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# THE PUBLIC PLACE FOR THE PEOPLE OF GOD<sup>1</sup>

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The appropriate role of Christians in the public place was an issue for the early church and has continued to be so throughout its history. A Christian in the early post-apostolic church defended active participation in his letter to a non-Christian, Diognetus, in the second century. The post-Constantinian church was suddenly faced with radical developments when its public role was unexpectedly expanded.<sup>2</sup> The sixteenth-century Reformation was deeply divided on the issue, with Anabaptists taking a radically opposite position to 'main-stream' reformers.<sup>3</sup> Today's church is no different. No consensus can be reached over the participation of the people of God in the public place. In recent years leaders of evangelical groupings in the United Kingdom sought to meet together to plan for a conference to discuss this issue and were unable to reach agreement among themselves, although all would have affirmed Scripture as their touchstone for their particular views. Why could there be no consensus?

Some perceive the role of the church as that of making a foray into society primarily for evangelistic purposes, or for fuelling that endeavour by securing the requisite financial resources. Others see the main focus along the lines of contemporary Roman Catholic thinking in terms of the mandate given by Jesus in his option for the poor based on gospel poverty. Some of the discussion has tended to bog down the issues because of the use of such terms as 'social gospel', 'kingdom vs. creation' ethics, and the theological or ideological constructs thought to rest behind them.<sup>4</sup> The concern of some is that the social implications of the gospel may end up as the message of the gospel. That concern may not be unfounded. Those with an understanding of the last one hundred years of church history know what happened subsequent to the early missionary conferences of a century ago. They originally met to coordinate and harness the vast force of Christian evangelists and church planters in order to evangelise the globe, only to be absorbed into the WCC. That excellent mandate of the last century was in effect swallowed up by social and political agendas.<sup>5</sup>

How can the discussion be furthered? The aim of all evangelicals has always been to set agendas based on responsible biblical interpretation and not simply to be driven by some external Hegelian thesis or antithesis, or even a skilful synthesis from a non-biblical construct. We

want to know what the public place of Christians is, based on God's word, for we have a God who is the God of the whole world. He cares enough to send his rain on his world and indeed blesses the whole of humankind with his providential care. He gives his general revelation to all born into this world. It must mean that to be the people of God in his world our horizons and concerns should be no less than his. There needs to be careful exegesis of the relevant biblical texts understood within the framework of the context into which God's word was originally sent, a biblical theology of the public place, as well as a careful understanding of and concern for our own particular societies. We will do this task better when we understand the various horizons of the public place to which the word of God was originally addressed before seeking to apply it to the many twentieth-century public places in which worldwide Christianity is now called upon to operate as salt and light.

In order to explore this issue it is proposed (1) to explain what was meant by the 'public place' in the ancient world, (2) to ask which public place is an appropriate model for us, (3) to examine some of the New Testament teaching on conduct in the public place, and (4) to discuss what is seen as negative and positive conduct in the public place. These issues are being tackled because they were biblical issues for the people of God then, and, it is suspected, they continue to be important issues at the end of the second Christian millennium.

### I. WHERE IS THE PUBLIC PLACE?

The classic passages to which most Christians almost instinctively turn when the term 'public place' is used are those seen to be dealing with 'church and state', i.e. Romans 13:1-7 and 1 Peter 2:13-17. Even here there is no agreement among evangelicals on these passages. They are sometimes seen as a description of Roman government and a prescription for our day, or an ideal as unobtainable in this present century as it is now thought to have been in the first. But that does not encompass the whole of what was meant by 'the public place'.

In New Testament times 'the public place' was called *politeia*. To transliterate it from Greek into English and conclude that it meant 'politics' would be wrong. The word was used to refer to all those activities which occur outside the household.<sup>6</sup> For the early Christians it would not have included the assembling of believers for the purpose of thanksgiving, encouragement, consolation and exhortation (1 Cor. 14:3), as these were held in a private place, i.e. households. As daily work was normally performed under the umbrella of households, that would not come under the heading of *politeia*.<sup>7</sup> *Politeia* encompassed matters relating to the welfare of the city. It would include benefactions by the rich for enhancing the environs of the city with the erection of buildings, pavements and aqueducts, and the securing of its survival by

the subsidy or gift of grain in times of severe shortages such as dogged the 40s and 50s in the Roman East. The courts used for civil and criminal litigation were included, as were the meetings of the *demos*, i.e. the secular *ekklēsia*, those meetings of the city council, the activities of the civic officials including those who administered the monthly corn dole and the child endowments for the privileged citizens, and the collection of rents and poll taxes, etc. All these activities came within the purview of *politeia*. Therefore, when we talk about putting the people of God in their public place, we are asking questions about their 'public' activities in contrast to their 'private' activities in their households. Our interest is to see what the relevant parts of the Bible teach about these issues.

### II. WHICH PUBLIC PLACE IN THE BIBLE?

But to what part of the Bible do we go? Some will feel that there is every justification in going to the Old Testament and moving those sections deemed relevant to us directly into the twentieth century without filtering it through any cultural grid or the New Testament era of salvation. But to which part of the Old Testament does one go? There are clearly distinctions drawn as to how the people of God operated in the public place in the 'promised land' as against the pre-conquest situation and also those living in the exile after 589 BC until the restoration. The particular cultural setting determined how their role as the people of God expressed itself.

The public place, therefore, in certain eras of Israel's history was in Egypt and Babylon. At other times it was in pre-conquest and post-conquest Palestine. As Egyptologists and Assyriologists have demonstrated, the public places were different, as indeed they were in pre-conquest and post-conquest Palestine. In most of these contexts the public place was already a given. In the promised land the Mosaic law determined how God's people should function in that place.

For those who take their starting point in the New Testament, again which public place is deemed appropriate? If it is the Province of Judea, then the roots of its public place for Jewish Christians had been set, based in part on the Old Testament law of Moses by the returned exiles, but substantially diluted by the secularism of the Hasmonean dynasty and eroded further by the cultural pluralism of the Herodian dynasty. We see not only a residue of Mosaic stipulations, but also a measure of adaptation to Greek and Roman civilisation.

If the public place was in cities in provinces of the Roman empire it was basically Greek in origin, centring around long-established conventions. In Roman colonies such as Philippi and Corinth, the public place was consciously modelled on Rome itself, for they owed their public place primarily to Roman civilisation. Of course, there are situations in

which it is right to speak of the 'Greco-Roman' public place in the East given the policy of Rome in allowing a measure of self-government in conquered East.

If there are many places, how do we make the right choice? This question alerts us to the fact that God spoke his word to people *in situ*, helping them to live in their day and generation as the people of God. In order to understand that word we do well to put it into the context in which it was originally sent, so that we can more responsibly raise it to our appropriate present-day horizon.

If we ask who the 'us' are, it will help to begin to address this issue. Had we been Jewish Christians in Palestine in the first century, then we would have been members of the public place before we embraced the salvation of Jesus the Messiah, as Saviour and Lord. The public place was already determined, and converts would need to work out the challenges, difficulties and necessary adjustments involved in being a Christian Jew in Palestinian society in the public sphere of life. If one were a Jewish or a Palestinian Christian in Israel today, believing that one must follow in the footsteps of nascent Jewish Christianity as one operated in the public place, would not the gospel setting and possibly the more Jewish parts of the New Testament have an immediacy for Israeli and Palestinian Christians? Acts in its Palestinian setting might also well serve such a cause, but would those Christians still feel a necessity to hold all things in common or demand that Gentile churches continue their collection for the poor in Jerusalem?

If the 'us' is the Gentile world, whether African, European, American or Asian in non-Jewish ethnicity, then perhaps the New Testament portions which address a similar world, possessing no Old Testament, might well be the correct first-century horizon to help us begin to map out the public place for us as the people of God. The Greco-Roman world was such a world, which had a public place in some ways not dissimilar to certain horizons in countries where the majority of Christians now live.

Assuming that the Gentile world is our most appropriate or immediate place, do we find in the New Testament instructions on how we should live as the people of God in the public place, and secondly, do those documents have a theological paradigm which is an appropriate starting point for our public place?

### III. CHRISTIAN EXAMPLES OF CONDUCT IN THE PUBLIC PLACE

There are a number of key texts which help us understand what some Christians were taught about the public place in which they lived.

#### 1. Living Worthily of the Gospel

First, there is Philippians 1:27 where Paul's plea to the Christians in Philippi was 'only live in the public place (*politeuomai*)<sup>8</sup> worthily of the gospel . . . standing fast in one spirit, with one soul striving for the sake of the gospel'. His great concern was that the people of God should be blameless and harmless children of God without blemish in a crooked and perverse generation shining as lights in the world, holding forth the word of life (2:15-16a).

Between 1:27 and 2:16 Paul explains what that meant in terms which other first-century writers used as they discussed 'discord' and 'concord' in the public place. Pagan writers used these categories to characterise the ways in which their fellow citizens operated in the public place. In the courts or as in Paul's case in the pre-trial situation, they created discord by denigrating the prisoner and sought by slander to prejudice the outcome of the case. In the public secular gathering of citizens called the *ekklēsia*, leading figures jockeyed for primacy with the aid of their following of clients. Paul's terms such as 'envy', 'strife', 'faction', and 'vainglory' were used by pagan writers to describe the 'party' politics of the clients of patrons who fought to have top position in the civic council, or the divisive behaviour of factions in the public activities in the assembly (*ekklēsia*). 'Murmuring and disputing' also epitomised the activities of some citizens. Concord terms such as 'the same . . .' were prevalent in pagan authors as they exhorted citizens to live in harmony in the public place.<sup>9</sup> Associations which also had meetings (*ekklēsiai*) modelled their activities on the civic *ekklēsia* and also managed to replicate discord and jockeying for power in their group.

So disgusted were thoughtful writers of the early Roman empire, that they wrote about the blessings of concord, even deifying 'concord' in the hope that the public place might somehow be rid of this debilitating activity. It diminished the effectiveness of those aspects of the public place that were meant to promote the welfare of the city or the objects of an association. Not only was concord (*concordia* or *homonía*) deified because it was beyond the reach of citizens to achieve, but 'strife' (*eris*) was also promoted to the ranks of divinity for a similar reason.

Paul was dealing with the same problem, i.e. 'ecclesiastical politics', in the Philippian Christians' meetings and community life. The basis of his appeal is firstly the very nature of the Christian's salvation and life described in an understated way in 2:1 as 'if there is any . . .', when of course comfort, consolation, fellowship, tender mercies and compassion are at the heart of the salvation effected through Christ, the Spirit and presumably the Father. There is also the strong appeal to the mind-set of the Messiah who did not grasp at his status, but deliberately took upon himself the form of a non-status person, a servant, and suffered the worst form of capital punishment. His great humility and lack of

preoccupation with status and primacy were rewarded by God who has bestowed upon him absolute primacy (2:5–11). The appeal was not to *Concordia* but to Jesus, whose powerful example secured the benefits of the Christian life (2:1). This was in Paul's mind a powerful appeal which he expected would break the nexus between conduct in the public place and discord.

There is little problem in hermeneutics in moving this injunction to various horizons today, as all Christian organisations are tempted not to follow the mind-set of Christ (2:5–8). Evangelicals in some cases boast of their political prowess in denominational and interdenominational work, and at times are among those who fight for primacy of place rather than provide humble service. The whole idea of 'ecclesiastical politics' has become almost respectable, or at least the notion is accommodated as a simple if not sad reality for some in Christian activities.

If we ourselves want to operate worthily of the gospel and thereby give credibility to its proclamation as we face an unbelieving world, then concord must reign within our fellowships. Paul was aware that great harm is done to the gospel's image and power if dissension exists in the gospel community. The church of God must reflect the character of God's Son as a servant, not seeking to use others to achieve objectives relating to power but rather counting others better than themselves (2:3). The 'outsider' sees and judges that the *ekklēsia* of God is no different from the secular world's relationships because members of the former replicate the latter in the way they conduct their activities and relationships.

## 2. Operating as the Benefactors of Others

The Gentile city depended on individual citizens undertaking honorary public office, giving benefactions for the enhancement of environs of the city and the lives of its citizens, and securing the welfare of the inhabitants especially in times of social unrest caused by the inflation of grain prices in the shortages which plagued the first century.

Were Christians encouraged to participate in this public role? An objection is raised that Christians could not participate in public office at this level of government because of the necessity of swearing oaths. However, the religious scruples of these benefactors from the early empire were respected.<sup>10</sup>

Did Christians of substance operate as civic benefactors? In the first-century description of government it was one of two functions of governors and officials to praise or honour those who were civic benefactors. In Romans 13:3 and 1 Peter 2:14–15 such praise is promised for Christians, and without hesitation that it would not be

forthcoming, even in the city of Rome and Anatolia to which these letters were written respectively. We know how benefactors were publicly honoured and the imperial censure that could follow if a city failed to do so. The reference cannot be to moral conduct, for in the city of Rome how could officials know of the conduct of such a small band of Christians among some one million inhabitants? It is a reference to civic benefactions, i.e. good works.

Did this mean that the role of the rank and file of the Christian community in the public place was simply to be united? I want to suggest that a radical change occurred for one particular group which altered the way they operated in the public place. I refer to those who were the clients of patrons, i.e. the political hangers-on who were supported by their patrons in exchange for attending them in public life wherever they went, being politically active on their behalf in the civic *ekklēsia*, attending their dinners with the unholy trinity of wine, food and immorality, and every morning giving the salutation in the patron's home when he emerged for the day's business—and all in exchange for a daily allowance and hopefully a large private benefaction for faithful services. The place where this change is recorded is in Thessalonica, where Paul refers to the fact that he set an example of working with his own hands even though he did not have to. He found the non-working group already there when he arrived and some were converted. Subsequently he records that there were some who now 'did not wish to work', and Paul places Christians under strong oath not to support such ones (2 Thess. 3:6). These 'clients' were commanded and exhorted in the Lord Jesus Christ 'that they work with quietness and eat their own bread' (3:12).

This was part of the radical Christian ethic for the public place that would have most marked out Christians in the first century. No longer could they be parasitic clients. All Christians who were able had to work with their own hands and thereby be in a situation to 'do good', i.e. to be benefactors and not to grow weary in this calling (3:12).

We see widows in 1 Timothy 5:10 operating as benefactors in their own spheres of service. Their 'good works' are reported and they are thus regarded as genuine widows indeed (5:10, 16). On retirement they were to be 'honoured' by the church with support if there were none to support them with the traditional widow's dowry.

Christians were to use their resources to meet genuine needs outside their own households. This was a new phenomenon, that a new social group who were normally regarded as the rightful recipient of benefactions now as Christians operated as benefactors of others. Commands to do good to all are easily skipped over by us, but they were revolutionary commands in the first century. It is this which marked out the early Christians from others in the public place.

### 3. Letting the Side Down

The New Testament provides examples of Christians who were not concerned for the welfare of others even though they themselves were theologically well-informed. They could make the credal statement that 'for us there is only one God, the Father, for whom all things exist and we exist for him' (1 Cor. 8:6) but the last affirmation—that we exist for him and not vice versa—was not allowed to interfere with their rights (8:9). They could sit in the idol temple and participate in the feast as a civic right because they knew that an idol was nothing (8:4).

Paul reminds those who argued that 'all things are permitted' for them, that 'not all things necessarily benefit others'. He continues that 'all things are permitted' but not everything 'builds up'. 'No person must seek his own but his neighbour's good' (10:23–24).

Here is a striking passage about Christians outside their family circle in the public place. Religion at the popular level in the first century was for one's own benefit—to persuade the gods to do things for you and to harm others who might offend you or impede your progress. Not so for the Christians! The neighbour was to be the object of their endeavours. His or her welfare was their obligation, whatever that welfare might be. It does not appear to be solely spiritual, although for Paul as a missionary it was their salvation he sought. Paul could point to his own example to show that he did not seek his own welfare, but the welfare of all that they might be saved (10:33). Some were slipping back into the old ways of pagan Corinth and Paul's extended treatment in 8:1–11:1 aims to pull them away from the 'rights' mentality to a Christian 'benefaction' syndrome.

There are other matters where prohibitions are placed on Christians engaging in the public place in certain areas or ways: for example, engaging in vexatious litigation which was a popular past-time in the first century (1 Cor. 6:1–8); seeing the public place as the opportunity to be upwardly mobile for reasons of covetousness, and taking risks that could seriously endanger their spiritual health (1 Cor. 7:17–24); and taking evasive action in order that being a Christian created no difficulties for them in the public place (Gal. 6:11–16), to name a few.<sup>11</sup> The picture that emerges of the early Christians is not that of perfection in the public place on their part, but rather the need for apostolic instruction and correction in the face of a trend simply to react to situations according to the accepted mores of their society.

#### IV. AN APPROPRIATE THEOLOGICAL PARADIGM

Is there a theological paradigm which the New Testament saw as apposite for those Christians of the 'dispersion', i.e. those not in the 'promised land'? The dispersed people of God were in Babylon where God caused them to be carried away. They were promised by the Lord

that in seventy years they would be taken back to the promised land (Jer. 29:10). In the meantime they were to seek the welfare of the city (29:7).

In 1 Peter 1:1–9 we have the people of God of the spiritual dispersion who through the great mercy of God have been begotten to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead to an inheritance, not in Israel, but laid up in heaven for them, and certain to be secured because they are being preserved by the power of God who keeps his promises. Heaven is secure. They are seen as a spiritual *diaspora*, i.e. in exile waiting to secure the New Testament's promised land which was not yet. How should they live? Not in the pursuit of self-fulfilment, but with an attractive life-style epitomised by good works which are observed in the public place as the means of glorifying God in the day of visitation (1 Pet. 2:11–12). Where are these good works to be manifested as the means of blessing others? Certainly in the city, i.e. *politeia*, as 2:13–17 makes clear.

Positively, Gentile Christians were taught to seek the welfare of the city from a theological paradigm which finds its origins in the exilic period of the Old Testament and not the promised land. Is it not the appropriate place for Gentile Christians still to look today as they ponder their role in the public place as the people of God?

#### V. CONCLUSION

There are two different public places in the New Testament—the province of Judea and the rest of the Greco-Roman Empire. The former has important residual influences from the Old Testament, and the other has an inheritance drawn from time-honoured traditions of Greece and Rome. In both, the people of God are called upon to do good. How that good is actually expressed by Christians is determined largely by the ethos of the public place of the particular cultures in which they live, whether in Israel or the Gentile world.

What does emerge is that in Gentile Christianity there was a clear apostolic endorsement of the Greco-Roman benefaction tradition and the redefinition of benefaction so that all able-bodied Christians were to be benefactors. It was all the more remarkable in an age where the welfare syndrome of the 'corn dole', child benefits for the rich only, and tax exemptions for some of the elite posed something of a threat to the welfare of the empire as a whole. Christians in the public place had an important role, and as a side benefit their good works were a signal to their society that there was something of eternal consequence which had motivated the community, *viz.* the God who seeks the great spiritual and physical welfare of the city.

What also emerges is the need to draw evangelicals back to the biblical emphasis on the doing of good. The traditional emphasis on

grace can readily slip into a perception of the Christian's life as a pleasurable stop-over before the final destination of heaven. Little emphasis on discipleship and little concern for the welfare of the city is perhaps a hall-mark of contemporary Christianity. There has been little teaching on seeking the welfare of the city and therefore no real motivation given to the new generation of those whom God blesses materially in this world's goods to operate as Christian benefactors, both spiritual and temporal, in an age where the generosity of Christians and non-Christians seems to be rapidly evaporating in the acquisitive societies of both East and West.

#### Endnotes

- 1 This lecture endowed as the Sir John Laing Lecture records the benefactions of a great Christian man of the past whose concerns enriched Christian work in his day through his Trust. Those concerns reached beyond the confines of 'Christian' work where he demonstrated his commitment to the public place in the way he ordered his business affairs and treated his staff. His interest in research and innovation reveals a man of great vision for the wider world. It seemed a fitting tribute to his memory to choose this topic for the 1995 Annual Lecture.
- 2 R.M. Grant, *Early Christianity and Society* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977).
- 3 W.R. Estep, *The Anabaptist Story* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), ch. 10.
- 4 There is a difference, not always observed, between the social dimensions of being a Christian on the one hand, and the gospel message of the dying and rising of Jesus as the remedy for humanity's enmity against God on the other, and the ultimate separation that unresolved confrontation brings.
- 5 H.T. Hoekstra, *Evangelism in Eclipse: World Mission and the World Council of Churches* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1979).
- 6 For discussion see my *Seek the Welfare of the City: Christians as Benefactors and Citizens*, First-Century Christians in the Graeco-Roman World (Grand Rapids and Carlisle: Eerdmans and Paternoster, 1994).
- 7 For a discussion, see B.B. Blue, *Secure the Well-Being of the Family: Christians as Householders and Servants*, First-Century Christians in the Graeco-Roman World (Grand Rapids and Carlisle: Eerdmans and Paternoster, forthcoming).
- 8 The verb is to be translated as 'live as citizens', and such an injunction covers activity not in one's own home, but outside it. For evidence, see Winter, *Seek the Welfare of the City*, ch. 5.
- 9 Dio Chrysostom wrote on these topics: 'To the Nicomedians, on Concord with the Nicaeans', 'On Concord in Nicae', 'On Concord Apameia', 'To the Apameians, on Concord', *Or.* 38–41.
- 10 For evidence, see Winter, *Seek the Welfare of the City*, 192–95.
- 11 For evidence and arguments supporting these interpretations, see Winter, *Seek the Welfare of the City*, chs. 6–8.