

# A Public Missiology

HOW LOCAL CHURCHES WITNESS  
TO A COMPLEX WORLD



Gregg Okesson

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# Introduction

The basic unit of [a] new society is the local congregation.

—Lesslie Newbigin, *Truth to Tell*<sup>1</sup>

I have come to feel that the primary reality of which we have to take account in seeking for a Christian impact on public life is the Christian congregation. . . . I am suggesting that the only answer, the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it.

—Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*<sup>2</sup>

**T**he city of Buffalo, New York, faces a thick array of difficulties. It lies in a part of the United States called the rust belt. Decades of economic decline, labor outsourcing, population decline, environmental decay, and deep racial tensions have left the city with a complex assortment of interrelated problems. This is particularly the case in east Buffalo, where the majority of blacks live. Few businesses exist in that part of the city. Schools receive scant resources to face the demands facing their communities. Meanwhile, political leaders devote most of their energies to other parts of Buffalo, where wealthy voters live. Crime is high. Unscrupulous people swoop down on east Buffalo to sell drugs and set up pawn shops, preying on people’s vulnerabilities. The challenges are compounded by mythic perceptions throughout the city. People

1. Lesslie Newbigin, *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 85.

2. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 227.

avoid going anywhere near east Buffalo, saying, “That’s where all the drug dealers live.” Hence, the challenges facing the city are not just empirical, such as with the high percentage of people living below the poverty level, but also imaginary, influencing everyday perceptions of people living in the region.

First Baptist Church exists within and for east Buffalo.<sup>3</sup> Most of the parishioners have resided in that part of the city for generations. The church has worship services several times a week. Parishioners carry their public challenges with them, bringing things such as poverty, violence, and political neglect into the liturgy and doxology of the community. Once there, such thorny, public aspects of life are woven into sermons, songs, and prayer. Public realities come into contact with God’s kingship and the persons of the Trinity, causing parishioners to think of them in new ways. Congregants scatter throughout the neighborhood as collective agents of the kingdom of God, in and for east Buffalo. One family begins a business in the worst part of town. The church opens up an after-school mentoring program in one of its Sunday school rooms. Several families start a neighborhood watch program to alert people to the presence of crime or drug problems. They walk throughout the neighborhoods developing relationships with young men in the area, providing them positive role models and proclaiming Christ’s rule over their difficulties. The church assists several young people in getting their GED. First Baptist also partners with a Hispanic church in the area, and together the two churches develop a program to meet the needs of new refugees who are moving into the neighborhood from Syria, Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Honduras—opening up “space” in the community for diverse ethnicities to live together. Slowly, the character of east Buffalo begins to change, eventually influencing the perceptions of people in the city.

The public realm, as we experience it in the twenty-first century, is complex and thick, formed by the interpenetration of many elements. People everywhere in the world experience the public realm thickly. There are no simple publics. And this, I contend, is one of the major reasons Christians hesitate to witness to the public realm.<sup>4</sup> The size of our gospel limits the scope of our witness. Christians recoil from witnessing to the public realm because we too often possess thin forms of faith. The thinness of our faith struggles to

3. While the complex predicament facing east Buffalo is faithful to the facts, First Baptist Church is a fabricated example of a public missiology of a local congregation. I do borrow some of the inspiration for the example from Jonathan Blackburn’s excellent PhD dissertation, “The Role of Black Churches in Response to African-American Well-Being in the Rust Belt Region: A Single Location Case Study of East Side Churches of Buffalo, NY” (Asbury Theological Seminary, 2015).

4. Throughout this book I will speak of witnessing to the public realm and witnessing in and through our publics. This will become clearer after chapter 2.

interpenetrate the thickness of the public realm, and so we don't witness to these valuable aspects of life.

This book is about public witness. It attempts to unpack what Lesslie Newbigin means when he says, "The basic unit of [a] new society is the local congregation," or when he refers to the church as the "hermeneutic of the gospel." This book is a call for Christians to thicken their witness, and to do so in and through local congregations.

### Why Witness through Local Congregations?

We don't often think of local congregations as "the basic unit of [a] new society," even as we hesitate to consider the church as the "hermeneutic of the gospel." Meanwhile, the word *public* has become all the rage these days.<sup>5</sup> After years of lurking in some shadowy existence, Christianity in the West has begun to step out boldly into the public realm. At the same time, local congregations have retreated from view. We love all things "public" and almost nothing that smacks of the church. Hence, we run wildly into social entrepreneurship, political advocacy, and marketplace ministries, and away from anything suggestive of the church.<sup>6</sup> It is almost as if our uneasy history with the Enlightenment has preconditioned us to think of the church as a "private" entity, and thus at odds with anything "public."

Does our current infatuation with everything public come at the expense of any inward distinction? Indeed, we risk losing what Martin Marty calls "special interiority" in an effort to be utterly open.<sup>7</sup> This same reaction can be seen elsewhere. We have become anti-buildings as a result of the focus on buildings in a previous era. We have also become anti-institutions because of the oppressive nature of institutions under Christendom. It's almost as if we have become so anti-anything-we-were-in-the-past that I am not sure anymore what we are in favor of. Perhaps I am hyperbolizing for effect—and, indeed, things are not always this extreme—but unless we vilify the church in its gathering, it's as if we cannot talk about public engagement. That is precisely my concern. As we move out into the public realm, we have exchanged ecclesiology for public

5. I will explain the public realm in some depth in chapter 2. At this point, it might be best to think of it as comprising a shared sense of togetherness, drawing on different aspects of what it means to be human.

6. Some try to connect "social entrepreneurship" or "marketplace ministries" with church planting; however, I am concerned that in doing so we inadvertently elevate economics as the greatest good and lose sight of what it means to be the church in and for the world.

7. Marty borrows the phrase from Pope John Paul II. See Martin E. Marty, *The Public Church: Mainline, Evangelical, Catholic* (1981; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012), 4.

change (especially elevating key domains, such as economics or politics), and we have jettisoned any commitment to “witness” or “evangelism” (out of fear for any cultural baggage associated with those terms) for more sanitized terminology of “engagement.” Hence, our turn toward public has included a shift away from ecclesiology as well as the accompanying loss of any witness to public realities through the local congregation.

At the heart of this book is an attempt to rethink the apostolic nature of the church, especially in regard to the public realm. I will explain how we need to cultivate back-and-forth movement between gathering and scattering to effectively witness to the surrounding publics. This book is therefore predicated on movement and, with this movement, the desire to nurture a thickness of identity within and for the publics of this world.

Let me say up front that I don’t think the church provides us with everything we need to witness to the public realm. We need to be careful not to limit God’s mission to what happens in and through local congregations. David Bosch rightly reminds us, “The church should continually be aware of its provisional character.”<sup>8</sup> Or, as Johannes Hoekendijk helps us to appreciate, we should take seriously the secular realm as the location of the coming kingdom of God and not view everything exclusively through the church.<sup>9</sup> By talking about churches, I am not saying they are identical with God’s mission. God’s mission is always much larger than the church.

However, I still believe that local congregations are the primary engine of a new society. And I want us to appreciate the public nature of the church. To integrate these, I need to hold three things together: congregations, publics, and witness. There are scholars who incorporate different configurations of these elements, such as Martin Marty and Emmanuel Katongole, who focus on churches and publics;<sup>10</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, Miroslav Volf, and Vinoth Ramachandra, who speak about publics and witness;<sup>11</sup> and Darrell Guder, who writes about congregations and witness.<sup>12</sup> A few scholars combine all

8. David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 377.

9. Johannes Hoekendijk, *The Church Inside Out* (London: SCM, 1967).

10. Marty, *Public Church*; Emmanuel Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa: A Political Theology for Africa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).

11. Jürgen Moltmann, *God for a Secular Age: The Public Relevance of Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999); Miroslav Volf, *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2011), esp. 106–9 for witness; Vinoth Ramachandra, *Subverting Global Myths: Theology and the Public Issues Shaping Our World* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008).

12. Darrell L. Guder, *Called to Witness: Doing Missional Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015).

three, such as Lesslie Newbigin, Stanley Hauerwas,<sup>13</sup> and George Hunsberger.<sup>14</sup> However, I will go further. Not only will I integrate these three elements, but I will describe what public witness looks like in three actual case studies. This book moves from theoretical foundations (outlining a public missiology of the local congregation) to descriptive analysis (showing what it looks like in living color).

My central thesis is this: congregations participate in different movements, lending them a witness capable of interpenetrating the thickness of the public realm to witness to it from within.

### Why Thickness?

One should not be surprised to see a missiologist talking about movement. Sending and receiving remain central to our discipline. However, I will talk about movement in different kinds of ways. Geographical movement is one example of movement. Never before in history have we seen such incredible flows of migration occurring across the globe. But we are seeing other forms of movement in the world as well, and some of the most significant varieties occur within and around the local congregation. To make this point, I need to connect movement with thickness.

#### *The Relationship between Movement and Thickness*

Let me use the analogy of weaving. In order to weave, you must possess two critical components. First, you need to have various threads—or string, twine, hair, or anything that is long and supple and can be maneuvered to fit around other entities. Second, you must have movement, whereby the different pieces of thread can be wrapped around the other elements. The more threads being used, along with the greater movement of the pieces back and forth across each other, the thicker the resultant weave.

All congregations possess this back-and-forth movement. It is actually possible to diagram what it looks like. Take, for example, a map of your city and draw lines that connect the location of your church building with parishioners' neighborhoods, workplaces, schools, and places of leisure. I suspect that if you did this for just twenty families in your church, the map would display an ornate crisscrossing fabric of lines extending from your

13. Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989).

14. George Hunsberger, *The Story That Chooses Us: A Tapestry of Missional Vision* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015).

congregation throughout the city. However, each of these lines is not a one-way movement outward from the congregation but a two-lane highway with traffic streaming back and forth. The threads thicken through movement. Parishioners enter the church with their publics (carrying with them their notions of public life), where together with other believers they are exposed to Christ in the form of liturgy, sacrament, preaching, and worship. As congregants depart the church, they witness to their neighborhoods, work, and “third places” (locations where people spend time outside of work and home) in and through the liturgy, sacrament, preaching, and worship that have influenced their understanding of public life.

In this book I will draw on a wide range of metaphors for speaking of movement, from ecology to metallurgy, from weaving to communal characteristics. Theologians likewise use different analogies, especially to describe the Trinity. These include dance, drama, and dialogue. I will draw on all these resources to show how movement results in a thickening of our witness in and for the world.

### *What Kind of Thickness?*

Since the relationship between movement and thickness plays such a critical role in my argument, let me propose a few analogies to help us visualize what thickness looks like.

First, consider the seashore. As waves move back and forth—crashing against the beach, then pulling back with a mighty swell, and thundering once again on the coastline—we behold massive power capable of altering an entire landscape. Change happens slowly, over countless years. The natural beauty of the seashore arises through minutiae, as grains of sand get pressed together by the crashing of the waves, or as wind strikes relentlessly against the land, or as rain and sun alternate to bake the exposed earth into majestic outcroppings. Movement creates the majestic grandeur of the seashore.

Second, consider the making of alloys. Metals of various organic compounds are heated together in ovens, melted into liquids, then pressed together with tremendous force into a new solid. The new solid is then cooled rapidly to increase the cohesion of the particles into each other. Such movement (in terms of liquid-solid, or heating-cooling) results in a compound of greater strength than the individual parts.

Let me offer one further example. Years ago I traveled to a remote village church in eastern Kenya to conduct research. I asked the pastor if I could interview a few women after the service. He arranged for eight lay leaders to meet with me under an acacia tree. I asked the group of women one question,

and for the next forty-five minutes they spoke, disagreed slightly with each other, revised their statements, asked each other key clarifying questions, and eventually came to a consensus of agreement pertaining to my question. I never spoke again during those forty-five minutes. To this day, it is the best interview I ever conducted, largely because I let them talk and because their comfort with each other helped nuance their answer. The women provided me what Clifford Geertz calls “thick description.”<sup>15</sup>

In all these examples, back-and-forth movement results in thickness, whether the density of sand particles pressed into a seashore, the compounds combined to form alloy strength, or the collaborative voices of the women that give nuance to meaning. Back-and-forth movement results in a thickness of identity. And the ensuing thickness serves a purpose or mission. The seashore produces a diverse, integrated ecosystem for billions of creatures. Alloy metals form the frame of an airplane carrying people around the world. And the interview with the women helped nuance a critical cultural concept. In each of these examples, the thickness associated with movement produces a good. I want to explore what good the thickness of local congregations accomplishes within and for the public realm.

### *Why Is This Important?*

Let me suggest two reasons why it is helpful to talk about thickness and congregational witness. The first reason is theological. In God’s trinitarian nature we find a thickness of identity. I will explore this further in chapter 3, but for the present let me refer to the Trinity as integrated persons who, through eternal back-and-forth movement of sending and receiving, represent a thick, divine community of love. Who God is directly leads to what God is accomplishing in the world. The second reason is sociological. Publics have a thickness to them. The thickness of the public realm arises from the multiplicity of overlapping and interpenetrating publics. For some the thickness of the public realm is a thing of beauty; for many others it is a labyrinth of despair. Another way of speaking about thickness is to refer to complexity, and for the rest of the book I will be using these terms interchangeably.

Here is my basic point: it is not possible to witness to anything as thick (or complex) as the public realm with a thinness (or simplicity) of identity. We may think of a local congregation as a fairly simple entity, but it is actually

15. Geertz introduces this phrase in his essay “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theology of Culture” and then illustrates it in the essay “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 3–30, 412–53.

a complex organism. Or as Martyn Percy explains, “As anyone who has ever studied churches or denominations will know, the complexity, density, extensivity and intricacy of a congregation contains manifold layers of complexity.”<sup>16</sup> There are no simple congregations!

Rather than be discouraged by this fact, I ask us to embrace it. Complexity is not the enemy of Christianity and might just be our greatest ally. As I will share in chapter 3, complexity is a gift arising from the Trinity and flows into our world to create fruitfulness for all of life.

Of course, there are different kinds of complexity in the world. Complexity does not always lead to fruitfulness and in some cases results in great evil. John Wesley speaks of “complicated wickedness” to describe how many people experience the public realm. In her treatment of Wesley’s concept, Christine Pohl refers to it as “a complex intertwining of several fundamental problems: the absence of true religion, a deep social alienation, degradation and oppression, and acute physical need.”<sup>17</sup> We see this all around us in the world today. The distortion of God’s nature leads to atrocious social evils such as slavery, racism, sexism, and tribalism, along with corresponding economic and environmental ills such as poverty, malnutrition, homelessness, deforestation, and global warming. One of the reasons it’s complicated is that humans experience these less as singular ills and more as “complex, intertwining” social realities.

In the face of “complicated wickedness,” evangelicals have historically sought succor in the arms of romanticized visions of simplicity (whether as a return to a previous era or a retreat altogether from public life). N. K. Clifford explains, “The Evangelical Protestant mind has never relished complexity. Indeed its crusading genius, whether in religion or politics, has always tended toward an over-simplification of issues and the substitution of inspiration and zeal for critical analysis and serious reflection.”<sup>18</sup>

But there is another kind of complexity in this world, what Wesley calls a “complication of goodness,” and that, I propose, is what we find in the local congregation. As we stand before the dizzying complexity of the public realm with its mixing and intoxicating appeal, can we really expect God to do anything less than give us a different kind of complexity by which to witness to the public realm? We can throw up our hands in discouragement

16. Martyn Percy, *Shaping the Church: The Promise of Implicit Theology* (Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2010), 2.

17. Christine Pohl, “Practicing Hospitality in the Face of ‘Complicated Wickedness,’” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 42, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 11.

18. N. K. Clifford, “His Dominion: A Vision in Crisis,” *Studies in Religion* 2, no. 4 (1973): 323. Of course, we need not bifurcate zeal from critical analysis as this quotation suggests, but it does highlight a problem that has long haunted Western evangelicalism.

with local congregations, or we can look beneath the surface to see what God is doing through the various movements taking place within and around the church.

### What I Am Not Saying

Let me be clear about what I am not saying. When I talk about thickness (or complexity), I am not attempting to hide behind the obscure in order to say something profound. Nor am I suggesting that complexity or thickness lacks an order—that it's nothing but a free-for-all of movement. I am also not suggesting that only academic elites can witness to the public realm. The complexity I'm discussing in this book is thus not an intellectual complexity, like some giant Rubik's Cube. Instead, it's a complexity of movement, and I learned it from living in a rural Tanzanian village. Furthermore, at times complexity and simplicity might be intimately inter-related. For example, it is possible to experience a simplicity on the other side of complexity. That is perfectly compatible with the primary argument offered in this book.

I am also not saying that everything in God's mission is reducible to local congregations. I merely want to highlight that in local congregations we find all the resources necessary for public witness, which is why I refer to this book as a public missiology of the local congregation.

Finally, I am not putting forward one particular model of public witness. Every congregation exists in dynamic relationship with its surroundings, which is why sociologists speak of the church in ecological terms—much like an organism existing in a particular ecosystem.<sup>19</sup> In the second half of the book I offer three case studies to show diverse ways that actual congregations are doing public witness. These case studies are in no way meant to suggest what other churches should do. I am seeking merely to describe their public witness through movement and thickness. Every congregation is uniquely situated within and for its own context or ecosystem.

### Parishioners as Evangelists in and through Their Publics

Throughout this book I will highlight the critical role of parishioners in God's mission. By talking about the local congregation as the agent of a new society,

19. See, e.g., Nancy L. Eiesland and R. Stephen Warner, "Ecology: Seeing the Congregation in Context," in *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook*, ed. Nancy T. Ammerman et al. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 40–77.

I am referring to every person in the church, and especially the scattered church as a collective witness of God's reign within and for society.

Admittedly, clergy have a unique role in public witness. But this book is predicated on how parishioners utilize everyday life and work as the means of doing so. John Stackhouse refers to this as vocation: "Vocation is the divine calling to be a Christian in every mode of life, public as well as private, religious as well as secular, adult as well as juvenile, corporate as well as individual, female as well as male."<sup>20</sup> It is common for us to think of vocation through the lenses of a person's profession—and nothing I say in this book should question that. But vocation is much broader than a person's employment. Vocation happens in and through the ways the collective body of Jesus Christ inhabits public life.

Ultimately, I am making the case that parishioners serve as evangelists within and for the totality of public life. Perhaps another way of saying this is that when we share the gospel of Jesus Christ with another person, we do so through the basic resources of our humanity. We might conceptually witness to Christ in a wooden or transactional way—like giving people a get-out-of-hell-free card—but that is not what salvation really means. We are not saved *from* life but saved *in and for* the fullness of life. If this is true, and if the public realm emerges from the resources of the image of God entrusted to humans in creation, then this means that all of the things that emerge from human imaging (such as work, family, technology, power, and media) provide us with the means of extending salvation back into the public realm, for the flourishing of everything.

### My Own Social Location

Let me explain my own social location. This is essential, since public theologians and public missiologists alike acknowledge the critical role self-knowledge plays in how people do theological or missiological activity (what social scientists call "reflexivity"). No one hovers over the world as a disembodied spirit. We all occupy real space in the world, which means we inhabit a story and are located in time, place, and a particular community.

Speaking of social location in the singular implies that people interpret life from a sole social location. However, increasingly, people do not possess one discrete social location but overlap *between* stories, spaces, and communities in a world defined by migration and transnationalism. Hence, social location can also mean movement between social locations. For example, I

20. John G. Stackhouse Jr., *Making the Best of It: Following Christ in the Real World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 222.

am a third-generation missionary, raised with a foot in both East Africa and the United States. I was born in Kenya, grew up in upstate New York, studied in Wheaton, Illinois, and Leeds, England, lived extended periods of my adult life in East Africa, and am now back residing in Kentucky. What does this mean for my social location? In a word: confused! Admittedly, I am a white man and have benefited from being a white man in society. But I have also drunk deeply from the incredible streams of African Christianity.<sup>21</sup> And as a family we have experienced eleven international moves between four countries—Tanzania, the United States, Kenya, and England—while living on three continents. This back-and-forth movement has unsettled any feelings I have of operating out of a fixed identity.<sup>22</sup>

Perhaps an analogy would be helpful. I think of myself as belonging to an international airport. Of course, no one really lives in an international airport—and that is precisely the point. At an international airport, one hears different languages spoken by diverse groups of people, but no language, culture, or nation “owns” the place, unless you consider the country where it’s located—but then only nominally. People are on the move in an international airport. They experience liminality, moving fluidly between a number of places. And that is how I can best describe myself.

Why is this important? Theologians and missiologists write out of their own social location. Most of my public missiology colleagues do so out of conditions of secularity and the privatization of religion in the West. While I will also reflect on these realities, my concerns are much broader. I draw readily on Western and African literatures in my discussion. And as one might expect from a person who has moved internationally eleven times, I am reflecting on the conditions of movement in the world—not just in terms of migration but in terms of how movement results in a thickening of identity. This book, in part, reflects on my own experience in the world. As I have benefited from movement and its resultant thickening, so I am calling local congregations to witness through the same.

## The Structure of the Book

This book is divided into two parts. The first part, “Public Witness” (chaps. 1–5), lays out a theoretical framework for congregational witness, and the

21. Brian Stanley goes so far as to talk about “missionary conversion” to describe how missionaries travel to another country to convert others, only to find themselves converted to the ways people in that location do theology. See “Conversion to Christianity: Colonization of the Mind?,” *International Review of Mission* 92, no. 366 (2003): 315–31.

22. I don’t mean to suggest I don’t have a default identity. But even my default identity (American?) can easily get confused by the different contexts in which I have lived.

second part, “Congregations and Public Witness” (chaps. 6–9) describes in vivid detail what this looks like. After describing how we can study local congregations (chap. 6), I will offer case studies of three specific congregations: the first in Kenya (chap. 7), the second in Montreal (chap. 8), and the third in Nashville (chap. 9). Hence, the book starts broadly, examining a theoretical rationale for a public missiology, and then enters the churches to see what it looks like in living color.

In chapter 1 I am problematizing. I want to show why and how Christians in the West struggle with what to do with complex social problems. The purpose of this chapter is to draw the reader into a complex dilemma. It’s not just an intellectual problem, like some grand puzzle, but something we experience with our bodies, within and for local communities around the world.

After problematizing, I will explore the nature of contemporary publics. We have good resources for the study of culture, but almost nothing for explicating the complexity of the public realm. I will differentiate the public realm—in its broad expanse—from smaller publics and show how the former is composed of the latter. The goal of chapter 2 is less an exegesis of publics and more an introduction to the thickness of publics.

In chapter 3 I will narrate the complex story of God’s mission in the world and show how various kinds of back-and-forth movements contribute critically to that story. I will tell the story of God’s mission through the imagery of movement and thickness. God is taking us on a journey from particularity to universality, but without ever leaving particularity behind.<sup>23</sup> God is thus fashioning a thicker humanity in the world, and he is doing so through different kinds of movement.

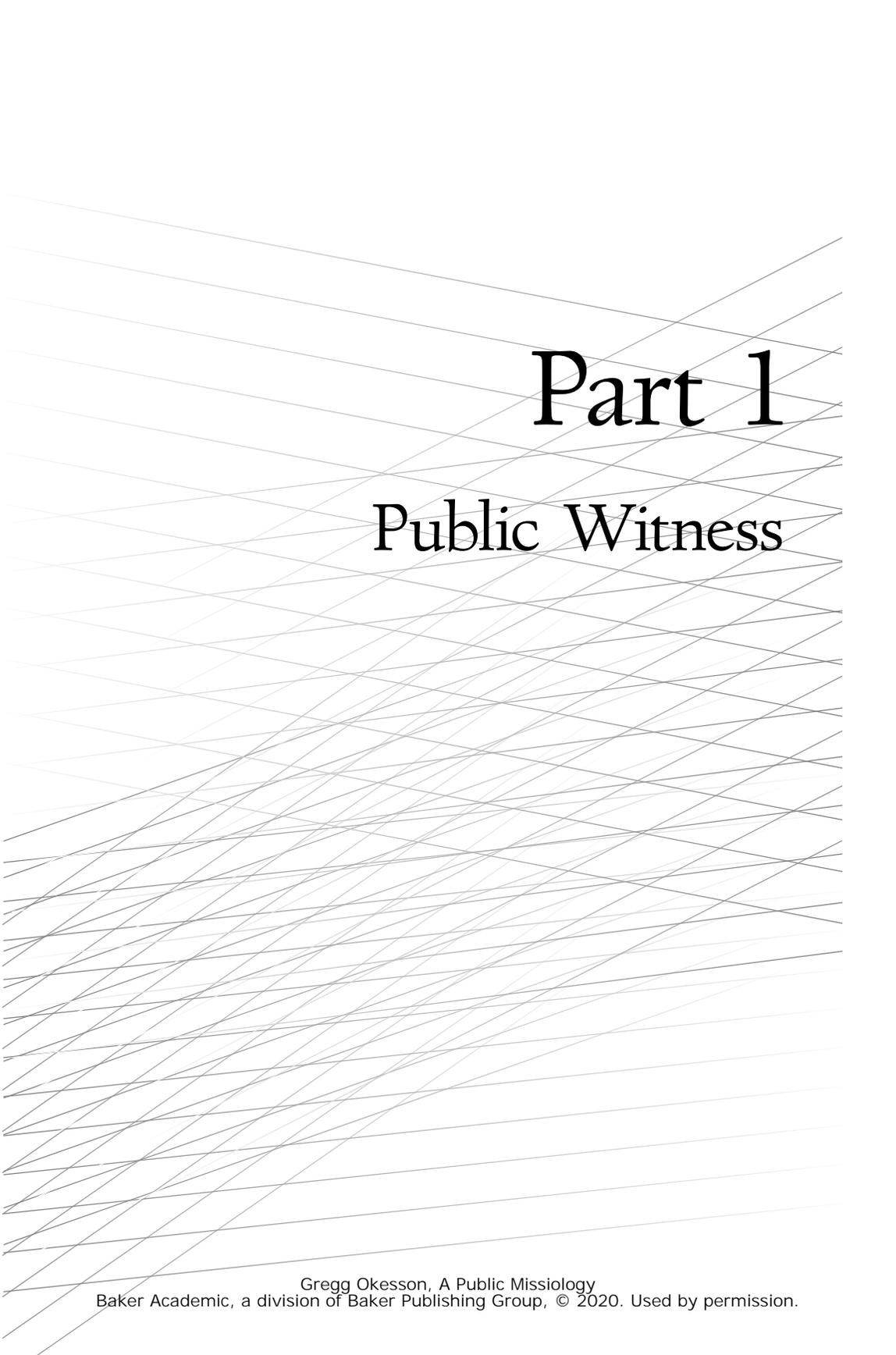
In chapter 4 I will lay out my thesis in full detail. I define what I mean by public missiology. I will relate this to public theology, showing similarities between the two disciplines while highlighting key differences. Chapter 5 will then focus on local congregations. I will study the various kinds of movement happening within and around local congregations and show how local congregations enter into the “open weave” of their surrounding publics through resources of liturgy, sacrament, and song. If chapter 4 is more theoretical in nature, chapter 5 shows what this looks like within local congregations.

In the second part of the book, I will transition to a more empirical focus. Rather than talking in the abstract about congregational witness, I describe what it actually looks like in three case studies. Chapter 6 will introduce

23. Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003).

the reader to the study of congregations, which moves us from theology into ethnography. In chapters 7, 8, and 9 we will journey into three specific congregations. The different locations reveal different kinds of movements taking place in and around local congregations. In those chapters, we will be introduced to “thick doxology” and its connections with agricultural development (in Kenya); “thick place” and witness to the city of Montreal; and “thick identity” and witness to race and ethnicity (in Nashville).

Let’s begin this journey by discussing why we need a public missiology of local congregations.



# Part 1

## Public Witness

# 1

## Why Congregational Witness?

The problem is not simple and the answer is not going to be simple either.

—C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*<sup>1</sup>

**W**hy witness to the public realm? And why do so through local congregations? Those are two of the questions I will be asking in this opening chapter. My intention is to draw the reader into a complex dilemma involving the public realm and make the case for why we need to witness to it—within and through local congregations.

As I shared in the introduction, “public” has become all the rage these days. And so it should be. In the public realm, we work, shop, eat, and play. It’s where we laugh, cry, and relate. We participate in the public realm with our bodies and experience it with our affections. However, the public realm is not just empirical, something we can point to and say, “That’s the public realm!”—such as with a coffee shop down the street—but it operates at another level of existence. Charles Taylor refers to a “social imaginary,” which he defines as “the ways in which [ordinary people] imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations which are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and

1. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Collier, 1943), 33.

images that underlie these expectation.”<sup>2</sup> Hence, although we experience the public realm as a proximate place (such as where people physically gather), it is also notional (how people imagine public life).

Bringing together physical and imaginative dimensions is critical for what I am arguing in this chapter. We have developed good resources for confronting the more empirical aspects of public life, such as development for addressing physical dimensions of poverty or advocacy for confronting political issues. But we do not really know what to do with the imaginative (invisible) dimensions of public life, and we possess almost nothing for making sense of thick publics, especially those formed through interpenetration and overlap.

And yet the public realm exerts great influence on humans. It’s the stuff of nation-states, Wall Street, Hollywood, and the United Nations, while no less the site of parks, coffee shops, malls, and restaurants. The public realm spans far and near. And if a proximate public, such as a city park, shapes human existence, then social imaginaries, such as notions of progress or freedom, do so with greater power. We interact with the public realm every time we turn on the television or scroll through the internet. It’s the stuff of daily existence and where we are human together with others.

I will explain in chapter 2 what the public realm is and how it operates. But at this point let me underscore its complexity or thickness. We like to think of the public realm in simple ways, such as the coffee shop down the street or prominent domains such as politics. We then correlate particular domains of public life with key locations, such as politics with Washington, DC, economics with Wall Street, and media with Hollywood. At one level, these correlations are accurate. A coffee shop resides in the public realm, and Washington, DC, is certainly associated with politics. However, publics do not stand still.<sup>3</sup> The public realm is composed of many elements that interpenetrate one another in a wild dance. Wall Street is heavily influenced by decisions occurring in Washington, DC, as well as conflicts taking place across the globe in the Arabian Peninsula. Meanwhile, Hollywood has great economic power and shapes people’s social imaginaries. Hence, the public realm may seem like a simple thing, but it owes its existence to different kinds of movement. People experience the public realm thickly.

We enjoy some of this thickness, such as visiting downtown London on a warm summer day and hearing the sounds of laughter, walking through shops, and riding the Underground. Other elements of thickness feel different.

2. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007), 171.

3. I will use the language of “publics” to refer to the multiplicity of overlapping and interpenetrating publics, and the “public realm” to refer to the collective whole where all of these publics exist.

When sin worms its way into the public realm, it does not sit comfortably in any one domain. For example, a transnational company seeks to increase its profit share by outsourcing manufacturing costs to a business located in East Africa. That business is able to win the contract because the owner is the son of a leading politician, and the business gains its own profits by hiring day laborers at a salary of one dollar a day and by securing rights to access the city's water supply. Day laborers cannot afford to commute and therefore set up a squatter camp next to the factory. They end up cutting down all the trees in the vicinity to cook their meals. Meanwhile, the nearby city experiences a dire water shortage due to decreased supply, raising the cost of living for all its residents. In this example, economics interrelates with politics and affects the environment, which subsequently influences economics across the entire city. The sin of greed brings forth more greed, resulting in increased poverty and environmental decay across the entire region. Hence, if publics arise through movement, sin spreads through movement, resulting in what John Wesley calls "complicated wickedness."

In this chapter I will explain why we need a public missiology. To do so, I will problematize. I want to show why we struggle to engage the public realm theologically and missiologically, especially as sin enters into the thickness of the public realm.

But first, let's begin with a story.

## A Story of Publics

Growing up, I never spent time thinking about the public realm. I probably viewed it as a natural (albeit sinful) part of "the world." The public realm certainly was not anything my local congregation saw any value in considering, except to repeatedly warn people of its potential hazards.

And yet I was daily immersed in the public realm. I attended public schools, rode my bike around the neighborhood, shopped in malls, watched television, played sports in local parks, ate in restaurants, voted in elections (when I was old enough), and studied psychology and theology at a Christian liberal arts college. After graduating from college, I devoted more than a decade to working with American youth culture but still did not give much thought to the public realm. I dabbled in the study of culture (such as reading *Rolling Stone* magazine and watching MTV to better understand current trends in youth culture) but devoted most of my time to doing evangelism and discipleship with individuals, without connecting these activities with the public contexts in which the youth lived. I did

not consider the public realm or think about how to witness to it with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

I first gave any consideration to the public realm when my family moved to a rural village in Tanzania. This may sound surprising to some. Yet the public realm is as much the stuff of rural African life as it is of urban American culture. In fact, that's where I first became aware of the public realm and especially the density of publics.

Before moving there, I nurtured romantic visions of life in Africa. I envisioned sitting with neighbors around a fire and telling stories as elongated shadows danced across the African landscape; or I saw myself farming a small plot of land into abundance, while acacia and baobab trees rose majestically across the sprawling plains. Looking back, these visions were not just romantic; they were simple. I can't put a finger on the reasons for desiring simplicity. Perhaps I felt disillusioned with Western forms of complexity, or maybe I wanted to return to my family heritage (as a third-generation African missionary). I'm really not sure. I only know that any visions of simplicity were quickly vanquished by real life in the village.

The village of Selare abuts the Maasai Steppe in north-central Tanzania.<sup>4</sup> The people living there are Warangi: Bantu by ethnolinguistic descent and socioreligiously Muslim. Our village had approximately fifteen hundred people. The landscape was arid and hard. People worked tirelessly from sunup to sundown and, because of the scarcity of food, had little nourishment to feed their meager frames. The women started every day by making a fire and sweeping the dirt outside their homes; the men set off to the fields, driving hoes relentlessly into the hard, red earth. Young boys led cows and goats in an endless search for anything green, while girls assisted with household chores, such as collecting water and wood or cooking food.

I knew life would be hard. It was rather the complexity of public life that surprised me. We lived eight hours from the nearest city of Arusha. There was no electricity or phone service anywhere within a three hours' drive. We had no internet or banks and only one small shop in the center of the village, where we purchased basic items such as matches, kerosene, and maize. All the things we normally associate with public life in the West were conspicuously absent. But public life in the little village of Selare was anything but simple.

I also first became aware of what Wesley calls "complicated wickedness" when living in the village—though I have come to see that it was always there

4. Some of this material first appeared in Gregg A. Okesson, "Public Theology for Global Development: A Case Study Dealing with 'Health' in Africa," *The Asbury Journal* 67, no. 1 (2012): 56–76.

in front of me, whether growing up in the American suburbs or pastoring American youth. There was nothing more “wicked” about public life in Africa than what I experienced in the States, only the people were more vulnerable to its effects, and we shared in their vulnerability. As a white male, I had never bumped into complicated wickedness before (and it is usually with our bodies that we experience complex forms of sin). But in the village we toiled alongside our neighbors in the fields; my entire family became sick with malaria, worms, and tuberculosis; and we felt the ravages of malnutrition. Of course, we did not experience any of these to the degree our neighbors did. We had a vehicle and money to seek medical help in the city of Arusha eight hours away, and we could purchase fruit and vegetables to supplement our diet. Nevertheless, we felt complex forms of public life with our bodies.

What we experienced opened my eyes to sin in public places. Our neighbors were trapped in a labyrinth. In the beginning, I searched frantically for simple solutions to alleviate their poverty. I experimented with irrigation and purchased new technologies from the city. I brought back supplies to help improve the water supply to the village, only to find that each of these “solutions” engendered new dilemmas. A new faucet required a change in community behavior and was soon broken. Advanced technology for tilling soil required financial investment and led to increased division between family groups. I felt frustrated. I watched people die daily and grasped for any “solution” I could find, only to discover that my neighbors had tried all of them. And then they told me of a hundred other things they had attempted and why those didn’t work. Theirs was not a deficiency of intellect, innovation, or effort. Quite the contrary, their capacities astounded me. It was rather how sin entered into their everyday public life that made their plight so dire.

The rains would come only to end abruptly, and everything would die. On the off chance the rains continued, caterpillars, locusts, and birds infested the crops, devouring everything in sight. And when the villagers managed to harvest crops, so did many others, and the price of maize or sorghum would plunge because of supply and demand. A few well-to-do family groups had the luxury of storing produce until they could sell it at a higher price, but even for them, insects ravaged the crops while in storage. Meanwhile, unscrupulous middlemen descended on the village at various points each year, offering to purchase maize or sorghum at insultingly low prices, taking advantage of the people’s desperation.

Most of the homes were constructed of mud, making them susceptible to insects, damp, and disease. The rains would come and bring relief from heat, while bringing waves of sickness to the region. People died of malaria, typhoid, pneumonia, tuberculosis, and most commonly, as I discovered later,

HIV/AIDS. Funerals occurred several times a week. In the beginning, they told me the cause of death was malaria or pneumonia, only to admit later that people died as the result of “the sickness nobody talks about.” My “job” in the community was that of ambulance driver. People would come to my house in the middle of the night, usually when a person’s fever was highest and all other traditional efforts had failed. We filled the vehicle with family members and raced off over tenuous roads to the nearest government hospital three hours away. Many of the sick survived; some did not. Mothers gave birth in my truck. I also transported corpses so they could be buried in the family homestead, a socioreligious value held by the people living in the village.

Community leaders requested my help with informal training programs to raise awareness of health-related needs. We walked throughout the village discussing things like sanitation and dietary issues with family groups. Each of the solutions engendered socioeconomic implications and necessitated religious and cultural rationale. To boil water to purify drinking water, the people needed to collect firewood from the mountains; not only was this illegal, but it required them to enter into the ambiguous domain of the spirits (and cutting down trees led to deforestation). Or if they bought mosquito nets, they had less money for daily needs, and it required changes to how they lived, since most of the people did not own beds. Hence, “health” was not an autonomous domain but was combined with economic, environmental, and spiritual issues. Agriculture was also economic, as well as intensely political, because of the absence of property boundary markers. Each of these domains did not just sit on top of the others but burrowed into other facets of life. Furthermore, this sleepy little village was surprisingly well connected with national and global stages. People listened to the Swahili BBC and actively aligned themselves with religious groups in Saudi Arabia and Zanzibar. Local and global were locked in a complex dance of movement and melody, of which I could make little sense.

I listened to my neighbors’ questions as we drank strong coffee or walked through their fields. Their queries led me deeper into the swirling complexity of public life. Where were the rains? How should they feed their children? Should they spend any money to send their children to school or have them work in the fields? After I earned a certain amount of trust in the community, they confided in me their spiritual fears. How should they ward off evil? What were the causes of sickness? And when my own infant son experienced demonic attacks, everything took on a new level of meaning. Theirs was a cosmology far larger than anything I had experienced in the West.

Here is my main purpose in narrating this story: little in my theological education prepared me for what I experienced in the village. I held degrees in psychology, theology, and intercultural studies and prided myself on living

within the confluence of multiple disciplines. However, the complexity of public life in that rural village astounded me. Our intentions were to plant a church, and thus I was constantly thinking about gospel and culture. Even here I encountered difficulties. How does the subject of God relate to development, salvation to agriculture, or ecclesiology to health? And then there were the “invisible” things we bumped up against in our pursuit to alleviate human suffering. My theological training might have provided a few meager insights for encountering evil spirits, but it offered me almost nothing for dealing with sin in systems and structures. White evangelicals living in North America do not consider such things. Systems and structures usually work for us. But in Tanzania I felt them alongside my neighbors. And thus I “saw” public life as if for the very first time.

Of course, I had always lived in the public realm. In one sense, none of this was new to me. My neighbors merely bestowed on me the great honor of seeing life through their eyes. I was shocked by what I experienced. Their lives ultimately led me in the direction of public missiology.

I learned that there are no simple societies. Our theological training in the West often struggles to interpenetrate the thick webs of public life. Once I saw the public realm—or better yet, experienced it through my neighbors and my own body—I was led on a journey that became this book.

We all experience life thickly. In one sense, thickness is a natural part of living together with others in public life. But it’s also one of the main reasons we fail to witness to publics. We have been trained (whether explicitly or implicitly) to think of the gospel simply (or thinly) and thus approach the subject of witness by focusing on the lowest common denominator: the conversion of individuals. Let me say up front: we should never neglect the “for me-ness” of the gospel! However, salvation is more than individual conversion. Public missiology requires a robust understanding of salvation (what David Bosch refers to as a “total comprehensive salvation”<sup>5</sup>), along with a complex analysis of public life. Hence, I will argue that public missiology is thick witness within and for a thick society.

Before I unpack what this looks like, let me explain why it is necessary.

### Why Public Missiology?

My previous story provides the point of departure for my journey into public missiology. When I moved to Tanzania, I did so as a missionary, a church

5. David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 399–400.

planter, and a theologically trained development practitioner. I had devoted years to sharing the gospel with youth and serving as the deacon of outreach at my local congregation. I knew the gospel (or so I thought), and I certainly knew how to share the gospel with individuals—just not within and for thick publics.

Nothing in my life or theological training prepared me for what I experienced in the village. I reached frantically into my theological tool belt to find anything that would help my neighbors, but to little avail. Their predicament forced me to think anew about my theological heritage. It caused me to read Scripture afresh through a larger understanding of salvation. None of this moved me away from the gospel, or evangelism, but always more deeply into it. And it has not lessened my interest in missiology but expanded it into what some of us are calling “public missiology.”

If we believe God created everything “good,” and redemption is the reconciliation of all things to the Source of that goodness (Christ himself, as we see in Eph. 1:10), then we cannot restrict salvation to individuals but instead extend it to everything that emerges from human imaging (work, family, and other institutions of human life), along with the realm of creation (Paul explains we are eternally linked to the redemption of creation—e.g., Rom. 8:19–25).

The church is called to “make known” God’s wisdom to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms (Eph. 3:10), which, as Walter Wink makes clear, must involve both spiritual and material realities, refusing to separate the two.<sup>6</sup> By highlighting the church in Ephesians 3, Paul foregrounds the reality that God redeems the world through communities that embody the kingdom of God in all aspects of their lives. Hence, we need a gospel thick enough to interpenetrate the public realm, where people live, work, eat, and relate. Where life happens!

Unfortunately, I did not possess that when we moved to Tanzania, and maybe you are wondering whether you do as well.

Simple answers did not help my neighbors. And sharing the gospel as a private, individual message of propositional truth did not do anything to address the dire predicament of poverty in which my neighbors lived. Developing a public missiology is also critical for those of us living in the West, where complex forms of racism, poverty, human trafficking, sexism, and the intermingling of economic and political ideologies with religious resources daily vexes public life. We have been trained to witness to individuals but not

6. Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 5.

to the complex publics that spin, turn, and merge together as if participating in some large ballroom dance.

Let me lay out five problems that have contributed to our current situation.

*Problem 1: Theology Divorced from Life*

Those of us in the West have been trained to associate theology with the private realm, divorced from all public realities. Theology happens in churches and seminaries (if we assume those to be “private” locations), done by specialists we call pastors and theologians. And the primary goal of theology is to address spiritual aspects of life, while guarding theology from being tarnished by the public realm.

Of course, this is a particular problem for Western societies, where the Enlightenment project gradually expanded the scope of the public realm through scientific inquiry, while marginalizing religion in the process.<sup>7</sup> As public domains enlarged in scope and legitimacy, the private domain shrunk and was questioned. As the secular realm became synonymous with all things public, the sacred diminished in scope and at times retreated into the safety of private ghettos. Christians of various stripes reinforced this divide by interpreting the public realm as synonymous with sin and corruption, and the private realm (erroneously associated with the church) as associated with salvation and purity. This binary cartography continues to haunt us. The task of theology, according to this very limited cosmology, is to protect the purity of the church by guarding the frontiers where the church meets the public realm.<sup>8</sup>

For theological institutions, this means the theology we teach usually revolves around private and spiritual concerns, with limited contact with public domains. We see this in the different categories of systematic theology (God, salvation, church, and eschatology) and the struggles we in the West experience relating them with public life. We need more attention given to movement. How does the doctrine of God provide resources for encountering injustices in the world? How does salvation relate to global poverty? How might our doctrines of ecclesiology address economic or political ideologies?

7. I am simplifying things for the sake of argument. For a more complete picture, we would need to talk about scholasticism, the influence of the Reformation(s), and the ensuing ecclesiastical wars, along with other developments associated with the Enlightenment, the rise of Pietism, and many other influences.

8. Let me make clear that boundaries are critical. No church is utterly open to its surroundings. I am not arguing we should do away with boundaries. I am merely suggesting that the Enlightenment cartography of drawing boundaries according to simplistic binaries is a project we need to reconsider.

And what connections can we make between eschatology and God's intentions for all of creation?

This problem bleeds into the churches, where we attempt to keep all the messiness of the public realm on the outside so we can "do church" in a purer manner. Let me say that I believe deeply in purity, but the church is pure not by distancing itself from public life. The church is a different kind of public in the world, and its publicness relates to a different way of being human. But that is not how we normally think about the church. We think of it as a "private" entity, removed from public life. And thus the "theology" we do in local congregations is often intentionally distanced from the everydayness of life that people experience in the public realm.

The great irony is that publics are always entering churches with parishioners (and also with clergy)! Publics walk through the doors in the form of invisible ideologies and social imaginaries, which shape the affections of people sitting in the pews. We allow some of the elements into the church, such as our allegiance to a local sports team (where we celebrate a victory from the pulpit or wear a sweater with the team's logo). Churches actively court other public dimensions, such as endorsing various forms of capitalism as it relates to a forthcoming church building project or helping people get out of debt. But then we attempt to restrict other forms of public life. How do you decide which forms of public life to preach about, sing to, pray for, or liturgize and which to guard against?

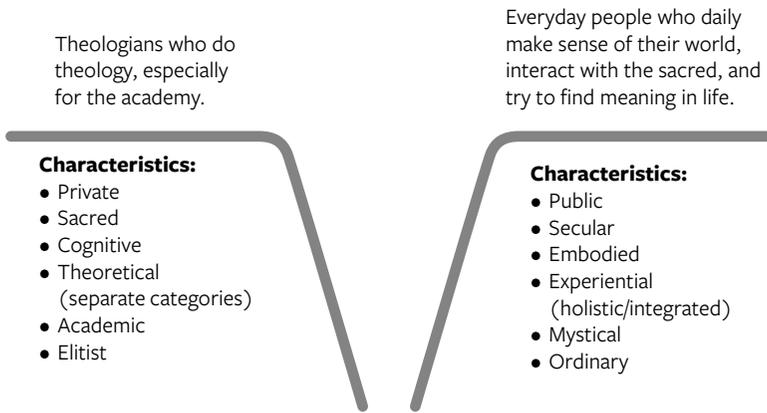
The lingering assumption behind our theological heritage is that theology is a sacred discipline having nothing to do with the secular world. We have established it as an academic discipline located within the faculties of cognition but not embodiment, affections, or social realities. And we think of theology as associated with spiritual specialists, the theologians or pastors, but not pertaining to average people sitting in the pews.

And yet parishioners are doing theology all the time, and doing it in public places. We may not readily call their tweets, posts, discussions over a cup of coffee, or stories around the water cooler by the name theology. But parishioners are actively trying to make sense of their worlds and doing so through resources of God, creation, and eschatological visions of where the world is heading. People do so politically by venting frustration at the current legislative crisis, economically as they ponder the latest round of layoffs, and in relation to public issues—such as nationalism, immigration, or the latest movie hitting the theaters. None of this implies their theology is faithful to Scripture. Undoubtedly, they might use their theologizing to endorse secular eschatologies of materialism or as a means of baptizing quasi-religious forms of nationalism. At this point, I am not interpreting the merits of their

theology. I am just highlighting the simple fact that parishioners are always doing theology in public spaces.

Here’s the problem. On one side of a chasm, we find theology “proper.” This is what we teach in our seminaries and churches. The theology done on this side arises from spiritual specialists—pastors, theologians, historians, and biblical scholars—and leans toward private, sacred, cognitive, and theoretical characteristics. On the other side of the chasm is “ordinary” theology. It’s done by people sitting in the pews as they make sense of their public lives. And they further do it in public spaces and by drawing on secular, embodied, experiential, and even mystical resources (see fig. 1.1).

Figure 1.1  
**The Divide**



What does this mean for theology? If you restrict theology to the vocation of specialists who do theology in carefully sequestered locations, then you will inevitably end up only talking about what matters to those spaces. This does not mean you won’t discuss important things. You may very well engage critical issues, such as God’s nature, place, and human identity (all topics I will address later in the case studies), but you will discuss those topics in ways that restrict them to sacred antecedents. Hence, when we teach God’s nature (e.g., the Trinity), we will primarily relate the Trinity to what we do inside the church and not what we experience in public life.<sup>9</sup> This is the legacy we have received, and it is hard to unlearn those lessons. And it

9. A couple years ago I taught a Sunday school class in my local church where I dealt with the public significance of the Trinity. It was a fun and helpful exercise for me (and hopefully for the parishioners) to grapple with how the Trinity moves us out into the public realm. For more on this, see Lesslie Newbigin, “The Trinity as Public Truth,” in *The Trinity in a*

makes it virtually impossible to engage Hollywood, racism, globalization, or local issues confronting your hometown—or the dire, complex problems facing my village in Tanzania.

### *Problem 2: Missiology Divorced from Theology*

Not only is theology divorced from life, but this problem is exacerbated by the separation of theology from missiology. Theology’s flight from missiology occurred slowly over time, as the missionary impulse took place at the frontiers of Christianity (what we might call the margins), while theology gradually became associated with the center of Christendom (the places of power). This separation of the margins from the center deprived theology of the invaluable resources of Christian witness as it has always taken place in public spaces.<sup>10</sup>

To narrate the story of theology’s separation from missiology, we need to begin with the early church. David Bosch calls mission “the mother of theology”<sup>11</sup> and explains that throughout the first few centuries “theology was not a luxury of the world-conquering church but was generated by the emergency situation in which the missionizing church found itself.”<sup>12</sup> As theology responded to the emergency situation of the missionizing church, it invariably faced public realities, such as persecution, poverty, slavery, and civil forms of religion (e.g., emperor worship). Daniel Treier refers to theology during the premodern period as “an aspect of *paideia* or *humanitas*, the Greco-Roman emphasis upon forming people for public life.”<sup>13</sup> Early on, both theology and mission were focused on public life.

Throughout the growth of the early church, theology and mission related to each other in an intimate dance: theology as public wisdom responding to the issues that the “missionizing church” encountered from the margins, such as witness amid persecution. The early church also did not separate what believers did in their gathering from what they did in their scattering. How the church formed itself *from* worship became the church’s primary witness

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*Pluralistic Age: Theological Essays on Culture and Religion*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 1–8.

10. Andrew Walls calls this the “gospel test,” referring to Kenneth Latourette’s reflection on “the effect of Jesus on individual lives and civilizations.” See *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), 18; Walls quotes Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, vol. 7 (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1945), 418.

11. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 15–16.

12. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 489. Here Bosch is paraphrasing a point made by Martin Kähler; see *Schriften zur Christologie und Mission* (Munich: Kaiser, 1971), 189.

13. Daniel J. Treier, *Virtue and the Voice of God: Toward Theology as Wisdom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 5.

*amid* public life.<sup>14</sup> Or as Morna Hooker explains, “Holiness [was, for the early church,] about transforming *this* world.”<sup>15</sup> The house fellowships served as the primary means for the public transformation of society.

Through the years, this changed. I won’t take the time to explain how and why it changed. Suffice it to say that the center of theologizing activity became separated from the margins of mission through the alliance of the church’s power with the state after Constantine’s conversion. With the rise of the Enlightenment project, we see further changes. Not only do we find the dichotomizing of sacred and secular, along with private and public, which I discussed in the previous section, but theology began to mirror the hard sciences in regard to specializations. Up to this point, “there was only one discipline of theology, without sub-divisions.”<sup>16</sup> Now we find the development of subfields of biblical, dogmatic, historical, and practical theology—but little integration between these fields, and virtually no room for mission. Eventually mission was added, but it did not fit comfortably into any of the specializations, leading Bosch to say, “Missiology became the theological institution’s ‘department of foreign affairs,’ dealing with the exotic but at the same time the peripheral.”<sup>17</sup>

The separation of theology and mission carries three implications for the subject material of this book. First, theology after the Enlightenment concerns itself with what happens in private, spiritual places, far away from the public realm. Meanwhile, mission always happens in public life, leading some scholars to rightfully question whether public missiology is nothing other than a redundancy of terms. As a multidisciplinary field, missiology is focused on movement *into*, conversion *of*, and integration *with* the entire realm of God’s redemptive work. Apart from mission, theology in the West has historically struggled to know what to do with the full scope of public life or to witness to it in and through the gospel.<sup>18</sup>

Second, theology in the West is associated more with various centers of Christian thought and less with what is happening on the margins, where

14. For an excellent treatment of the habitus of the early church, see Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016).

15. Morna Hooker and Frances Young, *Holiness and Mission: Learning from the Early Church about Mission in the City* (London: SCM, 2010), 25.

16. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 489.

17. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 492.

18. With the recent rise of public theology, some of that is changing, and not surprisingly, public theology is actively courting the voices of missiologists. Recently, William Storrar and Dirkie Smit have invited our working group of public missiology to discuss shared interests with them at Princeton Theological Seminary. This gives hope that theologians and missiologists might work more closely in the years to come.

the gospel confronts unbelief. Not only does this lead theology to speak to itself in theological echo chambers, but it deprives theology of the benefits of “emergency situations” around the world. The growth of world Christianity as a scholarly field of study has helped us see that without the margins (as they are called), the “center” can easily become dangerous and even toxic in nature, defining theology for all people everywhere according to its own cultural suppositions. We need a healthy relationship between centers and margins—and this is something missiology offers theology.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, the separation of theology and missiology leads to a situation where theology struggles to do anything with publics other than “engage” them. It’s true that some public theologians, such as Duncan Forrester and Max Stackhouse, use the language of witness, but it’s unclear what they mean by this word. It is further uncertain how this language relates to salvation. Whatever the reasons for the hesitation—and some of it is undoubtedly due to a desire to use accessible language, along with legitimate concerns arising from the colonial heritage of Western missions—missiology offers theology a robust soteriology within and for the public realm.

### *Problem 3: The Thickness of the Public Realm*

I won’t spend much time with this problem since it is the subject of the following chapter and I have already hinted at the problem previously in this chapter. But let me explicitly state my concerns here.

We live in the public world but rarely consider it, and when we do, it is usually one dominant aspect of the public realm (say, politics or economics). We avoid considering the overlap and interpenetration occurring within the public realm, since that intimates great complexity. It is easier to think of publics one-dimensionally. We also like to treat them empirically. But the public realm is both empirical *and* notional, with an implicit spirituality behind the public realm that influences people far more than they would like to admit. Furthermore, we rarely connect theology with the public realm, and when we do, it is with singular domains (not with all the messiness that happens in everyday life).

And yet we are immersed in the public realm daily. It is the stuff of human life. In it we experience the building blocks of identity: ethnicity, race, place, family, education, and social status. We carry such things with us wherever we

19. The language of margins is critical in light of shifts taking place in today’s world, and especially with the secularization of the West. It may soon happen (and some argue it already has) that the West will become the margin—and it is my hope that public missiology will help prepare us for witnessing to all of life from the margins.