

Public Theology

The Spirit Sent to Bring Good News

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All theology happens in particular contexts. This means that theology, if worth doing at all—whether as critical construction, ecclesial dogma, or apologetic versions—is done in and from real places. The contributions in the present volume, including this chapter, have as their stated perspective to be “thinking theologically from and in the Spirit.”¹ While this viewpoint, seen in each essay, contributes to the budding of what is being called Third Article Theology, even theologies beginning

with such uniformity are going to bring additional perspectives beyond thinking with an explicit precommitment “from and in the Spirit.” Some of these perspectives will reflect various sensibilities, proclivities, and eccentricities of authors, whether this be the result of their ecclesial identities, some other theological or philosophical persuasions, or the part of the world they come from, their so-called contexts.² To refer to such a theology as

1. Myk Habets, “Prologeomenon: On Starting with the Spirit,” chapter 1 of the present volume.

2. For a recent example of an approach to developing a regional theology, see Fred Sanders and Jason S. Sexton, eds., *Theology and California: Theological Refractions on California’s Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

contextual theology would be jejune, since all theology is done from somewhere and bears particular markings descriptive of particular settings and situations.

These considerations bring the theologian paying attention to the place where she finds an echo of the very first question asked in Scripture, a question asked by God to the first human beings: “Where are you?” (Gen. 3:9).³ This question is not wrought in any private setting, but flies entirely out in the open, despite the human inclination to retreat in isolation and hiding (3:7–8, 10). Here our first parents are summoned to reckon with their own postlapsarian condition, and with the actual events that were carried out openly, which brought them to their mortified, ruined estate. Precisely here, in this context, God speaks. It is the place that has been profaned and would be cursed, where all creation hears the divine public pronouncement of malediction (3:14–19). Yet equally in this place a divine promise is made (3:15). It is the setting where the divine presence invades, where grace comes and God’s word is clearly spoken and heard. It all happens in public. But what is “public”?

3. *The New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011).

The Nature of Public Theology

Various models have been given in the extant literature attempting to describe precisely the meaning of the term “public theology.”⁴ I do not propose to settle any matters pertinent

4. Definitions of “public theology” offered in recent scholarship often begin with either political or societal agendas, as noted in Max L. Stackhouse, *Public Theology and Political Economy: Christian Stewardship in Modern Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), xi, 17–35; Ronald F. Thiemann, *Constructing a Public Theology: The Church in a Pluralistic Culture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991), 19–25; William F. Storrar and Andrew R. Morton, eds., *Public Theology for the 21st Century* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 1–21; and Sebastian C. H. Kim, *Theology in the Public Sphere: Public Theology as Catalyst for Open Debate* (London: SCM, 2011), 3–26. See the description of Stackhouse and Thiemann alongside Abraham Kuyper in Vincent E. Bacote, *The Spirit in Public Theology: Appropriating the Legacy of Abraham Kuyper* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 40–53; and an account of Wolfhart Pannenberg’s concept of a public, scientific theology in Jason S. Sexton, *The Trinitarian Theology of Stanley J. Grenz* (London: T&T Clark, 2013), 26–29. Alternatively, see the different notion of “public theology” as a “thoroughly theological and biblical analysis,” in Stephen R. Holmes, ed., *Public Theology in Cultural Engagement* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2008), x; and an evangelical, presuppositional, apologetic method applied to constructive societal engagement in Daniel Strange, “Evangelical Public Theology: What on Earth? Why on Earth? How on Earth?” in *A Higher Throne: Evangelicals and Public Theology*, ed. Chris Green (Nottingham: Apollos, 2008), 14–61.

to the wider debate here, but I do wish to acknowledge that many of the descriptions given are quite particularist and therefore less descriptive for the wider practice of actually doing theology. Eneida Jacobsen helpfully sketches a number of models for possible appropriation in her own Brazilian context. After her survey, she ultimately finds that the kind of theology that would be found relevant and meaningful will be “anchored in the lifeworld,” “mobilized by the suffering of people,” and seeking “to contribute to the expansion of the communicative efforts of a society.”⁵ This seems relevant for theology’s work in any public setting.

If these communicative efforts truly come through in the language of the people, appropriately anchored in their lifeworld, as with the aim of theologies like that of Jürgen Moltmann and liberation theologians,⁶

5. Eneida Jacobsen, “Models of Public Theology,” *International Journal of Public Theology* 6 (2012): 22.

6. Moltmann’s vision of public theology ought not to be equated with that of liberation theology, the latter often collapsing a theological vision into a political one whereas the former understands *Deus crucifixus* as a “stateless God,” the church thus unable to be identified with a national community. Indeed, for Moltmann, freedom in Christ means fellowship and solidarity with the victims of political religion. He writes, “The worship of politics is a superstition,

this kind of theology will also include diverse media and forms of public expressions that come from the people. It should take the form of such things as poetry, prose, letters, and other popular, regional expressions of meaningful life in a given culture. Fred Sanders has argued that something like this should be made use of for doing theology at least in the highly problematic California context,⁷ with implications for elsewhere. Various moods, tonalities, and rhythms will naturally mark a language descriptive of a reality known to the common person’s experience of the world. Insofar as this is fueled by the Holy Spirit it is for “others,” as Moltmann consistently emphasizes, and especially for the poor and those who have fallen victim to tyrannical pride and fear of oppressors with whom the church must resist any alliance.⁸

anathema to Christians. For Christians are joined with Christ crucified to speak to men of a greater freedom” (“The Cross and Civil Religion,” in *Religion and Political Society*, trans. Thomas Hughson and Paul Rigby [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1974], 46).

7. Fred Sanders, “California, Localized Theology, and Theological Localism,” in Sanders and Sexton, *Theology and California*, 19–33.

8. Moltmann, “Cross and Civil Religion,” 41–47. I am also grateful to my colleague Sandra M. Pérez for recently highlighting the role theology might play in the contemporary California State University as having something of a prophetic voice

With public theology's aim being for the good of the "other," following Moltmann, a corresponding question becomes precisely how this kind of theology might meaningfully serve the other in concrete ways and in public expressions that highlight the nature of its authentic witness. Pursuing this question requires further consideration of the nature of public space.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "public" in this way: "Open to general observation, view, or knowledge; existing, performed, or carried out without concealment, so that all may see or hear."⁹ Applying this definition to the action of the church's theology highlights Christianity as something universally verifiable, supernaturally revealed, and personally experienced. It showcases the action of the Trinity to create and work through Israel's story, coming to fruition in the incarnation, with the angelic announcements of Jesus' birth (Luke 2), brought about and into the public by the Spirit (Matt. 1:20). Beyond this, Jesus' entire public ministry is

for responding to oppressive societal (esp. religious) power structures.

9. "public, adj. and n." *OED Online*. December 2014 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), accessed January 3, 2015, <http://www.oed.com.libproxy.usc.edu/view/Entry/154052?result=1&rskey=VUMIOq&>.

visibly manifested and inaugurated at his public baptism in the Jordan River (Matt. 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:22; John 1:32), and all the way to his crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, as well as to his promised and anticipated second advent. More will be said about the nature of Jesus' ministry in a moment, but what is interesting to note is *the public witness of embodiment* on display at each point. This leads one's watchful eyes, following the biblical arc, to the Spirit's public action in the life of the church, creating a new kind of body politic within the public sphere, having constituted the church precisely there in time and space, embodied.

Focusing these matters of the Spirit's activity in the embodied activity of redemptive history, this essay proceeds with an argument sympathetic to Wolfhart Pannenberg's approach to the matter, exhibiting a measured disdain for the privatization of religion that existed at various unfortunate times in the history of the church. Rightly rejecting religion's totalizing impulse, religious expression after the Reformation, for example, became a matter of private practice.¹⁰ This has especially been amplified by US evangelicals at different

10. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Faith and Reality* (London: Search Press, 1977), 137–38.

points in more recent history, where religion became cut off from other cultural issues affecting the church and society. This would happen only to then see religion roar back at different moments in the forms of reactionary movements that tend to co-opt faith for unfortunate, and sometimes both dubious and disastrous, ends.

Christianity's Public Localized Shape

Yet nevertheless and in spite of Christianity being co-opted for other ends in the public square, the truth at the heart of Christianity still holds power of transforming lives, of witnessing to the coming kingdom, of proclaiming judgment,¹¹ and of laboring to love inexplicably. In spite of being co-opted at times, the gospel does this insofar as it remains under the ultimate jurisdiction of the divine Holy Spirit who remains sovereign throughout the course of all matters in heaven and on earth, whether in the lives of individuals, in the life of the church, or in the affairs of the wider society.

11. Luke Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics: The Conditions and Possibilities of Faithful Witness* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 148–49.

Also worth mentioning, before accounting for how sustained public pneumatology gives way to the actual unfolding of the gospel in the world, is the nature of the contemporary world. As conversations continue about the nature of theology in public space, including how it relates to civil religion and secular society, the game may be changing faster than often realized.¹² Much of this has to do with globalization and its effects on nearly every aspect of a commonly shared global society.

Globalization is the big idea that the world has changed to become much more interconnected than it was in previous eras, and thus refers to the deeper, wider, faster, and increasing forms of interconnectedness of all of social life at every level, including the cultural, criminal, financial, and theological.¹³ As such globalization affirms both the

12. Linell E. Cady, "Public Theology and the Postsecular Turn," *International Journal of Public Theology* 8 (2014): 292–312. For more critical responses to the impulse to move beyond secularism, see Khaled Furani, "Is There a Postsecular?," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 83 (March 2015): 1–26; and Atalia Omer, "Modernists Despite Themselves: The Phenomenology of the Secular and the Limits of Critique as an Instrument of Change," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 81 (March 2015): 27–71.

13. For a brief discussion of this, see Jason S. Sexton, "Globalization," in *New Dictionary of Theology*, rev. ed., ed. T. A. Noble, Tim Grass, Martin

local, universal, and transcendent, including the significance of particular settings as meaningful places to do theology *from*. This relates precisely to an important feature of theology's essential public shape as a centrifugal movement, and where universality comes, but only through particularity.¹⁴ It is therefore the local that comes into view as the place where the Spirit works, and from where witness continues to take expansive shape, all while in public. The Spirit's work to accomplish this has no ultimate aim other than that God be all in all, and all things be reconciled (1 Cor. 15:28). The Spirit's *testimonium* goes out, revealing in ways that are not part of the common order of things as currently situated, but pulsating with distinct rhythms and tonalities that disrupt the now common course of the created order in all of its post-lapsarian bungle.

Some theologians have begun to make much of not only the church in exile, but also the church as entirely displaced, arguing this

as the way mission works.¹⁵ While there is surely something true about this, it cannot be a vision of the public life of the church (and revelation) happening in such a way that the church vanishes from public altogether, only to reappear at the beginning of apocalyptic irruption. This seems like a sure recipe for apostasy. In contrast, the church's very identity, as a divinely re-created and reconstituted thing (even amid its extant forms of disrepair), is an affront to the world, fulfilling the world's deepest longings in various ways by the power of the Spirit, and doing so as a testimony to the worldly principalities and powers. It is therefore situated, having been built with a concrete historical identity and with real human lives (*epoikodomēthentes*, Eph. 2:20), and indeed having a real operational space as the reality lived out in lives of real participants who both come from and remain living in real communities in the contemporary world. This contemporary world is thus

Davie, John McDowell, and Stephen R. Holmes (Nottingham: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 364–65.

14. For a discussion of the centripetal, centrifugal, and diasporic images of Christian mission, see Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 72–81.

15. For example, see Jonathan R. Wilson, "Aesthetics of the Kingdom: Apocalypsis, Eschatos, and Vision for Christian Mission," in *Revisioning, Renewing, and Rediscovering the Triune Center: Essays in Honor of Stanley J. Grenz*, ed. Derek J. Tidball, Brian S. Harris, and Jason S. Sexton (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014), 157–74; and Samuel V. Adams, *The Reality of God and Historical Method: Apocalyptic Theology in Conversation with N. T. Wright* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015).

precisely the place where the Spirit operates to create church, wherever it may find itself and whatever the nature of its public witness, as the “new humanity” (Eph. 2:15). This means that there is an otherwise operative humanity that this new one is replacing by virtue of its relationship to Christ and new access through him to God the Father by the Spirit (Eph. 2:18). With a testimony to its real and prophetic healing, the church is locally established amid the brokenness of both the corporate community and its own members’ bodies, yet while simultaneously testifying to what these will become through the Spirit’s work to bring Christ’s work to completion. The church’s public shape then is irreducibly both local and transcendent.

Pneumatological Public Christology

An integral feature of the Spirit’s action seen in Scripture (for example, John 15:26) is to witness to Christ, whose very life is bound up with the life and action of the Spirit.¹⁶ As

16. The work of the Spirit and Son are also bound up with the life and work of the Father, as the well-known Trinitarian dictate goes (*opera trinitatis ad extra indivisa sunt*, “the external works of the Trinity are inseparable”), and therefore every member of the Trinity is present for and in every action.

such, nobody can acknowledge Jesus apart from the Spirit’s action. John Owen (1616–83) wrestled with this matter for those who would locate the Spirit’s work exclusively in the early church. Himself locating the “extraordinary and miraculous operations” of the Spirit in that first-century moment (against the Socinians), Owen refused to confine the Spirit’s entire work there. Owen believed that doing so is “plainly to deny the truth of Christ’s promises, and to overthrow his church: for we shall make it undeniably evident, that none can believe in Christ, or yield obedience to him, or worship God in him, but by the Holy Ghost; and, therefore, if his communications cease, so must all faith in Christ, and Christianity too.”¹⁷ In the same discourse Owen explains,

He who never experienced the special work of the Spirit upon him, never received any special mercy from God. How is it possible? For whatever God works in us, is by his Spirit; he therefore who has no work of the Spirit on his heart, never received either mercy or grace from God. To renounce therefore

17. John Owen, *The Holy Spirit: His Gifts and Power* (repr., Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1954), 32.

the work of the Spirit is to renounce all interest in the mercy and grace of God.

There is not anything done by us, that is holy and acceptable to God, but it is an effect of the Spirit's operation. "Without him we can do nothing"; John xv.5; for without Christ we cannot; and by him alone, is the grace of Christ communicated. By him we are regenerated; by him we are sanctified; by him we are cleansed; by him we are assisted in every good work.¹⁸

The expansiveness of public witness relates to the universal reach of the lordship of Christ, who possesses "all authority in heaven and on earth" (Matt. 28:18). Pneumatologically driven public theology grants this high Christology. Jesus is Lord of the cosmos, and his followers are caught up in a kind of worship-igniting enrapturement that prepares a kind of existential martyrdom posture and nurtures reliance on the Spirit's wisdom and dynamic dependence on ecclesial siblings and genuine friends in missional living; it resists the current structures, fueling witness, and testifying widely to the truth of the gospel. It testifies to the comprehensiveness of Christ, which locates this Jesus in the particularities of believers' lives,

18. *Ibid.*, 24.

and also in the relationship Jesus has with his Father by the Spirit as seen in the biblical Gospels, highlighting a low Christology. By virtue of this movement, one of "sonship," Christ's life, death, and exaltation become the means of all participation in God.¹⁹

While union with Christ through the Spirit precisely denotes participation in the life of God, the very same reality is also a participation in public space, where the incarnation touches. It corresponds to the *homo-ousios* nature of Christ and therefore reaches into and touches the places where community brokenness exists, of abused women and children with no fathers, as well as abusers and abandoners. Personal and societal wounds in their particularities give way to the healing that the pneumatologically empowered incarnation brings in its own woundedness and atoning power.

Jesus' presence is the very divine presence and goodness. In Dietrich Bonhoeffer's

19. For an argument that Jesus occupies "space" or the "normative place" within the "field of force" in God that is wisdom, and does so in such a way that his atoning work establishes him as becoming "the space for all people into which wisdom is concentrated," see Paul S. Fiddes, *Seeing the World and Knowing God: Hebrew Wisdom and Christian Doctrine in a Late-Modern Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 344–46, 387–92.

terms, Christ becomes the man for us today, or the one rerealized in ever new spaces by the Spirit. This happens since Christ is what Paul Fiddes calls “the ‘comprehensive space’ where we have access to the inexhaustible depths and multiplicity of the divine wisdom.”²⁰ This wisdom revealed by the Spirit (1 Cor. 2:10) enabled Christ to become wisdom for us (1:30), which grants not only fellowship with God’s Son but also an understanding of “spiritual realities” (2:14). This new insight equips believers with the facilities to reckon all things as *sub ratione dei*, which renders everything in relationship to God. This leads consequently to the life of the church, the public actor established by virtue of its union with Christ, and the faith *in* Christ possessed by those participating in the life of the church.

Pneumatological Public Ecclesiology

Unlike some systematic theologies (especially evangelical ones) and various academic curricula in some theological institutions that treat ecclesiology as somewhat detached from other theological categories, and especially from theology proper, this should not

be the case. Whenever the Creed is recited, in contrast, the church does not come *after* belief in the Trinity, but is rather part of what it means to believe in the Trinity today. The Third Article²¹ has this: “I believe in the Holy Spirit . . . the holy catholic church, the communion of saints” [*Credo in Spiritum Sanctum, sanctam ecclesiam catholicam, sanctorum communionem*]. The presence of the cognate terms, *sanctam* and *sanctorum*, following *Spiritum Sanctum* is not insignificant. There is a holy catholic church and a communion of holy people (saints) precisely because the Holy Spirit acted to make it so. The church is therefore intimately connected to the Spirit and to the Trinity insofar as the Third Article of the Creed is part of any exposition of what

21. The Creed is better understood as a threefold confession rather than a twelvefold one if it is to be shorthand for the gospel. The designation of twelve seems to be much more suitable for academic analysis and critical assessment of the Creed’s features. But otherwise, the point of the Creed is to confess faith in the triune God who is reconciling the world through Christ. As Pannenberg emphasizes at the close of his Trinitarian theology: “The distinction and unity of the immanent and economic Trinity constitute the heartbeat of the divine love, and with a single such heartbeat this love encompasses the whole world of creatures” (*Systematic Theology*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998], 3:646).

20. *Ibid.*, 345.

it means to believe in God the Father, and in his Son, Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Spirit.

Hans Urs von Balthasar in perhaps less careful language takes the part of the Creed that expresses faith in the church as belief in precisely what *follows* belief in the Father, Son, and Spirit. That is, now that belief in the Trinity is established, focus turns to the redemptive work of the three divine persons.²² But this divides the Creed unnecessarily, somewhat betraying the structure and content of the Creed as *one whole Creed*, which articulates faith in and an exposition of the life and action of the triune God, which views everything in relation to this God, the Trinity, requiring that belief in the church is an essential part of what it means to believe in the triune God, and thus in the Spirit who creates the church. Contrary to Balthasar, then, it is not that the church begins once faith in the Trinity has concluded, allowing belief to range off into other foreign directions, into foreign objects of worship or additional works of the Trinity that operate beyond our salvation, as if believers do not know and come to believe in the Trinity on the basis of and in relation to the triune

action. The triune action in the salvation economy focuses particularly and primarily on the church. Belief in the Trinity means there is also a church, a holy one, by virtue of its relationship to the Holy One. As such, the church is an extension of the triune God's action and continues bearing witness to that action of the Spirit's life within the church, and also in the revelation of the church's book.

Witnesses within the Church

The special creation of the Spirit is the church, which boasts various gifts to carry out its many different ministries. Some of these gifts showed up as apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers (Eph. 4:11). Each of these gifts has a public function, but sometimes will overlap more explicitly into a public role, with a different measure of public presence, and sometimes even a different level of statesmanship. The pastor may even be a state senator, and sometimes a martyr. This is precisely the openness and vulnerability of the witness displayed in the life of the late Reverend Clementa Pinckney,²³ who along with eight others

22. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Credo: Meditations on the Apostle's Creed*, trans. David Kipp (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), 83.

23. See the brief biography of Pinckney, the late South Carolina state senator and the pastor of the Emanuel A.M.E. Church in Charleston, South Carolina in Tom Cleary, "Clementa

was killed in Mother Emanuel Church in Charleston, South Carolina, by a racist act of terrorism after hospitably welcoming his very murderer into a small open Bible study.²⁴ In this way, for one, the Spirit's public action is displayed in the life of the church, empowering the church for extraordinary witness, even in the face of death. In the case of the very public slayings of Clementa Pinckney and the members of his congregation, this death bore all sorts of strange fruit, including the reflection on grace from the sitting United States president, amid his singing of the song "Amazing Grace" during his eulogy at Pinckney's funeral service.²⁵

The Spirit births this kind of reality in the life of the church, giving it an embodied

Pinckney Dead: 5 Fast Facts You Need to Know," *Heavy* (June 18, 2015), accessed August 5, 2015, <http://heavy.com/news/2015/06/clementa-pinckney-dead-charleston-church-shooting-victim-black-church-pastor-ame-shot-injury/>.

24. See also the conversation, "In the Shadow of Charleston: Politics, Religion, & White Supremacy," *Syndicate* (July 2015), accessed August 6, 2015, <https://syndicatetheology.com/symposium/in-the-shadow-of-charleston/>.

25. Sarah Kaufman, "Why Obama's Singing of 'Amazing Grace' Is So Powerful," *Washington Post* (June 26, 2015), accessed August 6, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/style-blog/wp/2015/06/26/why-obamas-singing-of-amazing-grace-is-so-powerful/>.

outlook far beyond mere public optimism, and certainly not a banal and misplaced triumphalism, which some colonialist ecclesiologies exhibit. Instead the church embodies a hope of a true renewal of all things in God. This reality has begun within the renewed community brought into union with Christ by the Spirit and living in adopted fellowship with God the Father. The Spirit calls the church into public existence, which translates into the significance of why water baptism takes place in a public setting.

The Spirit also speaks to the church, which exists in public, and thus maintains a vulnerable calling as the primary actor in the public square. Precisely in this space the Spirit offers forgiveness to all who believe, extending the same to members of the church, granting them hope in the resurrection and in everlasting life, as the Creed states. All of this is part of the public faith and witness of the church, as the Spirit sanctifies it in the very same space where it was called to life. In this way, the church has a function of hallowing space, embodying a kind of healing presence among those who do not yet believe the gospel. This can change cultures, and yet can also be abused when misappropriated by a dislocation from the derived healing presence and power that

the church both experiences and participates in through the Spirit.

Throughout all this there exists a kind of negotiability of culture that corresponds to the vulnerability of active witness, where nothing ever remains static. This also designates all cultural settings as opening up the in-between spaces where pneumatological action occurs, where life is breathed where there is none, where healing is desperately needed, and where the Spirit comes in power (1 Thess. 1:5). Among this divine action is the movement of the Spirit that created not only the church, but also the church's sacred text.

Witnesses within Scripture

The Spirit speaks in such a way as to draw believers into the heart and essence of what is spoken in Holy Scripture. The shape and forms of this speaking are not always necessarily found in Scripture, but will be more often than not in the contemporary age. The Bible is indeed "the Spirit's book" and as such is the place the Spirit has spoken God's word and will to humanity.²⁶ But this was not always the case.

What is now seen and commanded to be read in public (1 Tim. 4:13)—the Bible—was

grounded in earlier public action. In other words, the Spirit was working in public space, in redemptive history and in the lives of participants in the redeemed community, long before Scripture was ever produced. The Spirit worked in the task of the production and will work long after the text had been produced. The text accounts for the additional witness of the Spirit's public activity, past, present, and future, as viewed through the lens of Scripture and through our lenses.

As a small sampling of the public activity of the Spirit—a kind of pneumatic public theology seen in the pages of Scripture where the Spirit redemptively sweeps up God's people to act in particular ways in the public square—consider the following. The psalmist describes the Spirit's powerful action, moving out both to create and to renew (Ps. 104:30). After David describes the inscrutability of God's knowledge, he then develops a subsequent understanding that there is no place where one might avoid the omnipresence of the Spirit, meaning that his presence is always public inasmuch as all flesh is ever before him (Ps. 139:7).

The Spirit's public activity bringing about public ministry is seen at Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River (Luke 3:21--23), which took place before the Spirit hurled (*ekballei*) Jesus into the desert, leading him into great

26. Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 379–91.

difficulty (Mark 1:12). The Spirit empowers witness (Acts 1:8), giving the words to say (Luke 12:11–12). It is precisely there in the public arena for all to see that the Spirit transforms believers by gifts given to otherwise menial and “less honorable” members of the church (1 Corinthians 12). In this way the Spirit brings life amid cultural decay, even as one’s public testimony of faith in Christ is the genuine sign of salvation wrought by the Spirit (Rom. 10:8–9; 1 Cor. 12:3).

Scripture highlights the Spirit’s role in public theology, which—while done within the wider culture—can never be reduced to mere cultural description, however well developed and insightful. Stephen Holmes correctly says that a proper notion of public theology—and I would add, one that is pneumatologically driven—will never be reduced to sociology, cultural studies, or social anthropology. Instead it will shine forth as a thoroughly theological and biblical analysis, meaning that theology will show itself as what it is in its ability “to speak truthfully about all present realities.”²⁷

As the church’s book, Scripture takes cues from the Spirit’s witness and what the

Spirit is saying to the churches. In this way Scripture is equally the Spirit’s book. Calvin describes Scripture as where “God is truly and vividly described to us from his works, while these very works are appraised not by our depraved judgment but by the rule of eternal truth.”²⁸ He elsewhere states that “the Holy Spirit so inheres in His truth, which He expresses in Scripture, that only when its proper reverence and dignity are given to the Word does the Holy Spirit show forth His power.” He goes on to describe that by this “kind of mutual bond the Lord has joined together the certainty of his Word and of his Spirit so that the perfect religion of the Word may abide in our minds when the Spirit, who causes us to contemplate God’s face, shines.”²⁹

The church as the primary actor in the world remains such as it is oriented to the Spirit’s voice in Scripture, the Spirit’s book. The church sees this authority in its own life in the same way that the church derives its very existence from the triune God as a unique creature of the Spirit, gathered around the

27. Holmes, *Public Theology in Cultural Engagement*, x.

28. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 1.6.3 (1:73).

29. *Ibid.*, 1.9.3 (1:95)

Spirit-inspired text, which charts the course of its existence in the public arena.

Public Pneumatology, Societal Religions, and Cultural Institutions

In the public arena the church exists as church, having ontological priority over the world in a very real sense and making a critical assessment of the institutions and other public-square actors that exist within the church's proximity and purview. In its engagement the church labors for the good of its members, but also for the freedom and flourishing of all—people of faith and no faith, wealthy and poor, and otherwise—within a culture that is never “neutral” in any meaningful sense, but ought to be neutral in this penultimate age. Laboring for such an emphasis, especially when power brokers and stakeholders feel cut in on, can often cost the church significantly.³⁰

Empowered by the Holy Spirit, the church exists in the world with what Lesslie Newbigin described as “lenses” through

which it can understand and interpret the world. In doing so, believers strive to see plausibility structures brought about which establish greater senses of neutrality so that the gospel message about what God in Christ has done to reconcile the world can be preached.³¹ Some of these plausibility structures will take shape in the grammar of various institutions of healing, wholeness, and hope birthed by the church, both in the ancient and present worlds. Among these might be things like the institution of marriage, or hospitals, or academic institutions. They might also include institutions with different operational bases, including things like governments, other governance structures, or prisons, which have had the church at the center of their existence.³²

Whatever institutional structures are erected at any given time, the task belongs to the Spirit to bring about an irruption amid the structures, especially those erected against the Spirit's lordship, as it were. The Spirit breaks through those edifices with a view to bringing life where there is none, birthing the

30. Drawing from William T. Cavanaugh, see Rowan Williams, “Convictions, Loyalties and the Secular State,” in *Faith in the Public Square* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 43–44.

31. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (London: SPCK, 1989), 227–29.

32. I list government and prison because each has played significant roles within sociopolitical entities where the church has existed as part of the official government structure.

church and cultivating gospel witness. This happens also amid societal religions of particular cultures, for which the church is called to an elenctic task of mission. Appropriating a presuppositional Reformed methodology, Daniel Strange refers to the elenctic task as

a triologue in which the Christian enters into the already existing relationship between the non-Christian and the Holy Spirit, the dynamic relationship between divine revelation and human suppression and substitution. . . . In such a triologue it is essential that the Christian takes time to listen compassionately and understand the religious Other to discover what they have done with God. To achieve this goal, one needs to be familiar with both a general “scientific awareness” of other religions (historically, psychologically, philosophically, and phenomenologically) and a more particular “living approach,” which appreciates the individualistic nature of religious consciousness.³³

Going further than Strange here, it seems necessary also to recognize the integrity of religions in their own development (morally,

33. Daniel Strange, *Their Rock Is Not Like Our Rock: A Theology of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 278.

historically particular, and otherwise) and a genuine contestability of each one’s truth claims in the public square. Commenting on John 16:8,³⁴ J. H. Bavinck states, “The Holy Spirit will convince the world of sin. The Holy Spirit is actually the only conceivable actor of the verb, for the conviction of sin exceeds all human ability. Only the Holy Spirit can do this, even though he can and will use instruments in his hand.”³⁵

Constituted and cultivated by the Holy Spirit amid all kinds of different societal structures at any given time, the resilience of the church shows itself by finding precisely the right places to serve and the right gaps to fill in a culture, even as it is often rebuffed by present and dominant institutional structures, including and often especially the so-called confessional ones. While no institution can always realize its goals, it is especially injurious when confessional ones do not.

Here is where difficulty may be seen in T. F. Torrance’s notion of evangelizing the “foundations of culture.” His identification

34. “When that helper comes he will convict the world concerning sin, righteousness, and judgment.”

35. J. H. Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions*, trans. David H. Freeman (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1960), 222, cited in Strange, *Their Rock*, 278.

of the need for transformation of human persons is one thing, and offers a correspondingly modest view of societal transformation in this age; but to assume this can be done for “the mind of human society and culture in which human beings exist” is another thing altogether. Yet Torrance thinks this is necessary if the church is to put down roots in a particular society and remain genuinely Christian.³⁶ Much could be said here about the early church existing during its first three centuries on the furthest societal margins, living as light in the darkness and operating in a distressed situation (1 Cor. 7:26). Furthermore, Torrance may simply be working with the notion of an established church. But even so, it doesn’t seem plausible that there is, or ever has been, an actual Christian society; there are only Christians. And they belong to society within public space, to one another, and to the Lord, insofar as they participate in the lives of each.

Accordingly, there are no foundations of culture per se. There are only *people* who make culture and are shaped by the culture that others have made, and who either contribute

to the health of particular cultures, or to their decay. Being negotiable at every point, all cultures exist within a constant negotiability of epistemological structures present within culture.³⁷ Institutions set within their cultures, as all institutions are, reflect more of the time and cultural features of their designers than any belief structures they are based on. This happens because the same belief will look different in different settings, even while some things remain the same, embodied by the same kinds of people.

In the advocacy of freedom for all in the public square, and plausibility structures more consistent with neutrality and the flourishing of all, the secular project has failed wider societies. Yet in the case of secularism, or other nonneutral cultural hegemonies, John Cobb has recently expressed the significant insight that “[t]he only justification of modern secularism is that Christendom was much worse.”³⁸ So while resisting any so-called Christian hegemonic triumphalism, there is a genuine work that the Spirit effectually

36. Thomas F. Torrance, *Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ*, ed. Robert T. Walker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 444.

37. George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 1984), 32–41.

38. John B. Cobb Jr., *Jesus’ Abba: The God Who Has Not Failed* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016).

performs with the gospel's advancement into public spaces, which truly changes things.

Dynamic, Expansive, Public Exposition

Paul described early Christians as Holy Spirit-generated human letters, consisting of individual lives known by all, and publicly verifiable as to their authenticity (2 Cor. 3:2). The Spirit reshapes these lives, effecting the divine will amid common societal structures and problems. This public action is liberating, and needs no additional secretive expression. They remain public, "in the light" (1 John 1:7; 2:9–10), open to outside scrutiny, yet anticipating that day when God's glory covers the land and all flesh shall see it. The question remains how such glory might be developed, how it works out in the public arena.

First, it must be stated that efforts for legislative and judicial struggles for righteousness have never been the way of the gospel. The Spirit maintains unfathomable freedom in sovereignly bringing about whatever God wants to produce in societies. Human effort—even Christians' attempts—to bring about the kingdom is not the way of Christianity. In his rebuke of Peter at his arrest, even

Jesus stated that his ways and kingdom were not of this world (John 18:36).

One intensely contested matter around the globe is the subject of marriage, a matter the gospel says very much about. Theological voices have been largely absent from the church's construction of a theological account of sexuality and marriage.³⁹ And yet, something has happened with the institution of marriage in common society that many evangelicals and Catholics (and Muslims . . .) find very troubling. What does a pneumatological public theology have to say about it? Whatever it might say in the freedom of conscience, it cannot remain neutral on matters that Scripture speaks to, and thus must make judgments on public and cultural phenomena. Public theology furthermore cannot remain silent about (and therefore complicit in) injustice, racism, prejudice, homophobia, and other forms of oppression, but maintains particular descriptions and assessments of each of these things, and even some things the gospel renders irredeemable.

If a public theology were robustly operative in the public square, faith would be

39. This is beginning to change, with numerous efforts underway, including the 2016 quadrennial meeting of the UK-based Tyndale Fellowship, focusing on "Marriage, Family, and Relationships."

recognized consistently by the powers of the age, leaders of Babylon, Athens, Jerusalem, or whatever contexts the church finds itself in. In the current situation, as in the past, the Spirit may indeed throw believers out into the desolate places, but so will the Spirit guide their words in the places of societal decay or power, wherever the journey may lead. Discerning the precise location of Christian witness is the ongoing task, but it cannot be done in any hegemonic ways. Even “Babylon” is a mixture of things, exuding ways that real people have made meaningful lives, and yet who are simultaneously called to find their ultimate life in Christ, as the Spirit and the bride call them (Rev. 22:7), which call remains an ever-present and public calling to all. But as the ages wax on ahead of the Lord’s return, Babylon is much more likely the destination where believers will find themselves.

Christian engagement in the public square must be explicitly rooted in God’s plan for the world.⁴⁰ This is the matter the Spirit is chiefly concerned with, and the manner in which the Spirit continues to dispatch grace to the world. Thereby mission becomes both the message and the posture of the church,

40. See Dan Strange, “Not Ashamed! The Sufficiency of Scripture for Public Theology,” *Themelios* 36 (2011): 241–43.

whose existence is captured by the movement of the triune God and whose place in the public arena is the sphere in which Christian confession announces the truth of the coming kingdom’s reality.

Contrary to the depiction of being the reduction of faith to “vague religiosity that serves primarily to energize, heal, and give meaning to the business of life” whose activity is shaped by factors other than faith,⁴¹ the vision that sees theology integrating with missiology as public theology aims to make sense of things both as they are and as they ought to be, deemed thus in light of Scripture’s vision of the coming kingdom, and in the way that the kingdom’s transformative features are embodied by those devoted to following Jesus in the present. This is not merely “internal difference” as opposed to the liberal, postliberal, or separatist programs,⁴² nor is it merely the notion of “faithful presence.”⁴³ Instead, it views theology’s outworking as a *mode* that intends

41. See this description of the primary target for his thesis in Miroslav Volf, *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2011), 40.

42. *Ibid.*, 84–97.

43. James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 197–286.

to address public issues and therefore as being a bit further down the line of confessing the substance of what is hoped for.

Therefore it is not only *being* a faithful witness (Acts 1:8), but also seeking ways to cultivate that witness while living life in the public square amid other competing narratives. By its very nature, Christian witness has always been public; to recap, this specific form aims “to address matters of public importance.” Arising from theological reflection along with commitments and convictions rooted in the Christian tradition, the reflection viewed here “is invariably sparked off by public issues, whether global or local or both, that require exploring trajectories of faith and praxis.” Yet this form of Christian witness occurs in the form of a discourse *accessible* within the framework of the very discourse operative in the public square.⁴⁴ In other words, while aware of and somewhat operative within the church-academy-society framework, the discourse flowing from the Christian witness is meant to be available to ordinary people. Public theology is then expressed through “reflection on public life in specific cultural contexts, and

if its conclusions are to be communicated and understood in the public square, then it may need to be expressed in the vernacular and in dynamic interaction with cultural forms.”⁴⁵ This correlates with Thiemann’s notion of “faith seeking to understand the relation between Christian convictions and the broader social and cultural context within which the Christian community lives.”⁴⁶ This is precisely faith actively situated within public life and expanding even further out in public.

The public mission of Christian witness, of course, is something that cannot be fabricated—the nature and existence of Christian witness are indicative (Acts 1:8). Therefore it is not something always necessarily operative in verbal form,⁴⁷ and when it is, is *never merely verbal*. The genuine engagement of public theology takes place with the whole being. It is ever opening in capaciousness to reckon

45. Kim, *Theology in the Public Sphere*, 54.

46. Ronald F. Thiemann, *Constructing a Public Theology: The Church in a Pluralistic Culture* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991), 21, cited in Kim, *Theology in the Public Sphere*, 7.

47. One of the challenges of the verbal-proclamation view is its anemic gospel for the whole people of God, including those who cannot talk. And what is the value of verbal gospel proclamation to a twenty-month-old, prematurely born child with a fatal disease and only minutes or hours to live?

44. John W. de Gruchy, “Public Theology as Christian Witness: Exploring the Genre,” *International Journal of Public Theology* 1 (2007): 40–41.

with all things personal and public, and ever expansive. According to Miroslav Volf, it is

not a matter of either speaking or doing; not a matter of either offering a compelling intellectual vision or embodying a set of alternative practices; not a matter of either merely making manifest the richness and depth of interior life or merely working to change the institutions of society; not a matter of either only displaying alternative politics gathered in Eucharistic celebrations or merely working for change as the dispersed people of God. It is all these things and more.⁴⁸

This public engagement concerns the space (or sphere) in which God is currently working amid the present brokenness, which the church enters into in its own brokenness for the world, a brokenness shaped by the church's imperfect confession, which nevertheless courageously and humbly, with Scripture's sure voice as guide,⁴⁹ tells of the world's

true hope. The distinctive Christian commitment to this gospel renders pluralism as a political project untenable,⁵⁰ itself seeming to obfuscate the special investment God has made, an investment of his life for the world by giving rise to the body of Christ, which has been called, gathered, and sent by an electing God of love. Thus God's Son came as Israel's promised king and messiah, who felt the force of sin's penalty as its verdict discoursed in a plurality of voices with contradictory worldviews who nevertheless united in realizing his crucifixion. These narrational voices he nevertheless subversively fulfills in his resurrection, ascension, and triumphal return, which is the public reality Christians witness to, and is far greater than anything else this world has to offer.

48. Volf, *Public Faith*, 97.

49. For the importance of this, see the chapter "The Bible as a Public Book" in Kim, *Theology in the Public Sphere*, 27–56; and Holmes, *Public Theology in Cultural Engagement*, 2, who claims the Bible should have "not just a place, but a central place, in public discourse."

50. See Volf, *Public Faith*, 126.