



THE GOSPEL AS PUBLIC TRUTH

by

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The term ‘public theology’ is increasingly being used to make the point that biblical and theological principles have relevance outside the four walls of the church. Christian ministry to the world in which we live is more than ethics and evangelism. ‘Public theology’ covers social and cultural analysis, workplace ministry, political involvement and social ethics. It deals with the public relevance of Christian doctrine and aims at overcoming the privatized and domesticated view of faith which has long restricted Christian influence. A privatized view of faith has suited both secularists and many Christians who have accommodated to this demarcation of life’s issues and focused on personal and family issues while leaving broader issues of public life alone.

But the past few years has seen a significant change in attitude, evidenced in the politicization of evangelical groups previously committed to being (at least nominally) a-political. Theologically, this fits well with the claim of theologian and ethicist Oliver O’Donovan in *Desire of the Nations* that ‘theology must be political if it is to be evangelical.’ Neither ‘evangelical’ nor ‘political’ is meant in a narrow way. By ‘evangelical’ he is referring to a way of thinking biblically and theologically and by ‘political’ he means the whole of our shared, corporate, social life together. It is a reminder that the gospel relates to all of life and that Christ is Lord of all. If theology it is not ‘public’ then it can be ‘a good secret’ but it cannot really be ‘good news’ for the poor, release for the captives, sight for the blind or freedom for the oppressed (Luke 4:18).

This new found freedom for involvement in the public sphere has brought a degree of political power to Christians and churches. This is attractive to many but it also constitutes a great danger as wielding political power as a means of social change can be inimical to the way that the gospel works. Jacques Ellul warned of Christians being drawn inappropriately into the political sphere ‘like iron filings to a magnet’¹ because of an unconscious mentality that public social action and political involvement by the church is the only real activity which will prevent the church becoming impotent.

One evidence of this sort of political seduction is the identification of ‘the Christian position’ with a specific place on the political spectrum. At different times Christian principles have been seen to be equated with both leftist, radical Christian socialism and rightist, conservative Christian nationalism. Individuals and, at times, Christian organizations or churches may align themselves with particular stances in order to achieve goals which are congruent with the gospel, but being authentically evangelical does not mean having a particular position on a left-right political spectrum. That sort of approach limits one’s understanding of the work of God and, at the same

¹ Jacques Ellul, *The New Demons* (NY: Seabury Press, 1975) 199

time, is insufficiently radical in that the gospel must be seen as critiquing the most basic presuppositions on which our society operates.

Another indication of political seduction is the belief that it is appropriate that Christians control society. This sort of control existed in a medieval Christian imperialism and there are trends today towards various forms of Christian nationalism in which Christian principles are associated with a particular vision of a nation under Christian control. But as missiologist Rene Padilla has said, “There is no basis to believe that our duty as Christians is to install a State that will impose Christian morality.”² In an even stronger fashion O’Donovan reminds us that it is precisely the Antichrist who claims to ‘unite earthly political rule and heavenly soteriological mediation’.

A genuinely evangelical public theology is one that maintains the supreme importance of ‘the evangel’, the gospel, the good news, for individuals and society. This not the same as the supremacy of the church or of Christian organizations. It is all about the supremacy of the gospel in the life of the church and in the church’s public proclamation – in word and deed – of the good news of Jesus Christ.

² Rene Padilla, *Transforming Church and Mission* (2004 Forum for World Evangelization, Thailand, September 2004).
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