

FROM PRACTICAL DIVINITY TO PUBLIC THEOLOGY¹

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Despite early twentieth-century attempts to stress the profoundly social dimensions of Christianity, the Western Church has demonstrated a remarkable facility for privatizing faith. The beginning of the twenty-first century has witnessed a theological reaction which involves the birth of a new movement operating under the name of "public theology." This movement is marked by a breadth of concern for the application of theological principles to all activity which takes place beyond "the four walls of the church." It is argued here that Wesleyan theology has a distinct contribution to make in this area and a direct line of connection between the "Practical Divinity" of John and Charles Wesley and the needs of public theology today is drawn. The following five themes are set forth as contributing helpfully to public theology - Wesleyan theology is essentially public; it is experiential; it follows a conjunctive approach; its doctrine of prevenient grace provides a foundation for engagement with the world, and it stresses social holiness.

In every era the church has as one of its primary theological responsibilities the task of establishing the principles and practices to be employed in its relationship with wider society. The church's perception of its social role, responsibilities and relationships is continually under review as biblical principles interact with cultural norms and historic circumstances. The first Christians lived, with a mixture of acceptance of (Romans 13) and resistance to (Revelation 13) their social context. They lived as aliens within a foreign land, as a new and illegal sect, restricted and persecuted because of faith. Several centuries later there was a radical transformation of the relationship between church and society to what is commonly known as Christendom or Constantinianism where the church took on an official, established role in society to the point where the distinction between the two was blurred or almost non-existent. Since then the church has acted in accordance with various self-

¹ This paper was delivered at the Symposium held at Kingsley College on 24 October 2007 to mark the Tercentenary of the Birth of Charles Wesley.

perceptions often characterized as, for example, people who live as residents of two cities, as an alternate community, as social reformers, prophetic critics and citizens of a pluralist culture.

The situation at around the start of the twentieth century is exemplified by three significant publications which provide a snapshot of the state of play at that particular time. They also influenced the church's thinking for much of the twentieth century. The first is Abraham Kuyper's *The Social Question and the Christian Religion* (1891); the second is Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* an encyclical on the "Rights and Duties of Capital and Labour" which was produced in the same year; and the third is Ernst Troeltsch's *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* (1911 and 1931). Although they differ in some important respects these documents, which represent different traditions of faith, are united in seeing the social responsibility of the church as a matter of the first importance. Despite this, the Western Church of the twentieth century demonstrated a remarkable facility for privatizing faith to such an extent that it has been seen by many to be a primary threat to the life and ministry of the whole church. Consequently, the beginning of the twenty-first century has witnessed a theological reaction which involves the birth of a new movement operating very deliberately under the name of "public theology."

Public theology is marked by a breadth of concern for the application of theological principles to all activity which takes place "outside the four walls of the church." It is a genuinely theological encounter with the world, not merely (as has often been the case in recent times) either an evangelistic encounter or an ethical commentary on what is taking place. It is an intrinsically practical discipline which is corporate in nature. It may be seen as either a sub-set of missiology or simply another way of looking at missiology. Public theology is political in that it constantly engages with politics, but is much more than what used to be called "political theology" as it deals with all areas of life – the arts, politics, education, occupation, entertainment, sport, family and health.

One of the main tasks of public theology as it is currently configured, is a negative one. That is, overcoming the dominant privatised, dualist, hard secularism of the twentieth century. More positively, public theology aims at creating a new form of "natural theology" - that is, a new bridge between reasonable and rational thinking in the wider community on the one hand, and the thinking of the church concerning fundamental biblical principles on the other. The term "public theology" is thus increasingly being used to

speak about the way that biblical and theological principles have relevance for a wide range of issues outside the four walls of the church. Whereas the church has often (particularly in more recent times) related to society with a twin focus involving evangelism and ethics, public theology aims at providing an appropriate theoretical framework for engaging with all dimensions of public life. Public theology recognises that western society cannot be understood in terms of being a Christian culture and this requires a more ambitious program of intellectual thought questioning the basis of modern secular society and the presuppositions which govern all aspects of social life.

Thinking more broadly means applying well-known theological themes differently. Baptism, for instance, is commonly understood as a personal commitment of faith, the sign of spiritual union with Christ and the point of entry into the life of the church. It is less commonly understood as having broad public implications and a radical social agenda. But when the apostle Paul expounded the meaning of baptism for the Galatians (3:26-27) he did not just discuss its personal, experiential and ecclesial implications. As Richard Longenecker comments, he addressed three pairs of relationships which “cover in embryonic fashion all the essential relationships of humanity, and so need to be seen as having racial, cultural and sexual implications.”² When he said, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” he was addressing profound social implications of three fundamental sets of human relationships which extend beyond the limits of the church. Ben Witherington has referred to Galatians 3:28 as “the Magna Carta of Humanity,” a fundamental statement of equality before God, and a kind of constitutional statement which sets a foundation for the way life is to be lived.³

Similarly, the Christian concept of forgiveness is widely seen as influencing the form of our relationships with God and others (“forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us” - Matthew 6:12, Luke 11:4). But properly understood it is a principle of life which goes well beyond the purely personal. The principle of forgiveness has, indeed, in the past been applied socially with great effect in economics – something observable in the form of the King James Version of the Lord’s Prayer which includes the petition,

² R. Longenecker, *Galatians* (Dallas: Word), 157.

³ B. Witherington III, *Grace in Galatia* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1998), 280.

“Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors” (Mat. 6:12). This actually became the foundation for the concept of bankruptcy – the forgiveness of debt – a concept which gradually developed in its modern form in the post-reformation period as a result of a much greater general awareness of the biblical text. Previously debtors were treated purely as criminals. And even the first bankruptcy laws were designed to give more control of the situation to the one owed money (only they could initiate proceedings, appropriate property and debts could still be pursued after bankruptcy). But the injunction to forgive and related texts in Deuteronomy 15:1-2, 12-14 were applied socially which led to more humanitarian treatment of those in debt. This demonstrates how scriptural principles can influence and benefit society as a whole.

Another, relatively well known, example concerns the way in which the Christian doctrine of the *imago dei* has had a profound effect on western society’s treatment of people. The Christian understanding of the person is a doctrine which has the most profound implications for the way we live and treat one another, especially the weak and defenceless, whether a new-born baby, disabled or dying person. It is *not* the case that a society or culture will naturally, or always, treat human life with reverence or that each and every culture will protect the weak. It is by no means even certain that a culture which is profoundly influenced by Christian thought will in fact do so. But a culture that lacks that influence will be greatly diminished. And it is not only Christian historians who can see this. Peter Singer agrees that it has been Christianity that brought “the distinctively Christian idea of the sanctity of all human life” which has influenced western culture and protected the weaker members of our society. However, he argues this as part of his own argument in favor of active euthanasia and optional infanticide (of any child up to the age of about 6 or 8 weeks). Singer argues that “our present absolute protection of the lives of infants is a distinctively Christian attitude rather than a universal ethical value.”⁴ The doctrine of the sanctity of human life is a product of Christianity and therefore, argues Singer, can be disposed of. The contribution that Christian thought made to the world cannot be taken for granted and it may need to be reasserted for the sake of the common good.

⁴ For these quotes see, respectively, Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (2nd ed.; London: Jonathan Cape, 1990), 7; ___, *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 172.

More recently the principles of grace and forgiveness have had an influence on international relationships, particularly in conjunction with the idea of the Jubilee as expressed in Leviticus 25. Christian groups, such as the three hundred evangelical Christian relief, development and justice agencies associated with the Micah Network have used the Jubilee principle to work in the global political world for fair and just conditions and the remission of unjust debt between nations. And this has borne some fruit as some debt has been remitted.

It would also be possible to go on and discuss the way that other biblical principles might affect the community. Biblical virtues or “the *fruit* of the Spirit” – so often treated purely individualistically - can be related to the present focus on the development of corporate “core values” for organisations and businesses. And if Christians are prepared to explore biblical concepts in terms of their value for the wider community as well for the inner life of the church then the biblical principles associated with the gifts of the Spirit will also be seen to have relevance for leadership in the wider community. In short, public theology is theologically integrative – relating disciplines (theology with sociology, politics, cultural analysis etc) and theory with practice. It deals with politics, workplace relations and cultural analysis and it assesses the foundations on which society is built and creates a theology of engagement in the public arena.

The growing importance of public theology is emphasized by the formation of the *Global Network for Public Theology* involving Princeton’s Abraham Kuyper Center for Public Theology, Edinburgh University’s Centre for Theology and Public Issues, the Manchester Research Institute Centre for Public Theology (Manchester University UK), Stellenbosch University (South Africa) and its Centre for Public Theology, Charles Sturt University (Australia) and the Centre for Public and Contextual Theology and the creation of a number of new journals, especially *The International Journal of Public Theology* (Brill) and the UK based *Evangelical Review of Society and Politics*. In Australia it is sufficient to note the work of the Public Theology department of the Australian Evangelical Alliance, the Tinsley Institute at Morling College, the Centre for Public Christianity and the Sophia Think Tank of the Bible Society. All of these are dealing with an issue which is as old as the church, but every age has to do the work of relating biblical principles to the current social and cultural context. The focus on “public theology” is the present response but learning from the past experiences of the

church is essential. Much of the most influential work being done at the moment comes from a broadly Reformed perspective, utilising for example, the fine work done by Abraham Kuyper. Without wanting to diminish the very positive work done there, when it is seen from a Wesleyan perspective, it is clear that there are some dimensions of current thinking which could well be developed. Despite obvious variations Christians from different traditions generally share in pretty much the same general understanding of the fundamental principles of grace, baptism, forgiveness, the image of God and so forth, and so they also share in recognizing their implications. At times, however, the differences are instructive. I would like to suggest that Wesleyan theology has considerable resources and a distinct contribution to make in this area. It is possible to draw a direct and positive theological line of connection between the “Practical Divinity” of John and Charles Wesley and the needs of public theology today. A Wesleyan contribution to public theology will include developing the implications of the following five themes.

A Wesleyan mode of theologising is essentially public

Firstly, Methodism was clearly meant to be a very public living, active movement rather than a set of ideas. This did not mean that it did not have ideas, only that they were necessarily expressed in practice. Those who understand theology to be primarily intellectual have sometimes looked down on Wesleyanism because John never wrote anything to compare, for instance, with Calvin's *Institutes*. Methodism took its deepest inspiration from John's sermons and Charles' hymns. These were Methodism's doctrinal standards along with “notes” on the New Testament, journals and tracts. But it is no weakness or theological shortcoming to have theological documents which are public, read and sung by the whole community! It is, in fact, a signal failure of theological and biblical thinking when it is possible to imply that the best form of theology is found in a systematic theology which is not applied to life. Wesleyan theology is more marked by being a “practical divinity” than by being a “systematic” or “philosophical” faith. It is this kind of public theologizing which can counter our contemporary private Christianity.

Wesleyan doctrine is understood as experiential

Closely related to this is the way that doctrine is understood as experiential. To reduce doctrine to a form of words is to misunderstand its nature. In *The Character of a Methodist* the answer to the question “Who is a Methodist?” is not given in terms of what Methodists believe, but in terms of the way they live: a Methodist is one who has “the love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost given to him” which means he “does good unto all men.” And these, John points out, are simply the common fundamental principles of Christianity. In this way Wesley’s theology is by no means merely antiquarian, it is appropriate for today – practical, participatory, broad and engaging. The experiential nature of theology is seen in the way that Wesley deals with the doctrine of the Trinity – a doctrine often reckoned to be an abstract or philosophical construction with an unusual perspective on mathematics which makes three equal to one! This common perception is not helped by the use of philosophical terms such as those in use in the fourth century such as “persons,” “hypostases,” “ousias,” and “essences.” Understanding these is helpful and very necessary but there is no doubt that that they are initially off-putting to many people and culturally foreign, and the comprehensibility of the doctrine has suffered as a result. The problem is compounded if it is assumed that the doctrine of the Trinity can only be comprehended by understanding the right meaning of ousia, essence and person. Wesley was, of course, thoroughly Trinitarian, but what was fundamental was not the form of words – even the term ‘Trinity’ was not essential - it was the *experience* of God as Trinity that mattered. “I dare not insist upon any one’s using the word Trinity, or Person... But I know not how any one can be a Christian believer... till God the Holy Ghost witnesses that God the Father has accepted him through the merits of God the Son: And, having this witness, he honours the Son, and the blessed Spirit, even as he honours the Father.”⁵ If we think that the doctrine of Trinity – or any part of doctrine - is entirely something of the mind and try to work it out along purely rational lines than we are altogether mistaken. Theology must be active for it to live.

Wesleyanism stresses a conjunctive approach which enhances public theology

⁵ John Wesley, *On The Trinity*, Sermon 55 see <http://new.gbmg-umc.org/umhistory/wesley/sermons/55/>

This kind of reflection on theology as something to be lived out is well expressed by Paul Chilcote who also points to the way that Wesleyan theology joins things together, rather than polarizing them.

For the Wesleys, theology was never meant to be either boring or irrelevant. The ultimate purpose of theology is transformation. And central to this understanding was their view that everyone is called to be a theologian...another aspect of Wesleyan theology made it particularly potent. Instead of setting aspects of the Christian faith over against each other (for example, forcing a choice between personal salvation and social action), the Wesley's tended to see matters of faith from a both/and point of view. Personal salvation, they would argue, must be held together with social action in Christian discipleship. Life in Christ, in other words, must be both personal and social. This synthetic or conjunctive approach is one of the most relevant aspects of Wesleyan theology for the contemporary church.⁶

This, incidentally, is noted by James Fowler as a prime example of a mature, "fifth stage" or "conjunctive faith" where faith and freedom, justification and justice, faith and works, evangelism and social action, private and public are all held together.⁷

The Wesleyan concept of prevenient grace provides a unique foundation for engagement with the world.

The fourth point is possibly the most important for the application of theological principles to the wider community. Prevenient grace provides the foundation for the relationship between the Christian community and the world. It means that God is at work in all parts of the world and it means that God has enabled all people to receive the offer of salvation. God has not limited his love or excluded any from the possibility of receiving grace. This grace provides a universally shared foundation and thus establishes the possibility of interaction between faith and the world. This is because there is a clear statement that God has gone before us into the world and that he is seeking there to redeem the whole world. Through prevenient grace the kingdom as a transforming presence reaches out into society, allowing for real transformation and change.

⁶ Paul Chilcote, *Recapturing the Wesley's Vision: An Introduction to the Faith of John and Charles Wesley* (Grand Rapids: InterVarsity Press), 15-16.

⁷ James Fowler, *Weaving the New Creation: Stages of Faith and the Public Church* (San Francisco: HarperCollins), 14.

What is of critical importance at this point is that this notion of prevenient grace is significantly different to the concept of common grace used in other traditions. Common grace also speaks of God's grace at work in the world but limits its effect by excluding from it all aspects of the person of Christ and the grace of salvation. It is precisely this approach which has created problems in the past separating, for example, evangelism and social action. It also engenders a greater limitation on the possible outcomes of Christian ministry in the wider world. Prevenient grace, however, is an aspect of salvation rather than simply of creation. It is Christologically orientated, grounded in Christ and the Spirit, and can therefore have a greater degree of optimism concerning the possibility of change. The Wesleyan notion of sanctification as faith working through love creates a view of holiness which is indivisibly personal and social and containing potential for elaboration in a public context.

Wesleyan theology encourages social holiness

Historically speaking, Wesley and his followers refused to participate in the theological silence concerning the social injustices and brutalities of the Industrial Revolution. Many Christians actually had an economic stake in the establishment of the day. There was a marked contrast in the way that the early Methodist appeal was precisely to miners, workers and their families. The social dimension of sin was recognised. But so too was the social dimension of holiness. In the introduction to the first volume of the Methodist Hymn book Wesley affirmed that "the gospel of Christ knows of no religion but social, no holiness but social holiness. Faith working by love is the length and breadth and height of Christian perfection." Note that this was in the introduction to hymns which are, by their nature, best sung – and lived – corporately. The transformation of the person was an essential dimension of social transformation. Holiness is not something that relates to the individual in isolation but to the person in community. The Wesleyan notion of sanctification as "faith working through love" created a view of holiness which is indivisibly personal and social, and this has continuing potential for further elaboration in our world. The concept of Christian perfection is a well-known Wesleyan distinctive. It is one of the strengths of Wesleyan theology and could well contribute positively towards a better understanding of the church's relationship with society.

Conclusion

These five points merely provide a summary indication of some aspects of Wesleyan theology which have the potential to contribute positively towards a better understanding of the church's relationship with society. Wesleyan observations on free-will, the role of evangelism and other specific areas of life such as economics and globalisation also have great potential for making an on-going contribution to contemporary public theology.