

Dilemmas in Preaching Doctrine: Theology's Public Voice

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Theology empowers preaching, including preaching that addresses the public square. Christology, writes Jürgen Moltmann, "is not for heaven, it is for women and men on the way in the conflicts of history." We, who are now "in the exile of history" are searching for a pilgrim christology, a christology of the way.¹ The preaching of Jesus was a proclamation of God's new order. His gospel was not utopian description of some far off future. He himself already was and still is "the daybreak of this future in the pardoning, promising word that sets people free." This News faithfully preached "becomes the creative word which effects what it utters."²

Moltmann sounding more the preacher than a lecturer addressed the November 1994 AAR/SBL in Chicago. Filled with passion, this carefully crafted paper invites an exploration of "theology and the future of the modern world." Theology focuses on God and God's presence, God's *Shekinah*, God's Kingdom or Reign. Because theology is always reign-of-God theology, it has to be public.³

Walter Wink in the most recent volume of his trilogy on power raises puzzling and disturbing questions. Why do people keep on voting in politicians whose policies plainly benefit a wealthy minority, jeopardize the middle class, and further crush the poor? Why do we accept their analysis when they claim that federal deficits are to be blamed on too much welfare, too many immigrants, too wide a social safety net? The answer he offers is through and through theological. We live in societies that have so internalized a "System of Domination" that economic stratification is regarded as ordained by God! The "apostate theology that identifies wealth with blessedness" has deluded and defrauded us.⁴

In the face of so many of the world's problems (the gun lobby across North America, the intractable war in Bosnia, slaughter in Rwanda, poverty of Mozambique...), many feel trapped between the twin jaws of guilt and powerlessness.⁵ We want to cry out. We also seek a theology adequate for these days and a way to preach that will effect change!

But how can we be sure that what we preach is theologically rooted in the gospel rather than ideologically grounded in a particular politics? In an incisive chapter on "Political Preaching," Stephen Carter, a Professor of Law at Yale University, sees evidence from both the political and religious left and right of preachments inspired by political commitments rather than by faith. As a result "the will of God is not discerned by the faithful but created by them." "The group does not consult scripture to determine whether or not their course is just. Rather, the quotes are selected to prove the justice of the cause."⁶ The idea of faith as the source of moral inspiration is trivialized when we begin with a political commitment and then seek a theological rationale. Religions, Carter believes, are moral forces not only in the personal lives of adherents but also in their public world. Further, in this latter arena they "are at their best when they are forms of resistance."⁷

Theologically grounded preaching is public, even political, but not politicized.

Theology leads. The gospel transcends political inclinations. The political dimension is not eliminated. Instead, we bring our political convictions, aspirations, and cherished positions to listen for a word from God. Our preaching aims to encourage people to allow their faith to extend into the public square and to explore the implications of this gospel invasion.

But, laments John Cobb, “theology as the serious activity of faith seeking understanding...has disappeared from many churches.” “Preaching,” he adds, “is largely based on popular psychology and common sense” and “designed to reassure and motivate rather than stimulate thought about what it means to be a Christian in our complex time.”⁸

Preachers have a major theological task if preaching is to become an authentic word of public address. Cultural and historical analysis are also required. Considerable questions surround preaching that engages public issues. David Buttrick is not alone in asking, “Why is our preaching strongly silent on public affairs?”⁹ Many sermon listeners believe that preaching should avoid societal and cultural questions, and certainly political ones. Others object when their own viewpoints in these areas seem challenged. Appeal to the separation of church and state closes the matter for some. Still others object when the sermon does *not* address thorny issues of the day. What assumptions about church and culture shape our approach to theology and preaching?

The Naked Public Square

The “American experiment” in democracy, asserts John Murray Cuddihy, has asked for something previously unknown and almost unthinkable, namely, that each religious community remain true to its revealed faith in private but “behave in the public arena as if its truth were as tentative as an aesthetic opinion or a scientific theory.”¹⁰ Stephen Carter sees ample evidence of this dichotomy in the political and legal cultures of the United States as though religious beliefs are arbitrary and unimportant, “a kind of mystical irrationality, something that thoughtful, public-spirited American citizens would do better to avoid.”¹⁰

In his influential *A Theory of Justice*, John Rawls contends that consensus in the public realm requires that religious, philosophical and moral doctrines not “play a decisive role in public discussions about what is just and fair.” Religious belief systems are private matters and “ought to have no bearing on the formulation of public policy.”¹¹ Similarly, Michael Novak seeks “a public space that has been cleared of any unitary vision of the good life.” Both views are based on the “thesis that public life has become, or soon will become, entirely post-religious” and that religion will be relegated to the private domain.¹²

Moving against claims to secularity

Mouw and Griffioen explore two responses to the positions of Rawls and Novak. One is denial and the other is challenge. John Richard Neuhaus denies that America is secular; it is “an unsecular nation” and the majority of its citizens hold ideas and values based on the Judeo-Christian biblical tradition. The public arena exists “under divine judgment.” There is “a transcendent point of reference” to which people are accountable.¹³

But in an increasingly pluralistic society, how are diverse religious perspectives

to be adjudicated? And if (according to the First Amendment to the Constitution)¹⁴ political authority should not infringe on the realm of religion, how are we to define what is legitimate and illegitimate?

Neuhaus responds with what he calls a “critical patriotism test: Does this particular religion assent that “the influence of the United States is a force for good in the world?” This is, at best, an *uncritical* patriotism that favours a religious interpretation of America as “a nation of destiny.” Surely those who dissent from this viewpoint are bound to feel like second class citizens.¹⁵

A very different response is offered by Leslie Newbigin. After forty years as a missionary in India, he returned to his native England. He was shocked by its secularity. Religion is reduced to “mere values” and questions of purpose neither of which appear to be important publicly. The public shrine, however, is not empty. Since human nature is “inherently purposive,” if the image of Jesus Christ is not enshrined, “an idol will take its place.”¹⁶

Pluralism is taken more seriously by Newbigin. Christians are a minority in society and cannot assume that the public role of Christianity is self-evident. The fact that they are only one of many minority groups has no bearing on the evaluation of the gospel. What really counts is “the intrinsic quality of the message that is being proclaimed.” The Christian message is “a critical force” calling every culture into question. No state is without beliefs or commitments about right and wrong (acknowledged or not). The church has a responsibility to expose these to the light of the gospel. There are no “areas of human life where the writ of Christ does not run.”¹⁷

But, there can be no return to *corpus Christianum* (where the church identifies with the ruling power). The sacralizing of politics “always unleashes demonic powers.” The church is aware of its own acculturation and does not identify itself or its context with the Reign of God. Theology itself must be declericalized. The laity have the primary responsibility for implementing the vision of God’s reign. This is a missionary encounter with culture and calls for serious and sustained dialogue with people of other faiths.¹⁸

The evaluation of the relationship between the gospel and culture has vast implications for preaching. Our increasing awareness of secularity and the often partisan political character of the preaching of the Moral Majority (and more recently the Christian Coalition), have sharpened the issues further. Much preaching (on both the Left and the Right) seems to be moving toward cultural accommodation. Stanley Hauerwas questions presumptions about “understanding.” “Preaching,” he states, “is meant to challenge the presumption that our ‘understanding’ is sufficient to hear the gospel.”¹⁹ Preaching in our culture calls for transformation if we are truly discerning the gospel.

The Problematic of Discernment

But truly discerning the gospel and its import, is precisely part of our problem. Mark Noll has served both evangelicals and “mainline Christians well in probing the roots of the demise of “the Christian mind.” He calls it nothing less than a scandal.²⁰ His review outlines the decline of theological discernment in ways especially important for our theological recovery of preaching’s public voice.

Christianity itself requires a specifically Christian consideration of our world. Calvin’s view of God as sovereign, Creator and life-enabling Spirit, called for a public

theology not only in Geneva but in other parts of Europe and Britain. Political and social orders were to reflect scriptural norms of justice. Later the Puritans recognized that religious acts had public significance and public acts had religious significance. But this intellectual heritage, Noll claims, no longer prevails widely among evangelicals. The reason is to be found in “the transatlantic crucible of revival, revolution, and Enlightenment.”²¹

The disestablishment of U.S. churches in the wake of the passing of the First Amendment led to “religious deregulation” and with it to religious “market” competition through revival meetings. As a result, pragmatic concerns (attracting new adherents) prevailed over principle (and theology became functional). More and more, Christian convictions were uncritically adapted to American ideals. These include: republican politics, democratic social theory, and liberal (market) economics. The churches themselves evolved into voluntary societies (the joining together of free individuals). Though a theology of creation, fall and redemption had historically applied to both individuals and groups generally, they were not related in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to the growing problems of industrialization.

Jonathan Edwards was a bold exception. He did not accept the assumptions of his culture. For him, God was the basic reality. The world depended on God’s ordaining. But his theology of grace led him to support revivals and, as revivalism grew, patient, comprehensive “worldly” Christian thinking of the sort Edwards engaged in was eclipsed.

Following the Civil War the Scottish commonsense Enlightenment offered evangelicals a philosophy to establish public virtue in a society that questioned tradition, revelation, history, social hierarchy, even the authority of the church. This intuitive philosophy helped preserve the hereditary (favoured) position of Christianity. Now the American way was beyond question, and (it seemed) compatible with Christian faith.

This became a time of division. “Progressive” evangelicals accepted the newly emerging developmental science and became theological “modernists.” Conservative evangelicals became fundamentalists. They stayed with a static mechanistic science, becoming “docetic in outlook and gnostic in method.” The majority of evangelicals vacillated in the middle. For all of them, in a way, Enlightenment rationality was left intact. Noll thus concludes, that the absence of well-articulated theology meant that the pressing human issues of the twentieth century (the Great Depression, two world wars, religious pluralism, communism, etc.) could not be addressed.

The development of great universities across the continent increasingly excluded evangelicals from 1865 onward. They were built on evolutionary science and pragmatic philosophy, and funded by the new industrialists (whose wealth and ways were seldom criticized).

In the first half of this century many evangelicals felt ostracized by mainline denominations. Theologically, the personal overwhelmed the public. Some churches developed the doctrine of “the spirituality of the church” and eschewed political involvement (as well as reflection on politics).

More recently political activism has reasserted itself dramatically (after the abortion decision of *Roe vs Wade* in 1973) in the Moral Majority and (more thoughtfully) by others like Carl F. H. Henry, John Howard Yoder, Richard Mouw, Harold O. J. Brown, and through the Center for Peace and Justice. These, Noll

believes, are promising signs of both intellectual and spiritual renewal for the common good public.²²

Engaging the Public Square

A theological place to begin engaging the public square is the powers referred to in Colossians 1:16 (especially read in the context of verses 9 to 20). The powers, says Walter Wink, both sustain and subvert human life. They possess an outer, visible structure and an inner, spiritual reality. The principalities and powers are the spiritual reality at the centre of political, economic and cultural institutions of the first century. They are real spiritual forces emanating from actual institutions and systems. They were felt (almost seen) by visitors to Nazi Germany in the late 1930's and in the pall of darkness across the U.S. after the assassination of John F. Kennedy. "When an entire network of powers becomes integrated around idolatrous values" we are confronted by "the Domination System."²³

Wink's programmatic thesis is declared simply but profoundly.

Only by confronting the spirituality of an institution *and* its concretions can the total entity be transformed, and that requires a kind of spiritual discernment and praxis that the materialistic ethos in which we live knows nothing about.²⁴

All institutions, even those we consider good, are fallen. We cannot face their oppressiveness unless they are also viewed as God's good creation. But we either legitimate their evil or eliminate hope for change unless we assert that they can and must be redeemed. The powers are good; they are fallen; they must be redeemed.²⁵

Violence, alas, is the ethos of our times; indeed, the spirituality of the modern world. The roots of violence, Wink believes, can be traced back to the ancient Babylonian myth of creation, the Enuma Elish. The creation of the cosmos emerged out of redemptive violence when Marduk murdered redemptive violence (in which evil is an ineradicable constituent of ultimate reality, versus the biblical priority of God and God's good creation) grounds a theology of war and the ideology of national security. It is pervasively remythologized through comics, cartoons, and television (from Superman to Wile E. Coyote to Popeye and on) and in movies like *Jaws* and *Mission Impossible*. "No other religious system has ever remotely rivalled the myth of redemptive violence in its ability to catechize its young so totally."²⁶

It is important to remember that the Domination System is powered, staffed, and perpetuated by people. Yet it is beyond human control. The System operates autonomously from people who have become its slaves.

But the System is not ultimate. Jesus revealed an alternative, dominion-free, nonviolent order based on partnership. In God's alternative order dominion and violence give way to compassion and communion. Signs of this new order have been impressive in a long list of liberation struggles over the last two hundred years (from the abolition of slavery to the spread of democracy, the civil rights and women's movements, struggles for human rights and ecological renewal to justice for gay persons. These very aspirations for a more just order, however, increase rather than decrease societal conflict.²⁷

Gradually we come to realize that the gospel is not only that God liberates us from

the powers, God also liberates the powers themselves. They are idolatrous (not ultimate) and can be redeemed. All political and economic systems are upheld by God, but also condemned insofar as they are destructive. God further calls for their transformation into a more human order.²⁸

Congregations will not understand this unless they are converted. The Domination System weaves a cultural trance within which we are not aware of our “soul-sickness” until we are liberated (from our deep internalization of this system) by the transcendent power of the gospel. The death of Jesus unmasks the powers (Colossians 2:15) and also transforms them (cf. Philippians 3:21). However, the delusion of internalized oppression is so deep that unmasking the powers is not enough. People do not capitulate and change when systems are publicly discredited. There must also be healing.

Our task is not to save the world. God alone saves the world. Our task is to witness to God in the faith that the final victory and ultimate wholeness is God’s. In the meantime we preach theology: the realities of creation, fall, and redemption. We work for justice. We pray. The act of praying and worshipping are indispensable means by which we engage the powers. In Christ we already celebrate the triumph of God.²⁹

Fundamentally this paper has been an exploration in theology, a theological formation that inspires a public gospel voice. We dispel darkness by means of light; we confront death through the affirmation of life. Congregations can be transformed as they complete sermons by taking the Word of life into their lives and into their daily worlds. The idolatrous powers are also put on notice as they are named for what they are. Theology truly proclaimed lives in the public square and nothing can silence its witness. Even death itself would call out for resurrection.³⁰

Notes

¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ, Christology in Messianic Dimensions* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1989), xiii-xiv.

² *Ibid.*, 95-96.

³ Jürgen Moltmann, “Theology and the Future of the Modern World.” Plenary address sponsored by the Association of Theological Schools at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion/Society of Biblical Literature, Chicago, 21 November 1994 (published as an occasional paper by ATS), 1.

⁴ Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers, Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 88.

⁵ Cf. use of this metaphor and an elaboration on guilt and powerlessness in Charles Elliott, *Praying the Kingdom, Towards a Political Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 2-10.

⁶ Stephen Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief, How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 73-74.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 82, cf. 68, “Democracy,” argues Carter, “is best served when the religions are able to act as independent moral voices interposed between the citizen and the State” (16). There are, according to Carter, two ways of trivializing religion: excluding it from the public square as though it is of no consequence and identifying religion and the public square as though they believe alike.

⁸ John B. Cobb, Jr., “Faith seeking understanding: the renewal of Christian thinking,” *Christian Century* (June 29-July 6, 1994): 642-43.

⁹ David Buttrick, *A Captive Voice, The Liberation of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 9. This silence in terms of theological critique was poignant at the time of the Persian Gulf War. See Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, 29, and Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994), 140.

¹⁰ John Murray Cuddihy, *No Offense: Civil Religion and Protestant Taste*, as quoted in Richard Mouw and Sander Griffioen, *Pluralisms and Horizons, An Essay in Christian Public Philosophy* (Grand Rapids:

Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1993), 6.

¹¹ Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief*, 6-7.

¹² Rawls as summarized by Mouw and Griffioen, *Pluralisms and Horizons*, 21.

¹³ *Pluralisms and Horizons*, 49. Mouw and Griffioen draw on Michael Novak's *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism and Freedom with Justice*.

¹⁴ *Pluralisms and Horizons*, 56-57, citing Neuhaus's *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America*. Cf. *The Culture of Disbelief*, 4.

¹⁵ In *The Culture of Disbelief* Carter contends that the First Amendment clauses were designed "not to remove religious values from the arena of public debate, but to keep them there" (112).

¹⁶ Mouw and Griffioen, *Pluralisms and Horizons*, 59-61.

¹⁷ *Pluralisms and Horizons*, 52-53, summarizing Leslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks, The Gospel and Western Culture* (London, SPCK, 1986). Cf. Loren Mead, *The Once and Future Church* (Washington: The Alban Institute, 1991), for a similar understanding of the United States as a secularized country.

¹⁸ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 115, 132-33.

¹⁹ *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 116-17, 137-44. In *Truth to Tell, The Gospel as Public Truth* (Geneva: WCC, 1991), Newbigin explains, "We are called...to bring our faith into the public arena, 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 in radically different human cultures" (59-60). On the role of the laity see also Loren B. Mead, *Transforming Congregations for the Future* (Washington: The Alban Institute, 1994), 96-97.

²⁰ In the introductory essay in William H. Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas, *Preaching to Strangers* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 10.

²¹ Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, 3, 7, 12-23. The following sketch barely outlines the salient features of his very thoughtful and well-documented history of evangelical thinking. For a critical but appreciative review, see David Heim, "In the Shadow of Fundamentalism," *Christian Century* (3 May, 1995): 488-90. Cf. also Cobb, "Faith seeking understanding," for a brief liberal challenge that echoes many of the same concerns.

²² Noll is indebted (p.59) for the trilogy to Canadian historian Michael Gauvreau's *The Evangelical Century* (1991).

²³ For the whole summary see, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, 30, 37-40, 59, 66-81, 84-90, 100-107, 112-14, 122, 153, 157-60, 164-67, 170-71, 221-27. For a careful analysis and theological critique of the Enlightenment see the two works by Newbigin previously cited.

²⁴ Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, 3-9. The Domination System is "the impersonal spiritual realities at the centre of corrupted institutional life" (9).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁶ *Ibid.* This is the overall thesis of the entire trilogy.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 13-23.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 41-42, 45, 48-49.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 65-67. Wink adds that conservatives stress that God upholds, revolutionaries that God condemns, and reformers that God transforms.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 82-89, 102-3, 320-21.

³¹ Cf. Julia Esquivel's marvellous poem, "Threatened with Resurrection," in her collection, *Threatened with Resurrection, Prayers and Poems from an Exiled Guatemalan* (Elgin, Ill: The Brethren Press, 1982), 59-63.