

*Mission in the Public Square: The Reformational Tradition*

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*Introduction*

1. Thank you for your gracious invitation to meet with you and share a little bit about our tradition. This is a tradition that has roots in the Netherlands and so it is a bit of an irony that a person with roots in the French Huguenot tradition should undertake this task! Lesslie Newbigin speaks of this tradition in a lecture given in 1995: "I think that in this respect we in Britain ought to pay more attention to the Kuyperian tradition (I will use Kuyperian, Reformational, and Neo-Calvinist synonymously) of the Netherlands Reformed churches--a tradition which has had much less influence in the thinking of British churches than its importance deserves" (*Can a Modern Society Be Christian?*, p.11). We share with you some of the insights that the reformational tradition has garnered in 100 years of practice of wrestling with public issues in the light of the gospel. We hope it will be an enrichment to you in our common commitment to the gospel. We also invite critique that we also may be enriched by your insights. One more comment: my introduction will be somewhat abstract and theoretical. I am hoping that my colleagues will contribute how they have worked this out in the political, economic, or educational sphere.

*Our Context: From Totalizing Modernity to Pluralistic Postmodernity*

2. The principal crisis facing those of us who live in the latter part of the 20th century was expressed beautifully and prophetically a number of years ago by Edna St. Vincent Millay:

Upon this gifted age, in its dark hour  
Rains from the sky a meteoric shower  
Of facts...they lie unquestioned, uncombined.  
Wisdom enough to leech us of our ill  
Is daily spun, but there exists no loom  
To weave it into fabric.

Our commitment to reason, science, technology and progress has led this "gifted age" to a place where there are many facts, wisdom enough to solve all our problems. The problem is that there is no "transcendent" story, no metanarrative that enables us to weave all of this into a fabric. And so we exist in a dark hour.

3. Perhaps this is a good place to start to sketch the contours of a neo-Calvinist or Reformational vision of involvement in the public life of society. For much of the middle ages society was shaped by the Augustinian story that bound together a Biblical view of the history of redemption and a neo-Platonic ontology. As we see in Augustine's *City of God*, the static ontology of neo-Platonism never fully engulfed the unfolding historical story of Scripture. Augustine saw history moving toward the City of God--the transcendent and future kingdom of God. It was this story that provided the public doctrine for medieval society. A shaping of public life according to this story was the normal state of affairs.

4. An enormous shift took place as we moved into modernity. We can point to the Renaissance as the pivot for the rise of modernity. Modernity sought to break with the shackles of tradition, superstition, and religion that were characteristic of the medieval period. It turned to a humanism that was shaped in Greece and Rome. However, modernity which came to maturity in the Enlightenment, inherited and carried on the Christian notion of an overarching story and transcendent norms like justice, freedom, and truth, though it re-read it in its own discourse. It maintained a sense of meaningful progress and development toward justice, freedom, and truth but rejected the origin of both the story and the norms. An enormous amount of creative energy was expended in the modern period to provide an immanent basis for both the narrative and the norms. Human autonomy and reason could

provide a foundation for justice, freedom, and truth. Hope was placed in science and technology to enable us to progress toward a more just society characterized by knowledge and liberty.

5. It was at the time of the Enlightenment that this commitment to human autonomy and reason reached its fullest expression. This was the result of at least two factors. The first was the tremendous success of the Newtonian physics. This seemed to be leading to agreement based in a common commitment to reason. The second was the religious wars of the 16th and 17th centuries. These religious wars led to an increasing skepticism with respect to the assumption that society could be based on confessional unity grounded in the gospel. The turn was to reason to provide this common bond. People like Hugo Grotius sought a basis for public order in the concept of natural law based on a rationality universal to all people. Law, morals, politics, economics--the whole of public life--was reconstructed on the basis of what was universally human.

6. The problem we face today is that our gods have failed us. Since the story of modernity has been built on idolatry--I will return to this--they have failed to deliver on their promises. Today many point to growing poverty, a chronically imbalanced economy, the depletion of resources, the destruction of the environment, escalating militarization, growing social and psychological and social problems, and more, as proof that these stories are false. They cannot deliver the goods. There is growing skepticism and cynicism toward overarching stories. Thus we hear Lyotard's famous description of the defining feature of the postmodern condition as an "incredulity toward metanarratives." There is no overarching or transcendent story that will provide meaning and weave life together.

7. What, then, will provide the basis for a public order in society? Terry Eagleton says:

Postmodernism signals the death of such 'metanarratives' whose secretly terroristic function is to ground and legitimate the illusion of a 'universal' human history. We are now in the process of awakening from the nightmare of modernity, with its manipulative reason and fetish of totality, *into the laid-back pluralism of the postmodern, that heterogeneous range of life-styles and language games which has renounced the nostalgic urge to totalise and legitimate itself...* Science and philosophy must jettison their grandiose claims and view themselves more modestly as just another set of narratives.

The hope for society is based on a "laid-back pluralism" in which a number of heterogeneous lifestyles and language games interact in the public square. Dialogue among numerous communities, each with its own story will provide the glue that binds society together. Our western society is not based on the universality of reason but rather our public discourse is based on our particular historical and cultural context. This context is made up of many forms of life that all contribute to the totality. Perhaps the avant-garde art movements are the new metaphor for society. A piece of artwork produced by an avant-garde artist appears to be a whole but it seeks to break through the appearance of totality and call attention to the fact that it is made up of many reality fragments. It is an artificial construct made up of many isolated parts that challenges the viewer to integrate these many disparate parts into their experience in a meaningful way.

8. Perhaps John Rawls gives us an example of this shift. In 1971 he published *A Theory of Justice* that was one more in a line of modern attempts to place public justice on a rational foundation. However, the postmodern critique has moved him more recently to defend his theory only within the society in which it emerged, leaving it open for non-Western or future Western societies to judge its validity. For the modern Rawls, justice was based on the universality of human reason. For the chastened Rawls, justice is just one more product of a culturally specific story whose validity or perhaps utility can be judged in the public square in competition with other concepts of justice.

#### *Neo-Calvinist Response*

9. The neo-Calvinist tradition that has its roots in Dutch Calvinism would reject both of these bases for public

order. Over against modernity the notion of the *antithesis* would challenge a universal rationality. Over against postmodernity the notion of *creation order* would challenge a pluralistic pastiche. Let me unfold these briefly.

### *Antithesis and Modernity*

10. I begin with a basic definition of the Christian faith given by Herman Bavinck, a Dutch theologian who lived at the turn of the century and who has had a formative effect on the reformational tradition. "God the Father has reconciled His created but fallen world through the death of His Son, and renews it into a Kingdom of God by His Spirit." The reformational tradition takes all the key phrases in this definition as cosmic in scope. "Reconciled", "created", "fallen", "world", "renews", and "kingdom of God" is related to everything except for God.

The kingdom of God announced and embodied by Jesus was the power of God to heal and restore his fallen world. Thus God's healing and renewing power extends to the full range of God's creation. This is because the breadth of sin's power also extends to the ends of creation. However, since God did not bring his final judgement upon sin and the powers of darkness, there remains at this time a titanic struggle between the power of God's reign in Jesus Christ and by the Spirit to renew the creation and the might of the powers of darkness to twist and distort the creation. In other words, there are two spiritual regimes struggling for control of the one creational domain.

11. This struggle for power extends over the entire public realm--its social relationships, its economic life, its political structure, its educational projects, and so forth. But this antithesis must be spelled out more specifically in terms of the religious roots of a society.

12. Human beings are creatures of faith. Our secular society would deny this by pointing to the secularization process as a turn from religion, a loss of faith. However, I would argue that the ultimate direction of the life of humankind is directed by faith. Modernity itself can be characterized as a growing faith or ultimate trust of humankind in autonomous reason, science, and technology to lead to materially prosperous and free society. Faith is trusting in something to give ultimate meaning and direction to our lives. It is our ultimate commitments that give shape to our lives. And since we live as communal creatures our faith is shared. Our ultimate commitments are not simply the possession of a single individual but are collectively and communally held. It is these ultimate faith commitments that give rise to a worldview or a collectively held vision of life that guides, shapes, integrates, and sustains a human cultural community.

13. If faith is not anchored in the living Creator God as revealed in Jesus Christ as light for the human condition, that faith will focus on an object within creation. Human beings are predisposed by their very nature to search to look for some particular aspect or object of their experience which will provide meaning and integration. This is idolatry. In western culture this faith commitment has been placed in the idols of autonomous reason, science, technology, and economic growth as those aspects of experience that will give meaning and direction to life. Western culture has, for centuries, been shaped by a faith commitment to these areas of creation. This faith commitment has provided the light for human society for several centuries.

14. The church is that community that has been called by Christ in the gospel from idolatry to serve the living God. The church is that community that lives from a faith rooted in Jesus Christ. Or putting it more philosophically we can say that the church is that community that embodies the rationality tradition that works in the light of commitment to the gospel. The gospel as public truth is the starting point that gives direction to the believing communities life.

15. The reality of this antithesis creates an enormous tension for the believing community. On the one hand, they live as part of Western culture that holds communally to the idols of scientism, technicism, and economism or pluralism. They share political, economic, social life in common with their neighbour. Yet they do not share the faith commitments that shape and give meaning to that culture. On the other hand, we live in a community called out by Jesus Christ to serve the living God and to reject the idols of her culture. In the words of Jesus in John, she

is *in* the world but *not of* the world. This creates a clash at the deepest level of faith commitments between the believing community and the cultural community.

16. This tension has been solved by the Christian community in a number of ways throughout church history. Some have tended to *withdraw* from the culture and create a counter-cultural community (Christ against culture). This tradition has rightly understood the antithetical religious commitments of the different communities but wrongly believes that cultural flight is right or even possible. Others have sought *common ground* in a common rationality or natural law or worldly kingdom that the believer and non-christian share together (Christ above culture and Christ and culture in paradox). This solution rightly understands the need for a sharing of life together and at the same time recognizes difference. The solution is to set aside religious beliefs in a separate compartment of life that does not affect society and culture. The error is to miss the powerful shaping affect of religious beliefs on all of cultural and social life. Others have accommodated the gospel to the faith commitments of that culture to such a degree that the tension is resolved by *absorption* (Christ of culture). The Reformational tradition would reject all of these solutions.

17. The question then is how to be in the world but not of it. How does one share life together with people whose faith commitments shape a culture in the service of idols? Further, how does the Christian community seek to witness to God's rule over all of life, a rule that calls for a turning from those idols to serve the living God?

18. So it should be clear that the neo-Calvinist tradition cannot accede to participation in the public order based on the universality of human reason. It is widely acknowledged today that rationality always works in the context of a tradition. Alasdair MacIntyre's book *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* poignantly argues that all rationality and all theories of justice are embedded in some tradition. The reformational tradition would agree. However, it would take another step not so commonly accepted today. That is, there is a religious root--indeed a spiritual battle, an issue of faith--that lies at the basis of the difference between the gospel and idolatry.

#### *Creation Order and Postmodernity*

19. It may appear as if this strong stress on antithesis, faith, religious roots of society, and idolatry would lead to a grateful embrace of a postmodern pluralism. We can now take our place as one more language game and form of life alongside others. Indeed, Jim Skillen and others in our tradition have argued for a *principled pluralism* in our social and political life. In speaking of pluralism Jim expresses the commitment of the gospel to freedom. Human beings are not to be coerced. Thus our tradition would stand against a Christendom or Constantinianism that imposes the Christian worldview by force. By affixing the adjective "principled" Jim wants to affirm the importance of struggling for truth in the public realm. This is obviously a long way from the "laid-back pluralism" of postmodernism.

20. On what basis, then, can a neo-Calvinist enter into the public square fully committed to the gospel? *Creation order* has played an important role in our tradition. That is, God orders and structures His creation by His Word. The same Word which gives order to the non-human creation (laws of nature) also structures and orders human life (norms). These norms do not make for some kind of static, metaphysical structure that exists outside the creation and that must be imposed from without upon a recalcitrant human reality. Rather, God's word is the call of a gracious God in the various dimensions of human life to live lives of freedom the way we were created.

21. God's norms not only structure and order our personal and individual lives but also the public life of society and culture. The primary task in disclosing and unfolding the normative structure of various social institutions is to identify in each case its characteristic task or responsibility in God's creation. Each institution is called to fulfill a divinely appointed function as God intended it. For example, God's call to government is to seek public justice in its administration of public affairs through just laws; His call to business corporations are to pursue a stewardly provision of humanly desirable goods and services; His call to schools and universities is to advance growing systematic insight into the creation; His call to marriage partners is to live in faithful, lifelong unions of love; His

call to local institutional churches is to equip believers with the faith commitment to accept their cultural tasks; and so forth.

22. The important points to be made here is that 1) these institutions are not negotiated institutions constructed by the creative use of reason or through dialogue. Rather, these institutions have a prior normative character that cannot be ignored. Further, 2) we must respond to God's word for creation. Our response may be (will be) distorted; however, some response is of the nature of our existence, inescapably.

23. Two further points have to be made before I return to the reformational approach to social engagement in the public realm. First, there is a wide scope for creativity and freedom in our response to God's norms. God's normative structures exist by his word prior to our response. We must respond. However, in the first place we respond creatively. The response must relate in healing ways to the degree, level, or state of culture each time. There is not one rigid structure that must be adhered to. Secondly, we respond freely; that is, in an obedient or disobedient way.

24. The second point, is that this must be understood in the context of a *covenantal* understanding of creation. Human life is characterized by an answering and responding nature. We are made to respond to God. We may respond in trustful obedience. This will bring blessing. We may also respond in unbelieving disobedience. This will bring the curses of a God who loves and continues to order and structure his creation for the well-being of his creatures.

25. It is on this basis that a neo-Calvinist participation in the public square seeks to operate. We participate in political affairs on the basis of God's order for political life. Even though the particular governments respond disobediently on the basis of idolatry, nevertheless, they *must* respond to God's call for public justice. They cannot entirely escape that characteristic responsibility since God's creational word remains in effect for human life. Further, since the creation is covenantal and since God remains faithful to his word, distortions of that task will lead to frustration and will become publicly recognizable. The same goes for our economic life. Bob Goudzwaard's books have analyzed the disastrous distortions of western economic life as a direct result of being in bondage to the idols of progress, science, and technology. Even in the USA the government is not entirely devoid of public justice nor is our economic life entirely devoid of stewardship or our educational life entirely devoid of insight into creation. It is on this basis that we can struggle for further faithfulness to God's normative demands.

26. This may become clear by making the important distinction between *structure and direction*. Structure has to do with the order of creation, the constant creational constitution of something that makes that entity what it is. It is anchored in God's word to the creation that constitutes the nature of creatures as different. Direction designates the power of sin to distort or pervert the creation and the power of God's redemptive work to heal and restore the creation. Structure has to do with creation order; direction has to do with the antithesis--the struggle for God's creation. For example, we may speak of a totalitarian government. Totalitarian points to a perversion of the nature of political authority. But the word government points to the creational structure of political authority. And since this structure can never entirely escape God's word for its very existence, there will be greater or lesser reflections of its characteristic responsibility to pursue public justice. The Christian seeks to struggle for more faithful manifestations of that public justice. The same kind of thing can be said for all other areas of public life.

27. Therefore, the reformational tradition calls for *reformation, not conservatism or revolution*. Conservatism seeks to maintain the status quo. Revolution wants to break down existing institutions and begin again based on some ideal. Reformation rejects conservatism because of the sinful distortion of all institutions. Reformation rejects revolution because it recognizes that no societal institution has entirely escaped God's normative role. The struggle is to reform the institution to be more faithful to its normative and characteristic calling.

### *Communal Task*

27. How has/can this vision be implemented? Another way of putting the question is what kind of ecclesiology underlies this vision? The reformational tradition has distinguished between the church as *institution* and the Church as *people of God*. The terms can lead to misunderstanding but what the distinction is trying to preserve is that the calling of the people of God goes beyond the cultic and liturgical life of the local church. God's people are the called out community that must live under the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all of life.

28. The concept of calling or vocation points to the concern to see individual Christians live out the gospel in their various positions in public life. This has been the underlying assumption of the large network of Christian schools that have characterized the Dutch tradition. However, there has been the recognition that because of the highly organized and complex structure of modern society, there is a need for communal Christian action. This has primarily been seen in alternative Christian organizations like Citizens for Public Justice, Christian Farmers Association, Christian Labour Association, Christian Schools and Universities, and the like.

29. What about the role of the local church? I believe this may be a weak point in our tradition. A telling comment was made last year here in Leeds in a paper written by the Canadian historian Harry Van Dyke. In his narrative of the neo-calvinist involvement in public life he says: "It was their failure to reform the national church that encouraged men of Groen and Kuyper's generations to throw more of their energy into non-ecclesiastical action, asserting a multi-faceted Christian presence in Dutch society at large." There is the danger, perhaps, that with the formation of alternative Christian organizations that their roots in a worshiping, praying, fellowshiping community of God's people may be lost. However, as stated above it is the differentiation and complexity of our western culture that has led to this strategy.

30. I close. This has been a rich tradition with a long history of distinctive and fruitful involvement in public life and reflection upon it. The literature is vast and has addressed many different subjects. However, it is a tradition that bears the marks of its cultural and historical roots. All living traditions will seek to embody the tradition in new and creative ways in the midst of changing cultural situations. This is as important for us at this time in history as for many other traditions that were formed in the period of modernity.

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