

Christian Formation in Practical Public Theology

JENNIFER PATTERSON

Abstract

Practical public theology engages questions concerning life together in a political community. Forming Christians in practical public theology draws on biblically informed principles and the experience of community in the church. It fosters a conception of public life that is wider than the strictly political, enabling responses with the resources and capacities of spheres beyond government alone. It cultivates a disposition to discern the multiple theological principles in many concerns of our common life and attention to multiple factors from the perspectives of practitioners in other spheres. Finally, practical public theology equips Christians to recognize more than material dimensions in challenges facing individuals and communities and to respond relationally, through loving service to all neighbors.

Keywords

Practical public theology, formation, creation, cultural mandate, common grace, image of God, stewardship, poverty, conscience, gender identity

Introduction

Hannah More was a successful poet and playwright among the literary elite of London when she read John Newton's *Cardiphonia* in 1780. The evangelical book occasioned a spiritual renewal in the lifelong Anglican. When her mother died several years later, she found a maternal figure in

Margaret Middleton, whose dining room was the center of much abolitionist activity. There More grew convicted to join the public cause. In 1787, she met William Wilberforce, and with others they organized a campaign against slavery made up of politicians, religious leaders, and artists. She used her skill as a writer to stir the British conscience against the horror of slavery. It would take twenty years to bring down the slave trade and almost half a century to enact legislation abolishing slavery, in 1833, the year that both Wilberforce and More died. They “were sustained in their long efforts not only by religious faith but also by the vitality of a moral imagination,” writes Karen Swallow Prior in her biography of More.¹

A biblically formed capacity to imagine social change was also a preeminent quality of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as he confronted racial bigotry a century later. “Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24), he wrote from Birmingham Jail in 1963, in a letter articulating his carefully reasoned protest of unjust laws.² Anthony Bradley attributes that moral imagination to the scriptural convictions of the black church in which King and others of his generation were raised, particularly its conviction about human dignity. He observes, “The liberation narrative of Exodus carried special meaning for a people whose experience of the New World began in slavery.”³

Shaped by Scripture and formed by Christian community, More and King exemplified a practical public theology: their practice of faith engaged public life. These luminaries dealt with great moral crises in their day, but the point is relevant with respect to all Christians engaging the full range of matters relating to public life, from the mundane to the monumental. The practice of public theology brings biblically informed principles and insights from the experience of covenant community in the church to bear on questions about how to order our lives together in political society, as fallen human beings with transcendent longings and material needs.

The idea of public theology considered here is *public* in a number of ways. It concerns the faith that the church is called to publicly proclaim, rooted in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ—events that are part of public

¹ Karen Swallow Prior, *Fierce Convictions: The Extraordinary Life of Hannah More—Poet, Reformer, Abolitionist* (Nashville: Nelson, 2014) 105, 115–21, 136. More also started Sunday schools to promote literacy and scriptural knowledge among children in poverty, *ibid.*, 139–62.

² Martin Luther King Jr., “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” April 16, 1963. The Martin Luther King Jr., Research and Education Institute, Stanford University. Available at <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/letter-birmingham-jail>.

³ Anthony Bradley, *Black and Tired: Essays on Race, Politics, Culture, and International Development* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 86–87.

history, of which it confesses Jesus to be Lord, with effects that ultimately extend to restoring all creation. Public theology concerns questions of how to organize public (i.e., common) life together in a political community as citizens determine what is worth pursuing as a society, what to avoid or prohibit, what to accomplish together, and what problems we need to solve. It assumes the relevance of Christian faith to such questions, and it continually seeks discernment about the complex pathways of that application. It testifies to a created reality known to all. It concerns the public, as a body politic; it seeks the welfare of all human beings and the good of all creation. It is concerned with Christians' duties as members of the public—including as citizens under political authority responsible for stewarding the calling of citizenship wisely and well. Finally, it concerns the public as understood to be wider than the strictly political, enabling responses to the challenges of our common life with the resources and capacities of spheres beyond government alone.⁴

Oliver O'Donovan observes that theology, "simply by responding to the dynamics of its own proper themes,"⁵ makes important aspects of public life more intelligible in a way that prevalent cultural accounts cannot.⁶ Theology can therefore serve by "educating a people in the practical reasonableness required for their political tasks."⁷ Relatedly, James Smith has highlighted how liturgical formation in the church⁸ contributes as well to a "social imaginary by which we 'read' the political."⁹

Forming believers in practical public theology fosters a vision of life together in political community. Such formation draws on theological principles and the experience of gathering as God's people in the church, including the shaping that comes through its teaching, ministry life, habits of prayer, and anticipation of the Spirit's work in common grace. What characterizes such a vision?

First, where general public discourse tends to focus one-dimensionally on the political sphere, practical public theology brings depth perception: it

⁴ This piece examines the question of practical public theology in the context of representative government in advanced modernity, specifically with a view to the United States.

⁵ Oliver O'Donovan, *Desire of Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 3.

⁶ Oliver O'Donovan, *Ways of Judgment* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), xiii, xv.

⁷ *Ibid.*, xv.

⁸ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 133–54.

⁹ James K. A. Smith, *Awaiting the King: Reforming Public Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 64; see also Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007), 146. Taylor defines *social imaginary* as "the way that we collectively imagine, even pre-theoretically, our social life."

sees a multiplicity of created dimensions in social life, a layered landscape of institutions at work in our common life. This also generates respect for particular callings in public life and their specialized knowledge and practical reason.

Second, where typical public discourse can often simplistically represent issues, practical public theology brings a more fine-tuned situational awareness: it recognizes multiple theological principles in many concerns of our common life. This approach also develops awareness that multiple factors are involved from the perspectives of other institutional practitioners as well (educators have particular knowledge of the multi-dimensional challenges facing schools, medical professionals of the health care system, etc.).

Third, where political discourse frequently focuses on the merely material, practical public theology discerns both spiritual and material dimensions of human life and their complex interaction in many problems facing individuals and communities, and it instinctively leans toward relational responses. This also entails a sober assessment of the limits of government and political measures for satisfying the range of human needs and the desire for meaning, purpose, and fullness in life.

Shaped by such ways of seeing public life, Christians have the opportunity to engage more deeply the longing of every person for wholeness and peace, individually and in relationships, a longing at the root of many challenges. To know the Creator and his Word is to have insight about how God has designed the world for human flourishing and to desire our neighbors' good in light of it. To partake in the covenant community of the church is to have our longings shaped by the Spirit, our imaginations stretched by life in the Spirit, and our hopes for the world attuned to the Spirit's work in common grace. A practical public theology commends these excellencies (1 Pet 2:9) through loving service to all our neighbors.

1. Knowledge of the Creator and His Word

1. Depth Perception: Seeing the Created Dimensions of Our Common Life

The tasks God gives humanity in Genesis 1:28—to be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, subdue it, and have dominion—imply a cascade of further imperatives for their fulfillment.¹⁰ This is the charge to form culture, “the

¹⁰ David VanDrunen makes similar points about the extent of the implied cultural activities and associational life in his treatment of both Genesis 1:28 and 9:1–7. See David VanDrunen, *Politics after Christendom: Political Theology in a Fractured World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 80–86, 215–17. William Edgar highlights the range of human activity in response to

communal calling of the human race to make the world its own,” writes Herman Bavinck.¹¹ These human endeavors require particular mastery of the various aspects of created reality.¹² As Bavinck describes it, “In order to rule over nature in the broadest sense, its essence, operation, pathways, and laws must be known.”¹³ God’s design yielded a cosmos with structure and stability, as the very arrangement of the account in Genesis 1 conveys,¹⁴ making it knowable and full of latent possibility.

Every field of cultural activity therefore reflects the structures and order of the creation it strives to know and develop.¹⁵ Such specialization in response to God’s ordered creation establishes for these cultural domains a scope of delegated authority within their respective spheres, as Abraham Kuyper emphasized.¹⁶ Similarly, the God-ordained institutions of family, government, and church have their respective jurisdictions.¹⁷ Together they are all subject to God’s ultimate sovereignty. The profundity of creation and the consequent magnitude of the Genesis 1:28 mandate entail a division of labor¹⁸ from which cultural spheres emerge with a legitimacy that warrants reciprocal acknowledgment among them.¹⁹

God’s blessing and command in Genesis 1:27–30 as imaging God’s governance of creation. William Edgar, *Created and Creating: A Biblical Theology of Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017), 166–68.

¹¹ Herman Bavinck, “The Kingdom of God, The Highest Good,” trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman, *The Bavinck Review* 2 (2011): 161.

¹² *Mastery* is used here in the sense of study shaped by the coherence of qualities in the object or field of inquiry.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ James W. Skillen notes Old Testament scholarship comparing the Genesis creation account, with its rhythm of forming and filling, to the construction of a royal dwelling, in which the divine sovereign installs humanity, his image, to represent him. See James W. Skillen, *The Good of Politics: A Biblical, Historical, and Contemporary Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 22–23.

¹⁵ Al Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 25.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 99. What Kuyper called “sphere sovereignty,” others have described as “differentiated responsibility” (*ibid.*) or “structural pluralism” (Skillen, *The Good of Politics*, 124–25).

¹⁷ Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 99.

¹⁸ On division of labor, see Nathaniel Gray Sutanto, *God and Knowledge: Herman Bavinck’s Theological Epistemology* (New York: T&T Clark, 2020), 61 (in the context of Bavinck’s analogous description of the diversity of the sciences, reflective of creation).

¹⁹ This is not to say that all development of cultural activities in a fallen world is a legitimate expression of the cultural mandate in a moral sense; see Wolters’s distinction between the structure and direction in cultural activity, Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 59. On the idea of reciprocal acknowledgment, see James K. A. Smith’s essay in *Five Views on the Church and Politics*, ed. Amy E. Black (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 148–55; and Nicholas Wolterstorff, *The Mighty and the Almighty: An Essay in Political Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 157–71.

Bavinck amplifies these ideas with observations about the unity and diversity found throughout creation, a reflection of the paradigmatic unity-in-diversity of the Trinity.²⁰ Even as cultural activities diversify and proliferate, they share a unity of principle and *telos* (goal).²¹ According to Bavinck's account, the totality of knowledge and reality forms an organic whole, as all truth is grounded in divine wisdom.²² This application of Bavinck's organic motif, emphasizing unity in diversity,²³ explains why he can insist that each human institution and cultural sphere has an independence and integrity in itself while also cohering in a unity that can only be illuminated fully by special revelation. Thus he writes both that "theology accords to the other sciences their full due"²⁴ and that Scripture "is a light on our path and a lamp for our feet, also with respect to science and art. It claims authority in all areas of life."²⁵

Sin, however, denies that ultimate authority, claims autonomy, and yields fragmentation and incoherence. How shall theology respond? The "queen of the sciences"²⁶ takes the posture of her Lord in his earthly ministry as she awaits his return as victorious King. "Theology also can rule only by serving," writes Bavinck in his treatise on common grace.²⁷ Nathaniel Gray Sutanto describes the relationship Bavinck envisions between theology and other fields of knowledge as one of reciprocity: "She serves them with her gifts—she can unify them and give them their proper context, and she can show how they are closely interconnected."²⁸ In so doing, theology testifies to the reconciliation of all things in Christ.²⁹

In the meantime, thanks to God's common grace, the development of creation continues beyond the fall (Gen 9:1–7). Moreover, the effects of sin give further impetus to the culture-making endeavor, which now must meet the challenges of human existence in the midst of creation groaning under the curse. The God-ordained institutions of family and government take on added significance to address the strife characterizing interpersonal and

²⁰ James Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism: Towards a New Reading of Herman Bavinck's Organic Motif* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 85–89.

²¹ Sutanto, *God and Knowledge*, 92.

²² Ibid. 67.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Herman Bavinck, "Common Grace," trans. Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, *Calvin Theological Journal* 24 (April 1989): 65.

²⁵ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003). Cited in Sutanto, *God and Knowledge*, 65–66.

²⁶ The phrase is Bavinck's; see Sutanto, *God and Knowledge*, 56ff.

²⁷ Bavinck, "Common Grace," 65.

²⁸ Sutanto, *God and Knowledge*, 59.

²⁹ Bavinck, "Common Grace," 65.

social relationships as well as the vulnerabilities of individuals and communities.³⁰ Even as these spheres remain essential to the pursuit of the cultural mandate, sin makes their interactions conflictual. Reinforcing their particular roles amid this friction, Bavinck writes, “God has accorded to state, home, and society the peculiar power and authority proper to each; beside them stands the church with its own government granted to it by Christ. Subjugation of the church by the state or of the state by the church are thus both condemned.”³¹

As this last statement indicates, to grasp the manifold response required by the cultural mandate is already to conceive of some basic aspects of ordering life together in political community.³² God designed creation to be developed in ways that require differentiated responsibility or, as James Skillen has described, “structured plurality.”³³ In this light, a test of government’s success in fulfilling its purpose is its respect for other spheres.³⁴ Government exhibits such deference by maintaining the conditions in which family, church, business, science, arts, and other cultural associations can flourish, rather than mistaking its mandate for theirs or permitting social dynamics that unjustly inhibit them. At the same time, government has particular tasks and authority to maintain a just public order under law, which Christians are to respect, heed, and pray for (Rom 13:1–7; 1 Pet 2:13–14, 17; Titus 3:1–2; 1 Tim 2:2).

This is the context in which public theology serves. As observed above about Bavinck’s view of theology generally in relation to other fields, so with public theology in relation to government and other spheres concerned with the common good: “She serves them with her gifts—she can unify them and give them their proper context, and she can show how they are closely interconnected.”³⁵ One way formation in practical public theology can do so is by helping Christians (and all citizens) develop a depth perception that recognizes a multiplicity of institutions at work in our common life. These distinctions are critical conceptually in the formation of policy and other responses. Government action may be necessary to address a given situation, but it is almost never sufficient; multiple other spheres,

³⁰ In contrast to the Anabaptist tradition, Reformed theology has affirmed the legitimacy of Christians serving in the civil sphere (see John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.20.4). This includes government, law enforcement, and military.

³¹ Bavinck, “Common Grace,” 63.

³² See Skillen, *The Good of Politics*, 23.

³³ James W. Skillen, “Witness in the Public Square,” *Unio cum Christo* 1.1–2 (Fall 2015): 166.

³⁴ Skillen makes an argument to this effect as well, *ibid.*; see also Skillen, *The Good of Politics*, 124.

³⁵ Sutanto, *God and Knowledge*, 59.

including the family, church, and private associations, have roles to play in meeting social needs.

2. Situational Awareness: Putting Theology in Conversation with Public Life

Theology can serve these various actors at work in the public square by equipping Christians with a situational awareness of the theological concerns at issue in current challenges. Teaching in the following theological areas, among others, can especially help develop such a practical public theology.

Image of God

Formation in theological anthropology is particularly significant for addressing a wide range of questions today. A number of the most fundamental challenges currently confronting society relate to the nature and purpose of human beings. Proposals concerning such issues as gender identity, assisted suicide, and transhumanism contest truths articulated in the very first chapters of Genesis. They dispute the reality that we are created, in the image of God, male and female, made for each other in marriage and community. Instead, they assert a radical autonomy with respect to humanity's nature and purpose.

Opening up the fullness of the biblical teaching that human beings are made in the image of God (Gen 1:27; 9:6) reveals further implications for public life. Bavinck's interpretation of the image in three dimensions begins to illuminate this. First, all of the human person, in the fullness of the person's material and spiritual composition, images all of God. Second, both male and female image God, individually and together. Finally, the whole of humanity, throughout all human history, images God.³⁶

The implications are vast. All human beings possess a created dignity that cannot be lost; human life should be protected in law and respected in all personal interactions. Racial bigotry in all its forms is repudiated. Misogyny is rejected. Views that base personhood solely on rational or other capacities are flawed; membership in the human species alone is the basis of personhood, from conception to natural death. Human beings image God in the entirety of their being, body and soul. They cannot be

³⁶ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, *God and Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 533, 554–62, 576–78. Brian Mattson notes that Bavinck is not constrained to limit the scope of the image because “all such identifications are analogical from the start” in view of his emphasis on the Creator-creature distinction; see Brian G. Mattson, *Restored to Our Destiny: Eschatology and the Image of God in Herman Bavinck's Reformed Dogmatics* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 130.

reduced to the merely material, and policy ought not to disregard or deny the spiritual nature of human beings and the relevance of religion in human life and society.³⁷ Neither can the material dimensions of humanity be ignored; the physical well-being of our neighbors is a part of their flourishing as made in the image of God. Christians need a strong biblical understanding of the nature and purpose of human beings in order to cast a vision for God's design of what it means to be human and to call on others to reason together about these things.

Unity and Diversity

Sin festers at the seams of difference. Hateful pride preys on distinctions of race, sex, class, age, and many others. Evidence of its harm is pronounced, among other places, in deep wounds from patterns of racism.

Where affinity does not draw us together, our society struggles with difference—in politics, in communities, in the church. Here the power of Christ is displayed as it reshapes us, writes Irwyn Ince, for in Christ “contraries have been reconciled.”³⁸ He brings about a unity in diversity in the church that is humanly inexplicable. The church is therefore called to be a picture of the eschatological community united in Christ, or what Ince calls “the beautiful community.”³⁹

Ince elaborates, “The ministry of reconciliation demonstrated in the local church by the gathering of people from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and ethnicities is the natural outworking of a rich covenantal theological commitment.”⁴⁰ Unity in diversity is a gospel imperative, he says, tracing it through the Bible from Adam and Eve to Revelation,⁴¹ where we see “a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb” (Rev 7:9 ESV).

In the meantime, redemption in Christ sets before us the vision of the restoration of all creation. The seams of difference we experience now are part of God's beautiful tapestry that we are to prize. “The image of God is much too rich for it to be fully realized in a single human being,” writes Bavinck. “Only humanity in its entirety ... is the fully finished image, the

³⁷ For example, government should not deny religious liberty. Foreign policy should recognize that religion is a perpetual factor in world affairs, contrary to secularization theory.

³⁸ Irwyn Ince, *The Beautiful Community: Unity, Diversity, and the Church at Its Best* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 110.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 12.

⁴¹ Ibid. 112.

most telling and striking likeness of God.”⁴² This vision should set the pattern for Christians’ outlook on unity, diversity, and reconciliation in the midst of public life. Unjust discrimination in policy, practice, or interpersonal relations is antithetical to it.

Stewardship

Competing demands for scarce resources are a central feature of politics and the source of great controversy. Interest-group politics, utilitarian arguments, and other strong currents figure in such disputes. The cultural mandate provides a different perspective from which to consider these questions: stewardship.

Stewardship is the exercise of responsibility at the intersection of our callings and questions of goods, resources, and capacities. It involves prudent decisions in our own spheres of influence about maintaining and equitably allotting existing resources, as well as developing new ones. In the context of representative government, citizenship in particular is a matter of responsible stewardship, including the stewardship of political freedom. Numerous biblical principles relate to stewardship in many specific contexts. Two examples are briefly mentioned here.

Stewardship applies to creation, a gift of God that humanity is meant to cultivate and enjoy (Gen 1:29–31; 2:15–16; Ps 8:6–8). The material world is not to be rejected or exploited, but used in ways that honor it and glorify God. Despite the goodness of creation, the curse of sin has affected all things. The experience of the blessings of creation and the blight of sin is uneven, and adversity is a permanent reality in this world.

Because of that reality, another aspect of stewardship is directing our resources and capacities to alleviate suffering and hardship. The people of God in the Old Testament were called to show mercy and justice to the vulnerable and dispossessed (Mic 6:8) because of God’s mercy, including to themselves (Deut 10:18–19). The representative categories of the stranger, the widow, the orphan, and the poor recur, with some variation, throughout the Old Testament (e.g., Deut 14:29; Isa 10:2; Jer 7:6; Ezek 22:7; Zech 7:10).⁴³ Nicholas Wolterstorff has called these the “quartet of the vulnerable.”⁴⁴ The New Testament echoes these categories (Matt 25:35–36; Jas 1:27). Christians have a responsibility to address the needs of our vulnerable

⁴² Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:577.

⁴³ John Scott Redd, “Deuteronomy,” in *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the Old Testament: The Gospel Promised*, ed. Miles V. Van Pelt (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 143.

⁴⁴ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 75.

neighbors in the stewardship of our callings in multiple spheres, including but not limited to seeking sound policy in these areas.

Truth and Conscience

“The large moral disagreements all turn on competing descriptions,” observes O’Donovan in *Desire of Nations*. “The world-shaping, cultural sins have to do with bad descriptions of a foetus as a piece of maternal tissue; of justice as the will of the majority, and so on. Serious moral debate cannot avoid arbitrating questions of description and so enquiring into the structures of reality.”⁴⁵ A part of the church’s task in each generation is to recognize and confront false testimonies about created reality.

To be equipped to do so, Christians must seek out true concepts authorized by Scripture, says O’Donovan. “Concepts disclose the elementary structures of reality.”⁴⁶ They form our consciences about ideas like justice, authority, freedom, and personal identity.

A concept of justice shaped in this way, for example, is not limited to a correctional system or to merely material conditions. Instead, it is closely linked to the idea of what is right and encompasses right relations.⁴⁷ This implies that individuals in their various spheres contribute to a just society, in addition to government maintaining a just order in which all these spheres interact. Government is responsible for proximate, not ultimate, justice.⁴⁸ But temporal justice may not simply bend itself away from the arc of God’s moral universe through corrupt or irresponsible use of power. Every authority on earth will be judged.

As another example, a biblically-shaped concept of personal identity is rooted in the image of God: it has a nature and purpose. It is not subject to radical redefinition that rejects this created reality. Yet false descriptions concerning identity have emerged in culture and, increasingly, in law. Following United States Supreme Court decisions redefining marriage and sex,⁴⁹ debate now concerns the freedom to speak and to act consistently

⁴⁵ O’Donovan, *Desire of Nations*, 14.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 15. O’Donovan emphasizes this is an exegetical task governed by a disciplined hermeneutic that recognizes differences in redemptive-historical contexts, and therefore differences in application.

⁴⁷ Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 258–60, 278.

⁴⁸ See John Scott Redd, “The Earth Is the Lord’s,” in *Set Free: Restoring Religious Freedom for All*, ed. Art Lindsley and Anne R. Bradley (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2019), 34–35.

⁴⁹ Court decisions have redefined marriage to include same-sex relationships (*Obergefell v. Hodges*, June 26, 2015) and sex discrimination in employment law to include sexual orientation and gender identity (*Bostock v. Clayton County*, June 15, 2020).

with biblical truth about marriage and about the created biological reality of sex. These questions are far reaching. They touch on the conscience rights of medical professionals to decline to be involved in gender transition surgeries. They concern the freedom of confessional organizations to maintain employee conduct standards as a part of their statement of faith. The problems with new policies related to sexual orientation and gender identity do not stop with religious organizations or individuals, however, and our concern should extend to all our neighbors. For example, privacy, safety, and equity for girls are significant issues as new gender identity policy has allowed biological males to use girls' showers and locker rooms and to compete in girls' sports.⁵⁰

In each of these four areas and others, if public theology is to serve well, development is needed in both the scholarly arena and in church Christian education. In the academic domain, this calls for the development of *theological* reasoning concerning the principles in public issues of significance to the church or to Christians as individuals.⁵¹ Such scholarly work can also supply Christian education resources⁵² in the church for the formation of believers of all ages.

3. A Case of Theology and Public Life: Poverty

The process of such theological reflection requires situational awareness of specific issues in public life. Just as practical public theology recognizes multiple principles in many concerns of our common life, so it anticipates that multiple factors are often involved from the perspectives of practitioners in other fields as well. To be able to discern which principles are involved and how to apply them prudentially requires some knowledge of circumstances and policy details. For example, the biblical admonition to care for the poor is unequivocal, but *how* to obey this command today is not explicit in Scripture. Such discernment requires situational knowledge to apply biblically derived principles.

Consider the case of poverty in the United States. Investigating the nature and causes of material hardship shows that, unlike the situation in the developing world, extreme need (a lack of basic provisions for sustenance and shelter)

⁵⁰ See Jennifer Marshall Patterson, "Preserving Religious Freedom, Pursuing the Common Good," in *Set Free*, ed. Lindsley and Bradley, 169–84. See also Ryan T. Anderson, *When Harry Became Sally: Responding to the Transgender Moment* (New York: Encounter Books, 2019).

⁵¹ For example, John Scott Redd's article "The Earth is the Lord's" presents a biblical theology rationale for religious freedom.

⁵² For example, see David VanDrunen, *Bioethics and the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009).

is not typical of American households in poverty. Current policies have focused on the material needs of the poor and have raised living standards—an outcome for which we can be thankful, but not satisfied. Government welfare spending levels are more than enough to raise every household out of poverty—yet poverty and dependence on public assistance persist. Material hardship among poor households with children often correlates with father absence and a lack of work, even in good economic times. Most public assistance to families with children goes to single-parent households.⁵³

A Christian response to poverty must see the image of God in neighbors in need. Rather than reducing those in poverty to their material needs, our response should seek their overall flourishing, including in relation to God, self, other people, and the material world.⁵⁴ Relationships, especially within the family, and purposeful activity through work are critical aspects of what it means to be human.

Yet policies have discouraged work and undermined marriage by penalizing a single mother on welfare if she marries a man with a job. Policy reforms can correct these negative dynamics in the way public assistance is structured. Meanwhile, we can pursue long-term change by striving, through churches and other ministries, to restore marriage and to prevent the relational breakdown that so often puts single mothers and their children at risk. Poverty in America goes much deeper than material need and exceeds the type of help government can provide. Churches, businesses, and nonprofit organizations all have roles to play, both in helping overcome poverty and working to prevent it.⁵⁵

This is an example of how practical public theology approaches a challenge in public life by seeking to understand the facts, to recognize the theological principles involved, and to discern the multiple dimensions of response needed to address aspects beyond material need. It assumes the relevance of various spheres in tackling social challenges and evaluates the relative contributions each can make to the case at hand. Finally, implicit in this response is a realism that is willing to engage the actual state of affairs, in all its cumulative complexity and brokenness—both in terms of the problem itself and prior attempts to solve it (whether through policy or other efforts). A Christian response to poverty—and other challenges—is willing to begin where things are, rather than where we might wish them to be, and to persevere so that they will one day approach fuller flourishing.

⁵³ Robert Rector, “How the War on Poverty Was Lost,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 7, 2014.

⁵⁴ Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty without Hurting the Poor and Yourself* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2009), 57–58.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

II. *Experience of Covenant Community in the Church*

The practice of public theology brings biblically informed principles and insights from the experience of covenant community in the church to bear on questions about how to order life together in political society. Gathering as God's people in the church reminds us that politics is contingent and temporal, taking place within the larger scope of redemptive history. To partake in the covenant community of the church is to have our longings shaped by the Spirit, our imaginations stretched by life in the Spirit, and our hopes for the world attuned to the Spirit's operations in common grace. This comes about through, for example, the church's preaching and teaching, ministry life, prayer habits, and watching for the work of the Spirit in common grace. This section reflects on how these contribute to the formation of a practical public theology in believers.

1. *Preaching, Teaching, and Formation in Practical Public Theology*

As a church's exegetical preaching, teaching, and formation take into account a congregation's circumstances, two general observations are relevant about the current topic. First, citizenship is a calling that includes everyone in the church. Not all will be husbands or wives, not all will have a job, but everyone is a citizen (even children)—if not of the country where the church is located, then of some other country. Second, congregational members in public service or related callings may have particular dilemmas or opportunities with respect to public life. These, too, are among the many situational contexts for which believers need to hear the Word of God for “all things that pertain to life and godliness” (2 Pet 1:3).

Christian education programs in the church can be a means of formation in the elements of a practical public theology discussed here. The development of resources is needed for all ages. For example, such education is needed to equip believers with respect to public issues that pertain to the identity of confessional organizations (including churches) and to the exercise of their own callings, as new government policies present challenges to biblical convictions.⁵⁶ As another example, teaching can provide an opportunity to consider biblical principles concerning care for the poor and vulnerable, with a view to informing the church's mercy ministries.

⁵⁶ For a discussion of some implications in various callings, see Patterson, “Preserving Religious Freedom, Pursuing the Common Good.”

2. *Shaping Practical Public Theology through Church Ministry*

A church's ministry life shapes believers' public theology. Outreach efforts that include evangelism and care for temporal needs express convictions about the image of God in our neighbors and the breadth of common grace. Mercy ministries habituate congregants to look to the needs of others and to take a measure of responsibility for them; the types of mercy ministries in which a church chooses to engage are instructive. Ministry principles that recognize churches' capacity to address the whole person contribute to a sense of differentiated responsibility among institutions and their relative capacities for responding to various dimensions of social challenges. A focus on relational and spiritual need, not merely material deprivation, attunes believers to both the depth of brokenness and the fullness of restoration. Effective compassion seeks the flourishing of human beings, individually and in community, aiming to restore relationships with God, self, others, and creation.⁵⁷

A church's grounding in such ministry principles will shape how believers conceptualize ordering life together in political community to serve neighbors in need. Such principles of ministry expand the horizon of hope for restoration because they open new possibilities for addressing deeply complex challenges like drug addiction, homelessness, or prisoner recidivism. To take the time to understand these complex problems and to relate to those trapped in them is to grow dissatisfied with simplistic answers relegating these human problems solely to the material, impersonal responses typical of government programs. Complex problems require differentiated responsibility among multiple institutions and a vision of the public square as a complex space where they interact, not as the exclusive province of government.

Not only the outward-facing but also the inward-facing church ministries are significant for members' theology of public life. The fellowship and hospitality experienced within the body of Christ in a local congregation are foundational.⁵⁸ The ways that a local church body cares for its members through family challenges, financial difficulties, cultural hostility, spiritual struggle, sickness, and death inculcate a pattern for serving others in the multiple dimensions of their identity as God's image bearers. Observing, receiving, and providing this care are all formative; they nurture virtues and practices of responsibility and reciprocity that carry over into citizenship. A congregation's habits for welcoming visitors, assimilating new members,

⁵⁷ Corbett and Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts*.

⁵⁸ Rosaria Butterfield, *The Gospel Comes with a House Key* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018).

and approaching differences of background, race, and socioeconomic status all teach habits that shape individual responses to issues in the public square, as well as an imagination for how the church's role may contribute to resolving them.

Yet the experience of covenant community in the church ought also to sharpen the contrast with the world in some respects, even in differing expectations about politics itself. Augustine observed that politics is about ordering our loves to their proper objects and ends. He saw that one of the reasons politics goes off track is that humans are tempted to place inordinate hopes in it.⁵⁹ In actuality, some of the desires human beings pin on government are longings that can only be satisfied in the world to come.⁶⁰ The temporal political order is not meant to bear the burdens of such ultimacy.

3. Corporate Prayer and Practical Public Theology

Praying for public officials is an admonition so basic as to have grown negligible in practice. The Scriptural directive, however, is unambiguous and thorough: "I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior" (1 Tim 2:2). The Westminster Confession underscores "the duty of people to pray for magistrates" (WCF 23.4).

Heeding this counsel to pray shapes worshipers' outlook on the relationship of civil and divine authority and their sense of responsibility for the calling of public theology. Its regular inclusion in public worship is instructive concerning civil authorities' continual need for wisdom in their leadership and the church's perpetual dependence on God's provision for its peaceful existence in society. Moreover, habitually praying for public officials guards against episodic intercession that may be vulnerable to motivations apart from the biblical directive for intercession and thanksgiving.

Corporate prayer should also lift up those in the congregation called to public service and *everyone* in the congregation as we exercise our callings as citizens. We should pray for sound teaching and discernment in applying our faith to emerging and recurrent challenges in public life. We should ask for perseverance in our individual and corporate responsibilities to act in

⁵⁹ Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (New York: Penguin, 2003), 593.

⁶⁰ See John von Heyking's *Augustine and Politics as Longing in the World* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001).

ways that will shape public life, including through the ministries of the church. We should ask God to raise up and sustain leaders who act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly before him (Mic 6:8).

4. Watching for the Spirit's Work

Common grace is frequently alluded to in discussions related to theology and public life, and rightly so. But at times such references can sound somewhat like invoking a law of nature. Common grace is not a mechanistic principle at work in the universe like a deist's watch in motion. It is grace, the active operation of the Holy Spirit in the life of the world.⁶¹

As such, we should watch for it with anticipation. "We need the Spirit's guidance in our hearts and minds as we seek to identify traces of the Spirit's work in the larger creation," writes Richard Mouw.⁶² In a study of Kuyper's public theology, Vincent Bacote emphasizes a responsive posture toward the Spirit's operations in common grace: "Such a pneumatological public theology ministers to the structures of creation as it attempts to respond to common grace."⁶³

We need the help of the Spirit to exercise wisdom and discernment as we engage in the public process of ordering our lives in political community. That such engagement and ordering are possible owes to God's blessing. Government's provision of order and peace in a sinful world is itself a mark of common grace. To seek sound government is to desire his favor for the benefit of all, and ultimately for his glory.⁶⁴

Conclusion

Practical public theology engages questions of how to organize life together as a political community. Forming Christians for this engagement draws on biblical doctrine and the experience of covenant community in the church. It commends biblical truth and sound reason about how God has made the world for its flourishing. Informed by the magnitude of the response to the Genesis 1:28 mandate, it fosters in believers a conception of public life that is wider than the strictly political. This enables responses to the challenges

⁶¹ John Murray, "Common Grace," *Collected Writings of John Murray*, vol. 2, *Systematic Theology* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), 94, 96, 117.

⁶² Richard Mouw, *He Shines in All That's Fair: Culture and Common Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 28.

⁶³ Vincent E. Bacote, *The Spirit in Public Theology: Appropriating the Legacy of Abraham Kuyper* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005), 151.

⁶⁴ Murray, "Common Grace," 111–12.

of common life with the resources and capacities of spheres beyond government alone. Practical public theology forms a disposition to discern the multiple theological principles at issue in many concerns of our common life and to be attentive to multiple factors from the perspectives of other spheres. Finally, practical public theology equips Christians to recognize both the spiritual and material dimensions of challenges facing individuals and communities.

Practical public theology needs the fortitude of the gospel and the fellowship of the church. It must reckon with the battering effects of sin in all aspects of life while maintaining faith in God's grace to overcome sin, redeem lives, and restore his creation. It requires the fruit of the Spirit to exercise patience in getting to know the complex problems facing public life and perseverance in pursuing responses that address the fullness of the need. It must have the courage to stand on true, biblically authorized concepts, even when false descriptions prevail. This is the endurance that produces character, and the character that produces hope, the renewable resource of the Spirit given to the church that it might not grow weary in its service (Rom 5:4–5).