

*Teach me, my God and King,  
In all things Thee to see,  
And what I do in anything  
To do it as for thee*

*George Herbert*

## Introduction: Public Theology? Public Enemy?

The title of this article refers to my ‘proud’ announcement last year to friends and family that I had been appointed as ‘Friends Lecturer in Culture, Religion and Public Theology’ at Oak Hill Theological College. Culture, or ‘culcha’ as we native Southenders call it, most people have some idea about, whether it is Matthew Arnold’s prescriptive definition which equated proper culture with high cultural pursuits, or more descriptive anthropological definitions which sees all human activity as cultural activity. ‘Religion’ well, this could be religion in general, or specific religious traditions. But what about ‘public theology’? Blank faces: ‘*What on earth is that*’ was the question. Well in my articulate way I mumbled “its kind of, you know, Christian engagement in society and public life...kind of thing, I think...” Blank expression now turns to quizzical expression ‘*Why on earth would you want to teach about that?*’ was the reply. Since then, this typical little exchange has become a helpful microcosm, illustrative of a larger bewilderment concerning the state we are in, both the state evangelicals are in concerning ‘public theology’ and as a result of this, more controversially, bewilderment over the state (of Great Britain) we are in.

Well what is public theology, or rather what is evangelical public theology? Now I don’t want us to get mired in defining terms. If theology is hard to define, just think about different senses of the term ‘public.’ Suffice it to say that for those in the

academy, ‘public theology’ is fast becoming a well established discipline with its own language and grammar, its own doyens, projects and publications. That ‘Joe-public Christian’ might not have a clue about it does, I’m afraid, say something about the in-house and isolated nature of much theology in the university. Public theology appears neither to be in public or for the public!

However, our ignorance of the discipline says something about us, because as usual, we, as evangelicals, seem to be playing a game of catch-up and now as we breathlessly arrive late on the scene ready for our turn, we discover that Public Theology is a game we don’t want to play indeed can’t play because in reality it is a game which others don’t want us to play. The rules of this game rule us out. Put simply, much public theology is a child of the modern university whose presuppositions are ultimately anti-Christian, or what Marsden calls ‘established unbelief.’ <sup>2</sup> This child has some noticeable family features and characteristics. For example let’s take David Tracey in his lecture ‘Defending the public character of theology’ “To speak in a public fashion means to speak in a manner that can be disclosive and transformative for any intelligent, reasonable, responsible human being”. <sup>3</sup> Alarm bells start ringing here, although this kind of statement is consistent with Tracey’s view of theology as a whole. Note this infamous statement in his book *Blessed Rage for Order*:

... In principle the fundamental loyalty of the theologian qua theologian is to that morality of scientific knowledge which he shares with his colleagues, the philosophers, historians and social scientists. No more than they, can he allow his own – or his tradition’s beliefs to serve as warrant for his arguments. In fact, in all proper theological inquiry, the analysis should be characterised by those same ethical stances of autonomous judgment, critical reflection, and properly sceptical hard-mindedness

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that characterize analysis in other fields...the theologian finds that his basic faith, his fundamental attitude towards reality, is the same faith shared implicitly or explicitly by his secular contemporaries.<sup>4</sup>

To which I ask, whatever happened to the noetic effects of the Fall, and our ultimate commitment that Jesus Christ is Lord?

Alternatively, public theology is defined in such a way that there is an inbuilt bias towards an ecumenical and inter-faith dialogue and co-operation, for example that all 'faiths' and 'faith communities' can and should speak together in the public square, however conceived. To which I ask, whatever happened to the finality and uniqueness of Jesus Christ?

So is Evangelical Public Theology a contradiction in terms? Should I hand in my letter of resignation because Evangelical Public Theology is a dead end, or do I need be dismissed from my post for leading Oak Hill College down the wrong path? Well I don't think so, because I think it is possible for an evangelical to do 'public theology', that is to say there is not total incommensurability between 'public theology' and my own definition of evangelical public theology. Let me attempt my own working definition which is a slightly tweaked version of the definition given by the Lutheran theologian Robert Benne: "the engagement of a living religious tradition with its public environment – the economic, political and cultural spheres of our common life."<sup>5</sup>

I would want to nuance this slightly to the following: Evangelical Public Theology is:

1. the theological *reflection* on the relationship of and responsibilities between evangelicals and their society / public environment (economic, political and cultural spheres)

2. the theological *engagement* of evangelicals within their society / public environment (economic, political and cultural spheres)

I make the distinction here because it is possible that after reflecting there might be a realisation that as evangelicals we want to limit our engagement or not be engaged at all. Fine; but in coming to this conclusion we would still be doing 'public theology'. Unless we completely shut our ourselves away in an hermetically sealed Christian enclave (and then how 'evangelical' would we be?) we will be doing some form of public theology.

Equipped with these definitions and knowing a little bit about the terrain ahead of us, let us take a few tentative steps into the world of evangelical public theology. What follows is not meant to be merely descriptive but prescriptive.

### Portrait of the speaker as a grumpy man

I would like to read two quotations by Christian authors.

To affirm and bask in the goodness of the world, to praise God for the wonders of creation, to practice responsible stewardship of this small planet, and to honour its Maker by using its resources widely for the welfare of the race and the enriching of human life are all integral aspects of work that Christians are called to do. Any idea that consistent Christianity must undermine or diminish concern for the tasks of civilization should be dismissed once and for all.

*Jim Packer and Thomas Howard*<sup>6</sup>

Who can doubt that there is something deeply wrong in the United Kingdom today? Everyone seems to be looking out for themselves, nobody seems to care, nobody appears to have any honour or respect - from the top to the bottom. There is a political culture of spin and lies, in which no-one can be trusted. Marriage vows don't matter, half a generation of children are growing up

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without a father, the government is encouraging children into promiscuity, homosexuality and infertility, crime has soared, people seek escape in drugs, our hospitals are filthy, our politicians spend our money like water while we all live on debt, injustice is done in the courts and the poor are robbed by the national lottery. The Christian Faith itself is under attack from politically-correct local government and the media and indecency is the rule in the arts. Last but not least, we kill our own children in what should be the safest place on earth. How did it come to this?<sup>7</sup>

*Christian Voice*

Are you a half glass empty or a half glass full person? I don't know if you have come across the television programme *Grumpy Old Men* (and now *Grumpy Old Women*.) I will stick to the male version. The premise is quite simple: one camera and lots of 'talking heads'. Well-known middle aged men moan about everything, music, television, politics, kids, dogs, pavements. Many of these grumpy old men look back to a time when things were better, music was better, television was better, politics was better, dogs were better, pavements were better, Britain was better.

Now I am very aware that this article could be interpreted as a Christian version of a grumpy 'youngish' man for I want to start by making two bold and provocative claims that are linked:

1. the positive impact that the gospel has had on our national and cultural life continues to disintegrate around us and this is something we should be deeply concerned about.
2. As evangelicals we need to acknowledge that *we* are partly to blame for this decline but that we have the God-given power of the gospel not only to stop the rot but to transform lives, communities and even our nation and culture.

Before I elaborate on these points I want to

acknowledge some immediate objections you might have to such claims.

a) **memory loss.** Unlike the grumpy old-men, I am aware of the dangers of putting on rose tinted glasses and looking dewy-eyed at a so-called golden era in British life – here the writer of Ecclesiastes is ready to rebuke me “Do not say, 'Why were the old days better than these?' For it is not wise to ask such questions” (Ecc. 7:10).

Christians, particularly of a more mature vintage, can lapse into nostalgia and sentimentalism. But remember, to quote Ecclesiastes again, “There is nothing new under the sun” (Ecc.1:9). One commentator puts it like this “to sigh for the good old days is doubly unrealistic: a substitute not only for action but for proper thought. It overlooks the evils of past generations that took a different form or vexed a different section of society in other times.”<sup>8</sup> One age is very much like the other.

While sin is still the same from generation to generation, I do want to assert that there is a historical and theological link between the closeness or distance of the gospel to the bloodstream of a culture/nation and the cohesion and well-being of that culture / nation. Yes I know the concept of Christendom, that Britain was and still is, or was and is not, or in fact never was, a 'Christian nation', yes I know this is a hotly disputed term among theologians and historians, yes I know such a statement is not in the spirit of multiculturalism or passes a PC test, and to the twisters of truth might sound more BNP. Yes I know that Christendom, had, has its own issues.

And yet, I would still maintain that in terms of certain areas in our society, public morality being one, there is a worrying decline and this has to do with a gradual drift away from Christian principles and culture.

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b) **short-sightedness.** Like the grumpy-old men, as well as memory loss there can also be short-sightedness, a tendency to gloss over or even forget completely positive aspects present in our society and situation. Even though they have important apologetic ramifications, I am not here talking about general issues to do with the role and profile of religion in our society and the debate between sociologists of religion over variations of *secularization* (the inevitable withering of religion) against *sacralization* (the flourishing of religion). I am also not talking about the role and influence of Islam in the UK, or the fact that when the Archbishop of Canterbury or Chief Rabbi speak on a particular issue, it is usually covered by the media, or the decline in church attendance, or the claim that 'spirituality' is fashionable. In actual fact I would not call these things 'positive' *per se*, although they do provide us with opportunities for bringing the gospel into conversations.

Rather I am focusing in more narrowly looking at the continuing impact of Christianity in Britain. To measure this impact is hard to evaluate, but I take comfort that I am in good company here. In his updated and best-selling book *'Who runs this place: an anatomy of Britain in the 21st century'*, Anthony Sampson deals with the individuals and institutions which make Britain tick. In his introduction he writes: "I do not feel qualified to explain the churches, whose political influence may well be increasing but is difficult to assess and analyse!"<sup>9</sup>

In terms of our topic, I am aware of the amazing work of thousands of Christians around the country in terms of the voluntary sector and charity work – if this work was to stop tomorrow we really would see a societal breakdown. I am also aware, of the number of Christian MP's in Parliament with links to outside groups (Remember that the Keep Sunday Special Campaign, inspired by the Jubilee Centre

was the only pressure group to inflict a defeat on Thatcher's government in the 1980's, Jubilee 2000, Make Poverty History etc.) And only in the last few months it has been encouraging to see the mobilisation of Christians to bring some influence to bear on the Incitement to Religious Hatred Bill, Civil Partnerships and now the Assisted Dying Bill. And yet I also weigh this up with the quality and quantity of coverage of evangelicals in the media, and the real influence evangelicals have on public policy. I compare this to the increasingly prominent presence of Islam in the public square – disproportionately compared to their numbers, 2%. In today's climate could we envisage a modern day Wilberforce or Shaftsbury? Therefore even noting the above caveats, I still would like to maintain my two opening statements.

Now I want us to remember that what I am saying is that we have to ask questions 'in here' before we look 'out there'. We need to get our house in order. I could talk about the way in which the world's values are eating into Christian values, but I would like to go in a slightly different direction.

I believe that we have dropped the ball and that it is skewed theology that is to blame. Now you may be thinking – ah he would say that, he is a theologian saying that the problem is theological - this is what keeps him in the job. All I would like to say is something that I am sure you are well aware of – a cliché but true – we are all theologians, all the time: "there will inevitably be theology: will it be good or bad, conscious or unconscious, disciplined or diffuse?"<sup>10</sup>

Now my contention is that when it comes to questions of our engagement in society from a grass roots level up, these have been insufficiently thought through either by unconsciously not thinking or consciously wrong thinking.

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Let's get personal. Just for a moment think about your life, your work, your leisure time, your relationships. Why do you do what you do? Is there a thought through strategy - think about your church and all the things that go on there, why do you do what you do, what is the big picture, what's the plan? Can you justify them all, can you link them all together, Can you say, we do  $x$  because of  $y$ ? The problem, I think, is that we don't think, we switch off, we coast, we accept things without questioning them and so are moulded by other agenda and worldviews.

If you were put on the spot and someone asked you as a Christian what you thought about the following what would you say, where would you go to in the Bible, would you even think the Bible had something to say on this: the welfare state, foreign aid, immigration, European integration, Town-planning, table-manners, Tracey Emin, *The House of tiny-tearaways*?

Perhaps we think but are just confused and think that we are getting mixed messages from our Christian friends, and even mixed messages from the Bible. Let me explain.

As a young Christian I was often confidently told that the answer to many of my perplexing questions concerning life and my place in it, was that I was to be 'in the world, but not of the world'. I was shown substantial biblical support for this statement that I could not deny.<sup>11</sup> However whenever it came to 'cash value,' I was left hanging as to what such a statement meant in practice, with the consequence that a wonderful biblical truth started to become rather trite and cliché ridden. As a slightly older Christian, I become more and more convinced of the truth of being 'in the world, but not of the world' but equally more and more convinced of the profound depth and complexity of such a statement,

needing prayer for God-given wisdom and discernment. For underlying our seemingly simple statement are huge theological tectonic plates that are put up against each other. If we start from the beginning we see both the goodness of creation ('the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof' Ps. 24:1), but also the 'badness' of a fallen 'world' (Do not love the world or anything in the world, 1 Jn. 2:15). Or from the perspective of praxis we have to obey and relate both to the cultural mandate 'to fill and subdue the earth' (Gen. 1:28) and to the gospel mandate 'to make disciples of all nations' (Mt. 28:19).<sup>12</sup> In terms of God's revelation we have to compare and contrast God's knowledge of himself in creation, and the knowledge of Himself in His revealed Word in Scripture and in Christ. Even if we choose to start at the end, we have to account for biblical teaching on both the continuity *and* discontinuity between the earth now, and the new heaven and new earth to come. What do we mean by, 'Your kingdom come, your will be done on *earth as it is in heaven*'

Paradoxically the pinnacle of creation, mankind created in the image of God, also highlights the pinnacle of the complexity. First, 'not of the world' believers have to work out how they are to live amongst and interact with 'of the world' unbelievers. Second, Christians have to account that just as they continue to battle with sin in their hearts, so non-Christians are often producers of great cultural achievement. Consider the following everyday examples: Am I wrong not to worry whether the computer I am using to type this paper was made by a Christian or not? Am I right to be concerned when a Christian friend of mine marries a non-Christian? Am I wrong not to vote in an election because I will be associating myself with unbelievers voting for the same party? In trying to influence public policy can I rely on a measure of divine law and common

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sense left in natural man “and that given a proper choice and good conditions, he may well choose biblical justice without himself being biblically converted”? <sup>13</sup>

Alternatively consider the following biblical examples: the Israelites ‘plundered the Egyptians’ (Ex. 12:35-36) and yet Paul is very clear that Christians are not to be unequally yoked (2 Cor. 6:14). The Samaritans were not allowed to help the people of God in the rebuilding of the temple, and yet Phoenician workmanship was welcomed (Ezra. 3-4). In Galatians we are told to do good to all, especially to the family of believers. Even if our first priority is to look after other believers, how do we explain the culture transforming power of the gospel in the first few hundred years of the church which turned the world upside down.

You see being ‘in the world but not of the world’ suddenly seems quite a messy business! What are the boundary lines that mark out legitimate commonality from an illegitimate compromise, and what are the theological presuppositions behind our drawing of them?

Now I don’t think I need to tell you that there has been a long running debate between evangelical theologians and missiologists concerning the nature of our social engagement in the world, where our priorities should be. As Robert K. Johnstone astutely observes:

*That evangelicals should be involved socially has become a foregone conclusion..... but how and why evangelicals are to be involved themselves in society have proven to be more vexing questions. That they are to be involved brings near unanimity; how that involvement takes shape and what is its Christian motivation brings only debate.*<sup>14</sup>

### Getting a Blurred picture

Before presenting a constructive basis for

Evangelical Public Theology, I need to do a little deconstruction to clear the decks. I want to alert us to two very different approaches to evangelical public theology and societal engagement both of which in their own ways, are not, in my opinion, totally in focus with the biblical picture and so in terms of our understanding of the gospel and its implications, present a somewhat blurry image.

**1. A Diluted Gospel.** *In our desire for social transformation, we relegate the call for conversion through the proclamation of the gospel and so lose our distinctiveness and effectiveness.*

As I have already stated, the debate over the relationship between evangelism and social action is a well rehearsed one. Maybe at its core ‘public theology’ is little more than another round of this old debate but with a posh name. I cannot go into theological or historical detail over the debate here, suffice it to say I am happy with Tim Chester’s trio of statements: Evangelism and social action are distinct activities, proclamation is central, evangelism and social action are inseparable. <sup>15</sup>

As evangelicals we have a unique message which no social service or charity can give, the evangel, the gospel. This message is unpopular and yet is a message which we must urgently tell people because it is their only hope. What can happen though is that we may be tempted to treat the visible symptoms without getting to a real diagnosis, let alone cure. We focus on felt needs because we can see these needs. Working with students for five years, I met students who were in debt and who had painful family backgrounds, students who were struggling with self-esteem because of obesity or anorexia. I never came across a student who came up to me and said they knew they were struggling under God’s wrath. Lloyd-Jones puts it well:

Why is it that people do not believe in the Lord Jesus

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Christ? Why is it that people are not Christians and not members of the Christian church? Why is it that the Lord does not come into their calculations at all? In the last analysis there is only one answer to that question: they do not believe in Him because they have never seen any need of Him. And they have never seen any need of Him because they have never realised that they are sinners. And they have never realised they are sinners because they have never realised the truth about the holiness of God and the justice and righteousness of God; they have never known anything about God as the judge eternal and about the wrath of God against the sin of man.<sup>16</sup>

As Chester astutely comments:

Many evangelicals want to argue that evangelism and social action are equal activities. They describe evangelism and social action as two wings of a bird or the blades of a pair of scissors. While evangelism and social action are partners in many situations, it is inadequate to think of them as corresponding activities of equal impact...the greatest need of the poor, as it is for all people, is to be reconciled with God and escape his wrath. Only the message of the gospel can do this. The adage, often attributed to St Francis of Assisi, 'Preach the gospel, use words if necessary' will not do. Social action can demonstrate the gospel, but without the communication of the gospel message, social action is like a signpost pointing nowhere. Indeed without the message of the gospel it points in the wrong direction. If we only do good works among people, then we point to ourselves and our charitable acts. People will think well of us but not of Jesus Christ. We may even convey the message that salvation is achieved by good works. Or we may convey the message that what matters most is economic and social betterment. We must not do social action without evangelism.<sup>17</sup>

We must not lose our distinctiveness. One danger I see is that in our floundering around in a culture of unbelief and wrong belief, we desperately grasp around and cling onto the nearest 'faith' we can find, assuming we are all in the same situation and that 'faiths' can speak as one voice against the

tide of secularism.

While there may be justification for co-belligerence on certain issues,<sup>18</sup> it is theologically naïve to simply lump ourselves with other faiths. We must maintain the uniqueness and exclusivity of Christ, not only do all other faiths say very different things about the nature of God, the nature of mankind, and the nature of salvation, they say very different things concerning matters of social ethics and public policy. We must always remember that the faith/no faith axiom is a false one. All humans are religious creatures, all have faith, all have a worldview and presuppositions – the question is: is it true and good faith or false and bad faith, faith in the triune God or faith in idols that are nothing. If we can even get this point across we will have done something.

*The danger: a 'social gospel'*

Danger here is always the Social Gospel or to give it another name, theological liberalism which is no gospel at all with its reduction of theology to ethics and its self-effort salvation. However there is a second danger.

**2. A stunted gospel.** *In our desire to call for conversion through the proclamation of the gospel we forget the power of the gospel for social transformation and so lose our place in public life.*

Here the problem is with a stunted view of the Christian message that does not see its full-flowering implications. Here is an example:

One well known evangelical Bible teacher from Britain was travelling with a white church minister in South Africa along a coastal road after apartheid had ended. On coming to a particularly attractive stretch of beach, the South African pointed to it and said approvingly, 'That used to be a 'whites only' beach. Now it is open to all.' The response of his English visitor was simply to shrug his shoulders and say, 'It doesn't matter one way or the other- it is not a Gospel issue.' What he meant of course,

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was that whether people could or could not use that beach because of the colour of their skin did not have any direct bearing on their eternal destiny, that was to be determined by their response to the Gospel message. However, from another viewpoint he was profoundly mistaken. It *was* a Gospel issue for not only did such restrictions constitute a barrier to black people in particular from hearing the Gospel, especially from whites who introduced such discriminatory laws, but it denied a fundamental tenet of the Gospel, namely, that in Christ there is 'neither male nor female, Jew nor Greek, slave nor free.' Here is a failure to recognise that the Gospel has certain entailments which need to be worked through which go beyond private morality.<sup>19</sup>

Here is a comment by Dewi Hughes – theological director of Tearfund.

By the middle of the twentieth century any Christian who dared to make a comment about the conduct of public life was very generally shouted down because it had become an assumption that Christianity was a matter of fostering individual spiritual experience that had nothing to do with the way in which the country was governed. I find it very odd that Reformed people who believe in a sovereign God who is the ruler of heaven and earth are happy to accept the position given to them by modernism. To denigrate Christian involvement in society is to accept the place that the world has given us.<sup>20</sup>

*The danger: a 'pietistic gospel'*

The danger here is an unhealthy pietism, that we end up internalising or spiritualising everything and just quietly and passively wait for it all to go even more pear-shaped. We really have nothing to say constructively concerning the issues of the day and so become increasingly inward and ingrowing. But you see not only do I think that God's word speaks into every area of life and that only God's way allows for human and societal flourishing in every area of life, but that if we don't speak God's way then others will readily speak in their godless ways which will inevitably lead to human and societal withering

and decay. The gap or territory that is the public square will always be filled by one someone and some ideology, be it secular humanism, Islam, or Christianity.

## Getting the BIG picture

Let us attempt to be more constructive? How do we begin to orientate ourselves in these issues? How are we to be faithful to the tenor of Scripture in our public theology? To return to Johnstone's remark we know *that* we are to be involved but *how* and *why*?

I believe we need to get God's 'big picture'. I mean 'big' in two ways: big in terms of seeing an overall framework and context within which we can place ourselves and our activities. I also mean 'big' in terms of quality. Do we understand and live in the knowledge of the full cosmic implications and application of the gospel, or is our view unnecessarily restricted, narrow, and impoverished?

Such a 'big picture' is not at all out of our reach for we are able to work from the familiar to the unfamiliar, a story that is very familiar, the story of the gospel, what Don Carson calls the redemptive-historical plot-line of Scripture: Creation, Fall, Redemption and Consummation.

I would like to make three short statements which are basically saying the same things but from three different perspectives. They are pretty general things but may act as compass points in our orientation into Evangelical Public Theology.

## Listening to the past

In both word and deed we must affirm both the Great Commission (Mt. 28:19) and the cultural mandate (Gen. 1:28)

The Bible gives us two great commissions, although we may be more familiar with the one in Matthew's Gospel. But God told Adam to be fruitful and

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multiply, to *fill* the earth and *subdue* it, to both *tend* and *keep* the Garden (2:15). These verses are technically referred to as ‘the cultural mandate’. It is God telling us as his unique image bearers, the importance of work and the culturative task in all its almost infinite differentiation and specialization. Of course with the Fall, this work becomes hard, frustrating and sin-tainted, but the mandate is not abrogated, indeed even breakers of God’s covenant, through God’s common grace may further the mandate albeit in rebellion. We might even want to interpret Jesus’ Great Commission of Matthew 28:19-20 to ‘go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you’ in light of the cultural mandate. John Frame comments on the comprehensiveness of Jesus’ words:

The Great Commission tells us not only to tell people the Gospel and get them baptized, but also teaches them to obey everything Jesus has commanded us. Everything. The Gospel creates new people, people radically committed to Christ in every area of their lives. People like these will change the world. They will fill and rule the earth to the glory of Jesus. They will plant churches, establish godly families, and will also plant godly hospitals, schools, arts, and sciences. That’s what has happened, by God’s grace. And that is what will continue to happen until Jesus comes.<sup>21</sup>

What has Jesus saved us for? He has saved us to work, creating an army of people to fill the earth and subdue it and the direction and structure of this Christian culture building is distinctive and comprehensive. “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.” (1 Cor. 10:31).

### **Looking forward to the future**

**In both word and deed we must affirm both the new heaven and the new earth**

Here we must ask two questions: what are we waiting for and how are we waiting for it? We need to remember the physicality of the future. Christians must resist the intrusion of popular cultural images that picture heaven and the after-life as being ‘up there in the sky’; of apparitional spiritualised existence; of clouds and harps and wings. Just as the Fall had cosmic implications so there are cosmic implications of Jesus’ death and resurrection. ‘For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross’ (Col. 1:19-20). As Christians, we have a wonderful, exciting and distinctive hope that is the final resurrection of the body and the new heaven *and new earth*, transformed and renewed. Yes, there will be both continuity and discontinuity between our bodies now and our resurrection bodies to come, and between the earth now and the earth to come, and yet our hope is more physical and concrete than is often believed. As one writer puts it, “we must abandon any view of the future ‘that abandons the earth to the wicked’ and where ‘The righteous are taken away from the world, whereas the wicked remain’ - the exact opposite of Christ’s point, where, with Noah, the eight Christians remained alive on the earth, whereas all the wicked were taken away by the flood. It is the meek who inherit the earth – not the wicked.”<sup>22</sup>

Therefore rather than thinking of ourselves as ‘resident aliens’ might it be more accurate to think of ourselves as ‘alienated residents’? <sup>23</sup> And when our framework encompasses the movement from Paradise lost to Paradise regained, and when we recognize the physicality and continuity between now and not-yet, this will motivate us to start working as soon as we are converted. Anthony Hoekema puts it like this:

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As citizen's of God's kingdom, we may not just write off the present earth as a total loss, or rejoice in its deterioration. We must indeed be working for a better world now. Our efforts to bring the kingdom of Christ into fuller manifestation are of eternal significance. Our Christian life today, our struggles against sin – both individual and institutional – our mission work, our attempt to develop and promote a distinctively Christian culture, have value not only for this world but even for the world to come ... Only eternity will reveal the full significance of what has been done for Christ here.<sup>24</sup>

## **Living in the Present**

**In both word and deed we must affirm the Lordship of Jesus Christ.**

A final way of saying the same thing. Whether people acknowledge it or not, Jesus Christ is Lord of the Universe, he is King, he is in control of everything. Abraham Kuyper the great Dutch theologian and prime-minister said famously "there is not a thumb-breadth of the universe about which Christ does not say 'It is mine'". Jesus has reconciled all things and this means for us that there is no such thing as a sacred / secular split, or a physical/ spiritual split, we must live under the authority of Christ and his Word in all the dimensions of our life. David McKay notes that there is "in this perspective, a thoroughgoing rejection of any privatization of the Christian faith. Christian principles cannot be restricted in their application to private and church matters... but have relevance to every sphere of life. The task of the people of God, individually and corporately, is not only to seek the conversion of sinners, but also to train them to live in every part of life in accordance with the royal words of King Jesus."<sup>25</sup>

Tim Chester uses a nice illustration. He says "imagine you had just turned on the TV. You have one of those television sets that take a moment to

warm up, so the sound comes on before the picture. And you hear the words 'Jesus is Lord.' What kind of image would you expect to see?" An interview with a government minister explaining policy, an A-level student writing a geography essay, a business man discussing company strategy, a builder mixing concrete, a world leader discussing international affairs. He says "I guess you might be surprised if any of these pictures came into view. In all of these contexts 'Jesus is Lord' sounds out of place."<sup>26</sup> But it shouldn't be.

What does Christ's Lordship over your life mean for your calling and vocation, what you do with your leisure time, your views on the economy?

And please don't think that any of this will detract from gospel proclamation. In reality it will provide *more* opportunities to speak about the gospel for we will realise that there is no neutrality, and that following the Maker's instructions actually works and what's more we can explain why it works. And there's even more because we can go on the offensive and argue that for the autonomous rebellious unbeliever, any order, structure and goodness in their life cannot be explained by them and that they can only make sense of it by borrowing Christian capital. As Cornelius Van Til once famously said, the non-Christian mathematician can count but he can't account for accounting!

## **Conclusion: "don't get bitter, get better"**

I would like to conclude this lecture by returning to where I started, with those two quotations by Jim Packer and Christian Voice. After listing the ways in which our nation is unraveling before us, Christian Voice ask 'How did it come to this?' My argument tonight has been that one important reason 'it has come to this' is because we 'consistent Christians' in Jim Packer's words have 'undermined or diminished

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concern for the tasks of civilization.' I have argued that we 'undermine or diminish' by either 'going out' with a diluted gospel or 'staying in' with a stunted gospel. Both I believe are biblically wrong-headed and are not going to bring about the transformation we desire and pray for, 'your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.'

What do we do then? Well faced with what might seem to be an insurmountable task, we don't freeze in the headlights and do nothing, we don't sulk, or snipe, or mope or blame, but we pray, roll our sleeves up and faithfully start doing some hard work. As a good friend of mine always tells me, 'don't get bitter, get better.'

Evangelical Public Theology is simply one attempt to do some hard theological work which will lay solid foundations for more hard work in ministry. Here is a trite start to my answer and finish to this article: 'the longest journey begins with a single step'. As I have already said, the three points I outlined in the previous part of this talk are meant to act both as boundary markers and foundations for us to build a solid and substantial evangelical public theology. Yet I am well aware that these points are rather vague, a bit like helping someone who asks for directions to Oak Hill College by pointing to the dot that is London on a wall-map of Great Britain as opposed to a six-figure grid reference on an ordinance survey map. The temptation to be caught in the headlights is great: overwhelmed with the realization that we are far behind in thinking these things through, staggered with how we could have not thought through these things before. We certainly have to continue thinking through the answers to big questions of theological method and biblical interpretation: questions about the presence and usefulness of a 'natural law', about how we

relate God's law in Scripture to the social issues of today, questions about the similarities and dissimilarities between the Israelite nation and the church, between the Israelite nation and our nation, questions about who does what when it comes to social involvement: individuals, local churches, parachurches, questions about our attitude toward the progress of the gospel in world history and whether we are to be optimistic, pessimistic or both. This is not even to mention the actual issues themselves, the nature and function of the State, Politics, Economics, Welfare and Aid, Asylum/Immigration, Multiculturalism, Crime and Punishment, the Family, Education, The Environment, Work and Employment, Leisure, Entertainment, the Arts. In summary, questions that ask '*What on earth? why on earth?*'

But at least we are asking the questions...

And as we continue to pray for understanding and discernment, as the Holy Spirit graciously illuminates the Bible to us as we study and reflect upon God's word in class and out of class, as iron sharpens iron, as students and faculty and even faculty and faculty discuss, debate and even disagree, we might just send people out who will go into church leadership, or other ministries, who might feel better equipped, equipped to comment constructively in the local paper on the issue of housing asylum seekers, who might encourage their congregations to tear down any sacred/secular partition they may have, and put their vocation and calling totally and utterly under Christ's Lordship, the computer programmer, the teacher, the businesswoman, the bin-man, the art student, knowing that this may bring trials and hardship. Leaders who might even tentatively question both the legitimacy and competency of the State to monopolise welfare, and education, who might come

to the conclusion that perhaps the church could and should start getting involved in these things.

And that as all these little things begin to happen, the urgency to evangelize is not relegated or embarrassingly bolted on as an afterthought, but the gospel message is proclaimed and displayed in all its glorious technicolour, men and women are converted, the kingdom grows, and whole communities, even whole nations are influenced by the good news.

Now this kind of vision might make even the most grumpy old Christian smile with joy.

‘He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and

planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches.”

He told them still another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough.” Matt. 13:31-33.

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