

Session 3, Essay 2

A POSTURE OF PUBLIC FAITH

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At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Christian church finds itself established in postures of public engagement that are crippling its ability to live faithfully in society. While new life in Christ is intended to be personally transforming and socially revitalizing, the church in our time struggles to equip its members for either a life completely reoriented by the gospel or a life of robust social engagement.

Contemporary culture presents significant challenges for both the institutional church and individual believers. While secularism challenges belief in God, pluralism (the existence of multiple cultures and faiths in one society) calls into question all exclusive faith claims. In addition, Christians who endeavor to live within the increasingly divergent moral code of their faith are at odds with the dominant culture.

These challenges create an uncomfortable reality for modern Christians, consistently bringing their faith into conflict with social norms. In an attempt to deal with this discomfort, some churches and individuals have tended to assimilate with the broader

culture and have lost all Christian distinction from society. Others have taken on a posture of domination by forcefully trying to recapture the lost prominence of Christian ideals within society. Still others withdraw from culture completely.

These postures of public engagement—seeking relevance, dominance, or isolation—have exacerbated rather than solved the challenges of social engagement. The purpose of this essay is to present a posture of public faith that will begin to restore the credibility of the church in the public eye, while maintaining Christian orthodoxy. In addition, an adequate posture of public engagement will build and sustain the plausibility of faith and address the unique cultural challenges of our time. Such a posture becomes the framework for the public mission of the church, enabling it to live skillfully and wisely *in* the world without being *of* the world.

Defining Our Terms

Public faith refers to the posture an individual

or church takes toward the wider world and it is lived out in public space. This posture has observable convictions, expressed through attitudes and behaviors that are experienced by those outside the community of faith. A church's public posture is, in part, determined by how it views its mission and purpose in the world. This then affects how the church engages society, proclaims the good news, and serves the needs of its neighbors.

Public space refers to those places where human responsibility for the common good is enacted. People of all faiths and ideologies are equally responsible for stewarding the common good and should be equally present in this public space. For Christians living in pluralistic societies, the implications of this are huge. It means that we share responsibility for the common good with people from other faiths and of no faith at all.

It requires wisdom to graciously share space with others without losing Christian distinction—a skill the Western church is struggling to recover. James Hunter, sociologist, researcher and author of *To Change the World*, refers to this process as “maintaining the tension between affirmation and antithesis.”⁴ On one hand, we are partners with those outside the faith on behalf of the common good to provide things like good governance, justice, and education. There will be many instances when the Christian can and should affirm the direction this partnership takes.

On the other hand, when we cannot affirm, and cannot change the practices we encounter we are to visibly live out countercultural alternatives, often antithetical alternatives, to things like sex, power, money, and marriage. Unless the church maintains this tension of affirmation and antithesis, it will tend to withdraw, try to dominate, or assimilate the dominant culture, further inhibiting the church in its mission.

Modern Christians (and churches) have generally responded to commonly-shared

social responsibility in one of the three ways mentioned above. Some have abdicated responsibility, pulling out of public space and retreating into the life of the church. Others have sought to dominate public space, insisting that it be informed by Christian values alone, creating hostility with the broader society. Still others have so assimilated to the culture that they inhabit public space with little to no Christian distinction. All of these reactions are theologically flawed and have promoted the erosion of Christian credibility in social engagement. This helps explain the church's increasing marginalization, its general ineffectiveness in social engagement, and the growing incomprehension of the gospel message.

The Mission and Calling of the Church

Faulty postures of public faith rest on skewed visions of the mission of the church. For the last century, the social mission of the church has been defined by the desire to make the world conform to Christian ideals, either through conversion or through social action. The result is that the church's engagement in public space has tended to be either coercive or sympathetic in nature. It has either maintained distinction from culture while trying to bend public behavior to its religious ideals, or sought to be inoffensive and relevant to the needs of society and lost its Christian distinction.

What if, however, the social mission of the church is not primarily defined by changing society but by being present in and available to society? As representatives of Christ, the church is to be the tangible and visible expression of the Kingdom of God.

In *The Church in Our Times*, Greg Thompson explains the mission and calling of the church: “Rather than a call to change the world, the vision of the church's calling is a movement into the fullness of culture, bearing the fullness of the gospel, and yet doing so for

the purposes of redemption (John 1).”⁵

When the church moves into “the fullness of culture,” it takes seriously the admonitions to go into “all the world,” not neglecting any social sphere *or* geographic location. When it “bears the fullness of the gospel,” it takes seriously the biblical mandate to both preach the gospel and love one’s neighbor. And when it does so for “the purposes of redemption,” it acknowledges that God is renewing “all things,” including people and their relationships with God, with others, and with the created order.

Such a call is adequate to describe the church sent, living, and fully present *in* the world but not being *of* the world. It demands both personal and institutional holiness. This vision of the church’s calling is theologically robust enough to engender a new posture of social engagement, one that will be sufficient to meet the demands on the church of the twenty-first century. James Hunter refers to this posture of public faith as “faithful presence.”⁶

A Theology of Faithful Presence

Faithful presence as a posture of public faith is rooted in the kingdom story and modeled on God’s faithful presence to His people. For insight into Jesus’ posture in the world and our intended posture, consider His prayer in John 17.

The Father sent Jesus into the world to glorify or reveal God to the world and Jesus sends His followers into the world in a similar manner for a similar purpose: “As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world” (John 17:18).

First, Jesus’ intent for His followers is that they are present in the world while being interconnected to God and to one another. As the Father and Son are one, eternally present and available to one another, so Christ’s disciples are united to God and to one another in a love that is present and available: Jesus prays that as “I [am] in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may

know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me” (John 17:23).

Public connection with Jesus’ body, the church, is not optional for the Christian who seeks to love and obey Christ. Identifying with the church is integral to the mission Jesus has sent His body into the world to accomplish; we become His message board to the world.

Second, it is God’s presence enacted through our presence to one another that builds and sustains faith: “I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:20, 21). This must become foundational if the church is to rebuild plausibility for the Christian faith.

John 17 goes on to reveal the nature of God’s presence: it is always at God’s initiative, it actively pursues, and is made possible through the sacrificial love of God. The incarnate Christ came into the world, revealing the Father’s love: “I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them” (John 17:26). God’s life-giving presence flows from His love!

Though John 17 provides a framework for faithful presence, God’s presence is a theme that runs throughout scripture. The incarnation of Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit are particularly helpful in understanding God’s real and immediate presence to His people. Each chapter of the biblical narrative--*Creation, Fall, Redemption, Consummation*--provides insight into God’s faithful presence, which can provide insight into a robust posture of public faith.

Faithful Presence: A Posture of Public Faith Shaped by the Kingdom Story

John 17 explains how Christ sends His church into the world, all four chapters of the biblical narrative inform and shape how the church

engages in society.

Creation. Society and culture are creational structures—part of God’s good creation. God loves the world, the whole created order, and He has not abandoned it because of sin. The Creation chapter of the story calls the Christian to affirm what is good in the world. Therefore the church’s posture in society should be world-affirming.

Fall. Culture with its social arrangements is a fallen structure and will never fully reflect the kingdom of God until the new creation. Therefore, the church’s posture in society is patient and yet uncompromising. The church can offer countercultural alternatives to things like sex, power, money, gender, and race when needed. However it should approach social change realistically, knowing that there are limits to what it can accomplish.

Redemption. God is currently renewing “all things,” including culture. As He works, God provides His common grace for the common good.

Because Christ is at work in the world, sin and darkness have not and *will* not overcome the church (John 1). This means that the church is secure from threat and that those outside the faith are not the enemy.

Although the world is no longer ordered by the original goodness of creation, neither is it completely shaped by the totality of the fall. The Redemption chapter of the biblical narrative mitigates the fall and gives hope for creation. Because of redemption, public faith can be hopeful and non-combative and yet uncompromising. The church can live in the midst of the chaos of the world as a tangible and visible expression of God’s kingdom, never condoning sin but also unthreatened by it. As Christ’s representative in the world, the church can engage culture in a way that moves toward redemptive solutions within society.

Consummation. The world, with all its created structures, will one day be made new. This final hope resides in Jesus Christ alone and sustains the church, allowing it to be present and available in society on behalf of Christ. Hope is the antidote for both a coercive and a compromised public posture.

Faithful Presence In Action

Because God’s presence is active, any true expression of public faith must move beyond attitudes to behavior. Public faith is expressed in these three areas⁷:

In relationships. To adopt a posture of faithful presence means we must adopt Jesus’ posture in and toward the world, allowing the incarnate life of Christ to shape the character of our relationships. We must learn to emulate Jesus in our actions and attitudes toward the people in our lives.

First John says that we are to love like Jesus loved in the world: “God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him. In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him” (1 John 4:16-5:1). This includes loving those who are different from us: both our neighbors (Luke 10:30-37, The Good Samaritan; Matthew 22:39, The Great Commandment) and our enemies (Matthew 5: 43-48). It means allowing Christ to break down the dividing wall that separates us from Christians of other races, ethnicities, social classes, and genders (Ephesians 2:14-22, Galatians 3:27). And it means being hospitable to strangers (Hebrews 13:2) and loving one another (John 13:34, 35).

Faithful presence in relationships includes more than just personal relationships with friends, family, and church acquaintances. These are foundational to our public faith, but they are not public in and of themselves. Our public relationships include those people with whom we share responsibility for the common good

and those whom we hope to serve by exercising that responsibility. Public relationships also include those people we encounter in corporate or institutional settings (e.g., employers, employees, customers, and others who share the same space in business and industry).

In tasks. Likewise, to adopt a posture of faithful presence means that we must adopt Jesus' posture in our tasks, allowing the incarnate life of Christ to shape all we do. This includes employing the highest moral standards of integrity and living consistently with what we say we believe. And it involves approaching our tasks with humility and handling power in a manner consistent with the servant leadership of Christ, considering others as more important than ourselves.

Faithful presence takes seriously the command to care for and develop the created order, which requires thoughtful and creative engagement in the workplace. Though it looks different for an accountant than it does an artist, creativity and innovation flow from the image of God and are part of what it means to faithfully reflect God in the world.

We are faithfully present in the world when we emulate Jesus in our actions and attitudes at work and in leisure. This includes our vocational work, family labor, and community volunteerism, as well as sports, hobbies, and other forms of entertainment. Faithful presence requires that we imitate Christ in our shared responsibility for the common good, believing that God's common grace is active in the world.

In Spheres of Influence. A posture of faithful presence also means that we allow the incarnate life of Christ to shape how we exist within our spheres of influence. Influence is equivalent to social power. Although the scope and degree of influence differs from person to person, everyone has some degree of influence.

Influence and status (the accumulation of social accomplishments), are often considered the antithesis of Christian love and humility.

A posture of faithful presence recognizes the pitfalls of social power and yet challenges the idea that the church should shun influence and status completely. If the church is to be faithful to its call to go into "all the world" without neglecting any social sphere, then social influence cannot be avoided. Having influence is not a sin. It's the mismanagement of influence that is the problem. The Christian, who lives in God's presence, is called to order her influence according to the love of Christ for the common good.

The tension between the opportunity and the pitfalls of status and influence are captured in the book of Philippians. Both Jesus and Paul modeled an attitude of indifference toward status. Jesus did not consider "equality with God a thing to be grasped but humbled himself..." (Phil. 2:6-8) and Paul counted his vast accomplishments as "rubbish" (Phil. 3:7-8). And this seems right to the Christian who knows he is called to look out for the interests of others, considering them as more important (Phil. 2:3-4).

Neither Jesus nor Paul allowed status to define them or others, but they were not ignorant of it either. In the biblical narrative status is employed for the purposes of redemption. Paul is a great example (see his accomplishments in Phil. 3:5-6). He was a Jew of the highest lineage, a Roman citizen, highly educated, and a Pharisee among other things. These accomplishments gave Paul knowledge, reputation, and position that were used to promote *shalom* and build the church.

Faithful presence ultimately reframes how the church and its people seek to influence society. Christ, as servant leader, becomes the role model for faith in the public square. It is enacted in word, deed, and attitude; in our relationships; through our tasks; and in our spheres of influence. New life in Christ and the continual transforming presence of the Holy Spirit are essential for the Christian who desires to be present and available in the world as a

representative of God's kingdom.

Conclusion

The mission and purpose of the church in the world is not to change the world but to pursue it as God pursued the church and to be present in the world as God is present to His people. The objective is not to force the world into submission to the ways of God but to uncompromisingly represent Christ and sacrificially love the world.

A posture of faithful presence is a framework for public faith grounded in the kingdom story. Such a posture requires the authenticity found in a life completely reoriented by the gospel of Jesus Christ. Faithful presence also requires those who are called into God's presence to be sent back into the world for robust social engagement.

Faithful presence underscores the church's commitment to society and is foundational to the Christian values of justice, mercy, and creation care. Whenever possible the church and its members should address injustice, working with Christian distinction that promotes the common good.

A posture of faithful presence is also foundational to both loving one's neighbor and the verbal proclamation of the gospel. Such a posture requires that proclamation remain integral to bearing witness to Christ but recognizes that bearing witness to Christ is more than just proclamation.

Although competing postures of public faith will continue to exist, a clear way forward is available for those who desire to live wisely in the pluralistic societies of the twenty-first century. A public posture of faithful presence, rooted in the biblical narrative of the kingdom story, will slowly begin to address both the lost credibility of the church and the eroding plausibility of faith.

4. James Hunter, *To Change the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 231.

5. Greg Thompson, "The Church in Our Time: Nurturing Congregations of Faithful Presence," New City Commons Foundation, October 2011, <http://newcity-commonsfoundation.com/perspective/church-our-time>

6. James Hunter, *To Change the World*, 237.

7. James Hunter, *To Change the World*, 243-248.