then must overcome not only the opposition of a secular conception of public life inherent in contemporary society and the church but also develop a rich and gospel-orientated conception of political life that gives due attention to both the character and the content of political activity. What explains our current malaise and what can be done?

Believers' tendency towards a view of public life that has emphasized and enforced the separation of the things of God and the things of this world is perhaps inspired by a misguided interpretation of two-kingdom theology.[3] Such sentiment is not without merit; after all, Jesus himself urged his followers to give to God what is God's and to Caesar what is Caesar's. Yet correctly interpreted, this passage is not relegating politics to the purview of the irrelevant and unspiritual but highlighting instead the limited and temporal power of earthly authorities beneath the one who is Lord of all. If the mere stamping of Caesar's face on the coinage of Rome is mark enough to justify the payment of taxes to the empire, how much more does the *imago Dei* stamped on all mankind justify the practice of governance and pursuit of public justice?

Contrary to the meek and neutered political character of secularised Christianity, the gospel is not uninterested in politics but scattered with political claims and appeals, notable amongst them the claim that Christ is the King, the herald and instigator of the kingdom of God. In Mark chapter 1, Jesus arrives with the revolutionary announcement that the kingdom of God has come near. In so doing, he makes a deliberate link to Old Testament prophecies regarding the promised King. In Luke, he begins his ministry by announcing the manifesto of Isaiah's servant of the Lord. And in Matthew, he preaches the most famous sermon of all time, which is all about the kingdom of God. The gospel is political.

Of course, this is where one can go dramatically wrong and claim a divinely inspired mandate for one's own cultural or political preferences. Tim Keller famously resisted this error and rejected the co-option of the gospel as a party political tool, something David Koyzis explored in greater detail.[4] The gospel is not political in the sense of calling the believer to party politics, though one can have great fun with Ecclesiastes 10:2. Still, it is calling the believer to a new nationhood, a new citizenship, and ultimately a new King. This was clearly understood by the early church, which adopted the language of the political not in service of contemporary political trends but as a means of articulating the great revolution of which they were part.[5]

Faith in Christ necessarily involves service to a higher authority, as made clear in Jesus' remarks to Pilate in John 19 and displayed by the perception of earlier

2 See for example "Does the British Electorate Mind Politicians Doing God?" *Theos*, (June 2023), https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/comment/2023/06/07/does-the-british-electorate-mind-politicians-doing-god.

3 Theologians such as Augustine and Luther are widely regarded as contributing to the development of this doctrine outlining the separation between the kingdom of God and the earthly kingdom or the temporal and spiritual realms. An exploration of the work of some more contemporary proponents of this idea can be found in Michael N. Jacobs, "The Resurgence of Two Kingdoms Doctrine: A Survey of the Literature" in *Themelios* 45, no.2.

4 See Tim Keller, "How do Christians fit into the Two-Party System? They Don't," *New York Times*, (September 2018), and David Koyzis, *Political Visions and Illusions: A Survey and Christian Critique of Contemporary Ideologies*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019).

5 William T. Cavanaugh, "Killing for the Telephone Company," in *Together for the Common Good*, https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/leading-thinkers/killing-for-the-telephone-company#_edn121.

Masaccio, *Tribute Money* (detail)

Jacob Kielland Sømme, *Lay Peacher* (1889)

believers as political troublemakers seen in Acts 17. Yet this greater allegiance is not a call for the withdrawal from, or an antagonistic approach towards, the world. Rather, this heavenly citizenship comes with a heavenly task: to represent and embody the kingdom to come. Tom Holland's *Dominion* has, in recent years, captured the minds of those searching for an alternative to secularism.[6] Its pages present a tale in which the world was captivated by the rich vision of mercy, goodness and justice embodied in the person of Christ and pursued by his followers, not by an elaborate, well-executed, and well-resourced political campaign. The power of Christianity was unlike anything the world had seen before, and its spread came about through ordinary believers living lives of service, hardship and sacrifice, proclaiming that Christ is King and striving for the values of his kingdom.

The gospel, therefore, not only motivates an engagement with the political but also transforms the character and the direction of the politician, transforming every aspect of political life and reminding the believer that it is not enough simply to be present. The Christian armed with the Word of God does not slot into the existing political framework; rather, they have a prophetic role to challenge the sensibilities and methods of politics as is. They paint a picture of what could be, and what one day will be.

To be a believer in politics, then, is to transcend the binaries of left and right in pursuit of the values of the kingdom that is to come. To pretend that this is a simple or uncomplicated task is naïve – public life is infamously messy and complex, and it can be all too easy for theologians and commentators to critique without ever having to take risks and embrace the difficulty involved in rolling up one's sleeves and joining the political frontline. Nevertheless, believers must avoid simplistic metanarratives and reductionism in their task. It is all too easy to overlook the nuances and structure of Scripture, and to misapply or misconstrue biblical texts for political life. For example, the gleaning laws of the Old Testament, rightly applied, do not demand their application to modern farming, but perhaps do call us to consider how and what care for the poor should look like. Instead, believers engaging with and working in politics need much wisdom, the accountability and encouragement of the Christian community, and dependence on Scripture and prayer, driven by the Spirit. Yet public theology and politics are an invaluable pairing. For engaging in public life, especially politics, is a means by which we can serve our King and work for public justice and righteousness. In so doing, we bring flourishing not just to the believer but to a people made in the image of God, who thrive when restored to harmony with the order for which they were designed.

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6 Tom Holland, *Dominion: The Making of the Western Mind* (London: Little, Brown, 2019).

THE KIRBY LAING CENTRE
Apologizing for Public Theology

PART 2 • CHAPTER 9

Wisdom's Way in Public Theology

BENJAMIN T. QUINN

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

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

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.

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

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,

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).

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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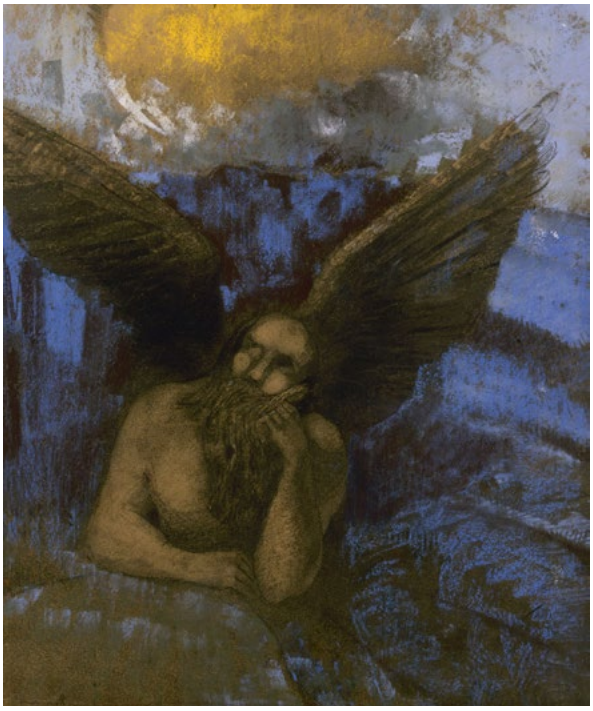
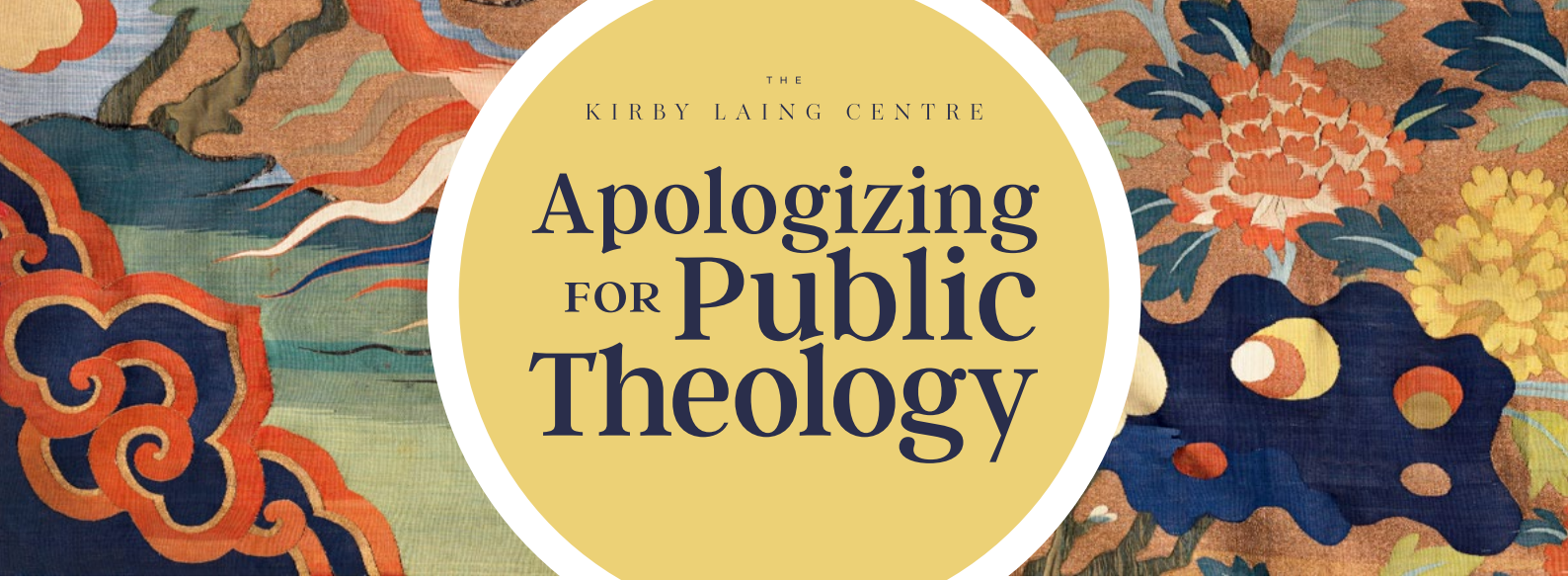


Odilon Redon, *Vieil ange* (1840-1916)



PART 2 • CHAPTER 10

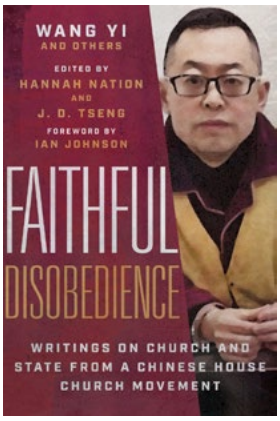
A Public Theology of the Cross: Pastor Wang Yi as Public Theologian

JARRED JUNG

Reflection on public theology has developed mainly in the Western world where liberal democratic societies grant the church a voice, albeit a voice that is less welcome today than before. However, as the church grows outside of the West, often under despotic totalitarian regimes, the question remains whether public theological discourse is possible in such environments and, if so, what it may look like. One answer is found in Wang Yi, a well-known pastor and public theologian in communist China. Wang is a prolific writer, but few of his works have been translated into English.[1] This essay will briefly introduce Wang's public theology and suggest what the Western church can learn from this Chinese pastor.

From Law Scholar to Pastor

As a teenager, Wang Yi (b. 1973) experienced the democracy protests and subsequent government crackdown of the summer of 1989 in his hometown in Sichuan. More than any other event, the June 4 massacre shaped the minds of that generation and led Wang to become a civil-rights law scholar in the liberal-leaning city of Chengdu. However, it was Wang's online cultural critiques that gained him recognition and a wider audience throughout China in the early 2000s. For a liberal-minded civil-rights attorney, public intellectual, and holder of a "June fourth complex," it would take more than an inward-focused, pietistic Christianity to attract Wang.[2] Rather, it was a public faith that he learned from other intellectual converts like his friend Yu Jie (b. 1973) that drew his attention to Christianity.[3] Wang began attending a Bible study in 2005, through which both he and his wife became Christians. The study became known as Early Rain Fellowship, and it was here that Wang began to preach as early as 2006. In 2008,



1 A recent translation of a selection of writings on church and state was published in Hannah Nation and J. D. Tseng, ed., *Faithful Disobedience: Writings on Church and State from a Chinese House Church Movement* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022).

2 Li Ma, *Religious Entrepreneurism in China's Urban House Churches: The Rise and Fall of Early Rain Reformed Presbyterian Church*, Routledge Studies in Religion (New York, Routledge, 2019), 35–37.

3 Alexander Chow, *Chinese Public Theology: Generational Shifts and Confucian Imagination in Chinese Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 172; Alexander Chow, "A Calvinist Public Theology in Urban China," *International Journal in Public Theology* 8 (2014), 167.

Early Rain Fellowship became Early Rain Reformed Church (now known as Early Rain Covenant Church [ERCC]), and Wang became its full-time pastor. However, Wang's move from law scholar to pastor was not a move from cultural critique to quietism but rather one in which Wang reframes his cultural critique in light of Scripture and theology.[4]

From the Pulpit to the Public

When discussing public theology in places like China under the CCP, it is necessary to point out that no critique or assessment of any sphere of society can be apolitical. As the CCP seeks an autonomous reign over every area of culture and society, public theology becomes political by necessity. In this atmosphere, Wang believes in a public proclamation of Christ's kingship in every area of life, even if that blurs the lines between public and political theology. He explains,

> The church will undoubtedly reflect a strong political character in the last days. What is political? As a community, the church operates within a larger community, and the power of this larger community and the logic of public life in it constitute a *de facto* confrontation, *de facto* opposite, *de facto* tit-for-tat, actual spiritual warfare.[5]

Therefore, Wang's sermons do not avoid the issues of everyday life in urban China and critiques of a society rife with social problems. Amid a government that seeks to suppress any criticism, Wang preaches openly to societal ills and yet points to the gospel as the answer to those ills. ERCC has been active in community outreach, seeking to start open conversations regarding abortion in a country where abortion was often government-mandated in the name of the One-Child Policy. Under Wang's pastoral guidance, ERCC held open prayer meetings on sensitive historical dates frequently censored by the government, like June 4. With Wang's leadership, ERCC even began a Christian school separate from the government-controlled education of China. Wang and ERCC have continually pushed the boundaries of speaking into China's CCP-dominated public square.

Central to Wang's message is the belief that the church ought to have a public presence in society because the gospel is a public *kerygma* for the world. He proclaims, "If Christ is my salvation, then what does Christ's salvation say to this society, this community, and the 'walls of hostility' that fill this world? We have something to say to this world, we have action to take regarding the walls of hostility in this world, we have something to do."[6] For Wang, the CCP represents the biblical image of Babylon—a kingdom that actively opposes God's kingdom and desires to supplant God's rule on earth with its own, providing an alternate "Mine!" to Christ's "every square inch."[7] Therefore, in Wang's public theology, as part of its mission to China, the church forms a sort of alternate public to that of the CCP, and it is in the public realm where spiritual warfare is carried out.

A Public Theology of the Cross

Such a bold stance in a place like China will inevitably lead to significant opposition. As one observer noted, "I had been wondering how long he could continue preaching before he would get in trouble. It wasn't really his sermons that made me wonder. Instead, it was that his church was a parallel realm outside the party's control."[8] The CCP decided to act decisively against Wang in December 2018, arresting him and over 100 of ERCC's members. A year later, Wang was sentenced to nine years in prison for inciting subversion of state power. While to some, it may seem that a public theology that leads to a prison cell might not be of much value, for Wang, persecution goes hand-in-hand with gospel proclamation and kingdom

"If Christ is my salvation, then what does Christ's salvation say to this society, this community, and the 'walls of hostility' that fill this world? We have something to say to this world, we have action to take regarding the walls of hostility in this world, we have something to do."

4 For a fuller biographical introduction to Wang Yi, see Hannah Nation, *Introduction to Faithful Disobedience: Writings on Church and State from a Chinese House Church Movement*, ed. Hannah Nation and J. D. Tseng (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022), 8–10; Ma, *Religious Entrepreneurism*, 23–41.

5 "The Cross and the Cultural Mandate (Revelation 11:7–13) [*Shizijia yu Wenhua Shiming*]" presented at the 2017 China Ministry International Three Transformation Vision Conference, Hong Kong, 12 September 2017. https://www.wangyilibrary.org/post/十字架与文化使命.

6 Wang Yi, "The Gospel of Peace (Ephesians 2:14) [*Heping de fuyin*], presented at the Early Rain Covenant Church Sunday Worship. Chengdu, 6 May 2018. https://www.wangyilibrary.org/post/和平的福音.

7 Abraham Kuyper, "Sphere Sovereignty," in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 488.

8 Ian Johnson, *The Souls of China: The Return of Religion After Mao* (New York: Vintage Books, 2017), 60.

existence. Wang's call was not for the church to withdraw from the public square in the face of opposition but rather to take up a cross-shaped presence in the public square, recognizing that in many situations, even the best efforts at gospel reformation will be met with opposition and persecution. For the church living in the last age, Christ indeed reigns, but the kingdoms of the world oppose his reign. Her public mission does not change, but neither should much change be expected by opposing kingdoms. As a result, the church must suffer in the public square.[9]

> "Wang's call was not for the church to withdraw from the public square ... but rather to take up a cross-shaped presence in the public square, recognizing that in many situations, even the best efforts at gospel reformation will be met with opposition and persecution."

It is perhaps this grasp of public theology that sets Wang Yi apart from public theologians in the Western world. Wang's public theology is one of bold kingdom proclamation, not only to the church but to all areas of society, with the expectation of suffering rather than victory. In this way, Wang presents a public theology that is perhaps better suited today for the global church, where a geographical and ethnic shift in majority Christianity increasingly places Christians in the crosshairs of hostile regimes. At the same time, Wang's public theology also gives a prophetic shape to public-theological discourse in a Western church that experiences increasing hostility in what was once a relatively friendly public square. In the Sermon on the Mount, Christ speaks both of persecution and of being salt and light in back-to-back sentences (Matt 5:11–13). Rather than escaping suffering, Wang has chosen to endure it for the sake of the proclamation of the gospel as truth for all people in every part of society and life.

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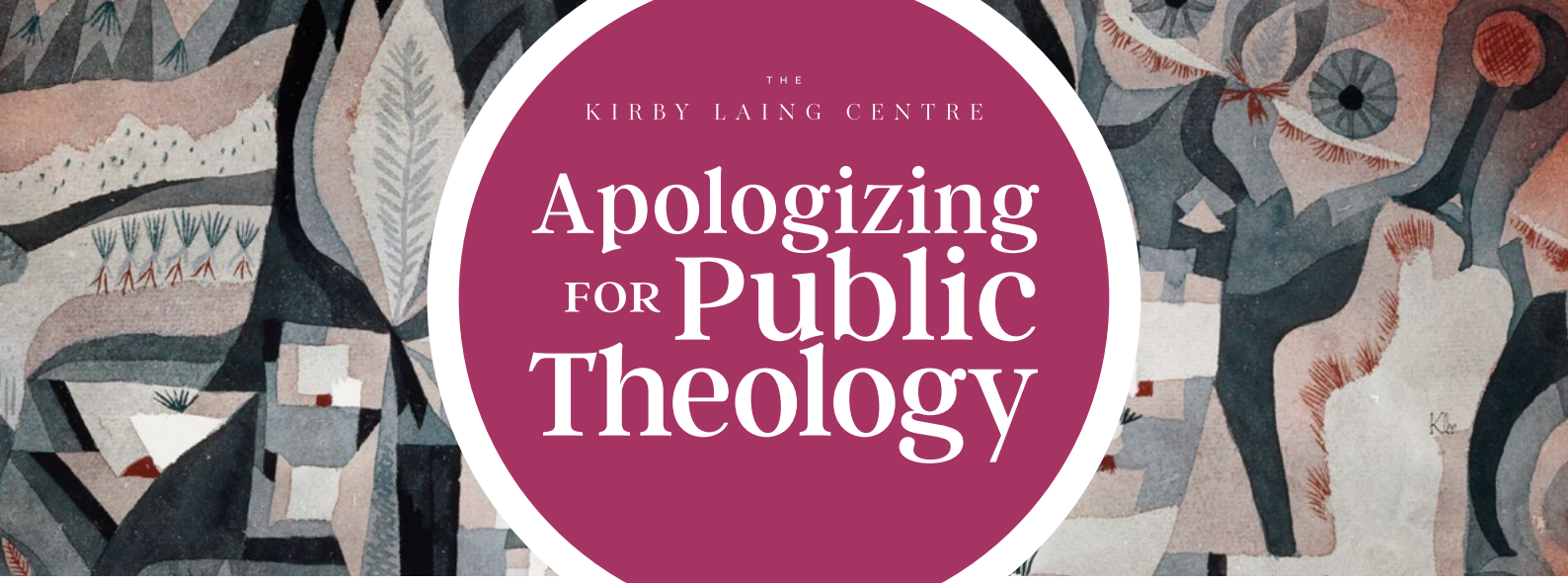
9 For the clearest presentation of his theology at this point, see Wang's three-sermon series "The Cross and the Cultural Mandate;" "Conservatism and the Cultural Mandate (Jude 18–25) [Baoshou Zhuyi yu Wenhua Shiming] presented at the 2017 China Ministry International Three Transformation Vision Conference, Hong Kong, 12 September 2017, https://www.wangyilibrary.org/post/保守主义与文化使命; and " Eschatology and the Cultural Mandate (Revelation 21:3–8) [*Moshilun yu Wenhua Shiming*]" presented at the 2017 China Ministry International Three Transformation Vision Conference Hong Kong, 12 September 2017. https://www.wangyilibrary.org/post/末世论与文化使命.



THE KIRBY LAING CENTRE

Apologizing FOR Public Theology

Paul Klee, *Dry Cooler Garden* (1921)

PART 2 • CHAPTER 11

Public Theology and Place (and Good Placemaking)

DAVID LARSEN

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."[1] 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."[2] The concept of time is difficult to pin down.

Mircea Eliade argued that ancient Judaism was the 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.[3] Most scholars today concede that biblical time has a linear, purposeful element. The same can be said 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.

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.[4]

As with time, the definition of place is challenging.

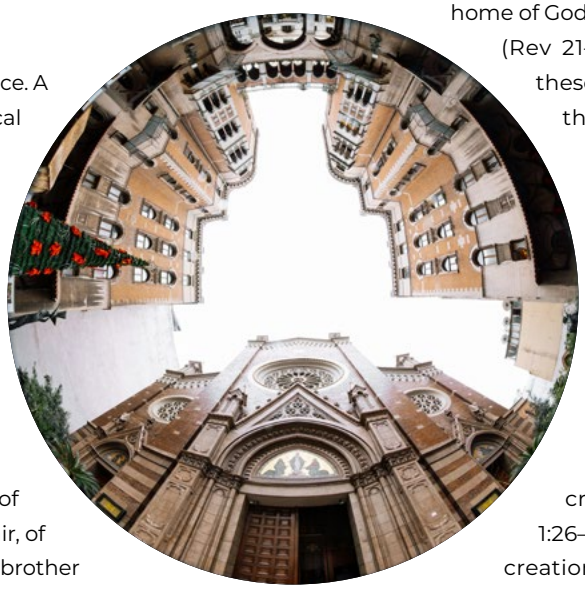
1 Augustine, *Confessions*, Book 11, Chp 14.

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

3 Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, trans by Williard 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.

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."[5]

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.[6] 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.[7] 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, *'eretz,* "earth, land") that God had just completed.[8] "Be fruitful, multiply, and fill *'eretz*. Subdue her and rule over all of her living residents." Thus, the humans' task was to continue making placial changes to *'eretz*, 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.[9]

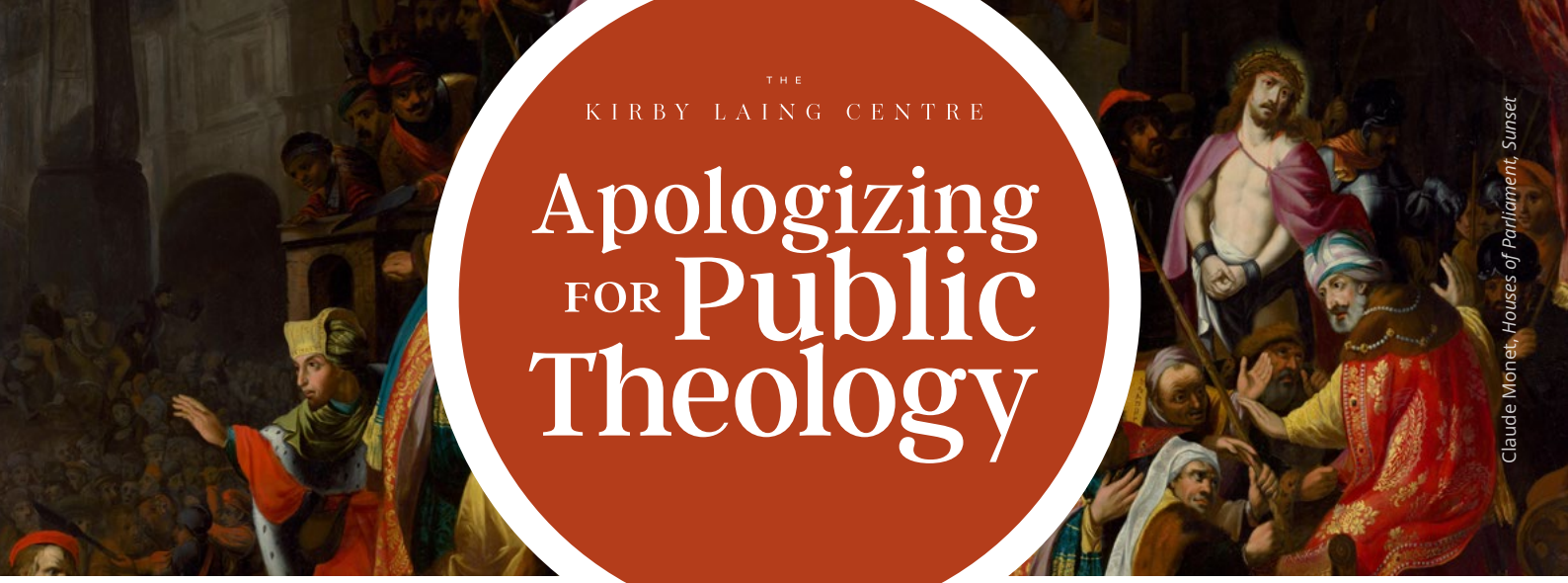
Viewed in this light, missional success is measured by the good placial changes that humans will make to the homeland of God.[10] Furthermore, in light of the magnitude of the earth's locale and in light of the rest of the canon's story about human sin, this command to "be fruitful, multiply, and fill" 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.

David Larsen is the Director of KLC's Scripture Collective, overseeing four seminars and our annual meal during SBL/AAR/IBR. Dr Larsen has recently written on the topic of placemaking, The Place of God at the Bookends of the Bible.



THE KIRBY LAING CENTRE

Apologizing FOR Public Theology

PART 2 • CHAPTER 12

How Does the Doctrine of Atonement Inform Public Theology?

ANDREW P. CAMPBELL

In a world grappling with issues of justice, wrongdoing and reconciliation, Christian theology offers a profound lens through which to view and address these challenges. Central to this perspective is the doctrine of atonement, which speaks not only to personal forgiveness but to the heart of public accountability and societal restoration. How can a doctrine that focuses on sin, redemption and forgiveness inform our collective approach to justice and healing in the public square? This essay explores how atonement theology, rooted in both the demands of justice and the promise of restoration, provides a robust framework for confronting sin's horizontal dimension – our wrongs against one another. By engaging with atonement models and biblical perspectives, we will see how this theology upholds the dignity of victims, insists on accountability for perpetrators and ultimately calls us toward a vision of justice tempered with mercy. Through this lens, public theology gains a powerful resource for building a society that values both truth and grace.

Sin and the upholding of victims

Sin has a vertical (human-God) and horizontal (human-human) dimension. The words of the prodigal son are, "I have sinned against heaven and before you" (Luke 15:21). Human beings sin against one another and God, and so atonement theology speaks not only to the issue of vertical sin but horizontal sin as well, reflecting the worth of the victims of sin. It is the horizontal dimension on which this article focuses.

In his treatise on the incarnation and atonement, Saint Anselm says, "You have not yet considered how heavy the weight of sin is."[1]

1 Anselm of Canterbury, *The Major Works*, ed. Brian Davies and G. R. Evans (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 305.

Recent rejections of atonement theories such as penal substitution have been based upon a rejection of the wrath of God. Yet Miroslav Volf offers an important corrective:

> My last resistance to the idea of God's wrath was a casualty of the war in the former Yugoslavia, the region from which I come. According to some estimates, 200,000 people were killed and over 3,000,000 were displaced. *My* villages and cities were destroyed, *my* people shelled day in and day out, some of them brutalized beyond imagination, and I could not imagine God not being angry. Or think of Rwanda in the last decade of the past century, where 800,000 people were hacked to death in one hundred days! How did God react to the carnage? … Though I used to complain about the indecency of the idea of God's wrath, I came to think that I would have to rebel against a God who *wasn't* wrathful at the sight of the world's evil. God isn't wrathful in spite of being love. God is wrathful *because* God is love.[2]

Few would question Volf's demands for justice or his sense of righteous anger. Wrath, when read from the position of such extreme wrongdoing and oppression, is a preferred outcome.

There is a human need to see wrongdoing held to account and injustice corrected. The cries of the Psalmist echo this need. For example, in Psalm 72, we hear such a call for justice as he implores God to protect the poor: "May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor."[3] A similar call to God is echoed in Psalm 94:

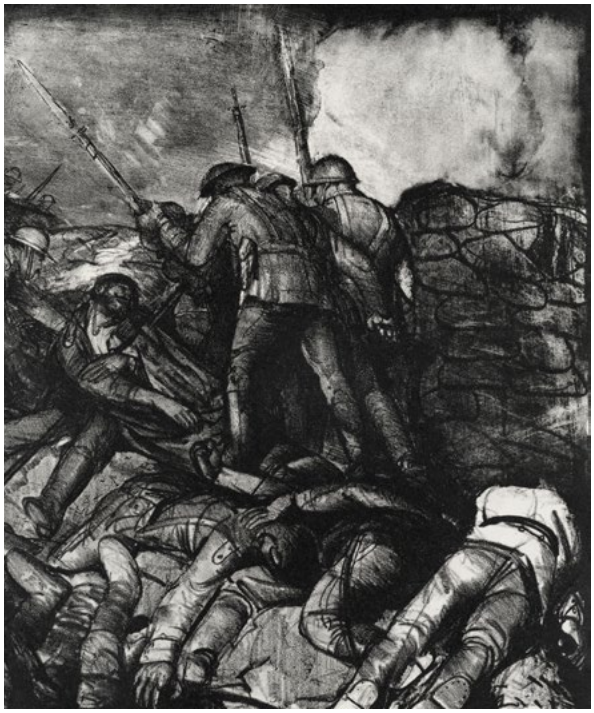
> O LORD, you God of vengeance,
> you God of vengeance, shine forth!
> Rise up, O judge of the earth;
> give to the proud what they deserve!
> O LORD, how long shall the wicked,
> how long shall the wicked exult?
> They pour out their arrogant words;
> all the evildoers boast.
> They crush your people, O LORD,
> and afflict your heritage.
> They kill the widow and the stranger,
> they murder the orphan,
> and they say, "The LORD does not see;
> the God of Jacob does not perceive."
> … He who disciplines the nations,
> he who teaches knowledge to humankind,
> does he not chastise?[4]

Proverbs 17:5 reads similarly: "Those who mock the poor insult their Maker; those who are glad at calamity will not go unpunished." The cry for justice continues in the New Testament, as in the Revelation of St John, where the oppressed and persecuted church cries out, "Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?"[5] These passages speak to a human need for divine justice, a need picked up by Rachael Denhollander while reflecting on her own experience as a victim of abuse. In *What is a Girl Worth*, Denhollander writes, "If God was really perfect – which I believed Him to be – He'd be wrong to act as if bad things weren't really bad or could be erased by doing nice things. I knew God hates sin."[6] Later, writing with her husband, Denhollander comments: "In short, the wrath of God vindicates the victim of abuse and stands against the unrighteous, self-centred abuser."[7]

> "In short, the wrath of God vindicates the victim of abuse and stands against the unrighteous, self-centred abuser."
> – RACHAEL DENHOLLANDER

2 Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 139.
3 Psalm 72:4.

4 Psalm 94:1-10.
5 Revelation 6:10. See also Psalms, 13:1; 35:1-28; 89:46; 103:6, Proverbs 22:22-23, Isaiah 10:1-3; 30:12-13; 49:26, Jeremiah 50:33-34, Amos 2:6; 5:11.
6 Rachael Denhollander, *What Is a Girl Worth?* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2019), 99.
7 https://www.fathommag.com/stories/justice-the-foundation-of-a-christian-approach-to-abuse.



George Wesley Bellows, *The Charge* (detail, 1918)

Similarly, the doctrine of atonement brings to public theology a statement about the worth of victims and the need for justice. Throughout all systems of atonement, the question of human sin is paramount. Regardless of which model of atonement one subscribes to, there is a recognition of the "weight of sin," to use Anselm's phase. This is particularly strong in objective models that require an action to atone for such sins. In Ransom and *Christus Victor* models, sin brings entrapment and slavery to Satan. In Penal Substitution, it brings punishment. In all cases, our failure to treat our fellow human beings according to their value as human beings brings with it divine consequences. These consequences reflect the divinely given value that God places upon the victim, even if justice escapes them in this life.

Such models not only speak to the value and worth of victims, providing them with a hope of justice, but also bring to bear the need for any society created in the image of God to hold wrongdoing and injustice to account. However, even our dispensing of justice must be understood in the light of the cross of Christ and God's love for the perpetrator.

The Cross and the restoration of the perpetrator

Within the doctrine of atonement, the divine condemnation of injustice is carried out in a restorative manner. Atonement includes condemnation of wrongdoing but also the restoration of the wrongdoer – the *telos* of atonement is the restoration of sinful humanity rather than their destruction. Within historical models such as *Christus Victor*, atonement liberates wrongdoers from the reign of Satan and restores them to God. In substitutional models, Christ takes the penalty that separates the wrongdoer from God, thereby bringing restoration. These models have in common the restoration between God and sinful humanity as the objective of atonement theology. "For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God." (1 Peter 3:18).

Quentin Metsys, *Man of Sorrows*

This brings us back to the question of how our view of atonement impacts our view of society. Wrongdoing must be publicity condemned and held to account – there must be consequences to injustice – but these consequences should be carried out with a view to restoration. Restorative models of justice bring with them both these concerns. For example, restorative practitioner Howard Zehr confesses, "Despite my earlier writing, I no longer see restoration as the polar opposite of retribution, though it should reduce our reliance on punishment for its own sake."[8] This insight is significant as he notes the need for redress and offender responsibility. The process includes an act of restitution whereby the act of wrongdoing is condemned, thereby upholding the victim, but with the restoration of the perpetrator in mind. The *telos* of such a system of justice reflects the twofold concepts of wrath and mercy that we find in cruciform atonement theology. Justice is provided to the wronged and restoration to the wrongdoer.

Conclusion

The potential of the doctrine of the atonement for public theology deserves fuller discussion. However, the judicial impact of atonement theology offers the most fertile field of discussion. I have suggested that the doctrine of atonement requires us to take wrongdoing seriously. Wrongdoing and injustice must be held to account and condemned. However, the goal of such actions must be the restoration of the wrongdoer. The doctrine of atonement understands the cross as the place where wrath and mercy meet. Sin is condemned and restoration is offered. The wronged are upheld and the wrongdoer is restored. Public theology can be equipped with these same principles to bring about a flourishing society grounded in a concern for both victim and perpetrator alike.

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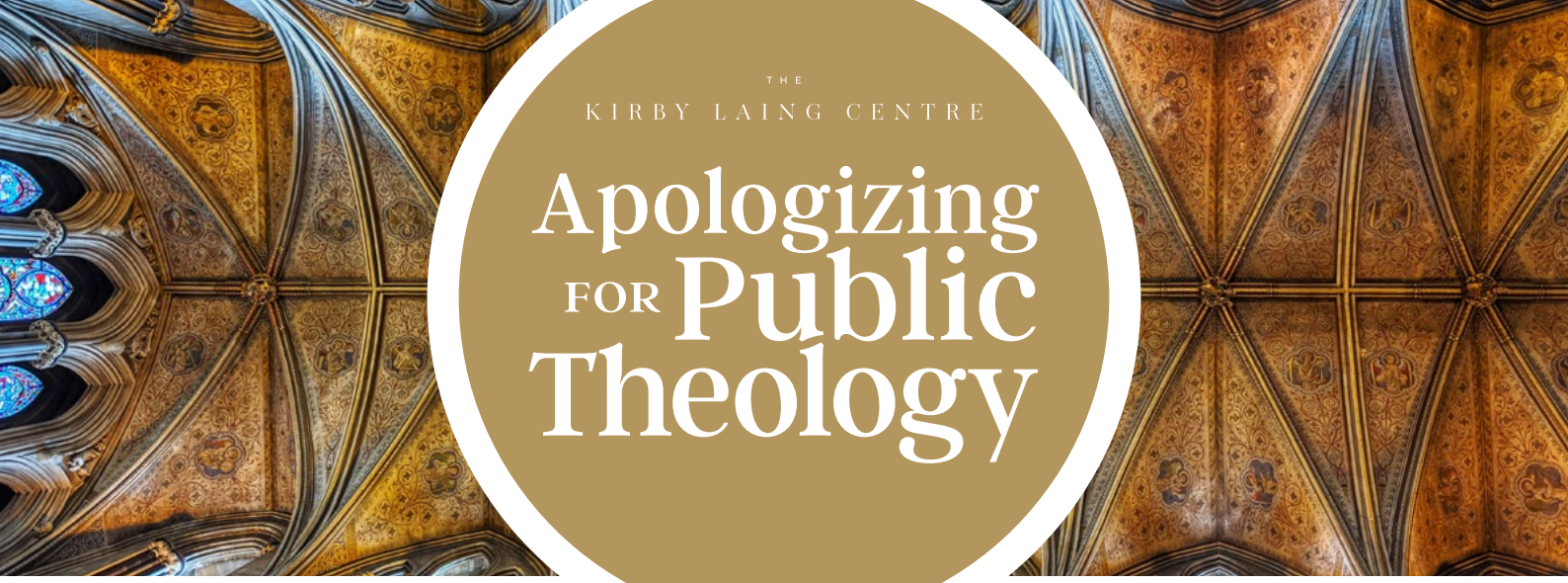
8 Howard Zehr, Allan MacRae, Kay Pranis, Lorraine Stutzman Amstutz, *The Big Book of Restorative Justice: Four Classic Justice & Peacebuilding Books in One Volume* (New York: Good Books, 2022), 20.



THE KIRBY LAING CENTRE

Apologizing FOR Public Theology

PART 2 • CHAPTER 13

Calvin as Public Theologian: Knowing God and the Freedom of the Christian

J. B. KROHN

Introduction | True and Sound Wisdom

One of the finest opening lines in all of Christian writing reads; "Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves" (*Institutes* 1.1.1).[1] With these words John Calvin classically reframed the human encounter with God, setting the trajectory for a work that has profoundly shaped intellectual history in the modern era. Every human activity, every dream, every endeavour, every human thought, Calvin contended, is exchanged *coram Deo*, at an interface with the Creator. For human existence to have any sense or meaning or purpose, one has to "do business" (*negotium cum Deo*) with the Triune God. And doing business with God, our inescapable and central human vocation, is exactly why public theology is necessary.

Historical Context | The Protestant Reformation

Alongside Luther, the Frenchman Jean Calvin (1509-1564), emerged as a principal figure of the Protestant Reformation, and the impact of his thought was nothing short of immense. As the historian David Steinmetz observed,

> there is no Protestant leader in the sixteenth century, with the obvious exception of Martin Luther, who left a more profound mark on Western culture than he did. For more than four hundred years Calvin has influenced the way successive generations of Europeans and Americans have thought about religion, structured their political institutions, looked at paintings, written poetry and music, theorized about economic relations, or struggled to uncover the laws which govern the physical universe.[2]

His impact can likewise be appraised, ironically, by

1 All references, unless otherwise indicated, are from the 1559 edition by John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill, 2 vols (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960).

2 D. C. Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 3.

the measure of the vilification of his character and the scandalous perversion of his thought. In marked contrast, his contemporary, the erudite and irenic Lutheran scholar Philip Melanchthon, saw fit to designate him "the theologian," a title once conferred upon the Cappadocian father Gregory Nazianzen in honour of his singular contribution to Trinitarian thought.[3]

Person | Calvin's Influence

What is the reason for Calvin's gigantesque stature and influence? Trained in law and the humanities at Europe's finest universities, he came to evangelical faith amidst the swirl of protestant ideas circulating on the continent, and, having given utterance to his newly discovered belief, he unexpectedly found himself fleeing for his life. The story of this shy young man in pursuit of scholarly seclusion yet arrested by God and "thrust into the game," as he put it, plays no small part in his astonishing ascent to continental prominence. Appointed as pastor of the cathedral of St Pierre in the imperial city of Geneva, Calvin, despite considerable travail – even exile, emerged to advance an international movement from its pulpit. Twice every Sunday and each day of every alternate week Calvin preached the Word, and it is primarily through this central public medium that Calvin exerted his influence. Add to this his considerable literary output (the *Institutes*, commentaries, tracts and treatises, letters, liturgical and catechetical writings), weekly consistory duties, the supervision of a company of pastors and an emerging academy, and one can begin to grasp the extent of his unprecedented impact.

> Calvin's trinitarian vision constituted a revolution in knowing God, ensuring that, instead of becoming just another schism, Protestantism developed into a new type of Christianity.

Calvin's Theological Distinctive

While an assessment of Calvin's theology is beyond the scope of this essay, one may inquire wherein lay the power of his persuasion? As hinted at in the opening paragraph, *the knowledge of God* was determinative in any theological undertaking. "Today," he wrote, commenting on Jeremiah 9:23-24, "all sorts of subjects are eagerly pursued; but the knowledge of God is neglected … *Yet to know God is man's chief end, and justifies his existence*. Even if a hundred lives were ours, this one aim would be sufficient for them all."[4] Beyond his scrupulous biblical fidelity, we discover in Calvin a comprehensive biblical- theological vision of the Triune God's operation in human salvation. Against the medieval penchant for "toying with idle speculations" (*Inst*. 1.2.2), Calvin favoured the biblical proposition *qualis sit Deus* (who is God), against the scholastic rubric *quid sit Deus* (what is God). If God alone is a fit witness to himself, and is not known except through himself, then the self-revelatory character of the Triune God is an invitation to communion with himself in Christ through the Holy Spirit. Several scholars have noted the distinctive nature of Calvin's doctrine of the Trinity,[5] and that similar to the fourth century, his trinitarian vision constituted a revolution in *knowing God*,[6] ensuring "that Protestantism, instead of becoming just another schism produced by a revolt against abuses in the medieval church, developed instead into a new type of Christianity [as opposed to the medieval consensus]."[7] What is held as *sine qua non* for any *Christian* public engagement, namely the indispensable priority of the knowledge of God, was bequeathed by Calvin.

Calvin's Public Theology: Culture

How does Calvin's theological vision translate into the Christian meaning of public life? In contrast to the austerity and de-sacralisation often associated with him, Calvin saw humanity as inherently spiritual or religious – having innately the "seed of religion" (*semen religionis*) and a "sense of the divine" (*sensus divinitatis*, cf. *Inst*. 1.4.4). By emphasising the value of common grace,

3 For this claim see T. F. Torrance, "The Doctrine of the Holy Trinity in Gregory Nazianzen and John Calvin," in *Trinitarian Perspectives: Toward Doctrinal Agreement* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 21-22.

4 Emphasis mine. Calvin saw in redemption a call to re-humanisation in Christ and a re-initiation of the cultural mandate. Similarly, he did not view creation negatively, but positively, as the province of God's glory; as "this magnificent theatre of heaven and earth replenished with numberless wonders" (2.6.1, cf. 1.5.8).

5 Foremost was Warfield, who noted that Calvin's distinctive trinitarian formulation marked "an epoch in the history of the doctrine of the trinity." B. B. Warfield, "Calvin's Doctrine of the Trinity," in *Calvin and Augustine* (Philadelphia: P&R Publishing, 1956), 230, 283.

6 Houston remarked "that the greatest impact made upon the Christianisation of the world of the fourth century, as upon the sixteenth century, [was] the recovery of the doctrine of the Trinity." James M. Houston, "Knowing God: The Transmission of Reformed Theology," in *Doing Theology for the People of God: Studies in Honour of J. I. Packer*, ed. D. Lewis and A. E. McGrath (Downers Grove: IVP, 1996), 236-237.

7 Gerald Bray, *The Doctrine of God* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993), 197-198.

and the *imago dei* within *all* humanity, he sought to deconstruct the medieval dichotomy between sacred and secular, even finding redemptive value in the cultural contribution of unbelievers.[8] Such cultural generosity was carefully balanced against exposing a culture turned in upon itself to the corrupting effects of misguided worship, recognising the heart to be "a veritable idol factory" (*Inst*. 1.11.8). In terms of vocation, Calvin radically proposed that no single vocation was more sacred than another,[9] or, as Georgia Harkness put it; "whereas Luther had asserted the possibility that one can 'serve God *within* one's calling,' Calvin took the bolder step of claiming that one can 'serve God *by* one's calling.'"[10] Calvin extended this same charity to the arts, despite accusations of being "hostile to the arts" (Voltaire) and an "enemy of all pleasure and diversion" (Douen). In Calvin's wake and beyond the iconoclasm sometimes associated with him, he birthed an aesthetic of biblical simplicity and inwardness that reshaped an idolatrous visual culture. Against the medieval symbolism and superstition of his age, Calvin taught a spirituality of everyday life within which the quotidian and mundane again became worthy subjects of Christian spirituality. This renewed vision of truth and beauty came to flower during the 17th century Dutch golden age in particular. Finally, the formation of the Genevan Academy confirmed Calvin's intention to foster Christian pursuit in the sciences and the arts – public theology at its best – and his followers sought to apply his thoughts to every form of human endeavour: history, law, the arts, economics, literature, philosophy, science, business, music, medicine, journalism and so forth.

8 Deeply indebted to classical thought himself, Calvin argued that despite the fall, "a universal apprehension of reason and understanding is by nature implanted in men … bestowed indiscriminately upon pious and impious, … [and] is rightly counted among natural gifts … this being a peculiar gift of God" (Inst. 2.3.3). However, these "virtues are so sullied that before God they lose all favour … [and] must be considered worthless," the light "choked with dense ignorance, so that it cannot come forth effectively" (*Inst*. 2.3.4; 2.2.12).

9 "[I]t is all one in the sight of God what a person's manner is in this world, inasmuch as this diversity does not hinder agreement in piety." John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries*, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 20,25.

10 Georgia Harkness, *John Calvin: The Man and His Ethics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1958), 179, cited by Leland Ryken in "Calvinism and Literature," in *Calvin and Culture*, ed. David W. Hall and Marvin Padgett (Philipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2010), 99.

Calvin's Public Theology: Politics and Freedom

Frequently maligned as the "dictator of Geneva" (Bainton) or "as undemocratic and authoritarian as possible" (Troeltsch), was Calvin's public theology politically oppressive? Or is it more accurate to present him as the "patron of modern human rights" (Knudson) and "the first stronghold of liberty in modern times" (Borgeaud)? Such divergence in opinion is suggestive of spiritual powers in conflict within the public domain. It is demonstrably true that Calvin lay a foundation for

Samuel Colman, *The Rock of Salvation* (1837)

the separation of the powers, civil liberty, individual and religious rights and even liberal democracy.[11] Fundamental to his understanding of the gospel was the notion of human freedom, and American historian George Bancroft accurately asserted that he who was a "fanatic for Calvinism was a fanatic for liberty."[12] Calvin dedicated several chapters to this subject in his *Institutes*, including a lucid exposition on the two kingdoms, spiritual and civil (3.19.15), and notably, following years of personal conflict with civic authority and its overreach, a final chapter (4.20.1-32) brilliant in innovative ideas and remarkable in its prescience regarding the abuses to follow in the centuries after. Far from utilising magisterial powers to his advantage, Calvin, whilst upholding the God-ordained authority of the magistrate, fought vigorously against its coercive character and potential overreach into the church (cf. *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* 1541). Insisting on the separation of the offices and operations of church and state, Calvin charted a narrow course between those who tended to subordinate or withdraw the church from the state (e.g. Lutheran Erastianism and Anabaptist sectarianism) and those who would subordinate the state to its power (e.g. Papal supremacy and hierocracy). Combining the rule of law, democratic process and individual liberty within both church and state, Calvin thus lay the foundation for modern constitutionalism. In following generations, starting with Theodore Beza, Calvin's ideas were fruitfully furthered by Johannes Althusius in the Netherlands, John Milton in the English-speaking world, and later by the neo- Calvinists, Abraham Kuyper in particular. Kuyper's development of sphere sovereignty and confessional pluralism, both essential components of a truly Christian public theology, are just two examples of achievements rooted in Calvin.

Conclusion | Calvin, a Man Subdued by God

Bernard Cottret observed that Calvin "was a man of order in a world swept along by change."[13] Nonetheless, the caricature of him as dictatorial iron-theologician does not match his accent on knowing God, nor his personal seal of a burning heart inscribed with the motto "my heart I offer, Lord, to Thee eagerly and earnestly."[14] Calvin never forgot his status as a refugee for Christ, and the *Institutes* remains a charter for the public freedom of the Christian. Ford Lewis Battles summarised it like this:

> To many Christians whose worship was proscribed under hostile governments, this book has supplied the courage to endure. Wherever in the crises of history social foundations are shaken and men's hearts quail, the pages of this classic are searched with fresh respect. ... [*The Institutes*] sprang from the vivid experience of a gifted young man amid the revival of Scriptural Christianity that marked the Protestant Reformation. We have every reason to believe that Calvin's convictions were born of struggle and anguish ... it is in fact a perpetually cogent defence of persecuted adherents of Scriptural faith.[15]

11 As a trained lawyer, Calvin was able to construct over a hundred statutes for the city welfare of Geneva. In recognition of this, the other Genevan, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, remarked: "Those who consider Calvin only as a theologian fail to recognise the breadth of his genius. The editing of our wise laws, in which he had a large share, does him as much credit as his *Institutes* ... [S]o long as the love of country and liberty is not extinct among us, the memory of this great man will be held in reverence." *Du Contrat Social* (1762), 2, 7n., in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, ed. Lester G. Crocker (New York: Pocket Books, 1967), 44n., cited in John Witte Jr., "Law, Authority, and Liberty in Early Calvinism," in *Calvin and Culture*, ed. David W. Hall and Marvin Padgett (Philipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2010), 39.
12 American historian George Bancroft cited in Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures in Calvinism* (1931; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 78.

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13 Bernard Cottret, *Calvin: A Biography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 289. See also the influential biography by William J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait* (Oxford: OUP, 1988).
14 "*cor meum tibi offero domine prompte et sincere*"
15 F. L. Battles, Translator's "Introduction" to Calvin: *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1559. It is important to be reminded that every edition of the Institutes began with a petition to King Francis I on behalf of the persecuted Protestants in France, to "defend the church against [political] furies" and against "overbearing tyranny" against which a Christian must "venture boldly to groan for freedom" (1536 *Inst*. 6.55).

THE KIRBY LAING CENTRE
Apologizing for Public Theology

Claude Monet, *Houses of Parliament, Sunset*

PART 2 • CHAPTER 14

"My Walk is a Public One": William Wilberforce as Public Theologian

BRUCE RILEY ASHFORD

The Church's public theology combines reflection and praxis, employing thought and action in tandem. Public theology conforms to the biblical pattern of word-deed witness mandated from Genesis to Revelation. From time to time, a public theologian emerges who embodies the ideal combination of reflection and practice; William Wilberforce is one such exemplar. One of the most successful social reformers in world history, Wilberforce drew upon a deep well of theological reflection – reading Owen, Baxter, and Edwards regularly – to lead Britain in abolishing the slave trade and, eventually, the practice of slavery altogether. "William Wilberforce was someone who took the Bible seriously, and as a result of this belief, he literally changed the world."[1] Indeed, his social achievements are staggering, especially when viewed against the backdrop of his relatively short life and the immense opposition he faced.

From Idle Aristocrat to Christian Politician

Yet, regarding Wilberforce's unwavering faith, it was not always so. As a teenager, he had little or no interest in the Christian faith, instead aspiring to become an aristocratic gentleman in British society. Enrolling at St John's College, Cambridge, he took advantage of his family's money and frittered away his time. "As much pains as were taken to make me idle as were ever taken to make anyone studious," he later reflected. After graduating in the summer of 1780, Wilberforce campaigned – at age 21 – for election as a Member of Parliament (MP), defying the odds to win a seat in Parliament, where he remained an MP for another 45 years.

In 1784, after his election to Parliament, Wilberforce experienced a spiritual awakening. Through conversations with his friend Isaac Milner and immersion in Philip Doddridge's *The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul* (1745), the young MP embraced the radical demands of the Christian

1 Eric Metaxas, *7 Men and the Secret of Their Greatness* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2013), 33.

faith, never looking back. Immediately, he began to view his parliamentary post as a divine vocation: "My walk I am sensible is a public one," he wrote in his diary. "My business is in the world, and I must mix in the assemblies of men or quit the post which Providence seems to have assigned me." He understood the implications of such a calling: "A man who acts from the principles I profess reflects that he is to give an account of his political conduct at the judgment seat of Christ."[2] With a clear sense of divine calling thus in mind, Wilberforce set forth with steady resolve to honor the Lord Christ in the political sphere.

From Intellectually Committed Christian to Fully Engaged Activist

In 1786, abolitionist friends approached Wilberforce, asking him to lead a parliamentary campaign for their cause. Initially, he hesitated, knowing that the economic security of Britain was deeply intertwined with the slave trade. Yet, soon, he came to see slavery as a great moral blight on his nation and embraced abolition as his mission. More than a decade into the struggle, Wilberforce declared this "the grand object of my parliamentary existence.... Before this great cause all others dwindle in my eyes.... If it please God to honor me so far, may I be the instrument of stopping such a course of wickedness and cruelty as never before disgraced a Christian country."[3] What Wesley and others had declared from the pulpit, he proclaimed on the floor of Parliament.

For twenty long years, Wilberforce faced one obstacle after another. In addition to bouts of serious illness – including lung problems, curvature of the spine, and debilitating ulcerative colitis – he was the subject of widespread public criticism and vicious slander. Moreover, he was fiercely opposed by businessmen, ship owners, traditionalists and even the King. Admiral Horatio Nelson famously lambasted "the damnable doctrine of Wilberforce and his hypocritical allies." Yet so steadfast was Wilberforce that an opponent lamented, "it is necessary to watch him as he is blessed with a sufficient quantity of that Enthusiastic spirit, which so far from yielding that it grows more vigorous from blows."[4] Wilberforce's indomitable spirit and relentless perseverance would soon reap dividends.

His great victory came in 1807 with the late-night passage of a bill to abolish the slave trade. Incredibly, it was a landslide victory, with 283 votes cast in favor of abolition and only sixteen in opposition. Wilberforce's biographer, Pollock, describes the scene: "The House rose almost to a man and turned toward Wilberforce in a burst of Parliamentary cheers. Suddenly, above the roar of 'Hear, hear,' and quite out of order, three hurrahs echoed and echoed while he sat, head bowed, tears streaming down his face."[5] Yet, even with this victory in hand, Wilberforce continued to work toward the deeper goal – abolition of slavery *in toto* – until Britain's emancipation bill was passed on July 26, 1833, just three days before his death.

William Wilberforce as Public Theologian

Wilberforce has been described in many ways: politician, political activist, political theologian and more. One description, however, fits him as well or better than any other, and that is a public theologian. Although he certainly was a politician and an activist, and even though some of what he wrote and said could be described as political theology, Wilberforce's whole body of work far exceeds the sphere of politics. From his earliest years as a Christian, he sought to apply the Christian faith broadly across society's architecture.

Anti-Slavery Medallion (Wedgwood Manufactory)

Two characteristics stand out regarding his public theology, informing his lifelong quest to abolish the slave trade.

The first, premised on his belief that politics is downhill from society, is his quest to foster a moral reformation in English society, while the second is his determination to critique and persuade, and the lifelong pursuit of excellence in that regard.

Fostering a Moral Reformation

Shortly after Wilberforce decided to run for office, he recorded a journal entry that would shape the rest of his life. "God Almighty has set before me two Great Objects: the suppression of the Slave Trade and the Reformation

2 Kevin Belmonte, *Hero for Humanity* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002), 96.
3 John Pollock, *Wilberforce* (London: Constable and Company, 1977), 143.
4 Pollock, *Wilberforce*, 105.
5 Pollock, *Wilberforce*, 211.

of Manners."[6] The second great object, the reformation of manners, is often overlooked but holds the key to understanding his approach to social change. By "reformation of manners," he means a moral reformation of the whole culture. For Wilberforce, politics is only one limited sphere of culture, and culture is shaped primarily by religion and morality. Thus, he worked to reform society at the religious and moral level so that a spiritual and moral awakening would radiate outward into all spheres of culture.

To understand his passion for reforming society at the religious and moral levels, we need not look any further than his books. The driving thrust of his first book, *A Practical View of Christianity*, is to show that Christianity is rooted in affection for Christ, which in turn is rooted in the biblical doctrines of depravity – that all aspects of human life are marred by sin – and substitutionary atonement – that Christ is God's redemptive response to our depravity. These doctrines transform a Christian's life and, at the social level, bequeath a determination to take the right courses of action morally. He wanted to "make goodness fashionable."[7] His second book, *An Appeal to the Religion, Justice, and Humanity of the Inhabitants of the British Empire on Behalf of the Negro Slaves in the West Indies*, published just before his death, employed Christian premises and forms of reasoning, urging British society to abolish slavery entirely rather than settling for the mere abolition of the slave trade. Moreover, historical records show that Wilberforce practiced what he preached – his days were marked by daily self-examination, extended prayer, times of solitude and faithful church attendance.

Honing the Art of Critique and Persuasion

Furthermore, Wilberforce employed a powerful combination of *pointed critique* and *humble persuasion* to bring about the abolition of slavery. His critiques were disruptive to the aristocratic class who benefitted enormously from the slave trade, causing him to be the recipient of widespread public criticism and vicious slander. "What a lesson it is to a man not to set his heart on low popularity when after 40 years of disinterested public service, I am believed by the Bulk to be a Hypocritical Rascal. O, what a comfort it is to have to fly for refuge to a God of unchangeable truth and love."[8] Yet, Wilberforce deployed his critiques in tandem with persuasion, using well-constructed arguments, magnificent rhetorical skills and personal humility to win the day: "He didn't grandstand and fulminate at those who were wrong, even if the subject was the horror of the slave trade... [and this] graciousness in the midst of the battle against the slave trade did a lot to persuade those who were on the fence instead of putting them off and pushing them away."[9]

Conclusion

God used William Wilberforce as a public theologian to bring tangible change to British society and the world at large. The world he left behind was dramatically different from the world it was when he entered politics some forty-nine years earlier. Not only had slavery and the slave trade been abolished but British society had been awakened to the necessity of social activism. His direct involvement launched at least four nonprofit organizations, and inspired countless coalitions and networks. Through his indirect influence, the entire Western world was reawakened to the biblical idea that fortunate people should use their privilege to help those less fortunate. For Wilberforce, therefore, his walk was a public one, as was his theology.

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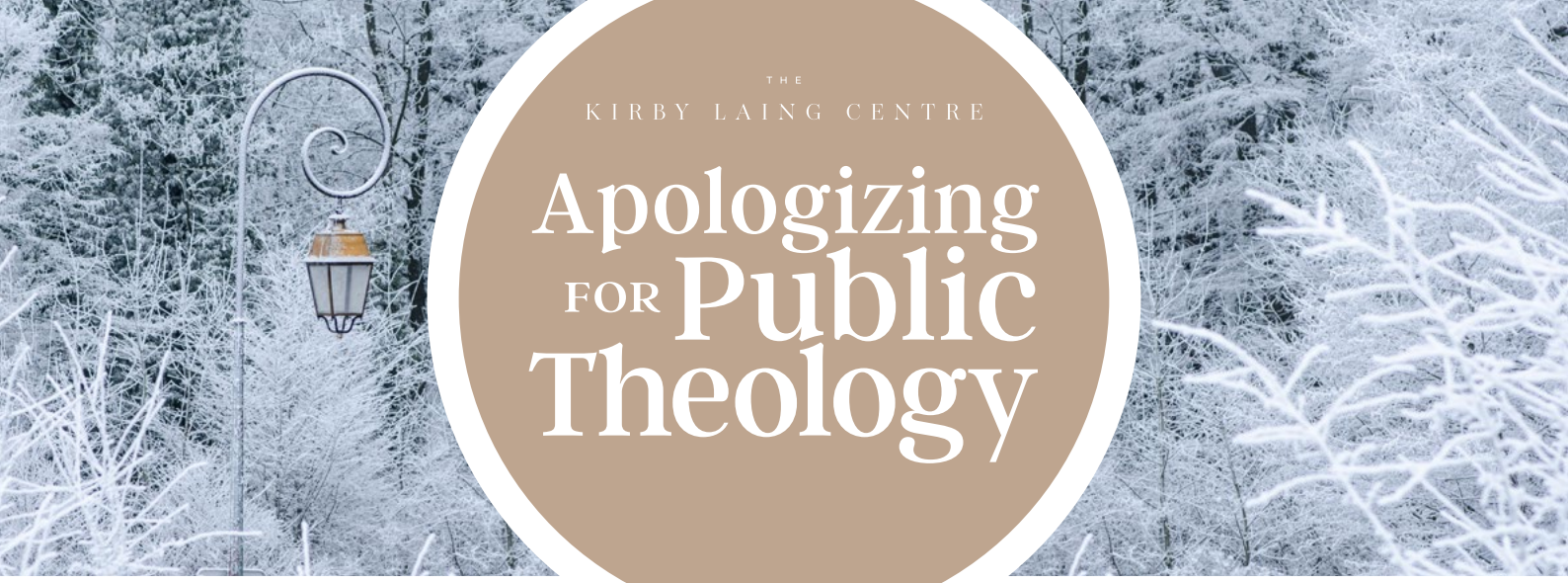
6 William Wilberforce, "Journal, Sunday, October 28, 1787," quoted in Robert Isaac Wilberforce and Samuel Wilberforce, *The Life of William Wilberforce*, vol. 1 (Andesite Press, 2017), 149.
7 Pollock, *Wilberforce*, 276.
8 Pollock, *Wilberforce*, 276.
9 Metaxas, *7 Men*, 54.

John Philip Simpson, *The Captive Slave (Ira Aldridge)*



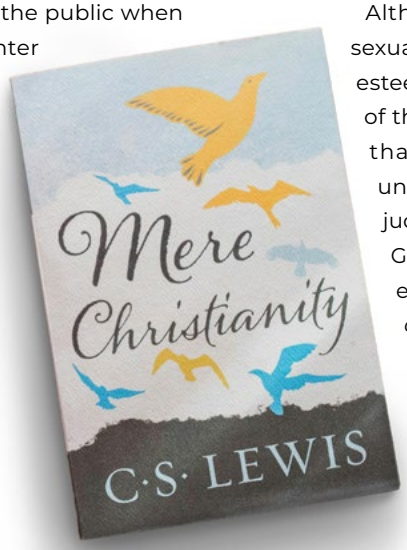
PART 2 • CHAPTER 15

C. S. Lewis as Public Theologian

DAVID MCILROY

It may come as a shock, but C. S. Lewis was not a natural mass communicator. His first published book after converting to Christianity, *The Pilgrim's Regress* (1933), is too clever by half. The allegory is so dense that only his fellow specialists in philosophy and English could appreciate what he was trying to say. Similarly, the first two volumes of his science fiction trilogy, *Out of the Silent Planet* (1938) and *Perelandra* (1943), were difficult to follow when I read them at a young age, though perhaps I wasn't ready for them as a teenager.

This raises the question: How did Lewis learn to communicate compellingly to the general public? He learnt to present Christian truths to the public when he had to speak at airbases to fighter and bomber crews who knew that their next flight could well be their last. This extraordinary situation fostered a lifelong quest to articulate complex theological and philosophical ideas in ordinary language. His BBC broadcast talks from that era, later published as *Mere Christianity,* refined those skills.



Indeed, Lewis developed a genius for composing short, compelling books for the general public, often in a single draft. To distil complex ideas into a readable format in which the general thrust of the argument is clear is a real talent, which requires, at a minimum, a mastery of the subject matter. The genius of Lewis's developing approach can be summarised in three categories, each of which is a hallmark of Lewis as a public theologian: a robust defence of objective truth, goodness, and beauty; a commitment to rekindling the imagination; and authenticity.

A robust defence of objective truth, goodness, and beauty

Although Lewis died before the 1960s sexual revolution and the rise of the self-esteem movement, he anticipated both of them. In '*God in the Dock*', he argued that whereas previous generations understood that they stood under the judgment of God, his generation placed God in the dock, asking God to prove his existence and goodness. In '*The Poison of Subjectivism*,' Lewis lays out all the arguments about why it is nonsense to "'live my 'truth" or claim the right to choose whatever values and lifestyle one wants.

Lewis insists that civilisation, reason and even our understanding of humanity depend on a shared commitment to the reality of truth, goodness and beauty. If there is no objective good, then we have no way of knowing what is right and what is wrong. If there is no objective truth, there is no reason, only rhetoric. If there is no objective beauty, then we have no reason not to turn Yellowstone Park into an industrial hellscape and no reason to value the Mona Lisa as more significant than a smear of human excrement.

He made this point forcefully in the three essays of *The Abolition of Man* and his story, *That Hideous Strength*. Further, the theme of reality versus shadows and illusions repeats again and again in *The Chronicles of Narnia*. One day, we will face Aslan, the true king of Narnia. One day, our actions will be judged, and all our special pleadings and excuses will be exposed for their hypocritical self-justifications.

A commitment to rekindling the imagination

Lewis recognised the dangers of "confirmation bias" long before the phrase became well known. In his writings, he repeatedly warned that humans are adept at shaping our reason to support outcomes we want to be true. Christianity is often rejected not because people are turned off by the person of Jesus or find his claims implausible but because they simply don't *want* to be Christian. Lewis's *Narnia* stories demonstrate how to do public theology in this type of hostile environment. Where Christianity is dismissed as unattractive and implausible, Lewis explains why it is something we should *want* to be true and how it makes sense logically and emotionally.

Both in *The Chronicles of Narnia* and in his non-fiction writings, Lewis seeks to awaken his readers' imaginations to combat three concerns about the cultural mood of his day.

Lewis's first concern is that the intellectual elite, comfortable in their Oxford colleges or their Bloomsbury set, have not understood the consequences of their own relativistic ideas. They profess to believe that all human values are invented, that all moral judgments are merely expressions of our own personal preferences, and that each of us should be free to live our lives without judgment from others. Yet, they failed to recognise that

their relativism undermined the Christian framework undergirding the ordered world in which they lived and found themselves comfortable.

Second, Lewis was aware of the dangers of corrosive scepticism. Lewis is sympathetic to the critic of the Church who condemns Christians for their hypocrisy or who finds organised religion unbelievable because of how it fails to measure up to what genuine truth and goodness look like. He has no time, however, for the sceptic who denies that there is any such thing as absolute truth or real goodness. Such a sceptic has made the logical error of concluding that because some things are false and bad, everything is false and bad, or we have no way of knowing what is true and good. As Lewis is at pains to point out, unless truth and goodness exist, ideas of falsity and badness would be meaningless.

Lewis's third concern is that these attitudes are being taught to children, that generations are being indoctrinated into dead-end philosophies, brought up to believe that the world is meaningless, and left without hope. As a response, Lewis wanted to instil hope and reawaken people to the meaning and purpose of their lives. Thus, he aimed to leverage the narrative format to touch the longings of our hearts for heroism, community and salvation.

An Authenticity of Mind and Pen

Like Augustine of Hippo, C. S. Lewis was someone who had lived outside the Christian faith. By the end of the First World War, he had rejected Christianity. His conversion to Christianity occurred in stages, beginning with a generic theism and ending with a robust Christianity. For that reason, he could write about the heroism of pagan defiance of ultimate futility because that was a mode of life he had explored and found unsatisfying. Lewis sought to write for authentic seekers of any stripe.

One anecdote is illustrative of Lewis's approach to doing public theology. As he recounts, he was profoundly affected by the reaction of an RAF officer to one of his early talks. The officer said: "I've no use for all that stuff. But, mind you, I'm a religious man too. I know there's a God. I've felt Him: out alone in the desert at night: the tremendous mystery. And that's just why I don't believe all your neat little dogmas and formulas about Him. To anyone who's met the real thing they all seem so petty and pedantic and unreal!"

After that, Lewis was committed to showing how the reality of God can be felt in the raw, rough reality of our lives. He was not interested in theological systems but in experiential theology, in communicating in ways that connected with the reality of human experience, most famously when describing in *A Grief Observed* how he felt after the death of his wife. Lewis's theology was, in some respects, idiosyncratic. Part of the reason for his enduring appeal to Evangelicals, Catholics, and seekers of truth who would not subscribe to a confession or a creed is that he was not afraid to let readers know about his own doubts and struggles.

Conclusion

Lewis's style was inimitable, but his commitment to objective truth, his appeal to the imagination and his determination to remain authentic are all characteristics all public theologians should seek to emulate.

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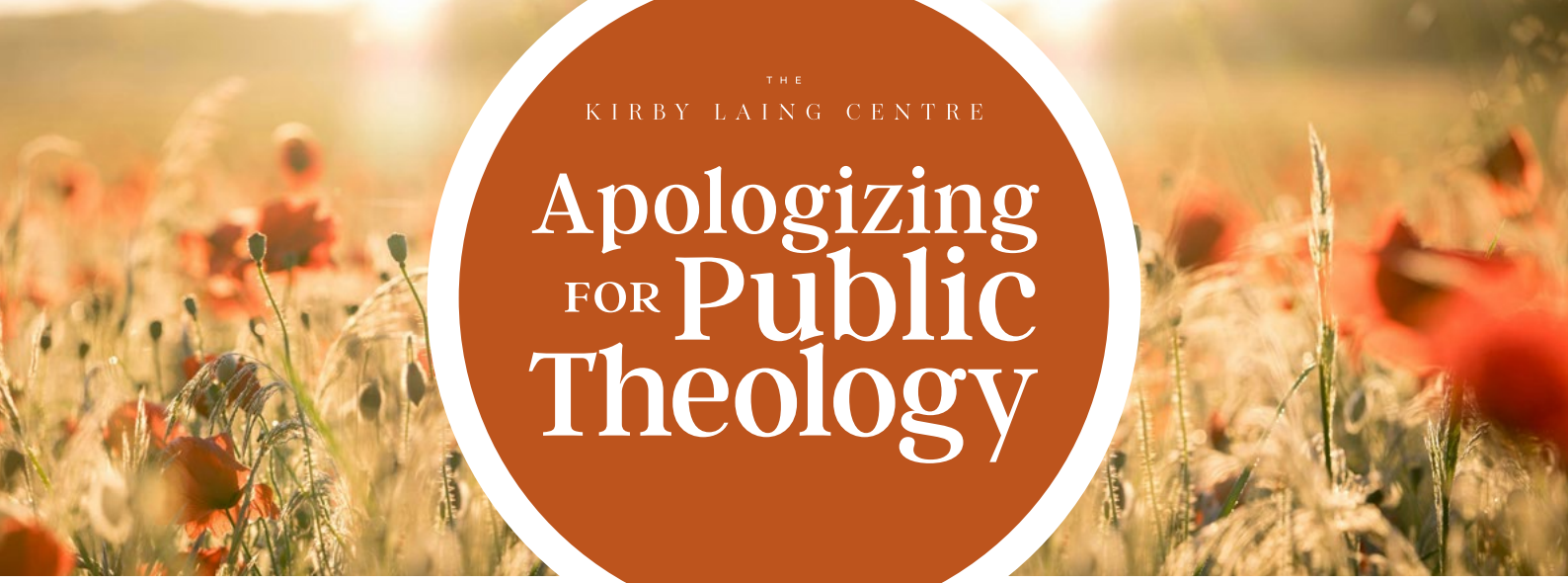
Akseli Gallen-Kallela, *Winter Landscape*



THE KIRBY LAING CENTRE

Apologizing for Public Theology

PART 2 • CHAPTER 16

The Church and Public Theology

MICHAEL WAGENMAN

"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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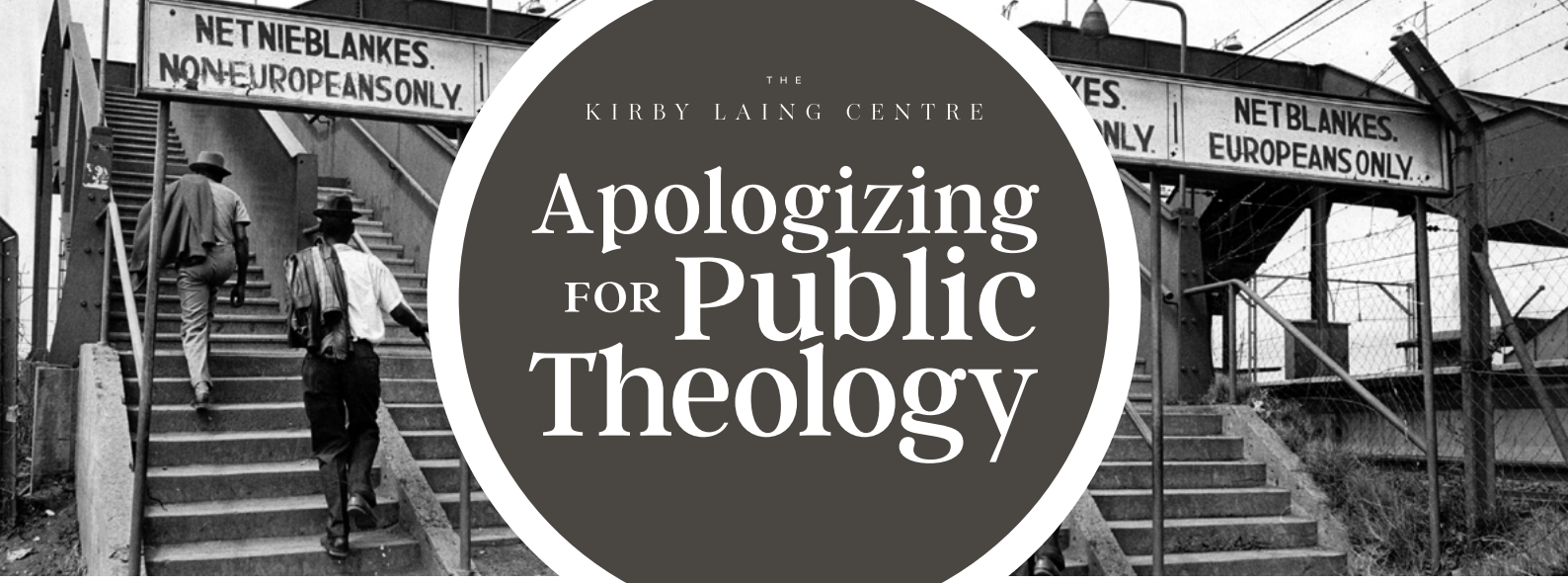


THE KIRBY LAING CENTRE

Apologizing FOR Public Theology

PART 2 • CHAPTER 17

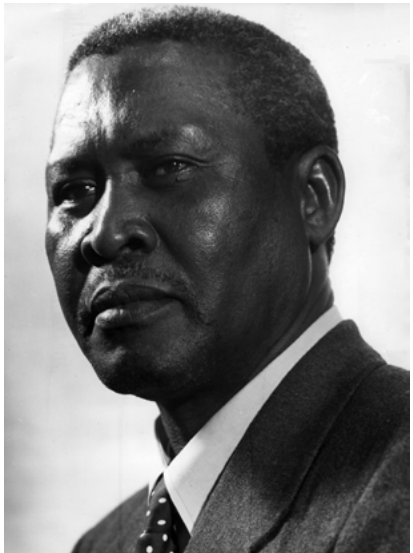
Chief Albert John Mvumbi Luthuli as Public Theologian

"A SPECIFICALLY CHRISTIAN MODE OF GOING ABOUT WORK IN SOCIETY"

DAMBUDZO MUSHAMBI

It's always a bit perilous to go about appending labels to things, and especially to people. There is every possibility that they will resist your label, whether by rejecting it outright or by seeking to nuance it in some way. Applying a label to someone may be a form of "speaking for" them, which is not an uncomplicated matter,[1] specifically because those labels may carry content that is disagreeable for one reason or another. For instance, South African theologian Tinyiko Maluleke has sought to create distance between himself and the designation of "public theologian" in his work.[2] In his reading of the global public theology movement, Maluleke sees what he deems to be a creeping totalising tendency in its methodology – the "desire to annex, possess, homogenise, and globalise," to the point where it could minimise and even become blind to the differences, realities, histories and pain that shape publics across the world.[3] Maluleke's concern is that the generic label of "public theology" might swallow up other local theologies that work at the margins – such as Black, feminist, and African theologies – erasing their unique contributions and critiques.

Such is the peril inherent in describing Chief Albert John Mvumbi Luthuli as a "public theologian," but it is important to note that public theology is not a monolith, and there are a variety of approaches and concerns implied by that term.



Despite these complexities, Chief Luthuli is worth considering for how he understood his Christian faith and its implications for society. Chief Luthuli was born around 1898

1 Jeanne Perreault, "Chain Gang Narratives and the Politics of 'Speaking For,'" *Biography* 24, no. 1 (2001): 152-171.
2 Tinyiko S. Maluleke, "Why I Am Not a Public Theologian," *The Ecumenical Review* 73, no. 2, (2021): 297-315; Tinyiko Maluleke, "The Elusive Public of Public Theology: A Response to William Storrar," *International Journal of Public Theology* 5, no. 1 (2011): 79-89.
3 Maluleke, "Why I am Not a Public Theologian," 301.

in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). He was the first African Nobel Laureate, a confessing and practicing Christian within the Congregational Church, and an anti-apartheid activist who was President-General of the African National Congress (ANC) from 1952 until his untimely death in 1967.

Luthuli's Context and Situation[4]

The church in South Africa faced a constellation of questions both before and after 1948, when apartheid was instituted as national policy. Some of these questions included what the role of the church was within the country, and how the church was to respond to the policies instituted by the Nationalist government. Other questions included whether the equality of believers – and the broader societal implications of that idea – was a reality to which the church should consistently witness, and whether there indeed was a true equality of believers.

Following the National Party's electoral victory in 1948 and the subsequent institution of apartheid as state policy, South Africa entered a tumultuous period that generated some of the more momentous events in the country's history – the Defiance Campaign (1952); the Congress of the People in Kliptown that produced the Freedom Charter (1955); the Treason Trial (1956); the bulldozing of Sophiatown (1958) to make way for a white suburb that was named *Triomf* (triumph); the Sharpeville massacre of March 1960 and the subsequent banning of the ANC and Pan African Congress, and the Rivonia Trial of ANC leaders that included Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu and Govan Mbeki (1963). Further afield, countries such as Ghana (1957), Cameroon (1960), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (1960) and Nigeria (1961) were attaining their independence from colonial rule. Luthuli noted that "Africa as a whole is sick of colonial 'partnership,' with whites as perpetual 'senior partner.'"[5]

The issue of racial inequality, which existed both within and outside the church, was not a problem generated by the institution of apartheid in 1948. The Protestant church in South Africa struggled from its earliest days to recognise black Africans as equals (spiritual and otherwise) with their white counterparts. Sol Plaatje's important work titled *Native Life in South Africa* was written as a "sincere narrative of a melancholy situation" as he endeavoured to describe the effects of the Natives Land Act of 1913, which displaced and disenfranchised the black majority, effectively rendering them pariahs in their land of birth.[6]

South African society, including the church, was shaped in various ways by a social imagination that assigned value to people according to the colour of their skin. Black Africans and others designated "non-Europeans" were often subjected to violence through the state security apparatus. Thus, the question of the colour bar,[7] which Chief Luthuli termed a "fictitious and beastly thing,"[8] could reasonably be considered *the* key question within South Africa at that time.

The colour bar Chief Luthuli confronted in his time was not a new phenomenon *per se*, but the advent of apartheid certainly sharpened the crisis and placed even greater emphasis and scrutiny on the question of racial inequality, not only for society at large, but for the

4 Elements of this section have been taken and adapted from an upcoming publication, Dambudzo Mushambi, "Chief Albert Luthuli's Ecclesiology and Praxis in *Let My People Go*: An Evangelical Witness During Apartheid?", *Faith & Flourishing* vol. 6, (2027): 1-25.

5 Albert Luthuli, *Let My People Go* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1962), 188.

6 Sol T. Plaatje, *Native Life in South Africa* (1916; repr., Johannesburg: Picador Africa, 2007),15, 21.

7 The "colour bar" refers to the fact that in apartheid South Africa, race played a determinative role in everyday life, including who you could marry and associate with, where you could live, what work you could do, or if you could vote.

8 Luthuli, *Let My People Go*, 171.

Godfrey Rubens, *Murder at Sharpeville, 21 March 1960.*

church specifically. As Peter Walshe put it, "[t]he struggle against apartheid in South Africa was theological, as well as political. When prophetic Christianity confronted segregation and the apartheid state, it challenged the passivity of the diverse denominations and the *de facto* acceptance of the *status quo* – the Christian church itself became a site of political struggle."[9] Scott Couper wrote that Chief Luthuli's autobiography "prophetically demonstrated (decades before the Kairos Document was published) that the Apartheid context was as much a theological issue as it was a political issue."[10]

Luthuli as Public Theologian

Albert Luthuli was raised in a Christian household. His grandparents, Ntaba and Titisi Luthuli, were the first two converts to Christianity when Reverend Aldin Grout of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions settled near the Umvoti River and built a mission station, and they became founders of what their grandson later called "the Luthuli Christian line."[11] Luthuli credits CW Atkins, who was at one time the principal of Adams College, with the ethos that shaped his outlook. He wrote the following in his autobiography:

> Among my many debts to Adams and its people the greatest was the gift of an ethos gradually absorbed, and profoundly lasting in its effects. It became clear to me that the Christian faith was not a private affair without relevance to society. It was, rather, a belief which equipped us in a unique way to meet the challenges of our society. It was a belief which had to be applied to the conditions of our lives; and our many works – they ranged from Sunday School teaching to road-building – became meaningful as the outflow of Christian belief.
>
> Adams taught me what Edendale did not, that I had to *do* something about being a Christian, and that this something must identify me with my neighbour, not dissociate me from him. Adams taught me more. It inculcated, by example rather than precept, a specifically Christian mode of going about work in society, and I have had frequent reason to be grateful for this in later life.[12]

Luthuli was involved in many initiatives, including serving as the president of the African Teacher's Association, founding the Zulu Language and Cultural Society, and organising African sugar producers so that they could receive fair compensation. In 1936, the community of Groutville, in which Luthuli had been raised, issued a call for him to become their Chief, and he embraced this call to public service.[13] He became keenly aware, in ways he hadn't been before, of the abject poverty that people lived in. His path gradually led him to join and become part of the leadership structures of the ANC, and he was voted in as President-General of the ANC on the 16th of October 1952. In response, the apartheid government deposed him as chief on the 14th of November 1952.[14]

For Luthuli, the desire for what he termed "normal human relations" between people of different ethnicities flowed from being made in the image of God.[15] One of the outworkings of this was to work with all who sought to free South Africa from the thrall of white supremacy. Thus, he worked with others across the racial lines designated by the apartheid government.

Luthuli saw how African and other "non-European" peoples were dehumanised, and he opposed that vehemently with what he termed "militant defiance."[16] Though "militant," this defiance was pursued under a policy of nonviolence. In this regard, he wrote:

> I am identified with those who love South Africa, and will resist with them the attempt to smash a noble land with base and ignoble doctrines, and sub-human practices... I make it clear that we mean to cling to methods such

9 P. Walshe, "Christianity and the Anti-Apartheid Struggle: The Prophetic Voice Within Divided Churches," in *Christianity in South Africa: A Political, Social, and Cultural History*, ed. R. Elphick, and R. Davenport (Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), 383.
10 Scott E. Couper, "'My People Let Go': A Historical Examination of Chief Albert Luthuli and his Position on the Use of Violence as a Means by which to Achieve South Africa's Liberation from Apartheid," *International Congregational Journal* 5, no. 1 (2005): 104.
11 Luthuli, *Let My People Go*, 21.
12 Luthuli, *Let My People Go*, 42, emphasis original.
13 See https://www.thoughtco.com/chief-albert-luthuli-4069406.
14 See https://www.ialch.co.za/the-albert-luthuli-story/. Luthuli also made a public statement titled "The Road to Freedom is Via the Cross" which he made immediately after his deposition; see *Let My People Go*, 235-238.
15 Luthuli, *Let My People Go*, 85.
16 Luthuli, *Let My People Go*, 136.

> as this, to non-violence, and we mean increasingly to use these weapons even against such tyrants as South Africa's present government. This is not only a question of morality. As long as our patience can be made to hold out, we shall not jeopardise the South Africa of tomorrow by precipitating violence today.[17]

He also reiterated that the resistance movement was deploying against apartheid as a system of governance and not a race, saying, "We made it abundantly clear long before the campaign was launched that it was a system, not a race, which we were opposing."[18] The issue of non-violence and Luthuli is complex because it was while the ANC was under his leadership that *uMkhonto weSizwe* (Spear of the Nation), the military wing of the ANC, was founded and began operations. There is ongoing debate among scholars as to the extent, if any, to which Luthuli supported the turn toward violent resistance against apartheid.[19]

17 Luthuli, *Let My People Go*, 15, 219-220.
18 Luthuli, *Let My People Go*, 116.
19 See Vuyisile Msila, "Chief Albert Luthuli: The Ambivalent or Ambidextrous ANC Leader?", *SAJCH/SATKG* 38, no. 1 (2024): 154–175; Allan A. Boesak, "Testing the Inescapable Network of Mutuality: Albert Luthuli, Martin Luther King Jr and the Challenges of Post-Liberation South Africa," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 75, no. 4 (2019); R. Vinson and B. Carton, "Albert Luthuli's Private Struggle: How an Icon of Peace Came to Accept Sabotage in South Africa," *Journal Of African History* 59, no. 1 (2018): 69-96; Scott Couper, "'An Embarrassment To The Congresses?' The Silencing of Chief Albert Luthuli and the Production of ANC History," *Journal Of Southern African Studies* 35, no. 2 (2009): 331-348; R. Suttner, "'The Road To Freedom Is Via The Cross': 'Just Means' in Chief Albert Luthuli's Life", *South African Historical Journal* 62, no. 4 (2010): 693-715.

Luthuli desired churches *as churches* to participate in the struggle against racial inequality.[20] After the Defiance Campaign of 1952, an organised mass protest against pass laws, many churches and denominations spoke officially and stated their position regarding apartheid and the organised efforts to undermine it. Though the churches didn't reach a united position, this was Luthuli's take: "I cannot speak authoritatively of all that the churches did and said at this time. The point is that whatever their reaction they were participating, instead of taking the stand, 'Politics is not our business'."[21] While welcoming the participation of churches, Luthuli was nonetheless distressed at the positions different churches took, leading him to say:

> The churches above all were to have brought us not apartheid but fellowship one with another. Have they? Some measure of human failure is inevitable. Even so, have not many of the churches simply submitted to a secular state which opposes expressions of fellowship and our membership one of another? Have not some even gone so far as to *support* the outlook of the secular state?[22]

Luthuli desired for Christians, whether black or white, to "look at the Gospels and redefine their allegiance"[23] in alignment with Scripture, and not the ideology of apartheid.

20 Luthuli, *Let My People Go*, 136.
21 Luthuli, *Let My people Go*, 137.
22 Luthuli, *Let My People Go*, 132, emphasis original.
23 Luthuli, *Let My People Go*, 132.

The Challenges of Operating in Public as a Christian

Engaging public issues using a shared platform can be challenging for various reasons, not least because it could raise questions about the nature or authenticity of one's faith. In 1953, the apartheid government issued Luthuli a year-long ban, meaning that he could not participate in public meetings; in July of the following year, he was banned for a further two years. Around the time when various political and social activist groups ratified the Freedom Charter, Luthuli was at a house near Freedom Square in Sophiatown, where he was beset by reporters. This was when the communist scare and McCarthyism were at their height, and a "rather haughty" American reporter asked him, "How is it that you, alleged to be a Christian, can cooperate with Communists?" In other words, the reporter was suggesting that the ideological differences between a Christian and a Communist ought to render cooperation a non-starter, and the framing of the question would seem to call Luthuli's *bona fides* into question. Luthuli's response to this line of questioning and thinking is thus:

> For myself, I am in Congress precisely because I am a Christian. My Christian belief about society must find expression here and now, and Congress is the spearhead of the real struggle. Some would have Communists excluded, others would have all non-Communists withdraw from Congress. My own urge, because I am a Christian, is to get into the thick of the struggle with other Christians, taking my Christianity with me and praying that it may be used to influence for good the character of the resistance... The strength to combat and rectify their false doctrines, as with the false doctrines of white supremacists, does not lie in my depersonalising them and going apart into an anti-somebody camp. It lies rather in the things I believe in, it lies within me. I am confident enough in the Christian faith to believe that I can serve my neighbour best by remaining in his company. Men doubtful about the inner strength of their own cause will put their faith in exclusiveness, discriminatory laws, apartheid, guns – their fear makes materialists of them, the spirit is weak and they seek to make the flesh strong.[24]

This, then, was one outworking of Luthuli's understanding of a "specifically Christian mode of going about work in society." It entailed engaging issues with others (even Communist others) for the common good, but bringing one's Christian distinctives along to influence the character of that engagement. The common goal Luthuli was working toward, and the reason he joined the struggle against apartheid was to build "one South Africa embodying all simply as fellow-citizens," with the outcome being "the ideal of a raceless South Africa" with a hierarchy based on ability, not colour.[25]

Luthuli never got to see the South Africa he'd dedicated his life to bring about. His tragic death, which has recently been declared the result of an assault by apartheid police,[26] cut his life and work short. However, he was hopeful that change would come. The closing words of his autobiography, somewhat echoing the ending of John's apocalypse, read:

> The struggle must go on – the struggle to make the opportunity for the building to begin. The struggle will go on. I speak humbly and without levity when I say that, God giving me strength and courage enough, I shall die, if need be, for this cause. But I do not want to die until I have seen the building begun. *Mayibuye iAfrika!* Come, Africa, come![27]

Conclusion

Chief Luthuli's life was one of public service informed by his faith as a Christian. He didn't shy away from engaging the issues of his day, refusing to be drawn into ideological camps that excluded others. Propelled by his understanding that he and his fellow South Africans were created in God's image, he eschewed violence while seeking the demise of the system of apartheid. He leveraged and even created platforms of various kinds, working for the betterment of society through a specifically Christian mode of working in public for the common good. Chief Luthuli played an important role in bringing about the birth of a non-racial democratic order in South Africa, and his is an enduring legacy in South Africa and beyond.

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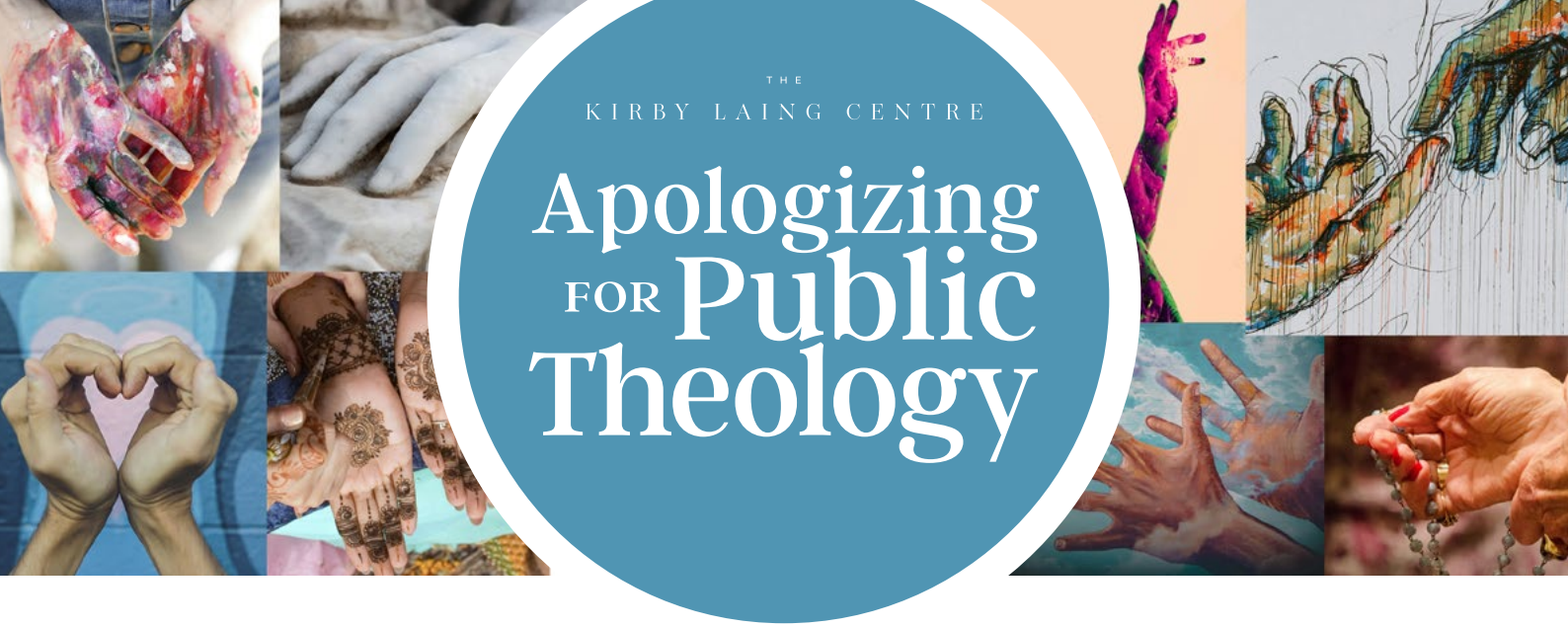
24 Luthuli, *Let My People Go*, 154-155.

25 Luthuli, *Let My People Go*, 134-5; 209-210.

26 https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c874yqvdr13o

27 Luthuli, *Let My People Go*, 232.



PART 2 • CHAPTER 18

How Does the Pauline Literature Inform Public Theology?

J. DAVID STARK

For centuries, theologians have searched for and debated the most central, unifying concept for Paul's theology (e.g., justification, being in Jesus). But what distinguishes public theology from theology in general is its express orientation toward the public. From this orientation, when one seeks in Paul's letters for a central, unifying concept for his *public* theology, one finds—perhaps surprisingly—the structure of *welcome*.

Paul's Two Publics

Paul's letters have a two-fold relation to public theology. On the one hand, they are directed to particular audiences within the first-century Jesus movement (see Luke 1:1–4; Acts 1:1–3; Rev 1:4–5, 10–11). On the other hand, the letters do not regard their addressees as isolated individuals or groups. Instead, they characteristically seek to form their addressees in relation to others. Those others may be within the same community, within other Jesus communities in other places, or even yet outside the Jesus movement. In this way, Paul's public theology has in view more than one public.[1]

His letters have in view narrower "publics of address" (i.e., specific audiences or addressees) as well as broader publics with and for whom the letters express concern

Karl Emanuel Jansson, *Sakariston Ovi (Vestry Door)*, 1871.

1 This duality of publics occurs elsewhere too. For instance, the United States Constitution requires the President annually to report to Congress on the "State of the Union" (art. II, §3). Since the advent of broadcast media, this report has typically taken the form of an address that is both about the broader union and, in part, to the broader public within that union.

(i.e., "publics of concern"). As the letters make their address, they create a particular relation between these two publics that may appropriately be called welcome.[2] So, if modern public theologians want their own public theology to be shaped by a fully orbed understanding of Paul's letters, these public theologians must also accept the challenge of expressing and fostering welcome.

Welcome as the Relation of Paul's Publics

The relation of welcome arises vividly in the short letter to Philemon. This letter is formally sent by both Paul and Timothy to Philemon and several others, including "the assembly that meets at [Philemon's] house" (1–2; translations mine throughout).

Most of the letter is dominated by Paul's direct address to Philemon (2, 4–24).[3] And Paul's core admonition is for Philemon to welcome Onesimus, for whom Paul cares deeply (10, 12, 15–20).

2 Beyond the examples discussed here, the letters often foster welcome in their greetings and in texts like 2 Cor 2:5–11; 5:11–21; 6:11–10:18; 13:9–12; Eph 4:1–3, 25–32; 6:11–12; Phil 1:12–18, 27–28; 2:2–1, 14–16; 3:17–21; 4:2–3; Col 1:21–23; 2:18–19; 3:11–17; 4:5–6, 10; 1 Thess 4:9–12; 5:12–15; 2 Thess 2:8–11; 3:6–15; 1 Tim 1:20; 3:2–7; 5:8–16; 6:1–2, 18–19; 2 Tim 1:15–18; 3:2–9; 4:9–11; Tit 1:7–9; 3:9–11. See also Stephen R. Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change*, 25th anniversary ed. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013), 88–92; Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2019).

3 The first-person singular verbs and pronouns refer to Paul, as the second-person singular verbs and pronouns do to Philemon. See James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 313; Douglas Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 381–85, 394; Michael Wolter, "Der Brief an Philemon," in *Der Brief an die Kolosser, der Brief an Philemon*, ÖTK 12 (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1993), 254.

Spinello Aretino, *The Conversion of Saint Paul*.

Negretti and Zambra, *Paul Preaching at Athens*.

Only in the initial greeting and conclusion does the letter reference Timothy or the wider group of recipients (1–3, 22, 25). Yet this wider circle, along with Onesimus (10, 12–13, 15, 17–18) and a handful of other individuals (23–24), fills out the letter's public of concern.

Perhaps it would hardly have been needed (18, 21), but by citing Timothy and other individuals close to Paul who are on his side of the admonition (1, 23–24), he broadens the public of concern. Involving the other addressees with whom Philemon has immediate relationships also increases the social stakes for him to welcome Onesimus as Paul asks.[4] Thus, in Philemon, welcome is both the letter's main topic and the orientation the letter seeks to create between its public of address (primarily Philemon and secondarily those with him) and its public of concern (primarily Onesimus and secondarily Paul and those with him).

Paul's other letters address their own concerns and devote proportionately less space to the *topic* of welcome. Like the letter to Philemon, however, they consistently aim to create a *relation* of welcome between their publics of address and concern.

For instance, an orientation toward welcome becomes explicit in Paul's admonition for the Roman Jesus community's members to "welcome one another" (15:7a). In this way, each community member finds himself or herself addressed and oriented toward reciprocating concern with welcoming each other member.

4 See Lewis Brogdon, "Reimagining Koinonia: Confronting the Legacy and Logic of Racism by Reinterpreting Paul's Letter to Philemon," *ExAud* 31 (2015): 35–41.

But this welcome must be "just as the Messiah also welcomed you for God's glory" (15:7b). And the divine welcome through Messiah Jesus not only embraces those already within the community but also extends to those who have yet to join.[5] In the same way then, the community at Rome must both embrace each other and extend welcome toward whomever else may come.

Each community member finds himself or herself addressed and oriented toward reciprocating concern with welcoming each other member.

Beyond those within the community or who might join them, Paul also creates a relation of welcome toward those who might refuse. The community does not sacrifice its identity or mission in an attempt to make accepting its welcome more palatable to those who wish to remain outside (cf. Rom 12:1–2). Nor does a Pauline kind of welcome permit the use of force to coerce those who wish to reject this welcome.

For instance, in 1 Corinthians 8:5, Paul contemplates how "there are, indeed, those that are said to be gods – whether in heaven or on earth – just as there are many gods and many lords." The claims of Israel's God in his Messiah are not absolutely unique; Paul recognizes that many other similar claimants exist in his own highly pluralist context. "But for us," Paul continues, "there is one God, the father … and one Lord Messiah Jesus" (1 Cor 8:6).

The key phrase "but for us" demarcates a community boundary. Paul clearly rejects any other possible gods or lords.[6] Yet he also creates an orientation of welcome to others who remain devoted to these powers. Such publics of concern are welcome to join the "us" for whom there is but one God and one Lord, and they are welcome to remain outside, continuing their devotion to those other powers.

This dual welcome hardly suggests Paul's indifference toward such people, however (cf. 1 Cor 9:20–23). Instead, it expresses Paul's dual respect – on the one hand, for the exclusivity of the proclamation that Jesus communities accept and, on the other hand, for a right to self-exclusion of publics of concern who decline the welcome offered to them to join these communities.

Of course, such respect also does not mean Paul's orientation toward welcome always comes in language that is entirely calm and polite. Paul can be harsh when he finds the community's orientation to welcome in jeopardy (e.g., Galatians; Phil 3:2–11).

In addition, even Paul's approach to punitive measures helps create a relationship of welcome. To foster welcome toward those outside the community, Paul actively resists the idea that Jesus' followers have a mandate to judge those who do not wish to join them (e.g., 1 Cor 5:9–10, 12). When Paul advocates punitive measures with respect to members of the community, he fosters welcome in three ways. First, he credits such individuals' self-descriptions as members of the community and deals with these individuals on this basis (e.g., 1 Cor 5:11). Second, while expressing his disagreement with such individuals' behavior and resisting their efforts to exclude others, Paul affirms their capacity to engage in conduct that separates themselves from the community (e.g., Gal 2:11–21; 5:4, 12). And third, the punitive measures he advocates have the express purpose of fostering reconciliation (e.g., 1 Cor 5:1–5; 2 Cor 10:5–6; 13:9–10).

Pauline Welcome and Public Theology in the Twenty-first Century

What then, in sum, does Pauline welcome mean for the shape of modern public theology? First, public theologians may consider themselves to be one of the publics that Paul addresses. As such, public theologians find themselves confronted with the task of interpreting the letters in a way that welcomes broader publics of concern – even including these public theologians' detractors.

5 See also Rom 5:10; 14:1, 3, 15; 15:7; John M. G. Barclay, "Faith and Self-Detachment from Cultural Norms: A Study in Romans 14–15," *ZNW* 104.2 (2013): 194–200.

6 Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians*, AB 32 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 342; see also Acts 17:18, 23; John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Acts*, trans. Henry Beveridge, 2 vols., CCS (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1844; Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), 2:157.

Second, when theologians themselves turn to address a given public, they bear responsibility for doing so in a way that encourages that public to extend welcome to broader publics of concern. Any definite welcome requires definite boundaries, and some publics of concern may prefer to stand outside those boundaries. But these facts neither threaten those boundaries (e.g., of Pauline orthodoxy) nor lessen public theologians' responsibility both to express and to encourage welcome. Instead, it is precisely the places of greatest differentiation that most require an extension of welcome.

By its very name, public theology declares its express concern with both the world at large and the word of God. Yet this expression becomes totally empty where the "world at large" is merely a cover for the "world as I would like it to be." It likewise becomes empty where concern with "the word of God" is a cover for "how I want to assert power to make others as I would like them to be."

Instead, for public theology's claim of concern to prove true, it must directly reckon with the world and the word as they are.[7] Public theology truly formed by Paul's letters can never afford to lose sight of how even the most final and severe divine judgment is not to be separated from still more profound and powerful divine welcome, both of which come through and find themselves united in the crucified Messiah (e.g., Rom 2:16; 5:6–11). Public theology must acknowledge that it has no insider status except by benefiting from this divine welcome. Even and especially in the face of difference, therefore, public theology in the Pauline tradition finds itself obligated to extend both this same kind of welcome and that with which it wants itself to be welcomed (cf. Matt 7:12; Rom 5:6–11; 14:3; 15:7; Gal 5:13–15).

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7 On these dynamics, see Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West, and Douglas W. Stott, DBW(E) 6 (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 134–45, 256–89.

Martinus Rørbye, *The Entrance to the Old Vicarage in Hellested*.