

The missional voice and posture

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Efforts to discern the missional character and life of the church in a post-Christendom North American context have recognized the fundamentally public dimensions of the church's identity, its message, and its vocation of worship and witness. That means that public theologizing is an essential activity of the people of God in all the public places where they reside. The challenge for the church is to orient its public voice and posture to the new circumstances of a pluralist social order that no longer privileges the Christian vision in the conversation. It is proposed that this must include five features: a spirit of companionship; humility in truth-telling; particularity in discourse; courage in public action; and an eye on the horizon.

I am fairly certain that in the way it has come to be understood since Martin Marty coined the term in reference to Reinhold Niebuhr (Marty 1974), I would not be mistaken for a "public theologian." I am a mission theologian. And I am an ecclesiologist – a theologian of the church. But I know that pursuing a healthy missiology and ecclesiology means that I am engaged in "public theologizing." The mission requires it. The church's sense of its identity and calling requires it. The God who birthed the church and its mission intends it.

The particular avenues along which my work as missiologist and ecclesiologist has traveled most are those precipitated by Lesslie Newbigin's now-familiar challenge of two decades ago, that there needs to be "a missionary encounter of the Gospel with our Western culture." The Gospel and Our Culture Network (GOCN), whose work I am privileged to coordinate, exists as a movement in which thousands of people seek collaborative ways of responding to that challenge. The image of "Gospel and culture encounter" has shared space in that movement with the image of the "missional church," a church implicated in the Gospel and culture encounter and sent in the midst of the world on those terms.

The public theologizing made necessary by the GOCN agenda is underscored by the network's discoveries as it has attended to the historically shifting social location of the church and the impact that has on the church's character and witness. To reiterate what has become a familiar litany, we have noted:

1. The relegation of religious faith – which in the case of the USA meant Protestant Christian faith, mainly – to the private realm of permitted options, assigned to the private, family, and leisure areas of life and set outside the public ranges of life as having no direct bearing. This has been chronicled by Martin Marty, Alistair MacIntyre, Lesslie Newbigin, and many others.
2. The shift in recent decades from what remained of the church's privileged chaplaincy role in the social and public space. The society's former eagerness to receive the moral fruit of the church's influence on private life, forming character and values for those who would take up roles in public office or commercial enterprise, has waned and pretty much vanished. In Vigen Guroian's words, "we are witnessing the end of the symbiotic

relationship of biblical faith and society” (1994:95). “The day of American Christendom is over” (1994:12).

3. The failing confidence in modernity’s reliance on autonomous reason, its epistemological certainty, its privileging of individual choice and self-interest, and its faith in progress – technological and social. In modernity’s place, yet in mixed and ambiguous form, there have arisen postmodern sensibilities corresponding to what has come to be called the “postmodern condition.”

Within my own work, and perhaps in the GOCN movement’s emphasis more broadly, I fear that these public dimensions have been too little attended to. It may justifiably be said that the movement has tended to be more quietistic, or perhaps simply institution-bound (working within the churches as currently configured to be local organizations and/or corporate denominations). There are notable exceptions, colleagues within the network who have worked deliberately on the public dimensions of the agenda, including Charles West, Barry Harvey, Gary Simpson, and Bill Wylie-Kellermann, to name just a few. (In this regard, see especially *StormFront: The Good News of God*, written by West and Harvey along with James Brownson and Inagrace Dietterich. Brownson et al. 2003.)

Within the range of the network’s reflections, however, it is important to note some very significant trajectories among the accents and visions of the movement that open up potentially fruitful conversation between missiology and the field of inquiry that has been dubbed “public theology.” Neither of these fields has tended to see itself implicated in the concerns of the other, and each is impoverished by its distance from the other. By seizing and expanding upon some of the accents in the “gospel and our culture” conversation, we may be able to open up new ground for exploring cross-discipline possibilities.

One of the most important themes in the GOCN movement is the recovery of the central place of the reign of God in the message of Jesus – i.e., his gospel. “Turn around and believe this good news,” he said, “the reign of God is at hand!” The identity of his followers, the rationale for being church, the spilling out of this news report everywhere, were all bound up in this fundamentally new moment, one that provided the clue to the meaning of history and a vision of the world’s true destiny. News such as this was by its nature public. It is, as Lesslie Newbigin put it, “public truth” (See *Truth to Tell*, 1991, and many other places). It belongs to the whole world, then and now. This announcement of the reign of God, and the reality of its presence in Jesus Christ, captures us with a sense of what the public good is and can be, and makes witnesses out of us. We have tasted what God intends the world to be like in the end, and that opens a new way of being with everyone in that world.

This is not a private, inner, personal faith, but a shaping story that implicates us into God’s mission. Touched by the recovery of the theme, many are recognizing the major shift it brings about for contemporary, self-interest-oriented consuming Americans. We dare not any longer view salvation in terms of what we acquire in the transaction, but rather hear Jesus’ call to mean participation – we have been laid hold of for the larger purposes of God, and those touch the whole range of issues that have to do with public life (see Brownson et al 2003).

Public is a word that lurks at every turn in our emerging missional ecclesiology. The word

*ekklesia* itself is drawn not from first century Greek terminology for the variety of acceptable salvation cults, but from the idea of a civic meaning. Like its Hebrew counterpart (*qahal*) it “refers originally to a deliberative assembly of the body politic” (Yoder 1975:18). *Ekklesia* means “called into public assembly,” a town meeting, the gathered public. “As God calls the whole world to its proper worship in public assembly, we can think of the church as the community that has thus far assembled. It lives its life, therefore, in public and for the public” (Stutzman and Hunsberger 2004:105).

Public is associated with the New Testament word *kerygma* and its verbal counterparts. Usually translated “preaching” it has nothing to do with what we now call preaching – a homily or exposition or sermon given in the context of (usually) Sunday worship. Its meaning field has to do with the function of the “herald,” the news announcement by the official spokesperson of one in power or authority. The public broadcast of the news, the “*public ation*” of it, is the form of witness the New Testament describes.

Worship, too, is public. It is not public merely in the sense that the doors are open to the public and all are welcome to enter and join in. As Vigen Guroian notes, following Parker Palmer, this is very little “public” when the openness to the public is to join a very private-oriented faith in a private-faith oriented community’s gathered worship (1994:99). Even that may be too generous because what happens most is a worship setting orchestrated to allow persons entering the space and ambiance and ingredients to be able to worship. That’s a far cry from “gathered worship.” Even to use such a phrase as “gathered worship” says more! It says worship is generated out of all the experience of God in the public ranges of life that motivate and shape the worship a community brings with it into a common gathering.

The Greek word from which we derive our word “liturgy” has public, missional significance at its root. *Leitourgia* had to do with public service, usually rendered at one’s own expense. It was not about “the work of the people” – for the broader range of people who are the objects of God’s love and dreams, the whole public! In its liturgy, the church is a community for the whole (Cf. Francis 1999).

The public nature of the church’s identity, its message, and its vocation of worship and witness, places the people of God squarely in the public life of the world. While the ethos of many (most?) congregations in our part of the world fails to reflect that, simple observation confirms it. Once we are clear that “church is not an organization to which one belongs but a body of people sent, once we are clear on *who* we are, then *where* we are is not the facility on the corner but people pressed into the fabric of life, living it in all the public dimensions shared by others. We are in the public every day. As John Howard Yoder notes, we earn our living and raise our kids alongside of everyone else (1975).

This shapes three defining affirmations.

1. Public theologizing is missiological. That is to say that it is the church’s missional calling that this be evident in its life. But it is also to say that public theologizing is not outside that calling as though another activity. All that is true of how mission must unfold touches and implicates public theologizing as well.

2. Public theologizing is the work of the whole people of God. It is not only the provenance of the professional theologian, nor the professional social ethicist or political theorist, nor the social or political activist. Nor is it assigned locally to the theologically trained clergy. All these, by their special ways of attending to public theology, give help to the people of God for this vocation. But the vocation remains theirs. This, in part, is why I have used the word “theologizing” instead of “theology.” It is not a finished product, professional or otherwise, so much as an essential and ongoing practice of the missional church.
3. Public theologizing is done in a wide range of places. To talk about the public square begs for recognition that there are many publics and a variety of squares around which people work out matters of the common good. It includes what is normally in mind for most North Americans at the mention of the phrase: matters of governance, social policy, and politics. It includes other arenas as well:

*Economic interactions, exchanges, and transactions.*

*Workworld cultures and their particular orientations.*

*Media construals of reality, and the impact of their metanarratives, storylines.*

*Societal norms, bases for evaluating action, and preferences for behavior.*

*Ethnic communities, and their distinct nuances and patterns of relationship.*

All these are arenas in which definitions of what it means to be human and to be a society are at stake. And these are where the Christian community lives its daily presence, hence its habitual prayer for the nourishing bread of God’s tomorrow to be ours to eat and share today.

Certainly, for the sake of encouraging this churchly practice, we need to bring to bear cultural and social analysis, ethics and particularly social ethics, concern for the daily occupation of all the people of God and its relation to their mission, and general concern for the church to find ways to move beyond the residual Constantinian scripts we carry in our collective memories, and the temptations that are so close at hand to hanker for a return of a privileged social status for our visions of the common good. What I propose to do here is a modest contribution in the midst of all that. I wish to attend to the matter of the *voice* and *posture* in which Christians are present in and for public theologizing.

Experience in human relationships provides plenty of evidence that it isn’t always *what* you say that is most important, but the *way* you say it. In fact, the way something is said itself tells the message. We who live on this side of Marshall McLuhan have heard this all before. “The medium is the message.” (Or, if you prefer the book title, *The Medium Is the Massage*, McLuhan and Fiore 1967).

I discovered this once while working in Luke’s gospel. You have to feel it in the text of [Luke 1](#) because printed words alone don’t tell the whole story. The angel Gabriel comes first to Zachariah while he was performing his temple service. “Your wife Elizabeth will bear a son,” he says. Zachariah asks, “How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.” A few months later Gabriel visits Mary and tells her, “you will conceive in your womb and bear a son,” to which she replies, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” On the face of it, their responses to Gabriel were not that much different. Each voiced facts that made the announced birth counter-intuitive. The slight variance in their responses – “How will I know

that this is so?” and “How can this be?” – doesn’t prepare us for the sharp difference made in the assessment of what’s taking place in their words. To Zachariah, Gabriel says, “Because you did not believe my words, you will become mute.” To Mary, Elizabeth a little while later says, “Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord” ([Luke 1:8–45](#)). Similar reactions, a world of difference in the matter of their belief. What made the difference? Was Gabriel hearing a different accent or tone of voice from each of them? Was there a different gesture or facial expression? Was there some attitude more fundamental than the form of words showing up in some subtle way? You had to be there, I expect.

Today, by the confluence of a radically changed social position and a long overdue recovery of missional identity as the people of God, we are faced with a similar *kairos* moment in the life and witness of the churches of the West in which our expressions – the ones in words, and our “expressions” – the ones in tones of voice and personal posture, will need to find a new inner resonance. Nowhere is our attentiveness to matters of voice and posture more necessary than in our public theologizing. By the character of our verbal and personal presence, by walking and standing and speaking in a new way, with new accents, we will make clear the way the reign of God in Jesus Christ presents itself to today’s world.

I would like to position what I say about voice and posture against the backdrop of some lines of tension that may help to sharpen what it is we are searching for.

1. *The recovery of voice.* What kind of recovery we think we need depends on what we believe has been there before and what has somehow been lost. Several articulations offered in the early to mid-1990s illustrate the point. In 1995, Keith Clements published in the UK his book, *Learning to Speak: The Church’s Voice in Public Affairs* (1995). The idea of *learning* to speak is suggestive that a voice must be found. Ronald Thiemann suggests that more directly when he asks how we may “regain a public voice in our pluralistic culture” (1991:19). Something has been lost and is in need of recovery. In the end, Thiemann identifies the deeper issue by saying that this is a “search for an *authentic* public voice” (1991:18; emphasis mine).

At about the same time, in 1994, notes from an address by an American ethicist, Steve Hoogerwerf, carry a slightly different feel. Describing “virtues for Christian engagement in the public square,” he includes these among them: “Moving from public proclamation as an imposition of values to public witness as a *bold* and *humble* invitation. Being *tolerant* because we’re humble about our grasp of the gospel, not because we sacrifice our conviction about it being true. Being *hospitable* (welcoming strangers to be themselves) in the public square where we think we’re right and they think we’re wrong.” I value Hoogerwerf’s thoughtful and sensitive contribution. But ten years later there is something about it that feels anachronistic. Hoogerwerf works out of concern that the Christian public voice needs to get used to a new pluralist environment, to accommodate its voice and posture to that. It posits letting the “other” voices in, and even hosting the voice of the “other” in the public square. This presumes that Christians are those who up till now are in charge, and in new circumstances must now begin to make room. This feels very different from a quest to *find* our voice for entering the public space where the terms for engagement are already owned and shaped by other forces and voices.

So are we *modifying* our voice as we give *space* to others, or are we seeking a voice by which to

*enter?* In every context, I suspect, there will be a unique mix.

2. *The recovery of the church's identity.* Here I have in mind representatives of another axis of tension we need to negotiate: Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon on the one hand, and Lesslie Newbigin on the other. Their respective books published in the mid- to late 1980s, *Resident Aliens* (1989) and *Foolishness to the Greeks* (1986), were seminal in the foundations of the GOCN movement in North America. The two visions share many things in common, particularly a concern for the churches to recover genuine and overt Christian character. In many respects, their ecclesiologies have convergence. If there is a difference – whether subtle or substantial – it grows from the soil of their different angles of concern about the present situation in which the churches of the West, and particularly North America, find themselves. They see different sides of the same problem.

Hauerwas and Willimon see the problem as the over-accommodation of the churches, such that they have been little more than civic clubs (or country clubs), mildly religious at best, but embodying nothing distinctly different from the going visions and ideologies inherent in citizenship. So they call for the church to be again a distinctly and demonstrably Christian – and therefore cruciform – community. Newbigin, on the other hand, focuses on the cultural shifts by which the Christian faith has been relegated to the private realm in such a way that religious “belief” has come to be considered merely personal opinion with little or no relevance in public discourse. So his call for how the church can know, what the church must do, and who the church must be seeks the church’s re-entry into its mission to be witnesses to the very public announcement of God’s reign and Christ’s lordship.

Which tug shall our voice and posture reflect? Are we shaped by the recovery of ecclesial practices by which we are a social ethic? Are we shaped by the recovery of missional practices by which we *testify* in action and word to the coming reign of God? I suggest that finding an authentic voice and posture lies somewhere within this tension and that our voice and posture are finally tested by both accents.

I propose, then, five features to orient our voice and posture in public theologizing.

### **A Spirit of Companionship**

God so loved the world. Walking among others in a pluralist social environment, what people will read very quickly is whether we stand aloof, or as one of them. Do we posture ourselves as over against them, or as a community that, while following a distinct vision, is nonetheless committed to the good of all? Has God fashioned us to oppose them, or to be on their side, even when we disagree? Do we carry ourselves as though we are somehow set outside their experience, as though we are the privileged few?

The line of difficulty involved in this comes from the fact that we do recognize that God has touched us to be the “aftertaste of God’s loving triumph on the cross and foretaste of His ultimate loving triumph in His Kingdom” (Yoder 1975:10). Our posture reflects our fundamental ecclesiology: Are we a community of Christ for our own sakes? Or, with God, for the sake of the world? If the latter, we owe companionship.

In an earlier essay entitled “Acquiring the posture of a missionary church” (1993), I suggested that the church should see itself as sitting on both sides of the Gospel–culture encounter. We might be tempted to assume quickly that we are on the gospel side, but it is more crucial that we see ourselves first on the culture side in the encounter. The gospel meets our culture – the one we share with all others who are like us – within our own embodiment of it, in a continuing conversion like that about which Darrel Guder has so forcefully spoken (Guder 2000). The point is that we are not removed from the simple reality that as people who are part of a particular society, we share that society’s cultural ways. When the gospel addresses our culture – whichever that is for each of us – it does so first by addressing us who inhabit that culture’s worldview and ethos but have somewhere along the line said “yes” to Jesus’ call to follow. It is only by virtue of that kind of continuing encounter that we are formed to be a people who inhabit the gospel’s rendering of things. In that sense we sit on the gospel side, being for others in the society the ‘hermeneutic’ of the gospel by which they see it taking shape within their own culture.

The point of this is that for us to be the church does not disturb the fundamental companionship we have with others in our social environment. It remains that we are, like all others, the creations of God, made in God’s likeness. With them we share common ways to see the world and interpret experiences in it and assign value and make judgments. For them, we have had all those things shaken and re-patterned by this news that the reign of God has come. But we are still one of them. Our voice should reflect that, and not carry the tone that presumes we are so other as to have nothing in common with them.

Raymond Fung makes this point with great force in his big little book *The Isaiah Vision* (1992). He offers a profoundly simple “ecumenical strategy for congregational evangelism” that has three movements. First, we work for those things identified in the Isaiah agenda as things God wants for this world. Drawing that agenda from [Isaiah 65](#), it simply envisions that God intends a world where infants do not die, old people have dignity, and working men and women enjoy the fruit of their labors. We work for that, and do so with anyone else who cares about the same things. And many people do! Next, we invite all who work alongside us, and all for whom we are working, to worship with us the God whose vision this is. Finally, we invite folks who have joined us into discipleship, to be followers of Jesus.

The core spirituality that Fung holds up in this model is one of partnership and solidarity. He invites us to be unafraid to work in companionship with any who will. “Comradeship” is a similar word whose root meaning may lend a helpful image. The word comes from the Middle French word *camarade* which refers to “a group that sleeps in the same room,” referring often to soldiers quartered in a common barracks. As a globalizing world reminds us daily, we have the experience today of inhabiting “one room.” That is true of our life with all others. That is true in particular ways of our life with all those with whom we share a common history and society and culture.

We dare not stand as though aloof. Charles West reminds us that “The powers are part of God’s creation” (Brownson et al. 2003:87). We do not live over against them as the enemies of God’s intent, but care for them as God does, even when, as is perennially the case, “The powers are not content to serve God” (2003:89). We, along with all others, are “caught up in this battle between

God and the powers because we are the battleground” (2003:89; cf. West 1999).

At many points in public discourse and action about the common good we will commend vision we believe to be God’s. Many times there will be people who oppose that vision or have another vision to propose. In those encounters there remains a fundamental companionship at the heart of our relationship with others in the public square. The required posture is one that refused to act or speak aloof from others who do not share the vision of our faith. Rather we walk with the grace of a comrade among those who sleep in the same barracks with us!

### **Humility in Truth-telling**

The gospel’s truth is announced not so much in our personal evangelism’s “tellings” of it as in our public theologizing expressions of its relevance to the public life of the world. It is just that kind of gospel! That requires humility and respectful styles of dialogue.

Lesslie Newbigin’s articulation of what he called *Proper Confidence* (1995; cf. 1989:1 65) has provided many people a way to restore confidence in their believing, even in public arenas that have their way of ruling out religious faith as so private as to be irrelevant to the public world of facts. The form of knowledge in which we can have confidence, Newbigin says, is not the certainty sought in modernity. After all, knowing God is to know a person, and personal knowledge, as Newbigin learned long ago from Michael Polanyi, comes not by the exercise of a knower’s autonomous rationality but by way of the self-disclosure of the one known. That, he says, is what we encounter in the Bible which he takes to be “that body of literature which – primarily but not only in narrative form – renders accessible to us the character and actions and purposes of God” (1986:59).

But such a “proper confidence” as Newbigin describes must always have as its companion humility. We know in part, and all our knowing is qualified by the limitations of one vantage point and the distortions of human sin. We do not speak as though truth itself is what we utter. Rather, we recognize we are what I have elsewhere called a “community of the true” (Hunsberger 2002). That is to say, we recognize Jesus to be the truth, and following him we are intent on being – in our forms of thinking and speaking and acting – true to that. That is, our ambition is to correspond to the truth. Our way of being that truth and our way of speaking that truth, will be particular to who we are, what our cultural character is, and how we have thus far embodied that truth. Like every other Christian community in its own unique setting, we seek to be true to the One who *is* Truth.

This gives us the proper humility not to presume or propose more than that. In our various points of public engagement, our truth-telling is violated when in our voicing of what we know of the truth we convey that we so possess the truth that our expression of it is that very truth. Our accent and tone tell the truth better when they acknowledge that our knowing of the truth is provisional – it’s not finished – and it is contingent – it’s patterned on Another. Nevertheless, we have foundations for the expressions of truth we give, so far as they are the fruit of a community that lives true to the truth who is Jesus and so far as we have grasped what Jesus the Truth cares about in our world.

And we must not be mistaken; it is just such truth as this that is at stake. Douglas John Hall notes

in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's writings, particularly *The Cost of Discipleship*, his impassioned plea "to realize at last that the discipleship of Jesus Christ is a serious business. . . . It is a quest for and a witness to truth in the midst of societies that lie, for authentic goodness in the midst of societies that reward duplicity, for true beauty in the midst of societies that celebrate kitsch and sentimentality" (2003:142). The former dissident and later President of the Czech Republic, Václav Havel, points to similar things in his testament to the forces at work in the collapse of soviet regimes such as Czechoslovakia. There came a time when small acts of determination not to believe the lie grew to a groundswell. Duncan Forrester notes that Havel's testament "reminds us of the imperative to speak truth to power, and of the dangers of sloganising rather than offering serious and rigorous theology. It reminds us that theological truth is something to be lived, to be exemplified, rather than just thought and discussed; it is to be lived *together* in the life of the church and in society. And it is a truth that is concrete, challenging and specific rather than general and platitudinous" (2003:86-87).

### **Particularity in Discourse**

William Lindsey says of prophets that they "always speak perspectively" (1995:88). The postmodern critique of certainty has acquainted us with the fact that this is so of all speech. Cross-cultural missionaries have known it a lot longer! All cognitions of what is true are formed within some society's cultural pattern for thinking and knowing. Even our knowing of the gospel that we understand to be a universally relevant portrait of what is finally and everywhere true comes stated and traditioned in patterns of words and ideas that are a human creation. Lesslie Newbigin put it straightforwardly, in a couple of sentences that are like show-stoppers for many people as they begin to read *Foolishness to the Greeks*: "Neither at the beginning, nor at any subsequent time, is there or can there be a gospel that is not embodied in a culturally conditioned form of words. The idea that one can or could at any time separate out by some process of distillation a pure gospel unadulterated by any cultural accretions is an illusion. It is, in fact, an abandonment of the gospel, for the gospel is about the word made flesh" (1986:4).

Particularist speech is what we have in hand to offer. For many Christians, to be counted as a particular voice speaking from some perspective feels as though their voice is thereby discounted. "Well, that's only your opinion." In reality that is true of all voices, even the ones declaring someone else's particular perspective illegitimate. But that means owning it about ourselves, if we are to have any part in unmasking the pretensions of any others who claim for their own affirmation something that lies beyond particularity in some zone of neutrality or objectivity. To hold the posture of those who speak from the place where our own commitments and visions have been formed around this good news of God is to be both more honest and more able to invite others to exhibit similar honesty. At the same time, as Newbigin went on to say, "the gospel, which is from the beginning to the end embodied in culturally conditioned forms, calls into question all cultures, including the one in which it was originally embodied" (1986:4).

To embrace a self-conscious sense of the particularity of our witness challenges the dynamics of discourse that we will find present in many places. The unspoken rules that tend to disenfranchise a particularist voice are also the rules that tend to disallow voices that speak from a number of margins – economic, social, ethnic, etc. And anyone claiming to have a prophetic message calling into question the established wisdom is resisted. William Lindsey addresses "public theology and prophetic discourse" in these terms (1995). Public theology, he says,

“implicitly invites questions about the relationship between truth and power in the public discourse” (1995:89). To construe that as “civil discourse” in which “all contributors would be required to speak a common ‘civil’ language,” while it sounds generous to all voices, has a resistive and barring effect. “[C]ivil discourse appears on closer inspection to be about something else altogether, and that something else is control of the conversation” (1995:90–91). It becomes the mechanism for resisting any who claim to be prophets. He concludes that what elicits community resistance to prophetic speech is that “[p]rophets are less preposterous lunatics crying the absurd from the fringes of a society than [they are] people who have managed to invade the center successfully enough to mimic the speech of the center while absolutely refusing the logic that dominates that speech” (1995:101). They are “those who manage to say what is unsayable, against the sheer weight of received truth in socially constructed worlds” (1995:100).

Lindsey borrows from Emily Dickinson to propose that prophecy involves the “ability to tell the truth but tell it slant” (1995:101). Prophetic speech “talks about what those in power talk about but it does so slant and circuitously, opening up the controlled world of the discourse community to an imagination entirely different from the one mandated from on high, and yet so compellingly believable that we wonder who no one has pointed this out to us before” (Lindsey 1995:100).

This view of prophetic speech provides the clue that the Christian (prophetic) voice in public discourse must be bi-lingual. To put it in Newbigin’s terms, it must speak both culture and gospel. We speak from within the internal logic of Christian faith and vision among those who share a different internal logic. Knowing and speaking both languages, both logics, is crucial for our communications. At points it means speaking with others in the terms they comprehend and on the ground of logic that makes sense to them. But we will not forever remain merely on that ground, but will give to the discourse the fully particular logic of a community following the lead of Christ. “The goal should not be to replace the language of the liberal cult with that of the Christian cult; rather, it should be to work strenuously at drawing people outside the church into a dialogue that engages their imagination so that they will experience the capacity of Christian truth to illumine the nature of the problems they face and the moral decisions they must make” (Guroian 1994:51).

### **Courage in Public Action**

Charles West has said that “The church owes the powers of the world a ministry of social imagination” (Brownson et al. 2003:101). This is not only to be true of our speech and the intellectual imagination that is needed for conceiving social options. It has to do with our action as a Christian community. And that is two-fold.

On the one hand, it involves the committed, practiced action of the community to *be* what it espouses. As Newbigin affirms in *Truth to Tell*, “the most important contribution which the church can make to a new social order is to be itself a new social order. More fundamental than any of the things which the church can say or do is the reality of a new society which allows itself to be shaped by the Christian faith” (1991:85). Hauerwas and Willimon say a similar thing: “The church doesn’t have a social strategy, the church is a social strategy” (1989:43). Or as Hauerwas put it elsewhere: “The church does not have, but rather is a social ethic. That is, she is a social ethic inasmuch as she functions as a criteriological institution – that is, an institution that

has learned to embody the form and truth that is charity as revealed in the person and work of Christ” (1977:142–143).

The Christian community doesn’t wait until it can convince the government that a particular practice would be good for society and it becomes formally instituted for the nation. This would be to follow the path of “totalistic reform” against which Ephraim Radner protested many years ago (1989). Instead of that model, by which it looks to the state to implement the moral good, he commends being a “theocratic community” that lives the practices of God whether or not the society as a whole adopts them or legislates them. He sees a difference between the exodus model that looks for an entire reshaping of the social structures and an exilic model in which the community is faithful to be the community in allegiance to God while offering its life and vision in service to the empire insofar as the empire may be willing to receive it. The community doesn’t wait for the government to change; it lives it in advance, and does so whether or not the government embraces it.

In other words, there is something wrong with the picture when Christians across the country mount, as they did some years ago, a march on Washington to call for the government to do something about homelessness in America. We should wonder how many of the hundreds of thousands who appeared had themselves given shelter to any homeless persons in their spare bedrooms or in the largely unused basements of their church facilities. In such a scenario, the government becomes a kind of mechanism for the church to use to fulfill its ethical vision. That forfeits its own calling to be the witnessing agent of the kind of world God intends and brings – whatever the government does.

Several years ago, I discovered among people in the Dutch Reformed Churches of South Africa that they have experienced in a few short years since 1994 the reverse image of this. They have had the protective moral covering removed, and they find themselves lacking the capacity to deal with ethical choices. Many such choices had previously been pre-made for them by the government, but that is no longer true. Now they must make them, but will need to gain the skills of moral discernment to do so. If they gain those skills, the “freedom” that has left them feeling naked and exposed may turn out to be a truer freedom, one that clothes them in a new kind of community!

On the other hand, the rationale for the church as social strategy means that there *will* and *must* be intentionality about how it observes, discerns, and acts in its public locations. It will be a community that lives beyond itself. This is the thrust of Raymond Fung’s choice to put working at the Isaiah agenda first in the logical order of his three-fold vision, even if it is not always so chronologically.

Here the notion of “public theologizing” may appear to reach its limits, if it only means conversation and discourse in the public arena. Of course, even speech is sometimes more than mere conversation and is a dangerous act of resistance or defiance. Better, though, that public theologizing be construed actively as the argument or imagination made with hands instead of voices. This is particularly true when it comes to solidarity with the poor or marginalized or crushed. Solidarity is a tangible, lived experience of walking alongside, not just saying so. Solidarity cannot avoid the touch of deeds.

In 1991, the Western Theological Seminary community (in Holland, Michigan) came face to face with some important information, and with it, a challenge to act. While there was considerable denial about it around town, there were in fact people going hungry with insufficient food or financial resources. Right at that time, the state government took measures to cut back its program of general assistance by one third, meaning that many people who before had barely made ends meet would no longer be able to do so. Many with mental disabilities were being de-institutionalized, and that further pressured the resources of local agencies. Led by students, and joined by faculty, the seminary offered its kitchen and commons area and in partnership with a local agency began serving a free hot noon meal every week day. Volunteers from over twenty churches and food donations from local businesses and individuals have sustained the effort. It continues after 14 years to be a place where the hospitality of a shared meal joins people across wide diversities in culture, language, education, employment, and economic status.

It was widely thought at the time the seminary made this response that the government's budgetary action was really intended to encourage people on state aid to move away from the state and become someone else's problem. A noon meal may have made the difference and thwarted that intent for some of the folks who became the seminary's noon-meal friends. It was a quiet argument, but one with substance.

In all of this there is risk. "The public square will be a place of conflict where one can be wounded. . . . To claim that the Gospel is public truth is to enter into a struggle in which we can expect to be wounded. But these wounds are the authenticating marks of the missionary church" (Newbigin 1992). *The mark*, par excellence, Douglas John Hall would add (2003:137ff.).

### **An Eye on the Horizon**

I am very fascinated with flying. I gather from those who know the art that what is called the "attitude" of a plane is its position relative to three axes. It includes bank or roll, the raising or lowering of the wings in relation to the fuselage. It includes pitch, the upward or downward direction in which the nose is pointed. (That one is *really* important if there's a cross-wind! If a plane is aimed directly toward a particular destination, and there is a 20 mile per hour cross-wind, the plane will never arrive at its intended destination. It must direct the angle of its flight sufficiently into the wind that the angle of its flight and the force of the wind work together to bring it to the intended destination.) This image may be suggestive for a matter of posture. In what direction, with what tilt are we positioned in our public engagements? What is our *attitude*?

There's one more important feature to a plane's attitude. Its position, its bank and pitch and yaw, are gauged in relationship to the horizon! Our voice and posture in public theologizing is oriented to the horizon of the coming reign of God. The horizon is important if we are to avoid the twin dangers of thinking that we build the kingdom of God on earth (and that can be the vision of the right as well as the left, as we are discovering!) or thinking that we have no responsibility to act toward what the kingdom of God promises. We need to think neither too much nor too little of our efforts. "While Christians ought not to expect the advent of a new Christian society," says Vigen Guroian, "their presence in this society as a dialogic community of memory and tradition nonetheless makes possible practical embodiments of the Christian faith

even within secular institutions” (Guroian 1994:48).

We will keep focus and maintain our *attitude* by keeping an eye to the horizon, hoping ultimately in the promises of God rather than our own actions or those of other forces. On the horizon, what we see indelibly printed there are the tears of the cross and the joy or resurrection. And therefore, hope is there. In the daily exercise of the church’s public theologizing, it is this hope that will . . .

- guide action and strategy.
- critique agendas and means.
- redefine success.
- identify idols.
- qualify our best achievements as proximate practical embodiments.
- give caution about imagined finalities.
- give criteria for rejoicing!

These are the tokens of what is coming!

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