#### Beautiful Orthodoxy:

#### Public Theology for Perilous Times

by

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# “The Long and Winding Road” to Beautiful Orthodoxy

*Does not wisdom call? Does not understanding raise her voice?*

*On the heights beside the way; at the crossroads she takes her stand. Prov. 8:1-2*

The vision of a robust, Trinitarian public theology is captivating, but questions immediately arise. How to structure a public-theological approach that steers clear of moral denunciations, political shoals, and the not-so-hidden cultural agendas that seem to attend this sort of work? An approach that skirts and refines one’s own internal biases? An approach that isn’t just lofty theological musings, but that can fend for itself in the rough and tumble of public life? A theology that actually works.

Tempting as it may be, we cannot, like the modern two-kingdom proponents, simply copy the laws of ancient Israel, as there are distinct differences between the theocracy God set up with his people and the workings of a democratic republic based on the Spirit-led and hard-won principle of freedom of conscience. Neither should we seek to model public theology on an era in church history, although there are good insights to glean along the way. It simply isn’t possible (nor desirable) to replicate Calvin’s nosy city councils or the Puritan’s terror-inducing “practical divinity.” Nor should a system of public theology be specially tuned to our own national debates, given that a truly Christian public theology must be suitable for dealing with sin-shaped systems in all tribes and nations across time.

The dearth of possible starting points brings us back, empty pockets, to the beginning. To God. To the Triune God, the *fons*, or spring of all life that behind which we cannot go, in whom, quoting Sutanto and Brock earlier, all things relate absolutely. As John Webster states, “the Holy Trinity is the ontological principle (*principium essendi*) of Christian theology; its external or objective cognitive principle (*principium cognoscendi externum*) is the Word of God presented through the embassy of the prophets and apostles; its internal or subjective cognitive principle (*principium cognoscendi internum*) is the redeemed intelligence of the saints.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Webster goes on to say that theology is an “intellectual activity in which the order of being precedes and is actively present with the order of knowing.”[[2]](#footnote-2) The fact that I can even attempt to write such a book is because God knows himself archetypally and has accommodated himself to my finite mind by depositing drops of ectypal knowledge, through nature and scripture. But this honey is more than enough.

## A Roadmap

Using this “redeemed intelligence” then, we dare proceed to the question. We need to know the contour and character of this God to know how to represent him faithfully to his world as his ambassadors, “making his appeal through us” (2 Cor. 5:20). Before purporting to speak in his name, we must know who is God, as both incomprehensible and accommodating, and what are his desires, norms and plans for redeeming creation. In chapter 4, we address that question by considering the “publicness” of God and his revelation in scripture. The unity and diversity of the Trinity is the ultimate basis for the *imago dei* in both an individual and corporate sense. We learn that God isn’t just about us, but all of us. Because it is about (all) of him.

Using Webster’s definition of theology as “reason following God’s perfect knowledge of himself and of all things,”[[3]](#footnote-3) *Beautiful Orthodoxy* seeks to do just that, to follow the long and winding road of God’s knowledge of himself into the world he has made and even yet dearly loves. Along the way, we enlist Dutch Reformers Kuyper and Bavinck to guide this quest, and their 21st century intellectual heirs to contextualize it. These reformers were guided by the “core Reformed conviction: God alone, not the king, was sovereign over the public order, and the Holy Scriptures were a trustworthy guide for its renewal and reformation.”[[4]](#footnote-4) This conviction is foundational to bringing public theology from a sequestered spiritual kingdom into the mainstream of life.

God’s way of working in the world is what theologians call redemptive history. Drawing from biblical accounts of God’s dealings with his covenant people, chapter 5 considers questions about the degree of covenantal continuity and discontinuity in seeking to situate public theology in the era of common grace where it can enliven all spheres. Public theology’s emphasis on both public critique and persuasion is emblematic of the call of Jeremiah, whom God commanded to “go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem” (Jer. 2:2). To “stand up and say” with integrity, humility and respect requires a commitment to deepen one’s knowledge of God’s Word and a conviction that God’s moral law continues to be operative, not just for the individual soul, but for all of society. To that end, Kaemingk welcomes the “Christocentric framing of the field” by a South African theologian, who argues that public theology “reflects upon the implication of the confession of the Lordship of Christ for life and for life together in all public spheres, from the most intimate to the most social, global and cosmic.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

If Scripture is the *norming norm*, then the long-standing creeds and confessions are the *normed norms*. Building on the unity-diversity we find in the Trinity, and Christ as the word, who is content to grow his church in a weedy grainfield, chapters 6 and 7 follow with a noteworthy human response: the 1647 Westminster Confession and the voluminous treatment of the Ten Commandments in the Larger Catechism. Throughout these remarkable documents, we see the Divines wrestling like Jacob to instantiate ectypal knowledge of God into a confession that God’s people can learn, remember, and put in *their* pockets. The result is a normed norm that has proven applicable to both the individual and the church in society whatever the age.

Chapter 8 sketches the contour of a Christian poetic for bringing these theological insights artfully into the public square. This is a tall order in a society that, in Kantian fashion, has relegated Christian faith to the private confines of the human heart. Yet “all creation is groaning,” says St. Paul. (Romans 8:22). Matters such as identity, beauty, meaning and longing all beg for the Savior’s embrace, as do issues of justice, equality, and violence. The groans of rising seas and intensifying storms also have theological standing.

Compared to earlier rationalistic gospel presentations, the existential space of the groaning creation appears to offer a relatively open door. This is particularly true in a time of political polarization, when science and “facts” are suspect, and the moral authority of the church is at a nadir. A richer Christology, such as Christ the hospitable slave/naked King envisioned by Kaemingk, tempers the normative aspects of public theology (Christ the King of law and order). An existential focus brings the groaning culture within Christ’s loving embrace at the Cross where His abiding presence may succor the downtrodden.

Chapter 9 concludes with some specific applications of these theological principles to public life. Channeling Kuyper’s “every square inch,” Kaemingk argues that the redemptive benefits of the Atonement are “juridical, mystical, ethical, moral, economic, physical. In a word, the whole enterprise of recreation, the complete restoration of the world and humanity is the fruit of Christ’s work.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Richard Mouw cheerfully adds that “grace is everywhere.”[[7]](#footnote-7) But it is also deeply embedded in human history. To do this work well requires a faithful inquiry into both the legacy and present-day workings of a variety of human systems, including markets, governments and the varied institutions of civil society. Rather than keep painful injustices entombed in history, public theology takes courage to open the sealed vaults, allowing both lament and truth to enter the public square, while humbly offering redemption’s cure. “Justice is turned back, and righteousness stands far away; for truth has stumbled in the public squares, and uprightness cannot enter” (Isaiah 59:14).

## Conclusion

To come alongside Christ in his culture-redeeming work, public theologians must be able to “see” into sin-shaped human systems, discern their theological misalignment, and offer approaches for reform. Such work depends entirely on the gracious illumination of the Holy Spirit, and is thus spiritual work, even as it is prosaic. In his insightful case study on developing a Christian response to the issue of Muslim immigration, Kaemingk argues that “Christians need to 1) seriously wrestle with the problem; 2) develop an alternative model to follow; and 3) develop robust theological arguments against hegemony, uniformity and assimilation.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Nothing fancy, just hard and ultimately deeply satisfying work.

In the end, we find ourselves back at the beginning: the Holy Spirit is the one hovering over the dark waters of human chaos and, perchance, quickening public life with his deep wisdom and grace. Because the Trinity is the beginning and end of all things, a public theology that embraces beautiful orthodoxy offers hope for fractured and perilous times.

1. The Public Nature of Scripture and Theology

“The unity of God is written in the blueprint of the foundations; the unity of the world is merely painted on the walls.” Abraham Kuyper, *The Curse of Uniformity*, 1869

In 1869, Dutch theologian turned politician (and later prime minister), Abraham Kuyper touched on the ephemeral human longing for unity in a speech entitled, “Uniformity: the curse of Modern Life.” In contrast to our day, where some believe unity is threatened by the cult of the individual, a militant diversity, and the weakening of unifying national ideals, late 18th century Europe faced a different threat – the “iron train” of “the all-compelling, all regulating, and all-leveling power of society.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Although unity is the goal God has in mind for humanity, Kuyper went on to say, uniformity is a dangerous facsimile, an “iron fence made up of identical stiles.” In contrast, God’s unity is like the “mingling colors… [of a] wild forest.” It “develops by internal strength precisely from the diversity of nations and races; but sin, by a reckless leveling and the elimination of all diversity, seeks a false, deceptive unity, the uniformity of death.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Ominously hanging over Kuyper’s speech was the 1870 Franco-Prussian war and the long march toward German unification.

Human longing for a unity that encompasses diversity is baked into creation because God himself is unity-in-diversity. Drawing on the insights of another 19th century Dutch theologian, Herman Bavinck, this chapter seeks to establish the grounds for public theology in the public nature of Scripture and theology. Specifically, it finds support for human unity-in-diversity in the theological doctrines of God’s simplicity and trinity. First, it considers the paradox between God’s oneness, or aseity, and the perceived diversity of his perfections. Second, it considers how the trinitarian works of God, both *ad intra* and *ad extra*, display a similar unity-in-diversity motif that carries into creation. As a result, human beings image God as unique and diverse persons, but also in solidarity with others. Using Bavinck’s motif of *organism*, this rich understanding of *imago dei* offers the “third way” between alienating autonomism and stifling uniformity. A key application of this fuller appreciation is the elevation of a common human dignity and elimination of racial constructs.

## God’s Essential Unity

God’s oneness is derived from the special name God revealed to Moses at Sinai: Jehovah, or “I am that I am” (Exodus 3:14). From Augustine to Aquinas, and from Voetius to Turretin, theologians have long pondered the enormous concept of God’s aseity, that is, his complete independence and absoluteness. For Bavinck, God is “an immeasurable and unbounded ocean of being; the absolute being who alone has being in himself.” God is also simple; there is no composition in him. “God is recognized and confirmed as God in all his perfections.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

Yet if God is one, why does Scripture make distinctions between different divine attributes, such as justice and mercy, or power and wisdom? The answer is found in God’s accommodation to finite human understanding. Anything humans can know about God comes from his voluntary self-revelation. Because of the vast “creator/creature” divide, God’s names do not “reveal his being as such but rather his accommodation to human language.[[12]](#footnote-12)” Human knowledge of God is thus ectypal, that is, a limited “subset” of God’s archetypal knowledge of himself. Nevertheless, creaturely knowledge of its creator is “at the same time, true, pure and sufficient.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

In a further act of accommodation, God’s revelation is anthropomorphic through and through, bearing witness to “God’s coming to, and searching for, humanity.”[[14]](#footnote-14) God is depicted in terms of “human faculties, body parts, sensations, affections.”[[15]](#footnote-15) He is said to have a soul, and every human emotion is “present in God,” from love “in all its variations” to hatred, wrath and vengeance. But these descriptions are not our own; rather, God himself has put “these splendid words into our mouths.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

The “old distinction” between “reasoning reason” and “reasoned reason” sheds light on the distinctions humans make when thinking about God. As Turretin explains, “The divine attributes may be regarded either absolutely and subjectively in themselves (and on the part of God) or relatively as to their effects toward creatures (or on the part of the object).”[[17]](#footnote-17) By virtue of reasoning reason, humans use their intellect to distinguish between God’s absolute attributes of goodness and wisdom when in fact there is no real distinction between these attributes in God because they pertain to his ontological character. However, in the case of “reasoned reason,” humans do not reason their way to the distinctions, rather they experience God’s relative attributes passively. There is a real, objective distinction between wrath and grace, for example, because they refer to the triune persons and their economic (not ontological) character. Using Voetius’ sun metaphor, the sun can be experienced as either heating or drying, yet neither fully captures the “whole concept” of sunlight.[[18]](#footnote-18) As Bavinck would later say, “God is what he possesses.”[[19]](#footnote-19)

Separating God’s attributes from his being – or pitting one divine attribute against the other – is thus non-sensical, offensive to God and therefore dangerous. By focusing primarily on God’s attributes, without the foregrounding of divine simplicity, humans run the double risk of 1) reducing God to a singular attribute, such as love or justice, or 2) redefining God’s attributes by way of univocal reasoning – that is, we assume there is a one-to-one correlation between human conceptions of love and justice and the divine attributes revealed in Scripture.

Many debates within the western church today trip on these fault lines: accusations of woke/non-woke invariably center on the perceived tension between justice and mercy, as if these divine virtues need to vie for supremacy. How did it come to this? Rather than enrapture the culture with God’s essential unity, the church, in its insecurity, sadly apes the dichotomization that has a stranglehold on society. This cracking of God in two has led to an embittered tribalism fueled by righteous moralism. From our different theological compartments, we accuse the other side of misrepresenting Jesus in some way, shape or form. As Watkin astutely observes: “The Christianity that our culture retains is a poor photocopy of the real thing: streaky, partial and distorted. Often, principles that harmonize beautifully in the Bible are wrenched apart and set up as absolutes on opposite sides of a debate by the “divorce artists” of contemporary politics and cultural theory, with the result that opposing sides in the debate both contain fragments of the biblical truth but fail to grasp the whole.”[[20]](#footnote-20)

A related problem is the collapse of the creator/creature distinction. Operating with “borrowed capital,” post-Christian societies have used the divine attributes to concoct their own synthetic moral definitions and standards, such as “love is love” or a graceless justice. Nothing new here. In taking afresh from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, humans manipulate the knowledge God has graciously revealed to them in nature and in the receding “moraine” of Christianity. They assert themselves as judge and jury – and put God “in the dock.”

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## Many-ness: God’s Triune Nature

In addition to the manifold perfections of God, which refract into his creation like rays from a single, unified source, God’s triune nature also exhibits wondrous diversity. The three persons of the Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – are “one in essence, and the same being…They all share in the same divine nature and perfections. It is one and the same divine nature that exists in each person individual and in all of them collectively.”[[21]](#footnote-21) Each person is the one God in all his fullness.”[[22]](#footnote-22)

And yet, they are distinct separate persons. As Bavinck notes, the Godhead is not an “abstract unity or concept, but a fullness of being, an infinite abundance of life, whose diversity, so far from diminishing unity, unfolds it to the fullest extent.”[[23]](#footnote-23) The philosophical problem of the “one and the many” is thus a false polemic, according to Christopher Watkin. “God is no more fundamental than diversity, and diversity in God is no more fundamental than unity.”[[24]](#footnote-24)

God’s fullness is understood in two categories of works. Taking place within the Godhead, *ad intra* works include God’s natural understanding and willing, and the eternal progressions, which are proper to the person: God the Father is the eternally unbegotten one who eternally begets the Son, and the Spirit is the eternal love between Father and Son, the eternal spiration from the Father and the Son. The *ad intra* works indicate that God was fecund and generative prior to creation. “My Father is working until now, and I am working” (John 5:17).

Terminating outside of God, the *ad extra* works include creation, providence and redemption. In each work, one person is being highlighted, such as the association of the Son with redemption and the Spirit with sanctification of believers. Nevertheless, because there is “no distinction in substance, all work is Triune work; the three persons enacting one divine power, ordered by one divine wisdom, expressing one divine goodness, and manifesting one divine glory.”[[25]](#footnote-25) Swain notes: “God’s external works exhibit a Trinitarian shape, proceeding from the Father, through the Son and in the spirit. God’s external works exhibit a Trinitarian stamp, whether more faint, as in the products of his creative work, or more pronounced as in the products of his redeeming and consummating works.”[[26]](#footnote-26)

## Creation

The *ad extra* creation of the heavens and earth is an ectypal expression of the Trinity’s work *ad intra*. “The self-communication that takes place within the diving being is archetypal for God’s work in creation.”[[27]](#footnote-27) The parallelism can be seen in the distinction in the “two-fold communication of God… one within and the other outside the divine being; one to the Son who was in the beginning with God and was himself God, and another to creatures who originated in time.”[[28]](#footnote-28) It follows that “just as God is one in essence and distinct in persons, so also the work of creation is one and undivided, while in its unity it is still rich in diversity.” According to the doctrine of divine ideas, the whole world, says Bavinck, “is thus the realization of an idea of God.”[[29]](#footnote-29)

To capture the divine idea of unity in diversity Bavinck employs the motif of an organism, “in which all the parts are connected to each other and influence each other reciprocally. “Heaven and earth, man and animal, soul and body, truth and life, art and science, religion and morality, state and church, family and society and son on, though they are all distinct, are not separated. There is a wide range of connections between them; an organic, or if you will, an ethical bond holds them all together.”[[30]](#footnote-30) As Sutanto notes, “this conceptual apparatus allows Bavinck to preserve a worldview that includes a unity that does not imply uniformity, and a diversity that resists separation or analytical dissection.”[[31]](#footnote-31)

**Image of God**

In capturing the richness of Genesis 1:26-28, Bavinck considers *imago dei* in three dimensions: what it means for the individual, for humanity writ broad, and for man’s purpose as it extends spatially and in time. He argues that the unity-in-diversity distinction of image of God is directly traceable to God’s “trinitarian character and his immanent relations. They are the absolute archetypes of all those processions by which human nature achieves its full development in the individual, in the family and in humanity as a whole.”[[32]](#footnote-32) Watkin makes a similar point, saying: “unity and diversity; one and many, singularity and plurality, uniqueness and community, share a peaceful coexistence in a trinitarian model of reality.”[[33]](#footnote-33)

**Individual**. To be made in God’s image and likeness (terms which Bavinck treats as a unified concept) means that the whole person is the image of the whole deity. In keeping with the motif of organism, humans enjoy a diversity of faculties: intellect, will and affections but yet there is a united personality that undergirds all of these faculties. In the same way, the human body has different members, but a distinct personality that drives it. Humans do not simply bear or have the image: they *are* the image.

**Humanity**. God didn’t just create “him” but “them.” In the first sense, this refers to the creation of woman, who like man, is made in the image of God and after his likeness. Given that Eve is the mother of all the living, Bavinck draws a “further truth,” which is that the image of God is the earmark of all humanity, resting “in number of people, with differentiation of race, talent and powers—in short, mankind – and further that this image will achieve its full unfolding in the new humanity which is the church of Christ.”[[34]](#footnote-34) Thus, it is “not the man alone, nor the man and woman together, but only the whole of humanity is the fully developed image of God. Too rich of a concept for one person alone…it can only be somewhat unfolded in its depths and riches in a humanity counting billions of members.”[[35]](#footnote-35)

This corporate understanding implies that as a race, humans find full expression not in their individual selves, but in solidarity with one another. The sense of human connection is hence a feature, not a bug of our race; our “ethical relations are ontologically constitutive.”[[36]](#footnote-36) We also experience solidarity with our federal heads, through which we participate in either their guilt or their glory. “Christ demonstrated the truth of the solidarity of the human race in another and better way than Adam. If this solidarity also could be broken, not only all compassion but all love, friendship, intercession and so on would cease to exist. Humankind would fall apart in lifeless atoms.”[[37]](#footnote-37) Truly Christ is holding all things together (Col. 1:17).

As believers embrace this two-fold understanding of image of God, and the ethical solidarity that exists between the sons of Adam and is maintained by Christ, the effects should be evident. Honoring “the image of God in self and others entails both personal piety and public justice,” writes Jemar Tisby. “It means honoring truth and loving neighbor. It means cherishing the intellectual, physical and spiritual being of all humankind.”[[38]](#footnote-38)

**Dominion**. The third aspect of divine image-bearing has to do with man’s work and purpose: to subdue the earth and have dominion over it (Gen. 1:28). By this God invites his image bearer to pantomime His creative endeavors through ordering of the created world, including drawing out its latent potentialities to “bring it into manifestation.” Man’s purpose is the source both of productive labor and the creation of culture, which “returns to God.”[[39]](#footnote-39) Purpose also entails human efficacy and dignity. Vincent Bacote notes that “this commonality” of dignity is “the opposite of the distortions of an anthropology where the modern idea of race reigns supreme.”[[40]](#footnote-40) It alone has the power to demolish false racial constructs that “tell us that nature has given us humans in different races, with some clearly inferior.”[[41]](#footnote-41) In recounting Bavinck’s prescience in 1904 that rejecting Christianity would lead to pernicious racism, Brock and Sutanto observe that “by getting rid of the transcendent, we end up absolutizing one particular historical people group.”[[42]](#footnote-42) History bears this out this painful truth.

## Sin and Restoration

In considering the effect of sin on image of God, Bavinck distinguishes between a “narrow” and the “broad” image of God. The narrow view of “image of God” refers to the virtues of knowledge, righteousness and holiness which God bestowed on Adam at creation.[[43]](#footnote-43) As a result of Adam’s disobedience, that original righteousness (able not-to-sin) was lost, and the alien illness of sin entered and corrupted all of man’s nature. Because of the ethical and physical solidarity of the human race, the whole of Adam’s race falls. But because sin was not part of man’s original nature, it can be removed by God without unmaking the human being; hence, the virtues lost at the fall are restored to the elect in the Second Adam, Christ, who is the perfect image of God (Col. 3:10). Holding singularly to a narrow view of what it means to be made in God’s image, we may be tempted to over-focus on the implications of Christ’s restorative work in terms of individual salvation – to the neglect of the restoration of man’s “religio-moral life” and work in the world.[[44]](#footnote-44) On the other hand, the spread of sin to all of Adam’s posterity affirms the systemic nature of sin and its corrosive effect on society. Espousing the doctrine of original sin, Christians (of all people) should be quick to acknowledge, grieve and combat the presence of sin not only in themselves, but also in all human systems and institutions writ large.

To counter that impulse, Bavinck sketches a broader view of image of God that “is larger and more inclusive than original righteousness.” The main idea is that even after the fall “man remained man.” Despite the corrosive power of sin and the loss of “man’s spiritual wholeness and health,” vestiges of the divine image remain. These include man’s spiritual nature, reasoning powers, abstract thought and emotions arising from both spiritual as well as material goods. “All these particular abilities express themselves outwardly in language, religion, in morality and law and science and art.” Adopting this broader sense of image of God is aligned with the overarching thrust of Scripture and redemptive history. “God in his grace, continued to deal with man as a rational being after the fall.”[[45]](#footnote-45)

The broader view of “image of God” helps us to think clearly and charitably about humanity, even as it remains mired in sin. For Tisby, image of God “is the foundation of what Christians believe about human beings and ought to dictate every aspect of Christian thought and action—political, social, aesthetic, moral. At the most basic level, it should govern how we treat each other, especially across lines of difference.”[[46]](#footnote-46)

Christ’s redemption restores and recovers the original image of God at both the individual and societal level. It includes “the gift of our full humanity…” at both the individual and social level. As Bacote notes, redemption “must…play a role in erasing race and grinding a new set of lenses for us.” To have union with Christ and one another does not make us colorblind or “ignore our cultural particularities.” Rather, redemption makes us properly sensitive to the kaleidoscopic reality before us.”[[47]](#footnote-47)

## Conclusion

Contra to popular expressions of evangelicalism, with its *vertical* fixation on personal salvation, and the culture’s *inward* fixation on expressive individualism, this chapter explored the rich horizontally public insights in Scripture and Dutch reformed theology. The normativity – and longing for – both unity and diversity is the direct result of the One God’s “trinitarian” stamp on the human frame. Without the doctrine of simplicity, we are apt to prioritize (and politicize) different moral virtues, when they are one and same in God. On the other hand, without the doctrine of the trinity, we are apt to run roughshod over diversity by forcing the false unity of uniformity. Steering between errors, Bavinck’s corporate and post-lapsarian understanding of the image of God “diagonalizes” the polarities of nationalism and ethnic diversity; individuality and inclusion; and rights and responsibilities. Hence, a disjunction between the one and the many “has no place in the Christian narrative.”[[48]](#footnote-48)

Tasked with revealing the glory of God, the church has the high calling and privilege to show the world the beautiful dance of unity-in-diversity. Believers demonstrate the diversity of God as they are individually sanctified by Christ to reflect his glory. They demonstrate the unity of God as they are joined by Christ as living members in his body the church. When public theologians artfully turn this lens toward public debate, they offer a transcendent perspective to a hopelessly polarized world.

In resisting the dichotomizing tendencies rampant today, Christians must learn to shift the conversation from uniformity to unity, and from a polarizing diversity to one that embraces the other in ethical solidarity. In his book, *Reading While Black*, Esau McCauley writes, “At the end, we do not find the elimination of difference. Instead, the very diversity of cultures is a manifestation of God’s glory…What unites this diversity? It is not cultural assimilation, but the fact that we worship the Lamb.”[[49]](#footnote-49)

The unity-in-diversity of the gospel truly is the hope of creation. As this chapter has shown, it was God’s plan all along.

# Public Theology in the Era of Common Grace

*No more of this!*

Jesus, on swords. Luke 22:51

As the maker of all that is, seen and unseen, God has set times and places for his redemptive work to unfold in human history. In his book, *Biblical Theology*, Geerhardus Vos makes a careful study of how revelation and redemption march down the path of redemptive history hand-in-hand, starting with creation, the “first step in the production of extra-divine knowledge.”[[50]](#footnote-50) Across the Testaments, the two emerge and engage organically; that is, “where redemption takes slow steps…revelation proceeds accordingly.” Vos’s main point is that divine revelation is not abstract communication but embedded in the “historical life of a people” by way of a series of gracious covenants.[[51]](#footnote-51) The administrations of the covenants of grace – with supralapsarian Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses and David, and culminating in Christ’s shed blood -- are key markers in redemptive history. They show the steady expansion and fulfillment of God’s kingdom promises; the what and when of God’s providential acts in human history. At the consummation, the present era of common grace will cease. Then the stern ethics of Israel’s conquest and theocratic rule will become normative – and not a day before.

In support of a Reformed view of the eschatological timeline, we consider aspects of covenantal discontinuity as they apply to the challenges of living as faithful witnesses in an increasingly secular, if not hostile world. Given rising Christian discontent and the potential for nationalistic movements to foment violent acts, a focus on where public theology rests in terms of the “timeline” of redemptive history is both timely and important. Just because the cultural tide seems to be turning against Christianity in the secular west does not warrant an acceleration of eschatology. Imitating “table-flipping” Jesus is out of bounds for Christians during the present era of common grace.

## Covenantal Discontinuity

In 1962, the Chicago Transit Authority released a blockbuster song entitled “Does anybody really know what time it is? Does anybody really care?” The song is relevant to the 21st century church, which is looking at its eschatological wristwatch and getting impatient. Like children in the backseat of the car on a long trip, the church is tempted to whine, “Are we there yet?” The front seat driver answers encouragingly, “Just a little longer.”

The question “how long” is not a bad one – indeed, many a saint has begged the question. Job cries out in his agony (Job 7:19); David weeps in his sense of abandonment (Psalm 13:1-2), the prophets muttered it incessantly, and the white-robed martyrs groan it around the throne (Rev. 6:10). Taking matters into one’s hands to move things along is a different matter, however. Like Saul offering an unlawful sacrifice because Samuel was late (I Samuel 13:8), our tendency to push ahead the eschatological clock risks rebuke, if not judgment. Understanding what time it is, that is, where things stand in redemptive history and which covenant is operative, is necessary to quell impatience and live fruitful lives as faithful witnesses. To that end, the church needs to remind itself which “covenant and era in redemptive history” is operative – and the implications that go along with that understanding.

## Noah and Common Grace

God’s covenant with Noah has profound implications for public theology. After the flood waters subsided and Noah and his family came out of the ark, God established a covenant with them in which he promised never again to “curse the ground because of man,” nor “strike down every living creature” as he did through the flood. Further, God promised a stable and fruitful earth: “While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease” (Gen. 8:22). Poythress calls this passage “a kind of foundation for common grace.” It is sweeping in terms of both time (while the earth remains) and beneficiaries (all the descendants of Noah).[[52]](#footnote-52) Bavinck calls it a covenant. Following the great flood, God “firmly grounds the being and life of the creation in a covenant with all of nature and with every living thing.” The new deal is sweeping in its largesse. “Life, work, food, clothing come to [man] no longer on the basis of an agreement or right granted in the covenant of works but through grace alone. Grace has become the source and fountainhead of all life and every blessing for mankind. It is the overflowing spring of all good (Gen. 3:8-24).”[[53]](#footnote-53) The Noahic Covenant is thus a gracious olive branch extended by the Creator to every living creature. It is a fundamental demonstration that God cares about the created order and has taken pains to provide for it, sin or no sin. God seals the new arrangement with a rainbow, the first covenantal sign (Gen. 9:8-12).

All humanity is party to this covenant and there are no performance strings attached. In this way, God’s covenant with Noah “guarantees the continuation of the cultural mandate after the fall and provides for the establishment of civil government.” It also “sets the stage” for the covenant of grace God will later make with Abraham. In that covenant, God promises Abraham people, land and a great name; blessings that would pass to everyone in the world (Gen. 12:1-3).

The covenantal theme continues in redemptive history, although the forms change. Following the exodus, God’s covenant of grace becomes formalized under Moses. It now includes a set of legislation, the decalogue, and an array of accompanying commandments governing both religious and civil life, and specifics the blessings and curses that attend to the covenant. Centuries later the prophets prosecute the covenant, pleading with God’s people to live up to their side of the agreement – or else. Presaging the end of the Mosaic covenant, Jeremiah is inspired to look forward to a new covenant that is written not on stone tablets but on human hearts (Jer. 31:33). At the last supper, Jesus defines this new covenant in his body and blood. The ripping of the temple curtain after he bows his head in death symbolizes the termination of the rule-based covenant (that no human save Christ could keep) and the inauguration of the covenant of grace now based on Christ’s righteousness alone. Despite the discontinuity of the different formulations, God’s melodic covenant of grace extends from the Fall into eternity. Grace remains in effect until the “stay” of judgment ends. Quoting Kline, delay and grace are happily “coterminous.”[[54]](#footnote-54)

Jesus affirms the ruling ethic of grace in Matt 5:44-46. “But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?”

Sun and rain are unconditional gifts of God to all people. In delaying judgment, God graciously gives good things to all, regardless of their moral rectitude. In the same way, God’s children are expected follow the Father’s example of doing good to all, while suspending ultimate judgment. How long is that? According to Jesus, his followers are to love and pray for their enemies as God continues to give sunshine and rain to all.

The degree of continuity one sees between the old and new covenants, and the salience of the interlude of common grace, has given rise to different stances toward public engagement. Sharply discontinuous, modern “two-kingdom” theology under-applies scriptural norms to common life, while theonomy over-applies them, for example, by bringing the severe Mosaic penal system forward into the 21st century. Grounded in common grace and life, Dutch Reformed neo-Calvinism steers between the two extremes. We unpack these alternate views below.

## Modern “Two Kingdom” Theology

Modern “two-kingdom theology” sees a sharp dualism between nature and grace and between our present world and the world to come. Rather than grace and nature being intertwined in culture, like Jesus’ weedy grain field, according to this school of thought, grace is distinct from and above nature. In *Living in God’s Two Kingdoms* David Van Drunen writes: “If there is a ‘problem’ with the things of this present creation, it does not lie with the fact that they are physical and visible, but with the fact that they belong to a present creation that we was never meant to be the final home of the human race.”[[55]](#footnote-55) Those espousing this view cite Peter’s end times account of fiery judgment when the “heavens will pass away with a roar and the heavenly bodies will be burned up” (2 Peter 3:8-13). Nature passes away, making way for the new creation; there is no continuity between the present form and the new heavens and earth. This view of the destruction of nature – rather than a fiery purification of nature from its sinful corruption – leads to a chilling cultural nonchalance: it is going to burn anyway.

To arrive at this (admittedly crass) conclusion, two-kingdom theology departs from a common grace understanding of the present age along metaphysical, epistemic and ethical lines. It conflates the existence of a visible and invisible church into two actual kingdoms: one common and the other spiritual. The spiritual kingdom is defined by mercy and grace, governed by Scripture, with the well-being of the church is its central end. In contrast, the (doomed) common kingdom is governed by natural law, and politics is the ordained, common grace way of regulating peace and justice. The work Christians do in the common kingdom is penultimate; their ultimate calling is spiritual. Hence, to speak of “redeeming” the fields of architecture or artificial intelligence, for example, is meaningless because the two kingdoms do not overlap in a redemptive way. “We do not seek a uniquely Christian way to perform these activities and order these affairs,” says Van Drunen. “But we conduct ourselves as sojourners and exiles who share them in common with unbelievers and do not really at home when pursuing them.”[[56]](#footnote-56)

One can almost hear Kuyper’s retort: “Every square inch!” While two-kingdom dualism may seem descriptive of our polarized world, it should not be viewed as normative. God’s word is always relevant to everything, from the dark corners of the heart to the dark corners of society. The word enlightens all human dealings, penetrates the darkest conundrum, and convicts the public thief, warlord, and thug. And yet it loves what is lovely about culture, because there it finds itself. As Bavinck writes:

“The gospel gives us a standard by which we can judge phenomena and events; it is an absolute measure which enables us to determine the value of the present life; it is a guide to show us the way in the labyrinth of the present world; it raises us above time and teaches us to view all things from the standpoint of eternity…It is opposed to nothing that is pure and good and lovely. It condemns sin always and everywhere; but it cherishes marriage and family, society and the state, and nature and history, science, and art.”[[57]](#footnote-57)

A related problem with two-kingdom’s epistemic dualism is that access to natural law is complicated by the noetic effects of sin. Creation only makes sense in context of the purposes, design and character of its Creator. Attempts to appropriate creational norms such as marriage and family, worship and work – without reference to the Creator – is like clipping a flower from its roots and expecting it to grow. We disconnect God’s good gifts from their life source at our peril. Addressing Van Drunen, Frame observes that “people often say that it is difficult to argue ethical issues from Scripture in a society that does not honor Scripture’s authority. But it is even more difficult to argue from natural law. For natural law is not a written text. Even though it is objectively valid, there is no way of gaining public agreement as to what it says as long as we simply exchange opinions about what natural law says.”[[58]](#footnote-58) For Christians to keep special revelation at arms-length from culture, simply pursuing spiritual ends with nary a thought to the degradation of common life, is to remove the light that would guide it, and the salt that would preserve it.

Although Van Drunen’s two kingdom theology lies within the Reformed tradition, the Dutch Reformed side of the family tree eschews the dualism and holds firmly to the “common” of common grace. Neo-Calvinism insists that human beings – on whatever side of the antithesis – remain image bearers, and our fates are mysteriously intertwined. The public theologian is thus able to affirm the goodness of creational structures, while opposing the sin that corrupts them. She is not ashamed to hold out the Word of life because the good news is always and everywhere just that: good. God’s sovereign providential care – and his life-giving norms – leaven a world toiling heavy in sin.

## Theonomy

Arguing for more (not less) continuity between the covenants, theonomists reject the Noahic/natural law/common grace understanding altogether, arguing instead that the Mosaic covenant remains in effect. T. David Gordon, in a 1994 article, describes three legs of the theonomist stool and offers a critique. The first is an argument from necessity, that specific guidance regarding civil government is needed and the Sinai legislation is the only place in scripture that civil society can turn for such guidance. Related to the argument from necessity is a distorted view of the sufficiency of scripture. Theonomists contend that scripture is a “sufficient guide to the various departments of life, in all their specificity.”[[59]](#footnote-59) By contrast, the new-Calvinist takes a more nuanced view: the scriptures are sufficient with regard to all we need to know about our communion with God – but not with regard to everything there is to know in the world. Finally, theonomists misunderstand Jesus’ affirmation in Matthew 5:17-21 that he has fulfilled the law and that its jots and tittles will not pass away, which is the cornerstone to their assertion that the Mosaic law remains in effect.

Drawing on Gordon’s work, Walker updates the critique for our day. “Theonomy is a facile hermeneutic that channels an eschatology of triumph. Historically undesirable, it instrumentalizes religion, blurs church-state relationships, and jeopardizes religious dissent. And it proves unnecessary because of how other covenants showcase the benefits of common grace and natural law.”[[60]](#footnote-60) One need look no further than 16th century Europe or modern-day Pakistan to envision what this might look like for the non-believer. Decrying the destruction of her convent in 1525, German Franciscan nun Caritas Pirckheimer penned her in her journal, “We hope…that the honorable City Council will not apply pressure in matters of conscience.”[[61]](#footnote-61)

In this tense present moment, when some Christians are tempted to “take up a whip” to bring about the kingdom of God, it is critical to remember where we are on the redemptive historical timeline. Taking a covenantal – rather than legislative – approach situates the church in the common grace era of the Noahic covenant, which graciously permits the flourishing of both wheat and tares and the pursuit of the cultural mandate. “As long as the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease” (Gen. 8:22).

Steering between the dualism of two-kingdom theology and the over-realized eschatology of theonomy, neo-Calvinism embodies the ethos of the “already and not yet.” Amid great directional diversity (and confusion) the church is both distinct but entwined with culture. Because access to natural law is freighted by sin, the church – and the public theologians that plead on her behalf – has a providential role in bringing the wisdom of special revelation to bear on every good endeavor under heaven.

## Church in Exile

How the church understands itself – and the motifs that shape that identity – are fundamental to Christian public theology. As the new Israel, the church has traditionally sought to locate itself within the frame of Israel’s dealings with God. Whereas the motif of conquest may be more aligned with theonomic worldview, the themes of exodus, wilderness, and exile have spiritual analogies suited to the era of common grace. Individuals appropriate the motif of the exodus because of its alignment with the “golden chain” of salvation (Rom. 8:30). The exodus typifies a believer’ deliverance from sin, with the Red Sea crossing a metaphor for baptism, and the subsequent 40-years in the wilderness a sanctifying process before crossing the “stormy Jordan” into the promised land of heaven.

But despite its usefulness as a metaphor for the Christian journey, the evangelical tendency to individualize and spiritualize the exodus flattens the rich understanding of God’s deliverance of a people group *in history*. As Esau McCaulley points out in *Reading While Black*, the exodus resonates deeply with Black Christians. “The enslaved reading of the exodus as paradigmatic for understanding God’s character was more faithful to the biblical text than those who began with the Pauline slave passages.”[[62]](#footnote-62) McCaulley argues for a Black biblical interpretation that is both canonical and theological – as well as socially located, “in that it clearly arises out of the particular *context* of Black Americans.”[[63]](#footnote-63)

A second common grace motif is one of exile. Following the deportation of the Jews to Babylon in 586 BC, Jeremiah tells the exiled community to settle into the alien territory because they will be there a while, seventy years to be exact. During that time, the covenant community is commanded by God to “seek the welfare of the city…and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare” (Jer. 29:7). By embracing the motif of exile, the present-day church learns the virtues of humility, patience and long-suffering. She is not surprised to find herself situated within a pluralistic society with a multiformity of cultures and creational structures (e.g., families, schools, businesses, states, worship spaces, etc.) Like the Jews in idolatrous Babylon, the exile church is embedded in a society characterized by directional pluralism, that is, the various philosophies, religions and ideologies of life that oppose God’s work and will. But the call to seek the welfare of the “city” is the same. Amid a multiformity of idolatries and directions, the church in exile is called to be both faithful to God – and good neighbors, too.

The Apostle Peter echoes this theme in his letter to the “elect exiles of the Dispersion” (1 Peter 1:1). Having established their new identity as a “holy nation, a people for [God’s] own possession,” Peter gives the “sojourners and exiles” a two-fold command: to abstain from the passions of the flesh…[and] to “keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable” (1 Peter 2:9, 11-12). In both instances, individual and communal, Peter foresees conflict: the individual’s pursuit of holiness will be contested by internal spiritual warfare, and the church’s honorable behavior in society will be reproached as evil. Nevertheless, Peter exhorts the exiles to do good works, honor the emperor and to endure suffering – all to the glory of God.

## Conclusion

This chapter has sought to situate public theology in the era of common grace, providing a check against two extremes. The first is the impulse of two-kingdom theology to disengage from cultural renewal. The second is the theonomist impulse to advance the eschatological clock and start “flipping tables.” Contrary to a “conquest” mentality, the operative command for the church in exile is to “seek the welfare” of secular society.

The implications for a public theology situated in common grace are many: religious liberty for all, reliance on natural law (rather than on Israel’s theocratic code) to guide jurisprudence and penology, and the freedom to develop culture and work for its renewal. Just as God shows patience at this time toward directional pluralism, so should believers. As a welcoming method for public discourse, principled pluralism offers a way for engaging in the public square. Persons of faith are neither privileged nor cancelled, but rather participate as active contestants who argue out of our deepest convictions. May the best ideas win.

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