

LITURGY,
MUSIC,
PREACHING,
AND THE ARTS

Call to Worship

Volume 59.3
Worship and Politics



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Published by the Office of Theology and Worship
of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).
The official journal of the Presbyterian Association of Musicians

Call to Worship

Liturgy, Music, Preaching, and the Arts

Continuing the tradition of *Reformed Liturgy & Music* (1971–2000) and *Reformed Liturgics* (1963–69), *Call to Worship* seeks to further the church's commitment to theological integrity, corporate worship, and excellence in music, preaching, and other liturgical art forms.

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PDS# 21162-25-003

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Front Cover image: *Magnificat* by Benjamin Wildflower

Back cover image: David Gambrell presiding during worship at the Presbyterian Association of Musicians Worship and Music Conference in Montreat, North Carolina, June 2025

Indexed with abstract in Religion Index One: Periodicals, American Theological Library Association; available online through BRS (Bibliographic Retrieval Services) and DIALOG; by Music Article Guide and by Religious and Theological Abstracts. This publication is available in microfilm from ProQuest.

This periodical is indexed in the *ATLA Religion Database*, a product of the American Theological Library Association, 300 S. Wacker Drive, Suite 2100, Chicago, IL 60606; e-mail: atla@atla.com; online at atla.com.

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Introduction

Sally Ann McKinsey

If we want to build healthy, safe communities, then what we do and say in worship matters. The kind of liturgical theology that teaches us to act with empathy and justice in worship also forms us as members of all our communities. In communities of concern, we learn that the personal is political. Keith Ray investigates liturgical language as a way toward safe and affirming community in the face of social injustice. He recognizes the impact of small shifts in liturgical language on the ways we welcome and advocate for one another.

This issue comes to press in a political landscape of combat over connection in the United States, when cultivating the basic democratic practice of civil discourse across differences often feels impossible. “What was once mere disagreement or diverging opinions slides into fundamental incompatibility,” contributor Aimee Moiso writes. Internet culture and social media algorithms create echo chambers, reinforcing hateful ideologies and strict binaries, begetting social isolation that leads to more alienation, division, and distrust. A culture of violence is met with commodified care, injustice is legislated, and political power executed over persons and bodies.

At this time in public life, the relationship between worship and politics is not just relevant, but necessary to consider. The topic is admittedly too broad for one issue alone to address. I am grateful for the contributors to this issue who define the relationship between worship and politics with wisdom and nuance, bringing guidance to leaders in an urgent time.

How does worship form us as Christians with allegiance and belonging to God and one another? David Gambrell writes about liturgical leadership that is present in the midst of sorrow, uncertainty, and fear, leadership rooted in baptism and in the leadership of Christ. Joshua Taylor complicates the definition of “patriotic” music in worship by analyzing the histories of common hymn texts and

tunes, recognizing the challenge of parsing what might be political or religious about a piece of music. Melissa McNair-King offers a sermon from Reign of Christ Sunday in which she recognizes the origin of the day and its relevance for a conversation about the role of the state in the life of faith. If we want to build healthy, safe communities, then what we do and say in worship matters.

How does worship form us as citizens? Mark Douglas offers an approach to confronting Christian nationalism that borrows methods from queer theology. Considering the role of religion in public life, Rachel Baard investigates the meaning and practice of public theology and its relationship with worship. She names “Who is our God?” as the essential question when preaching for public theology. Safwat Marzouk brings an intersectional lens to interpreting texts, paying attention to power relationships and recognizing the ways texts may be heard by listeners of different experiences. Aimee Moiso pokes holes at the prophetic/pastoral dichotomy in preaching, offering a covenantal approach to preaching that takes seriously the active role of listeners and the relational dynamics that can make a sermon pastoral and prophetic. If we want to build healthy, safe communities, then what we do and say in worship matters.

An event of worship gathers us in community for ritual action, teaches us sacred stories, inspires us to think critically about what we believe, and unites us in concern and celebration with one another. Liturgical theology that seeks accessible, inclusive spaces to be formed in common belief amid diverse perspectives is theology that can influence our civic life, as well, without imposing or conflating a national story and a sacred one. If we want to build healthy, safe communities, then what we do and say in worship matters.

—Sally Ann McKinsey, Editor



Margaret Adams Parker
Mary as Prophet
Virginia Theological Seminary
Photo credit: B. Cayce Ramey



Call to Worship

Feature Articles

Worship as Public Theology

Rachel Baard

What is public theology?" This was the question I was asked, somewhat abruptly, by two of my Union Presbyterian Seminary colleagues at a faculty dinner in 2019. I was surprised by the question, since I had not previously focused explicitly on public theology in my work. Moreover, since Union proudly proclaims in its motto that it exists "for the church in the world," I thought they must surely have already figured it out. But as the newly appointed assistant professor of theology and ethics, I wanted to put my best foot forward, so I offered some thoughts. I assumed they wanted my input because they knew that my theology had been shaped by the church struggle against apartheid in my native South Africa—a struggle which can certainly be described as "public theology." This took the form of theological statements against apartheid (such as the Kairos Document and the Confession of Belhar), and of church folk getting involved in political action, with leading figures such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Rev. Allan Boesak among them.

But that background did not necessarily provide me with a ready-made definition of the concept of public theology that I could offer as part of dinner table conversation. And so the question has remained with me, shaping my work since then. It led me to help craft and now direct our Master of Arts in Public Theology Program, which operates in intersection with the work of our centers on womanist leadership, global Christianity, and justice and reconciliation, as well as other centers and initiatives at the school, including a Lilly grant project focused on the "church in the public square." In this work we have operated with a definition of public theology as "a field which draws on

biblical, historical, theological, ethical, and practical resources of the Christian faith in order to serve the common good of society."

The students who are drawn to our Public Theology program are interested in engaging topics such as public policy, ecological concerns, economic justice, gender issues, inter-religious dialogue, and issues of race and reconciliation. Some plan to include this kind of engagement in congregational ministry, while others are interested in working for charities or NGOs. Many of them arrive in the program with a vague notion of public theology as something different from the "regular" theology of the church—a kind of political addition aimed at social justice activism. But one would misunderstand what public theology is when one thinks of it as separate from the doctrinal theology or worship practices of the church. In fact, theology is never anything other than public.

In this regard it is good to recall Anselm of Canterbury's classical definition of theology as "faith seeking understanding," which means that it is the ongoing conversation of the Christian church about what we confess and how we are to live in light of that confession. Given the inevitably public nature of confession and of our very lives, it is in some ways unnecessary to speak of "public theology" since all theology is public—even those expressions that we think are "private" or belonging only to the inner life and organization of the church.

The theologian David Tracy suggested that a "thrust to publicness" must be present in all theologies, and he argued that the theologian is always addressing three publics: church, academia, and society.¹ Even though theologians often tend to focus on one or the other of these publics, it is not

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really possible for theology to be only “churchy,” purely academic, or entirely aimed at the public. As illustration one may point to the work of Karl Barth, whose *Church Dogmatics* is the source of countless academic treatises, and whose work spoke loudly and clearly to the social struggles in Nazi Germany and Apartheid South Africa, among others. (This is exemplified in documents such as the Barmen Declaration and the Confession of Belhar in response to those respective contexts.) Or one might point to liberation theologians, who aim to address social issues, yet do so from the church experience of the poor and in constant dialogue with academia.

In short, public theology is not an “extra” added to the theological reflection or worship practices of the church but is simply part and parcel of the whole theological package that makes up the self-reflection of the church, which in turn shapes the presence of the church in the world. This dynamic is perhaps best captured by Ted Peters’s definition of public theology: “Public theology is conceived in the church, critically reasoned in the academy, and offered to the world for the sake of the global common good.”²

to some complexities of the relationship between church and society, as well as some tensions inherent to public theology.

Public Theology and the Common Good

The language of “the common good” is usually associated with Catholic social teaching, a tradition that originated in the late nineteenth century when Pope Leo XIII issued *Rerum Novarum*, which addressed the plight of the working classes in the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution. In contrast to some versions of the “greater good” that would sacrifice some in the interest of the majority, the common good seeks the best interest and well-being of all.

Care for the common life reflects the very character of God as understood in the sources and traditions of the Christian faith. The Christian tradition leans into God’s providential care for all of creation, and to the divine presence in all of life. Religious concepts such as humans being made in the image of God—a concept variously interpreted as signaling human worth, freedom, and dignity—shaped Western secular ideas about human rights,

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Nevertheless, although all theology has a public nature, adding the adjective “public” to theology does have the merit of emphasizing the “outward facing” of the theological work of the church—an emphasis that is not always captured adequately in the traditional nomenclature of “systematic theology,” “practical theology,” etc. Indeed, using the language of public theology offers a challenge to the theological self-reflection of the church, to the ways it understands what it means to believe, to think, to pray, to worship, and to live in the world. More specifically, I want to suggest that emphasizing the public nature of theology has implications for how we think about the worship practices of the church. In order to examine the worldview-creating power of the church’s worship and how it may play a role in the broader culture, we need to delve more deeply into the concept of the common good and point

thereby contributing to notions about the common good even beyond the direct sphere of influence of the church.

Expressions of theology explicitly focused on the common good include not only Catholic social teaching, but also the abolitionist movement, the Social Gospel Movement, the religious elements of the Civil Rights Movement, as well as liberation theologies of various stripes across the globe, and more. While these theologies are often political in tone, public theology is not synonymous with political theology. The political theology that emerged in Germany after the Second World War as well as the liberation theologies that later came out of Latin America, the United States, South Africa, and elsewhere are characterized by a prophetic tone and a focus on social justice concerns. Public theology includes political theologies, but the focus

is not exclusively on issues of liberation or structural renewal, but also on the broader conversation in the public square.

In participating in this public conversation, the idea is not for the church to stick its nose where it does not belong by claiming the final voice in setting public policy, or by interfering with the rights of people of other or no faith. But the church cannot be a private club either, lest we find ourselves with only the alternatives of either a privatized gospel of the individual, or heretical public theology such as that of Christian Nationalism. The reality is that, if the church does not speak from its theocentric vision, or more broadly, if people who believe in a higher morality do not participate in the public conversation, those with political or economic power will be the only voices heard.

I find the theologian Paul Tillich's categories of *heteronomy*, *autonomy*, and *theonomy* helpful in thinking about the public nature of theology and the church's role in society.³ In *heteronomy* (i.e., rule by a foreign law) the church dominates, imposing its religious ideals upon society in a manner that oppresses freedom of thought. One may describe the Middle Ages as at least to some extent heteronomous due to the dominance of the Catholic church.

Conversely, in *autonomy*, expressed in particular in the European Enlightenment and its aftermath, human reason rules supreme, and religion is seen as at most a source of personal ethics, so faith is relegated to the private sphere. Tillich, like his contemporary Karl Barth, realized that a privatized faith ironically becomes a mere handmaiden to the dominant powers in any given culture, as illustrated in the theological decline that preceded the two world wars. Barth's response to that problem was to turn to what may be broadly called a confessional tradition that proclaims the historical confession of the lordship of Christ with an eye towards preserving the integrity of the church amidst the social crisis of the time.

Tillich, in his response to an autonomous culture that relegated faith to the "private" sphere, but fearful that a confessional approach is naively grasping for a new heteronomy, instead proposed *theonomy*. This concept essentially means that the church recognizes the deep spiritual elements of all of life, including life beyond the boundaries of our faith tradition, and participates fully in that life from its own wisdom. In other words, while Barth's church-focused theology certainly had a significant public

dimension, Tillich suggested a more self-conscious form of public theology that recognizes that God moves and works beyond the boundaries of the church.

If we make use of Tillich's categories, what that would suggest is that public theology neither dominates the public square nor retreats from it. It recognizes that its traditions are an expression of the depth dimension of human existence, that God is present in but also beyond the Christian faith community, that we are called to live lives of integrity that bear witness not so much to an otherworldly hope, but to our hope for the transformation of this world.

The Art of Public Theology

As a theonomous project that seeks to neither dominate "secular" society nor shrink away into the "private" sphere, public theology seeks to give a reasonable account of the church's convictions to those outside the faith tradition, with the aim that it might even provide some valuable moral guidance for the common life (this is similar to the Reformers' "civil use of the law"). Or as Hak Joon Lee notes, "Rejecting the modern dichotomy of fact and value, as well as that of the religious and the civic, public theology advocates for a constructive public role for religious discourse in a pluralistic society, neither suppressing religious expressions nor dismissing democratic values such as human rights, tolerance, and equality."⁴

In adding its voice to the public conversation, the church need not impose its specific religious beliefs on everyone else, but it ought not to shy away from it either. In fact, the church's voice is most authentic when it speaks from its own particular identity instead of trying to find the lowest common denominator.

As we think about the kind of language the church might add to the social conversation, we need to keep four things in mind. First, although public theology engages its time and context, it needs to be careful not to merely surrender to prevailing public opinion. This concern was central to much of the twentieth-century theological debate. Karl Barth's horror at his professors' uncritical support of German nationalism prior to World War I, and of course, later, his fierce rejection of the German church's acceptance of the false gospel of the Nazis, gave him a deep distrust of theologies that engage culture directly. Due to this distrust his theology

is often interpreted as focused more on protecting the church than engaging the public square. Yet the Barthian aversion to cultural accommodationism occupies an important space in public theology by suggesting that theologically informed mistrust of the cultural fashions of the day has an important role to play in thinking about the ways in which faith engages our various publics.

Second, at the same time the church should not shy away from engaging the concrete lived experiences of people. Our confession as a religious body is that God made a home among us in the incarnation. As such, our theology needs to be incarnational, grounded in the realities of life. This means listening, opening our hearts and minds, and, yes, our theologies to the experiences of others, including those outside our faith tradition. This openness to people's lived experiences may seem to be in tension with the warning against cultural accommodationism, but public theology needs to find creative ways to traverse that tension.

A third observation is in order, and it has to do with how public theology relates to the concept of truth. Truth is not always easy to find, and we often tend to confuse it with the most powerful argument. The work of public theology is to stand firm on the truth of the gospel, to refine that truth in our theological reflection, while at the same time engaging the ways in which truth manifests amidst the many voices of the people around us. It is in conversation characterized by attentive listening, courage in sharing, and respect for differences that truth (including truth that transcends confessional boundaries) may emerge, grab us, and transform us, in order to help us serve the common good.

Finally, the work of public theology is spiritual formation that shapes believers to stand firmly in truth as they seek to engage the issues of the day for the sake of the common good. There is, therefore, what one might call an "artistic element" to public theology. What I have in mind here is akin to what the rhetorical theorist Scott Consigny says about Aristotle's view of rhetoric as an art, which requires two attributes: integrity, that is, the knowledge and skills that are ready to engage any situation (one may call this the "universal" element), and receptivity, the ability to become concretely engaged in specific situations (one may call this the "contextual" element).⁵ What this boils down to is holding on to inherited truth on the one hand and being open to new insights on the other hand. This

artistic nimbleness is needed for public theology to avoid the unacceptable alternatives of either withdrawal from culture or surrender to the fashions of the day. In short, in an era in which much of the public debate struggles with truth amidst multiple and competing truth claims, the public theologian, and that includes the preacher, must be spiritually formed into an artist who continues to search out truth amidst the chaos and cacophony of our times.

So public theology seeks to avoid the unacceptable alternatives of the church either imposing its views on the broader society or shying away from public engagement. As such, public theology can take neither the form of succumbing to the cultural fashions of the day nor the form of ignoring the cultural and sociological realities of human life. It stands firm on the received wisdom of the gospel, sometimes proclaiming it against culture, while simultaneously continuing to seek truth that emerges in concrete and multiple contexts. As an art form, public theology is both universal in its vision and concretely anchored in the specifics of the situation.

In sum, theology that is done for the sake of the common good always engages its time and context. But in doing so, it pays attention to its own language, the way it preaches, what it teaches, the way it shapes human conscience, the way its worldview lingers beyond the boundaries of Sunday morning worship. Most importantly, public theology recognizes that, amidst social media debates, discussions about freedom of speech, and the all-too-often presence of hate speech, the church's voice cannot be silent or turned inward.

Worship and Public Theology

Worship, the communal act of giving honor to God, is irredeemably connected to the public voice of the church. In fact, the history of the church shows that our theology is often shaped by our worship practices. One is here reminded of the Latin maxim *lex orandi, lex credendi* (as we worship, so we believe), which signals the intertwined nature of worship and theology. To this is often added the phrase *lex vivendi* (so we live). In short, how we worship reflects and shapes what we believe and, in turn, how we will live.

In recent decades, theologians have become preoccupied with the rhetorical nature of theological language, that is, the ways in which the language of the church shapes not only the worldview of the

faithful but also filters through to those who do not identify with the church. In this regard it behooves us to think about the ways in which preaching and worship are tools of spiritual formation, how they shape the hearts and minds of people in the pews who in turn constitute the public voice of the church.

The public theology of the church has not always been faithful to the gospel, as illustrated by countless examples of the church conceiving theological ideas such as antisemitism, sexism, racism, the justification of colonialism, distorted theologies of creation that feed into the exploitation of the earth, and more.

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One of the clearest negative examples of the relationship between harmful social developments and the church's theology, and indeed specifically its liturgy, can be found in the history of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa. The DRC, which had arrived on South African shores with the Dutch East India Company in the seventeenth century, had a strong sense of mission and soon became a multiracial church. By the early nineteenth century some local congregations insisted on segregated worship largely due to racially charged disputes about the sharing of the common cup in the Eucharist. At its 1829 synod, the DRC confirmed as a matter of biblical principle that communion is to be served to all in the same place of worship regardless of race, but by 1857, the synod decided to allow segregated worship as a transitional measure "due to the weakness of some" (a phrase that would go down in infamy in South African church circles).⁶ What started as a temporary measure and a "mere" concession eventually turned into a full-blown ecclesiological framework, which led to the creation of four separate "ethnic" Dutch Reformed churches, for Whites, Blacks, Indians, and "Coloureds" (the latter is a term often used for mixed-

race people in South Africa). This fourfold "ethnic" construction, which placed people in artificial categories based on skin tone and phenotype, would later form the foundation of the political system of apartheid. What started out as a worship practice and a liturgical dispute ended up becoming a theological principle which in turn fed into a deeply unjust political system. Apartheid theology may be seen as one of the most immoral examples of public theology. It was conceived in the church, critically reasoned in the academy, and offered to the world as supposedly serving the common good—but nothing could have been further from the truth.

The public voice of the church witnesses to the practices and beliefs held within the church walls and within its worship practices. More specifically, it presents the face of God to the world—unfortunately sometimes in distorted ways. In his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wondered, as he thought about the "lofty spires pointing heavenward" of the churches in the South, "What kind of people worship here? Who is their God?"⁷

Or, as Allan Boesak was asked by a member of his congregation in the 1960s, when the apartheid government in South Africa forced people of color out of their homes, "What is God saying about this injustice?"⁸

These are the central questions we have to ask in thinking about the relationship between worship and the public face of the church. Theology, faith seeking understanding, is primarily speech about that Ultimate Reality we call God. Our God-talk matters. As Elizabeth Johnson observed in her groundbreaking work on language about God, the symbol of God functions to support our worldviews since it evokes our ideas about the Ultimate Good.⁹

Some time ago I had a conversation with a pastor on the topic of preaching with an eye towards creation care amidst the climate crisis. His initial instinct was to lean into Christian moral codes about love of neighbor and emphasizing that the neighbor includes non-human life as well. This would be a worthy avenue towards public theology preaching, but as our conversation continued it became clear that preaching for public theology needs to move beyond moral exhortation. We concluded that the bigger task would be to present God as the one who created this world and made a home in it, therefore shaping the religious imagination of the folks in the pew.

I believe this insight is true for preaching with an eye towards public theology regardless of topic. The moral imperative will come from the theological vision we offer more than it will from moral exhortation. In short, the question “Who is our God?” needs to be central to preaching for public theology.

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Conclusion

So, in conclusion, public theology is not an academic discipline separate from the life of the church, nor is it merely political activism dressed in religious language. Rather, it is the inevitable public dimension of all theological reflection and practice. It recognizes that our worship shapes our beliefs, and our beliefs shape how we live in the world. It acknowledges that when we gather to break bread, to sing hymns, to pray for our neighbors, and to confess our sins, we are not engaged in private acts but in profoundly public ones that signal to the world who our God is and what God requires of us.

The history of religiously sanctioned segregation in the United States offers painful reminders that our actions often speak louder than our words, presenting a distorted face of God to the world that not only undermines the gospel but also supports structural evils. The South African Dutch Reformed Church's tragic journey from integrated communion tables to the theological foundation of apartheid reminds us that our liturgical choices echo far beyond our sanctuaries. But the witness of people like Martin Luther King and Allan Boesak also shows us that faithful worship can shape an alternative worldview in which the values of the kingdom of God shine forth brightly.

Public theology is not different from the overall theological work of the church, but it is theology that is explicit about its own public nature—that recognizes all theology as inherently rhetorical, shaping identities and worldviews, addressing the church, academy, and society simultaneously. It is theology practiced with an artistic nimbleness to hold fast to inherited truth while remaining open to the Spirit's work in our midst. It is faith seeking understanding not just for the church's sake, but for the sake of the common good. It is, as Union Presbyterian Seminary's motto says, theological reflection “for the church in the world.”

Notes

1. David Tracy, “Defending the Public Character of Theology,” *Christian Century* (April 1, 1981): 350–356.
2. Ted Peters, *The Voice of Public Theology: Addressing Politics, Science, and Technology* (Adelaide, Australia: ATF Press, 2022), 3–12.
3. Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 41.
4. Hak Joon Lee, “Public Theology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Political Theology*, ed. Craig Hovey and Elizabeth Phillips (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 44.
5. Scott Consigny, “Rhetoric and Its Situations,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 7 (1974): 178.
6. Piet Naudé, “From Pluralism to Ideology: The Roots of Apartheid Theology in Abraham Kuyper, Gustav Warneck and Theological Pietism,” *Scriptura* 88 (2005): 165.
7. Martin Luther King Jr., “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” April 16, 1963, https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html, accessed August 15, 2025.
8. Allan Boesak, *Running with Horses: Reflections of an Accidental Politician* (Cape Town, South Africa: Joho, 2009), 33.
9. Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 4–5.

It acknowledges that when we gather to break bread, to sing hymns, to pray for our neighbors, and to confess our sins, we are not engaged in private acts but in profoundly public ones that signal to the world who our God is and what God requires of us.

And with Your Spirit: How Liturgical Language Speaks to Current Disorder

Keith D. Ray II

Common Language

If you have been in mainline Protestant or Catholic communities over the last forty years, you have likely heard and even spoken these words in corporate worship in this or similar form:

The Lord (God) be with you.
And also with you.

This applies whether you are Roman Catholic, Anglican in a variety of forms, Lutheran, Presbyterian, or Methodist. And there is good reason why so many gathered communities speak these words in worship.

During Vatican II, the Roman Catholic community experienced church-wide renewal, including in its rites and worship practices. Protestants, recognizing that Catholics were drawing upon biblical and historical sources in revising their liturgies, began a similar journey, asking questions about the earliest forms of Christian worship and how we, as worshiping communities today, might draw upon the liturgical treasures of our past.

One such document was “The Apostolic Tradition” of Hippolytus, a third-century text that gives insight into the early worship practices of the Christian church. And it is from this text that the words that open many of our prayers and ritual acts have come. In contemporary Christianity, these words have become almost second nature. See what happens if you shout out the words “The Lord (or God) be with you!” A resounding response is likely: “And also with you!”

But then the English-speaking Roman Catholics made a change. It is a modest change, to be sure, but nevertheless, a change. The revised words are

The Lord (God) be with you.
And with your Spirit.

Such a small change, I know. As someone who has spent a significant amount of time interested in things liturgical, I wondered, “Why the shift?” Especially given the widespread acceptance of common liturgical texts across denominations, I wondered, “Why mess up a good thing? What difference does this small adjustment make in the community’s liturgical expression?”

One simple reason why English-speaking Catholics changed these introductory words is simply a matter of improved translation of early liturgical sources. While “The Apostolic Tradition” was originally composed in Greek, it is the Latin text that influenced English translations. And in the Latin, the introductory words read:

Dominus vobiscum (translated “The Lord be with you”).
Et cum spiritu tuo (previously translated “And also with you”).

By simply looking at the Latin text, one can see that “spirit” is a more accurate rendering of the original text. In fact, other translations, including Spanish, French, and Italian texts, kept the spirit language:

Spanish: “Y con tu espíritu.”
French: “Et avec votre esprit.”
Italian: “E con il tuo spirito.”

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So, on the surface, the Catholic bishop's change makes perfect sense:

The Lord (God) be with you.
And with your spirit.

Like most things liturgical, however, the change has theological implications, some of which speak to our current moment in time, or dare I say crisis in time, as gathered communities of faith, both Catholic and Protestant.

Priestly Particularities

Before exploring the common theological themes present in this revision, it is important to recognize the particular Roman Catholic sensibilities in the new translations. Some Roman Catholic thinkers see the revision of these liturgical words as a kind of acknowledgement and blessing of the unique role of the ordained minister, the priest, in the gathered community. According to the church's catechism,

What does the people's response "And with your spirit" mean?

It is an acknowledgment of the gift of the Spirit the priest received at ordination and a prayer that he will be faithful to that gift in leading the people in worship. (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops)

As the Congregation for Divine Worship explained in the document *Liturgiam Authenticam* (2001), the translation "And with your spirit" more accurately reflects the Latin original, "Et cum spiritu tuo," and captures "the spiritual charism of the ordained minister" rather than rendering it as a general greeting (which is how "And also with you" had been interpreted). In a particularly Catholic interpretation, the role of the priest as a representative of Christ in a particular way is acknowledged by the simple words "And with your spirit," that is, the spirit that was bestowed upon the priest at ordination.

The Priesthood of All

If the emphasis of the revision is solely based on elevating the priestly role of the ordained, we in sister communities may wish to leave well enough alone. But what if we reconsider the theological emphasis of the Catholic tradition in light of our commitment to developing communities rooted in

the priesthood of all believers? As the PC(USA) *Book of Order* states,

The basic form of ministry is the ministry of the whole people of God, from whose midst some are called to ordered ministries, to fulfill particular functions. Members and those in ordered ministries serve together under the mandate of Christ. (*Book of Order*, G-2.0101)

Thus, the theological emphasis of a spirit-infused ministry is not restricted to a particular governing role in the community (i.e., ordained versus non-ordained). When we speak words of spirit-power in our community (God be with you. And with your spirit.), we are recalling the power of the Divine Spirit present in all members of the community, especially as they seek to embody the will and ways of God in daily life.

The new language turns what is more akin to an ordinary blessing (God be with you. And with you.) and emphasizes the role of the Spirit of God to empower us in our daily lives, especially as those living in contexts of widespread injustice. Perhaps it is best to turn to poetry to understand the significance of a small liturgical change to infuse even the introductory words of prayer or worship to include the Divine Spirit:

There's a spirit in the air,
telling Christians everywhere:
"Praise the love that Christ revealed,
living, working in our world!"¹
(Brian Wren)

As we gather in corporate worship, we do so in the knowledge that all are spirit-infused to live lives that embody the work of God in the world. And this awareness in liturgical practice, beyond offering a simple greeting like "Good morning," begins with a theological foundation that there is, indeed, a spirit in the very air of our gathering, calling us to love and work.

So the poet Brian Wren continues:

When believers break the bread,
when a hungry child is fed,
praise the love that Christ revealed,
living, working in our world.
The consequence of using spirit language in our

liturgy is that we are reminded of a power beyond that of the individuals in the community. There is a pulsating spirit at work in the world, and our ritual acts (e.g., breaking bread) empower us to translate our worship into actions of justice in the most challenging places of our world.

The Spirit Calls Even Today

As I write this, I have just finished listening to the *New York Times* podcast *The Daily* regarding hunger and possible mass starvation in Gaza. The introduction to the podcast reads, “The suffering in Gaza has reached new depths, and now finding food, which was already scarce, has become a deadly endeavor.”² Such news can leave us paralyzed. After all, what power do I have to make a real impact in this situation? Not to mention other atrocities that are taking place in our world each day: mass deportations, gun violence, economic despair.

Perhaps in a climate of despair, the slight shift proposed by the renewed translation of a small liturgical text can encourage and reinforce the notion that as we gather together to proclaim the teachings of Jesus, we are, in fact, empowered by a holy spirit to join our efforts with others around the community, country, and globe, to live out a new reality of life:

Still the Spirit gives us light,
seeing wrong and setting right:
God in Christ has come to stay.
Live tomorrow's life today!

The Spirit Empowers

After twenty-eight years of full-time representative ministry, I retired early to pursue a new vocational journey as a teacher in the local public schools system. I chose to work in a high poverty school with students who faced multiple challenges. After years of preaching sermons rooted in liberation theology, I found it painful and beautiful to live day-to-day with students and families on the margins.

Some days were extremely painful. Sometimes the pain came from my own lack of knowledge and experience. I walked into my supervisor's office in tears when my lesson was a disaster, and like a good mentor, she would listen and then push me to expand and grow in my understanding and practice.

Other times, however, I came face-to-face with the injustices so prevalent in our news today. One day as my English students were working independently on a project, one of my sixth-grade students asked to

talk to me privately in the hallway. My first thought was there must be conflict between her and another student as they worked collaboratively. We stepped out of the class, and her eyes filled with tears. She said, “My counselor said it would be okay to tell you this.” I nodded. “My dad was just deported,” she said as the tears flowed. I embraced her and we cried together in the hallway of our school. There was nothing to do but be present. I could not help but think how in my days of theological education, the in-vogue term “non-anxious presence” was used to describe the pastoral role in times of crisis, but I was anything but non-anxious. When the school day was over, I cried again, and part of those tears came from a place of utter helplessness. I could not fix this situation.

I wonder if a few small liturgical words might have made a difference in reminding me (and you) that in days of overwhelming injustice, we are empowered: by our gathered communities and by our belief in a Divine Presence that weeps with us, but also empowers us, to change the world.

A few months ago, the same student, now a high school senior, came to visit me. And this time we were able to laugh together. Life is better for her now. And she is planning a future. But we also know that because of her cultural background, there are always threats. Still, she pushes on. She reminds me that our small acts of resistance are used by the Spirit to bring change to the world.

May the Spirit fill our praise,
guide our thoughts and change our ways.
God in Christ has come to stay.
Live tomorrow's life today!

We are called and empowered to make the world more just. And it is difficult work. But remember, you are Spirit-led and Spirit-filled to; in the words of the poet, “live tomorrow's life today.”

God be with you, beloved.
And with your spirit.

Notes

1. Words: Brian Wren © 1979, 1995 Hope Publishing Company, www.hopepublishing.com. All rights reserved. Used by permission.
2. “How Seeking Food in Gaza Has Become So Deadly,” *New York Times* podcast *The Daily*, hosted by Michael Barbaro, Rachel Abrams, and Natalie Kitroeff, July 24, 2025.

Presiding in “Un-Presidented” Times

David Gambrell

When you come to appear before me,
who asked this from your hand?
Trample my courts no more! . . .
When you stretch out your hands,
I will hide my eyes from you;
even though you make many prayers,
I will not listen;
your hands are full of blood.
Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
remove your evil deeds
from before my eyes;
cease to do evil,
learn to do good;
seek justice,
rescue the oppressed,
defend the orphan,
plead for the widow.

—Isa. 1:12, 15–17

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to [Jesus] and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” And he said to them, “What is it you want me to do for you?” And they said to him, “Appoint us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” But Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?”

—Mark 10:35–38

P*raesidere*. This Latin word, meaning “to sit before,” stands behind the terms “presider” and “president.” These may seem like unrelated concepts. The first term, often used in ecclesiastical circles, refers to a liturgical leader: one with responsibility for the church’s worship. The second term, regularly seen in the daily news, refers to a political figure: one with authority in affairs of state. The commonality is that presiders and presidents are—or are *supposed* to be—those who sit before a public assembly in order to exercise guidance, offer direction, maintain order, promote justice, and seek the welfare of all within their care.

And therein lies a dilemma. How do we conceive of good and faithful liturgical leadership in times when prominent figures of authority—in church and state alike—set a starkly different example? How are our images of leadership being distorted, damaged, and destroyed when prominent leaders spread lies, betray trust, stoke division, incite violence, exploit the vulnerable, thunder and threaten, parade in their pomp, and hoard up for themselves power and wealth? How do we remember what it really means to preside?

This article begins with a consideration of the new way of life that is inaugurated through the sacrament of baptism. It includes a brief excursus on the language of liturgical leadership in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). It concludes with a reflection on the ministry of the presider in service to the church and the world.

In times when other standards of leadership are shattered, it is all the more important that liturgical leaders seek to model faithful, loving, and humble service. It is all the more important that we practice and proclaim Isaiah’s call to resist evil and seek the

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common good. It is all the more important that we follow the way of the Lord Jesus, who refused to “lord it over” others, who came not to be served, but to serve. Perhaps these are gifts that the body of Christ can offer to the body politic.

A New Way of Life

For those who belong to God in the body of Christ, baptism is the beginning of a new way of life. As the New Testament epistles explain, when we are baptized into Christ, the forces of evil and death are undone: “Consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 6:11). Former divisions and distinctions are dissolved: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). A new humanity is created, a new realm is established, and new family ties are forged: “You are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God” (Eph. 2:19).

The liturgy for the sacrament of baptism attests to this new way of life. It begins with a call to renounce evil, trust in God, and “pledge our allegiance” to Jesus Christ:

Trusting in the gracious mercy of God,
do you turn from the ways of sin
and renounce evil and its power in the world?

I renounce them. or I do.

Who is your Lord and Savior?

Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior.

Will you be Christ's faithful disciple,
obeying word and showing his love?

I will, with God's help.¹

These are not intended to be one-time promises, uttered and unremembered, like the empty rhetoric of campaign speeches. This is a daily discipline for followers of Christ, a continual practice of radical reorientation, rehearsed in worship through the rhythms of the day, the week, and the year.

The act of washing with water, central to the sacrament of baptism, serves as a natural symbol for this new way of life. Water is basic, common to every creature on earth. Yet water is powerful, delivering death and sustaining life. Washing with water is a sign of humility, an implicit acknowledgment of our need for cleansing, pardon, and renewal. Poured out

in the name of the Trinity, water becomes a sign of new birth: we are claimed as beloved children of God, members of Christ's own body, and citizens of a new creation.

The liturgy for baptism continues with words from Scripture describing the gifts of the Holy Spirit, bestowed on every child of the covenant:

O Lord, uphold N. [and N.]
by your Holy Spirit.
Give *her/him/them* the spirit
of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge
and the fear of the Lord,
the spirit of joy in your presence,
both now and forever. **Amen.** (Isa. 11:2)²

Through these sacred gifts, the Spirit equips us for life in Christ: a new way of life marked by the diligent discernment of God's will, the persistent pursuit of God's justice, and the exuberant exaltation of God's glory.

Elsewhere in Scripture, other gifts or fruits of the Holy Spirit are suggested. Drawing a contrast with desires of the flesh that lead to destruction, Galatians lists “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal. 5:22–23). Employing the baptismal imagery of putting on a new garment, Colossians calls us to clothe ourselves with “compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience” (Col. 3:12), along with forgiveness, love, peace, wisdom, and gratitude. The thread that ties them all together is an expansive sense of love in action—love for God and love for neighbors. “By this,” Jesus says, “everyone will know that you are my disciples” (John 13:35).

All of this is true for *every* Christian, *every* member of the body of Christ. Baptized into Christ, each Christian is empowered to say “no” to evil, oppression, and violence, and “yes” to God's righteousness, justice, and peace. Each Christian is stamped with the seal of new creation, embraced by the body of Christ, and welcomed into the commonwealth of God. Each Christian is nourished by the fruit of the Spirit and strengthened to carry out Jesus' mission and ministry of extending these blessings to all the earth.

Prior to the 2011 revision of the PC(USA)'s Form of Government, we referred to these ordered ministries as "offices." The shift in terminology from "office" to "ordered ministry" is a better reflection of our theology of ordination and ministry, in which the whole people of God serve together under the authority of Christ.

Of Presbyterians and Presiders

Baptism is the beginning of new life in Christ. It is also the foundation for every form of leadership and service in the church. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Directory for Worship expresses the relationship between baptism and ministry in this way:

In Baptism each Christian is called to ministry in Christ's name. God calls some persons from the midst of congregations to fulfill particular functions, so that the ministry of the whole people of God may flourish. In ordination the church sets apart with prayer and the laying on of hands those who have been called by God through the voice of the church to serve as deacons, ruling elders, and ministers of the Word and Sacrament.³

Our liturgy for ordination underscores this sacramental connection by beginning with the reaffirmation of baptism, gathering candidates for ordination around the font.

As the Directory for Worship teaches, some live out their baptismal calling through "ordered ministry" as deacons, elders, and pastors, carrying out particular roles in the mission and ministry of the church. These persons are spiritual leaders, to be sure. But this kind of leadership is not about position, power, or privilege; it is about vocation, service, and faithfulness. They do not trumpet their own accomplishments; they point to what God is doing. Their purpose is building up the body of Christ so that the church can do God's work in the world.

Prior to the 2011 revision of the PC(USA)'s Form of Government, we referred to these ordered ministries as "offices." The shift in terminology from "office" to "ordered ministry" is a better reflection of our theology of ordination and ministry, in which the whole people of God serve together under the authority of Christ.⁴ Leaders in the church are not "elected to office," but called to service. They are no longer called "officers," suggesting elevated status in an organization, but "ministers," conveying a

sense of spiritual vocation. Seeking to follow Jesus together, their mutual ministry is organized (or "ordered") in such a way that every member of the body can fulfill their God-given purpose.

Like presider/president, the words "minister" and "ministry" have a mixture of sacred and secular associations. In ecclesial circles, "minister" is often used as a synonym for the priest or pastor of a local congregation; in the PC(USA), this person is called a minister of Word and Sacrament. In the political sphere, a "prime minister" refers to the executive leader in a parliamentary system of governance; government offices are also sometimes known as "ministries," as in ministry of education, justice, or defense.

The previous edition of the PC(USA) *Book of Common Worship* used the word "minister" for the primary leader of worship, generally referring to a minister of Word and Sacrament. The following excerpts from an essay introducing the Service for the Lord's Day illustrates this usage (*italics added*):

The people respond with "Amen" to this and all other prayers offered by the *minister* or other worship leaders.

The readings may be read by a *minister* or by a member of the congregation.

In the name of the triune God, the *minister* pours or sprinkles water visibly and generously on the head of each candidate or immerses each candidate in water.

The *minister*, or the one authorized to preside, invites the people to the Lord's table using suitable words from scripture.⁵

In the decades since the publication of that service book, however, significant and growing numbers of PC(USA) congregations are served not by ministers of Word and Sacrament, but by ruling elders commissioned to pastoral service. While the lowercase term "minister" technically includes other ordered ministries, people often fail to make the connection to commissioned pastors.

Given this potential for confusion, the 2018 edition of the *Book of Common Worship* uses the term “presider” to refer to the primary leader in a service of worship. This decision was taken after considerable conversation and consultation with denominational leaders, liturgical scholars, and ecumenical partners. The word “presider” has a number of advantages: it avoids specifying minister, elder, or pastor, providing a neutral term; it is expansive enough to describe leaders in a variety of settings, including mid-council events (often ruling elders), community gatherings (other church leaders), and services of daily prayer (any member); and it has currency in other Christian traditions.

The word “presider” has a number of advantages: it avoids specifying minister, elder, or pastor, providing a neutral term; it is expansive enough to describe leaders in a variety of settings, including mid-council events (often ruling elders), community gatherings (other church leaders), and services of daily prayer (any member); and it has currency in other Christian traditions.

Other commonly used synonyms for presider—celebrant, officiant, and worship leader—arrive with certain baggage. Referring to the primary leader as the “celebrant” undermines that sense that the whole assembly shares in the celebration, and may seem misplaced in a service focusing on repentance or lament. This nomenclature has also come to be favored by leaders of secular weddings and funerals, a potential source of confusion. The term “officiant” has been similarly adopted by non-religious ritual practitioners. Furthermore, it shares a root with the problematic terms “office” and “officer,” and may convey unwanted overtones of rigidity, self-importance, and bureaucracy (as in “officious”). In the context of the contemporary praise and worship movement, “worship leader” has acquired a specialized meaning, referring primarily to music leadership in the opening part of the service, prior to the sermon.

Recently I have noticed some worship planners using the word “participants” to describe the leaders of a service. This is sometimes seen at the end of a service bulletin or slideshow, with a list of the names of “worship participants” where one might expect to see “worship leaders.” This usage should be avoided, as it contradicts our conviction that faithful worship is communal and collective work, demanding the “full, conscious, and active participation of the whole body of Christ, with heart, mind, soul, and strength.”⁶ We are all “worship participants”!

I suspect that this problematic phrase comes, at least in part, from a reticence to claim the language of leadership. This may be a vestige of our history—Reformed Christians are famously allergic to individual authority. Sixteenth-century continental Reformers raged against abuses of power in the papacy and priesthood at that time. Seventeenth-century reformers in England and Scotland contended with the monarchy and the imposition of a mandatory order of worship (see the prayer book riot of 1637). Puritan and Scottish immigrants to North America brought their resistance to the crown—along with their forms of church government and worship—across the Atlantic, eventually establishing the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America in 1789. As is often observed, Presbyterian polity was an important influence on the representative democracy of the United States Constitution, which went into effect that same year.

We are wise to be cautious about claiming the language of leadership; current events make this abundantly clear. And the time may come when the word “presider” no longer serves us well in the language of the liturgy. Its proximity to “president” certainly isn’t helping matters at the moment. Given our history and influence, perhaps we Presbyterians have a special responsibility for the ongoing critique and reform of this term, and of related roles in church and state.

I believe it would be a mistake, however, to abandon the language of leadership altogether, or to abdicate the role of the presider (whatever it may be called) in Christian worship. The people of God come to worship seeking guidance and direction in the practice of their faith. They expect their leaders to be good and trustworthy “servants of Christ and stewards of God’s mysteries” (1 Cor. 4:1). A faithful leader or presider fulfills their task in this spirit of service and stewardship—doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God

(Mic. 6:8). In the final section of this article, I will offer some observations on the work of the presider—with implications, I hope, for all who “sit before” public assemblies.

The Work of the Presider

The New Testament offers tantalizing glimpses of nascent models of leadership in the earliest Christian communities—deacons, elders, pastors, and bishops. These orders of ministry would not be fleshed out for several centuries, and their functions have evolved in manifold ways throughout the history of the universal church. A good and faithful presider attends to the heart of each of these forms of service, while empowering the ministry of *all* the baptized and engaging in the collegial work of the whole body of Christ.

Diakonos: deacon. The Greek word *diakonia* relates to ministry or service and is sometimes used for those who wait tables or deliver messages. References to deacons in the early church are found in Acts, Romans, Philippians, and 1 Timothy. Deacons are charged with the ministry of compassion, witness, and service.⁷ In some liturgical traditions, deacons are responsible for proclaiming the gospel, leading the prayers of intercession, and preparing the table for communion.

Jesus demonstrated diaconal leadership when he read from the scroll of Isaiah at the beginning of his ministry: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18–19). Jesus announced that his mission would be one of compassion, witness, and service, delivering a message of hope to people in need.

A good presider practices diaconal leadership by leading the church in service, showing compassion and care for those who are most vulnerable, within and beyond the walls of the church. Diaconal leadership is marked by kindness, humility, and simplicity. It involves speaking truth to power, standing with the powerless, and remembering those who are too often forgotten or ignored.

In a particular service of worship, a presider may exercise diaconal leadership by showing hospitality to vulnerable neighbors, demonstrating concern for the youngest and oldest worshipers,

providing support for those with particular needs, praying for the afflicted and oppressed, anointing the sick, modeling humble service at the table, and promoting opportunities for compassionate work in the community. Although “preside” means “to sit before,” a diaconal presider gives others a place of honor in the assembly.

Presbuteros: elder. The Greek word *presbuteros* describes someone who is advanced in age or wisdom, demonstrating prudent guidance and sound judgment; as a collective noun, *presbuterion* indicates an assembly or council of elders. References to elders in the early church are found in Acts, 1 Timothy, Titus, James, 1 Peter, 2 John, 3 John, and Revelation. Elders are charged with the ministry of discernment and governance.⁸ In some liturgical traditions, elders are invested with ritual expertise and authority: the English word “priest” is derived from the Greek and Latin forms of “presbyter.”

Jesus demonstrated presbyteral leadership throughout his ministry of teaching, as exemplified by the Sermon on the Mount and the many parables of the Gospels. Even at an early age, Jesus is praised for wisdom beyond his years: “The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom, and the favor of God was upon him” (Luke 2:40). In the temple, Jesus distinguished himself as a teacher of teachers; his disciples came to call him rabbi.

A good presider practices presbyteral leadership by being a trustworthy guide to the liturgy and a reliable figure in the assembly of God’s people. Presbyteral leadership is marked by prayerful, communal discernment of the will of God. It involves seeking what is just and right, working for the common good, and demonstrating good stewardship of the church’s resources.

In a particular service of worship, a presider may exercise presbyteral leadership by leading with confidence through the order of worship, encouraging faithful formation through patterns of prayer, interpreting the words and actions of the liturgy, and being a steady presence in times of uncertainty. A presbyteral presider models for the whole assembly what it means to devote oneself “to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). Before and after worship, a presbyteral leader also cultivates opportunities for the congregation to come to a deeper understanding of the theology and practice of Christian worship.

Poimen: pastor. The Greek word *poimen* means “shepherd,” one who tends and herds livestock; as a verb, *poimaino* refers to the activity of feeding and caring for sheep. The metaphor of “leader as shepherd” appears throughout the Bible, often with respect to the kings of ancient Israel. A reference to pastors in the early church is found in Ephesians; Hebrews and 1 Peter refer to the pastoral work of Jesus as a shepherd to lost sheep. Pastors are charged with the ministry of word and sacrament, leading the whole church in proclaiming the gospel and celebrating the mystery of faith.⁹ As shepherds for the flock, they are called “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:12).

Jesus demonstrated pastoral leadership when he said: “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. . . . I know my own and my own know me” (John 10:11, 14). For Jesus, pastoral leadership meant self-sacrificing service and intimate identification with the people of God.

A good presider practices pastoral leadership by being a good shepherd for the people of God, guiding them through deep valleys to still waters and green pastures. Pastoral leadership is marked by faithfulness, self-giving, and tender care. It involves bringing everyone along for the journey, sometimes stopping to wait for stragglers or seeking out one who has strayed from the flock.

In a particular service of worship, a presider may exercise pastoral leadership by declaring the assurance of pardon, preaching the gospel, and giving voice to God’s blessing. These three pivotal moments in worship are all proclamations of the word, relying on pastoral authority; as such they are typically led by one called by the church to speak a message of grace in the name of Jesus Christ, the good shepherd. A pastoral leader also tends and feeds the flock through the sacraments, presiding at baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Please note that prepositions matter: a pastoral leader presides *at* font or table, not *over* anyone or anything.

Episkopos: bishop. The Greek word *episkope* means “oversight,” keeping watch or taking care; related terms describe acts of guardianship, visitation, and management. References to bishops in the early church are found in Philippians, 1 Timothy, and Titus. Bishops are charged with the ministry of oversight, serving as caretakers for Christ’s church and guardians of its unity and peace. Presbyterians

have eschewed *personal* episcopacy in our form of government, eliminating the office of bishop; however, we practice *collegial* episcopacy by entrusting the oversight of the church to councils of elders.

Jesus demonstrated episcopal leadership in his intercession for the unity of his followers:

“I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:20–21).

This is one excerpt from a “high priestly” prayer in which Jesus calls on God to watch over the disciples, guarding and guiding the church.

A good presider practices episcopal leadership by paying careful attention to what is happening in worship at all times, overseeing the action of the liturgy. Episcopal leadership shares much with the ministry of elders and pastors, including deep wisdom and loving care. It requires a big-picture view of the life and mission of the church in the world.

In a particular service of worship, a presider may exercise episcopal leadership by caring for the preparation of the liturgy, attending to the structure and flow of worship, and ensuring that other leaders are prepared to play their parts. An episcopal presider also serves as a mirror, reflecting the praise and prayer of the people, and a lens, helping to focus their attention on what God is doing through the liturgy. This is especially important to remember when the presider’s face is visible to the assembly.

Koinonia: partnership. I’ve saved the most important point for last. The Greek word *koinonia* means “fellowship” or “participation”; it is sometimes translated as “sharing” or “communion.” Partnership is essential to the life of the body of Christ. While a good and faithful presider must be mindful of diaconal, presbyteral, pastoral, and episcopal ministry, no one person can or should fulfill all of these functions in the worship and work of the church. Christian ministry involves collaboration among the communion of the saints.

Jesus demonstrated collegial leadership by calling disciples and sending them to carry out his mission and ministry. With the Great Commission,

Jesus challenges them to cast their nets even more broadly: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:19–20).

A good presider practices collegial leadership by building relationships, creating community, and fostering the gifts of others. Collegial leadership is marked by love for God, love for neighbor, and love for one another, just as Jesus loves us. It involves the whole body of Christ and *every* gift of the Spirit: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal. 5:22–23). It can be a little messy at times, requiring us to clothe ourselves with the baptismal garments of “compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience” (Col. 3:12). And above all, love.

In a particular service of worship, a presider *should* exercise collegial leadership by drawing on the gifts of the whole body of Christ in the service of God, taking every opportunity to defer to others, and trusting the transforming work of the Holy Spirit.

A final source of challenge and inspiration for presiders may be found in the three “offices” of Christ described in the seventeenth-century Westminster Catechism. As the Shorter Catechism puts it, “Christ, as our Redeemer, executeth the offices of a prophet, of a priest, and of a king, both in his estate of humiliation and exaltation.”¹⁰ The crucified and risen Lord demonstrates *prophetic* ministry by revealing God’s saving purpose in our lives, *priestly* ministry by reconciling us with God through the offering of his life, and *kingly* (or pastoral) ministry by governing, guiding, and defending us from evil.¹¹

By extension, these three models of ministry

present still more ways to envision the service of a presider—especially in “un-presidented” times. Taking up the mantle of Christ, anointed by the Spirit, liturgical leaders can offer a prophetic witness by proclaiming liberation to the oppressed. Trusting in the grace of Christ, our great high priest, they can share in the priestly work of reconciliation by breaking down dividing walls in church and culture. And following in the steps of Christ, the good shepherd, they can subvert earthly concepts of kingship by leading with tenderness and love.

The church and the world together cry out for good and faithful leadership. Such leadership will, by the grace of God, shape the body of Christ for service, strengthen us to resist oppressive powers, equip us to do justice and show compassion, and make us ready to stand before the throne of the Lamb—who presides at the eternal liturgy of the new creation.

Notes

1. Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 409.
2. *Book of Common Worship* (2018), 412.
3. Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *Book of Order* (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, 2023–2025), W-4.0401.
4. *Book of Order* (2023–2025), G-2.0101.
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6. *Book of Order* (2023–2025), W-2.0201; cf. *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (Second Vatican Council, 1963).
7. *Book of Order* (2023–2025), G-2.0201, W-2.0302.
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The Truth about Conflict: Preaching When We're Divided

Aimee Moiso

On January 21, 2025, Episcopal Bishop Mariann Budde was the preacher for the interfaith Prayer Service for the Nation at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. Held the day after the second inauguration of President Donald Trump, the service was attended by the president and vice president, along with elected officials, public leaders, dignitaries, international guests, and many others.

Near the end of her sermon, Budde addressed the president directly. She asked for compassion and mercy for all who had put their trust in him, and especially for those who might be made more vulnerable by his promised actions.

The sermon went viral. Budde and her message were suddenly at the center of a whirlwind of questions about what it means to be a preacher in the United States in 2025. Reactions split largely along partisan lines. Some who supported the administration saw the sermon as an expression of disrespect and even “theological malpractice.”¹ Others, especially from mainline Christian traditions, praised her sermon as an example of “prophetic” courage.

In a post outlining what made the sermon prophetic, Leah Schade, a professor at Lexington Theological Seminary, wrote that Budde “stood in that sacred, public space . . . and asked for mercy on behalf of those who have no access to such a space. She used her privilege as an ordained minister to speak for those whose lives are threatened. And she did so knowing that she would be putting her own life at risk.”² For Schade, Budde’s sermon was prophetic not only because she spoke on behalf of

others, but because in doing so she risked her own well-being.

Similarly, Episcopal priest and Republican politician John Danforth commented that “what [Budde] did was preach biblical truth to power . . . that’s what the prophetic ministry does.”³ Mark Wingfield, executive director and publisher of Baptist News Global, noted that Budde’s sermon was prophetically prescient. She had called for care and protection of people who, a month later, were already being harmed by administration policies. “Bishop Budde was not just a preacher,” he wrote. “She was a prophet that day.”⁴

The word “prophetic” can evoke strong images in the mind’s eye: a vitriolic minister bellowing woes to a chastened congregation; a soapbox evangelist with a sandwich board and a megaphone rebuking passersby; a self-appointed visionary on cable TV predicting the end of the world and calling viewers to repent. The prophets of the Hebrew Bible are often remembered like that: as reluctant (or infuriated) heralds of condemnation who threaten the people with God’s wrath. Given these portrayals, it is no wonder prophetic preaching gets superficially contrasted with pastoral preaching, where a “prophetic” sermon is expected to make hearers feel bad (judged, rebuked, guilty), while a “pastoral” sermon will make them feel good (consoled, hope-filled, peaceful). Of course, neither of these is an accurate portrayal of most prophetic or pastoral preaching, but the caricatures remain salient. Even the most pastoral of prophetic preachers can be perceived as outlandish—just ask Bishop Budde how it feels to go viral after being publicly rebuked by the president of the United States.

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Many of us have never before experienced the levels of public hostility and volatility that are taking place in the United States in 2025. Continual waves of disruption and distraction can leave our communities and congregations unsettled and overwhelmed. Of course, this is not the only time preachers have navigated stormy seas while seeking to proclaim the good news, nor will it be the last, and there is some solace in knowing we are not alone in facing such situations. Still, when Sunday morning rolls around, preachers may struggle to hold everything together: screaming headlines, divergent narratives, biblical teachings, social outcry, congregational needs, local concerns, theological grounding, personal convictions, liturgical norms, spiritual and mental health, and on and on.

When preachers feel strained by the constant push-and-pull of expectations in turbulent times, it can be even more challenging to discern what a sermon should be and do, and how to preach well in a burdened pulpit to burdened listeners. Temptations abound: preachers drawn to the prophetic mode may want to use their sermons solely to express anger over injustice, or to create false equivalencies between the gospel and partisan politics. Others who are inclined toward keeping the peace through their sermons might lean on feel-good platitudes of reassurance in a desire to avoid getting into trouble. Those in homogeneous congregations may preach sermons that simply reinforce the existing beliefs and actions of the community and reaffirm the status quo. While such preaching strategies may feel reasonable or even necessary at times, they create problems as time goes on—not least because they often mold the Scripture to meet the moment rather than letting the Scripture speak truth into our changing realities. For better or worse, complex situations require nuanced, thoughtful responses and the cultivation of resilience amid change, which are often resources in short supply when we are exhausted and anxious.

It is striking, then, that at its heart Budde's sermon was about *unity*. She spoke not of cheap, superficial unity, but one that requires openness and sacrifice in a pluralistic society. She called for mercy, compassion, humility, honesty, and care—none of which should be, in and of themselves, controversial topics. In reflecting on the maelstrom that followed her sermon, Budde wrote in a July Substack post,

Though I attempted to speak with humility and respect when addressing the president, my words had the effect of amplifying the divisions that the prayer service for unity sought to address. It is a valid criticism. Yet if I had only said what our leaders wanted to hear, would that not have been a shirking of my responsibility?⁵

Few preachers will find themselves in the position of having to write a sermon for a congregation that includes the president of the United States. But Budde's comments reflect the questions a lot of preachers carry these days. What are the preacher's particular responsibilities in turbulent times, especially when preachers themselves may have strong feelings about what is happening? How might preachers speak prophetically while also demonstrating humility and respect for those in the pews and beyond?

Budde's experience adds an important consideration to preaching these days. Her sermon attempted to address the reality of division and alienation in the nation, in the congregation, and even between the preacher and the hearers. Neither prophetic nor pastoral modes of preaching are necessarily oriented toward what to do when communities or societies are in *conflict*. Though responding to local and national events seems like the realm of "prophetic" preaching, and social disruption might be best addressed with pastoral speech, are there other possibilities? What should preaching look like when our congregations and communities are divided? Moreover, what can we expect from preaching in such moments? What expectations are reasonable to put on a sermon in the first place?

Preaching has never been a static exercise. Over generations, it has shifted and changed to meet historic moments and specific needs, to include new faces and voices, and to imagine new possibilities for how God speaks through proclamation. This era certainly offers significant challenges for preaching but also reveals fresh opportunities for God to speak to us amid—and sometimes even through—our conflicts.

Preaching's Recent History: The More the Merrier

It is sometimes easy to forget that as Christians we have not always done things the same way. During the last century, for example, preaching in the United States went through significant change. A prominent discussion was about the relationship between the preacher and the hearer. In many traditions, the role of the preacher had traditionally been seen as one set apart from (and often “above”) the congregation, whether by calling, education, appointment, or convention. At times, this “set-apartness” created the impression that the preacher was speaking over against the congregation rather than with or alongside them, or that the preacher was the mouthpiece of God proclaiming a message the congregation was simply to receive without question. The sense of distance between preacher and congregation sometimes added to the feeling that sermons were irrelevant to the daily lives of hearers.

A “turn toward the listener” in twentieth-century homiletics helped preachers imagine fresh possibilities. New ideas about the nature and purpose of sermons, as well as an emerging focus on the needs and desires of the hearers, encouraged preachers toward more informal and familiar speech. Preachers shifted from primarily using expository or “explanatory” templates to being more pastoral, reflective, artistic, and narrative. Listeners were not blank slates receiving a timeless, perfected proclamation. Instead, they could play a role in interpretation by bringing their own perspectives and understandings to the sermon. Preachers did not need to think of themselves as “separate” from the congregation but could begin from points of connection and even bring stories from the congregation into the pulpit. By allowing the wisdom and experiences of the whole community to influence the sermon, the act of proclamation became a shared venture rather than a one-person show.

In practical terms, this shift toward the hearer meant that many preachers spoke more colloquially and interpersonally in their sermons, used more stories and images, focused more on pastoral concerns, and tried new ways to be relevant and timely.⁶ Preachers hoped that a more personal approach would provide hearers with more ways “into” the sermon and help parishioners feel like sermons were more applicable to their lives. Some pastors who

felt they were out of step with their congregation's cultural norms sought to better appreciate their parishioners' values and beliefs by intentionally learning about and integrating the congregation's context, history, and self-understanding into sermons.⁷ As preachers recognized the limitations of their own perspectives, they looked for interpretive resources by scholars from different traditions, cultures, and understandings. Some preachers employed roundtable or conversational approaches that brought congregation members together for biblical study, out of whose interpretations the weekly sermon was created.⁸ In each case, preachers chose to bring new and sometimes unexpected voices to the pulpit, integrating ideas and wisdom from the congregation and beyond.

These approaches also reflected a theological shift toward a more communal understanding of preaching and away from the idea that a preacher had to have all the answers. In denominations built on the “priesthood of all believers,” these shifts reinforced the belief that worship is the responsibility of the whole community. Particularly in Reformed traditions, where hierarchical, concentrated power is a significant historical and theological concern, ensuring broad representation and participation in leadership safeguards the body against complacency among the laity, and against abuse and heresy from the pulpit.

Today, in most mainline churches in the United States, there is still an (often unstated) expectation that the preacher is the one with something to say, and the congregation is there to receive that message. It can be hard for preachers to shake the feeling every sermon must offer something new and exciting for the congregation. Hearers, too, bring their own expectations, such as hoping the sermon will meet their individual need for particular inspiration, comfort, conviction, or transformation on a given Sunday. Both preachers and hearers may look to sermons for clear and definitive answers to life's toughest questions, or to make universal declarations of right and wrong. Or listeners may hope simply to hear and consider new ideas without being told what to think or how to act; they may feel frustrated by more directive preaching. All kinds of expectations can leave preachers feeling unsure or even paralyzed about what to say and parishioners disappointed or frustrated by what they hear.

Continuing to include multiple and varied perspectives in the sermon, though, means the

preacher doesn't face the expectations "alone." To facilitate congregational participation in the sermon, preachers might gather congregation members specifically to discuss upcoming Scripture texts together. The preacher then weaves into sermons the theology and interpretations that emerge from the conversations. As such conversations become familiar and normalized parts of the sermon-writing process, members may feel comfortable offering significant stories from their lives, which can become sermon illustrations (with the permission of the storyteller). In some settings, those who've shared stories could be asked to offer them directly as part of the sermon itself. One version of this "roundtable" preaching method is outlined in John McClure's *The Roundtable Pulpit*, where membership in the conversation group rotates over time to include as many participants as want to join—and even guests and community partners whose wisdom and perspectives broaden the conversation.⁹

A multiplicity of voices from the pulpit demonstrates our interdependence in the discernment of God's intentions. As listeners recognize their own stories interwoven with those of the community, they are reminded of their part in a larger story. Preachers can let go of the feeling they should have all the answers, and parishioners are empowered to participate in the hope-filled proclamation as they hear their own hopes and convictions resonate from the pulpit. Together, we are reminded of our shared vocation as learners, interpreters, visionaries, and wisdom-bringers. Rather than feeling like a lone voice in the wilderness, the preacher becomes the host of a conversation in which everyone has wisdom to contribute, and everyone's experience matters.

Especially in unsettled times, the simple act of allowing the voices of the community to be part of the sermon can help to ease tension and reconnect us with each other. How marvelous it is to realize that together we get to offer stories of the life of the congregation, the community, and the wider world as an act of Christian worship. What a joyful expression of faith it can be to listen to each other to hear the voice of God, who speaks beyond the limits of any of our individual understandings.

Coming into Conflict with Preaching

A challenge for Christian communities can be discerning the limits of diversity—what levels of difference are acceptable while upholding orthodoxy, for example. Diversity also brings another dynamic:

the potential for conflict. In its most basic terms, conflict is defined as differences that result in tension.¹⁰ That is, when we encounter something unfamiliar or different, it can cause us to feel discomfort or tension, and thus conflict. By this definition, any humans existing in proximity to each other will experience conflict, which means conflict is both neutral (not intrinsically good or bad) and unavoidable.

In Christian contexts, however, we often assume that conflict is a sign that something has gone wrong. Conflict can be uncomfortable and messy. Many of us feel wary of awkwardness, hurt feelings, and heightened emotion. We fear misunderstandings and broken relationships. We become anxious for resolution and a return to harmony. Each of these *feels* like it is in opposition to what God wants for us. So, rather than considering the deeper questions of what difference might mean, we often try to resist the conflict altogether—in our interpersonal interactions, our communities, and our preaching. We perceive differences as threats to unity, and therefore as sin. As Christian conflict theorist Carolyn Schrock-Shenk writes,

Many of us have been taught God is absent in conflict. We have often worked to achieve a false unity based on uniformity of thought and action rather than oneness of spirit. This belief has devastated relationships and congregations. It has closed down emotions, honest expression, and dialogue about differences. It has often led us to speak and act as if we have the complete truth. Then we become insecure and suspicious when faced with different beliefs or opinions.¹¹

When we seek to shut down conflict outright, we miss the opportunity to learn from differences and to embrace the diversity God has created as a gift for us. Further, we do not learn helpful and healthy ways to respond to conflict that lead to deeper learning and more honest relationships.

When conflict erupts, preachers may feel pressure to say something that will quickly move past it and bring the community together. Often, however, this impulse can sidestep the conflict rather than working toward authentic, constructive engagement with what underlies it. Finality is not required in a sermon, nor is certainty. Instead of rushing to answers, preachers can choose to craft sermons

that reflect on the conflict from differing faithful perspectives, providing framework for congregational discernment and prayer. The open-endedness of this approach may require some adjustment, both for preachers who feel pressure to tie together the loose ends of a sermon, and congregations who expect the same. One simple technique for preachers is to be honest and straightforward about what is taking place. It can come as a relief to both preacher and listeners to hear it said aloud that as the body of Christ, we sometimes don't know what to do or how to respond to the challenges before us. Rather than increasing tension, when preachers stand alongside the congregation in shared uncertainty and fear—and provide tools for attending to what is happening—the result is often a sense of empowerment for all involved. Despite our desire to avoid discomfort, rushing to resolution is often not as helpful or faithful as developing our spiritual capacities for listening, waiting, flexibility, and receptivity so that we can take the time needed to discern the way together. Preachers might (during the sermon itself!) lead the congregation in spiritual exercises designed to lessen anxiety while sitting with their discomfort, using the practices to strengthen capacity for openness and mindfulness in the community.

The preacher can act as the encourager of patient faithfulness and honesty among all gathered as they listen to and with each other and the world. In times of tension, this alternative understanding of the nature of preaching—one which centers voices of the whole rather than the voice of an individual—can be an antidote to anxiety for both the preacher and the congregation. Likewise, when the preacher feels at odds with the congregation, it can be a relief to let go of needing to “persuade” or “convince,” and to offer instead stories, ideas, and viewpoints from the gathered body as siblings in Christ. Rather than avoiding conflict to keep an uneasy peace, the preacher can help give expression to the deep convictions of the people. Preachers might gather personal stories from members of the congregation with differing views (again, with their permission) and incorporate them into the sermon. The intention here would not be to craft a sermon-as-two-sided-debate, but to demonstrate that well-meaning people of deep faith can disagree, and may have good, important, and even biblical reasons for the positions they hold. Together, then, we practice listening to the experiences of others to better hear how God might be speaking in ways we've missed

or misunderstood. It is also a spiritual exercise of remaining open and vulnerable to the possibility of being changed by another person who is also made in the image of God. Together, as a body of many parts, the community listens more comprehensively and prayerfully to one another during times of tension in order to hear the voice of God as it moves among them.

Conflict itself is neither bad nor good, but how we respond to conflict can be constructive or destructive. Constructive conflict opens us to new possibilities, encourages us to pause and listen to each other, grows our humility and patience, points toward needed change, and reminds us of our interdependence. Destructive conflict, by contrast, is marked by rigidity, defensiveness, hostility, entrenchment, and increased distance from one another. Not all moments are ripe for constructive conflict, and sometimes boundaries need to be set if participants move toward destructive responses. We do not need to extend the hospitality of listening to those who cause harm by, for example, proclaiming the superiority of any race, culture, gender, or other form of identity; insulting or demeaning others; or inciting malice, demonization, or violence. It is *always* appropriate to protect people from harm, especially if they are part of vulnerable groups. Simultaneously, harm is different from discomfort. It is normal to feel uncomfortable around conflict, and to feel a wide range of other emotions—fear, anxiety, anger, embarrassment, shame, for instance—as well. Feeling uncomfortable emotions is one of the reasons we often seek to shut down conflict before addressing it. However, we can choose to stay present to the situation even if we are uncomfortable, and to cultivate practices that help us listen well and remain patient and vulnerable in those situations. Responding to conflict constructively requires willing participants who seek new understanding of and deepened compassion for others.

When conflict emerges in a community—and it always will, whenever people gather—we have the choice to engage with it constructively or destructively. We can choose to build healthier relationships together, or to shove conflict under the rug, or to become defensive and hostile. Preaching offers one way to demonstrate, illustrate, and normalize constructive approaches to conflict, especially when we make a habit of presenting different viewpoints without feeling compelled to resolve them, or by pointing out the ways in which

our conflicts have led to growth and change. As we interpret Scripture together, our diverse perspectives can enrich the whole of our understanding and help us see God in new and surprising ways.

More importantly, recognizing that conflict is normal, natural, and simply an experience of differences that cause tension allows the preacher to approach conflict in healthy and open-minded ways. Conflict is often the means by which necessary change is made known—for instance, when situations of inadequate access, hospitality, justice, or equity are brought to light. Social change often emerges out of differences that have brought tensions to the foreground. Instead of fearing conflict, Schrock-Shenk writes, the church can choose to consider conflict an opportunity to listen more carefully for God's leading:

We can begin to understand conflict settings as holy ground, as places where God is present in powerful ways, as opportunities to gain new insight and understanding. Imagine how different our conflicts would be if we could move from an "Oh dear, how terrible" to "What is God trying to say to us?"¹²

What might it look like for preachers to put before the congregations the diverse concerns, hopes, viewpoints, and faithful actions of the congregation, and to ask the gathered community to reflect on what they've heard together by asking, "What is God trying to say to us?"

Preaching in a Long-Distance Relationship

Dealing with conflict or controversial issues from the pulpit is complicated in the best of times. But experts in conflict and peacemaking point out that when conflict becomes polarized (as in public life in the United States in 2025), we are no longer dealing with just "differences in tension." What was once mere disagreement or diverging opinions slides into fundamental incompatibility. Language within the conflict changes from addressing issues or ideas to making generalizations and speaking in stereotypes about the people with whom we disagree: people like "them" versus people like "us." As opposition hardens, common ground between groups is harder to find, and those who seek it are considered untrustworthy or disloyal to the group to which they belong. Ideologies become rigid and

absolute, and those who don't yet hold strong opinions are pressured to join a side. Compromise is no longer a viable option but a betrayal of the "cause." As the conflict becomes more and more about dehumanized "enemies," the only possible solutions require getting away from—or getting rid of—those "others."¹³

When polarization has gripped a community, it may be impossible for a sermon addressing controversy to be received well, no matter how pastoral its approach. Addressing conflict through a sermon requires willing participants in the pulpit and the pews. As participants become estranged from each other to the point of hostility, attempting to address conflict through public speech may only exacerbate antagonism. This is the scenario in which Bishop Budde found herself; though she tried to name the issues facing the nation and encourage people toward unity, the divisions were already too strained to allow even a reasonable hearing.

International conflict experts point out that top-down approaches to conflict rarely lead to lasting peace unless those who have been affected by the conflict—down to the grassroots—have ownership in the process.¹⁴ Similarly, preaching cannot solve significant congregational polarization. Addressing entrenched conflict within a congregation requires a more comprehensive approach in which the parties are empowered to work toward transformation together, to establish the means and processes of that transformation, and to find their way back to shared and mutual relationship.

When groups are so polarized that even compromise on divisive issues becomes difficult or impossible, one possibility for preaching is to focus on the nature of Christian community and how we want to *be* together in our divisions. Preaching shifts from "How do we deal with the conflict through the sermon?" to "What kind of relationships are we called to in this time and place?" Preachers again become encouragers—not toward imposed resolution or false unity, but toward reimagining what it means to be the body of Christ together. When we cannot agree on an issue, can we still promise to speak to each other with kindness and openness? When we cannot agree on which news source is telling the truth, can we still commit to being honest with each other about how we feel? When we cannot agree on how a Scripture should be interpreted, can we still agree that we should discern God's will together in community?

This orientation toward preaching is equally important whether the congregation is internally divided or the congregation is of the same mind but divided from external communities. As polarization reinforces who is “in” and who is “out” of a particular group, the temptation in like-minded communities is to double down on existing beliefs that reinforce the group’s identity. Prophetic preaching in such contexts requires a relational focus in order to resist demonizing others or venerating ourselves. Maintaining a sense of humility and an openness to admitting our limitations even as we speak powerfully about injustice can help temper the impulse to make “others” the problem. Preachers need to take special care to resist using tropes and straw-man arguments to make points, and to avoid speaking in generalities and abstractions. The most powerful and meaningful elements for the hearer will be specifics: stories about a real person or a particular situation rather than a large, generic population, visuals that bring big ideas like “liberation” or “fellowship” into a concrete and tangible reality, local and familiar experiences that can be connected to a larger or more global situation to remind us of our interdependence. In the end, maintaining our relational connection with others, who are all made in the image of God, is the only way toward long-term healing of broken communities and societies.

The writer of Ephesians encourages hearers to “put away falsehood” and “speak the truth with your neighbor” (4:25). When we are polarized from each other, it can seem like we must shout toward each other across a great chasm to try to get those on the other side to finally hear what is “true.” But the verse goes on to say why truth is so important: “for we are members of one another.” We tell the truth *because we are in this together*. We belong to each other. When we cannot agree, or even when we are divided for a time, we strive to hold the conviction that somehow, in the bonds of Christ, we remain connected. From this foundation, we live in hope of a healed and reconciled future for all who share this world together.

Notes

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The Transfiguration of Mary

Natasha Akery

The *Transfiguration of Mary* is a response to a question: Who would visit Mary if she was transfigured like Jesus? The women in Christ's genealogy seemed the most appropriate visitors. I recited the poem as a part of my church's Lessons and Carols service during the Christmas season. Revisiting the stories of these women will thicken the poem's meaning and significance.

The Transfiguration of Mary

the full moon of Mary's womb
orbits her restlessness

the fists and feet of her unborn son
are meteors that crater her sleep

she steps outside into the cornflower
blue of night for a deeper breath

parched, she lowers the pail in the well
and hears the agitation of water

suddenly, she glows
like the angel who announced her fate

suddenly, she knows
her son will not outlive her

the scent of incense and memory
leads her to a tent that glows amber

the air flickers and four women
nestle her into a pile of cushions

she searches the lines of their faces,
but her heart does the knowing

Tamar, the mother of Perez
Rahab, the mother of Boaz
Ruth, the mother of Obed
Bathsheba, the mother of Solomon

women whose shadows are scandal,
who traded shame for survival

Tamar slides a ring on Mary's finger
"may you remember whose you are"

Rahab ties a red thread around her wrist
"may God show you kindness for your kindness"

Ruth breaks fresh barley bread for her
"may you continue to find favor"

Bathsheba washes Mary's feet
"may your son be wise and bring us peace"

they anoint her head and hands with oil,
her cup overflows with goodness and mercy

can I live in this tent forever, she wonders
while warm waves touch the shore of her mind

dawn's rosy fingers brush her cheeks
and she blinks awake to a pool of light

no tent, no incense, eight hands absent
Elizabeth, her cousin, joins the birdsong

her son flutters in the nest of her womb
her spirit flies before her maker

and Mary keeps all these things
and ponders them in her heart

Natasha Akery is a secondary language arts teacher, restorative practitioner, poet, and member of Westminster Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.



Benjamin Wildflower

Benjamin Wildflower
Mary 2018
benwildflower.com

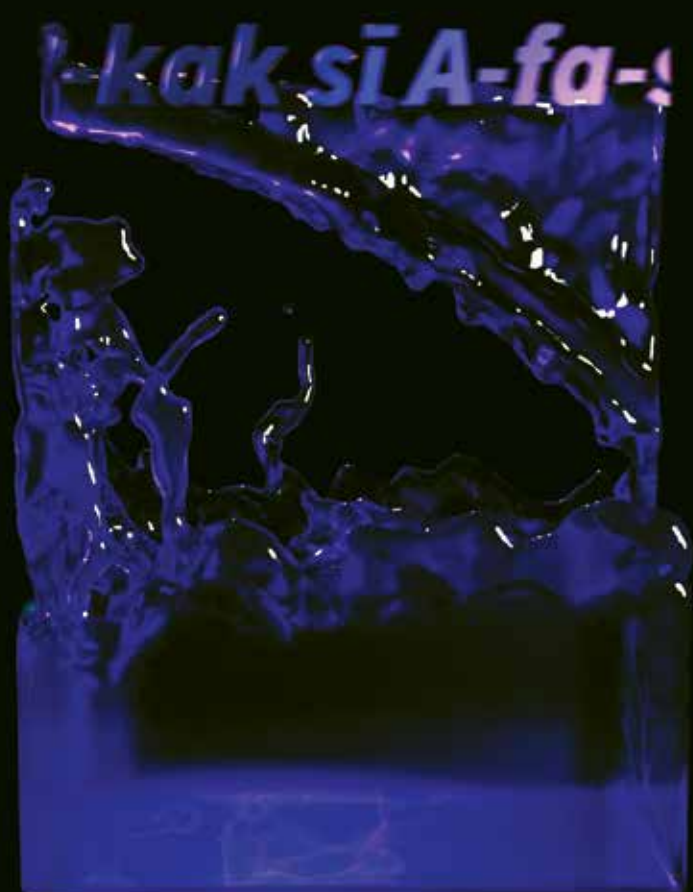
The Work of Our Hands: Mother Tongue

May Kytonen



Mother Tongue: Deluge Stories (detail)
three channel video
2023
size variable

May Kytonen is an interdisciplinary artist whose practice navigates memory, identity, and heritage through fibers, collage, and immersive installations.



Creating religious artwork was not my initial aim when I first began pursuing art. In fact, I had a conversation with a friend in college who asked me whether my post-graduation hopes included exclusively pursuing opportunities within the church. I paused, because at that point I had not experienced an integration of artistic pursuits and spirituality within my own life, let alone alongside a faith community. I had no concept of how art could be a part of the life of a church.

Over a decade later (and after some journeying around art and faith myself), Bethany Presbyterian Church in Seattle, Washington, approached me about commissioning a public-facing work in the community. Their aim was to invite BIPOC artists to create work reflecting their belief that “cultural, ethnic, and racial diversity, expression, and reconciliation are central to human flourishing

and at the very heart of God.” Their arts team explained that the finished piece would be for an outward-facing display on the church grounds, and that it need not be religious in nature. Bethany Presbyterian had been doing this work for several years and had a wide array of previous participants, including those working in two-dimensional and three-dimensional art forms, murals, free-standing outdoor sculptures, and more.

I knew right away that this was a unique opportunity, this my first commission with a local congregation. In fact, the freedom not to make something explicitly religious gave me permission to explore religious themes through my own cultural lens.

When asked to describe my art practice, I typically start by explaining that it is an examination of Asian American identity. Working in collage,



Mother Tongue: Deluge Stories (video still)
three channel video
2023
size variable

fiber, paper sculpture, and installation, I explore questions of home, heritage, and belonging. In my recent exhibition, *Field of Belonging*, I looked at how ancestral history and domestic space inform identity. In *Azimuth* and *Yuán Fèn*, I combined found photography, family ephemera, and Chinese cosmology to explore how cultural stories move across generations. For *In the Fabric of Space & Time* I used wax-resist dyed banners to trace zodiac constellations found across cultures. In *Making Home*, I overlaid HGTV dream home floor plans with Chinese lattice designs to reflect on the tension between cultural heritage and American ideals. I've continued to research traditional Chinese methods of making and their connection to contemporary

identity. I find my work is an ongoing investigation in how memory, place, and inheritance shape us, and how art can hold those questions.

As part of this commission, I found myself asking new questions at the intersection of the church and my Taiwanese lineage. Several years ago in my research around language, I found a unique orthography that connected Christianity with Taiwanese. The matrilineal language of my family is Taiwanese Hokkien, which my mother and grandmother both speak fluently. Although a standardized written form of this dialect does not exist, I learned that Péh-ōe-jī, also known as Church Romanization, was developed by Presbyterian missionaries in the nineteenth century. This Latin alphabet allowing Hokkien to be written phonetically was created to help teach Taiwanese Hokkien, as well as translate the Bible, church news, and religious tracts.

*Khó-sioh lín pún-kok ê jī chin oh, chió chió
lâng khòan ē hiáu-tit. Só-í góan ū siat pá t-mih
ê hoat-tō, ēng pé h-ōe-jī lâi in-chheh, hō lín
chèng-lâng khòan khah khòai bat . . .*

Translation: Because the characters in your country are so difficult, only a few people are literate. Therefore, we have striven to print books in Péh-ōe-jī to help you to read. . . .
(Thomas Barclay, *Tài-oân-hú-siân Kàu-hōe-pò*, Issue 1)

Missionary Thomas Barclay printed the first newspaper in Taiwan in any language, the *Taiwan Church News*, using Péh-ōe-jī.

Since then, this orthography has fallen out of use. Yet I was curious to continue the historical dialogue between the Seattle Presbytery and the Taiwanese people. My research led me to the creation of *Mother Tongue: Deluge Stories*. This video installation shares three traditional Taiwanese creation myths transcribed into Péh-ōe-jī. Many cultures have flood myths, and there are several traditional flood stories passed down from the various people groups of Taiwan. These three stories depict flood imagery alongside Taiwanese Hokkien text: one from the Atayal, another from the Amis Dou-lan, and finally a flood narrative from the Pingpu Paze people.

As I investigated the conceptual elements of this work, several questions arose for me. What are the implications of taking another's language and bending



its shape into a form that serves a missionary drive? What would it have looked like for a written form of this language to share the stories of the local people, their traditions, their spiritual heritage, and their sacred stories? Through this installation, I was able to continue the conversation between my people and the Seattle Presbytery. For me, this work opened up space to reflect on voice, story, and power. What stories get preserved, and by whom? What does worship look like when it makes room for languages and myths considered peripheral, or even incompatible, with the dominant faith tradition?

Working with Bethany Presbyterian Church felt like a true collaboration built on a mutual desire to create space for meaningful dialogue. By inviting BIPOC artists to share work on their own terms,

without the expectation of religious content, the church made room for a broader understanding of what sacred expression can look like. To me, that kind of openness, where cultural difference is embraced rather than folded into a single story, is a form of worship.

Above: *Mother Tongue: Deluge Stories* (detail)
three channel video
2023
size variable

Below: *Mother Tongue: Deluge Stories* (street view)
three channel video
2023
size variable



About the Artist

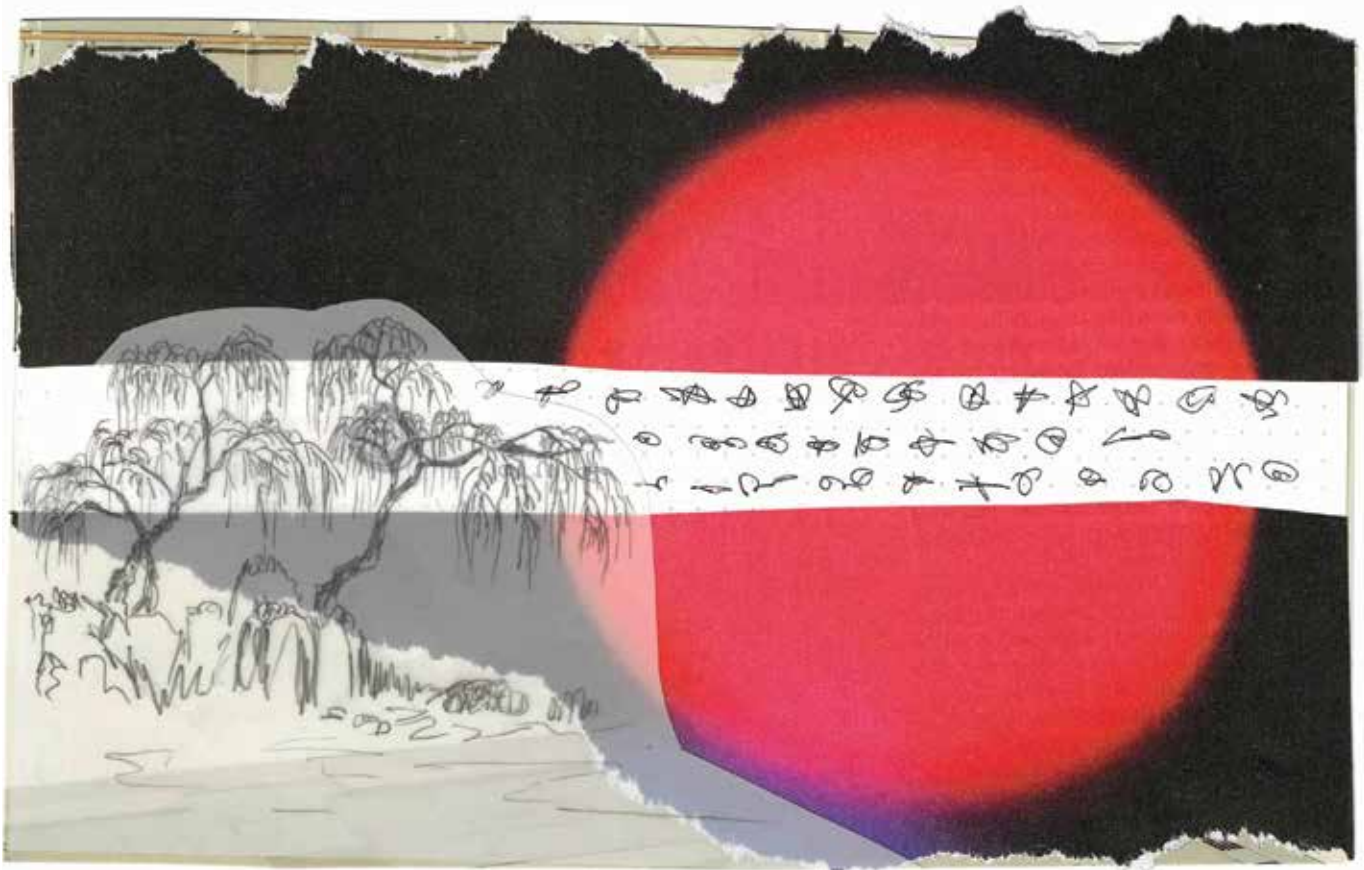
May Kytonen

Drawing from her Taiwanese ancestry, May Kytonen creates work that navigates memory, cultural hybridity, and the complexities of belonging.

Kytonen earned her BA in Interdisciplinary Visual Arts from the University of Washington in 2012 and has since exhibited widely across the Pacific Northwest and beyond. Her solo exhibitions include *Affinity Occasion* (2023) at Lewis-Clark State College, *Mother Tongue: Deluge Stories* (2023) in Seattle, and *Path of the Sky Dragon* (2022), a public installation at the Seattle Center.

A recipient of multiple awards, including Artist Trust's GAP Award and Seattle's smART Ventures Mini Grant, Kytonen has been selected for public art rosters by the Seattle Office of Arts & Culture and the Washington State Arts Commission. Her work has been featured in publications like *Crosscut*, *Daria Magazine*, and *The Spokesman Review*. In addition to her studio practice, she has been an active member of artist collectives including SOIL and Saranac Art Projects.

Kytonen's work continues to explore the intersections of cultural memory and contemporary identity, blending personal and collective histories through her use of materials and storytelling.



Who Is My Neighbor/Who Is My Ancestor (from Azimuth series)

mixed media collage

2020

5 x 7 inches



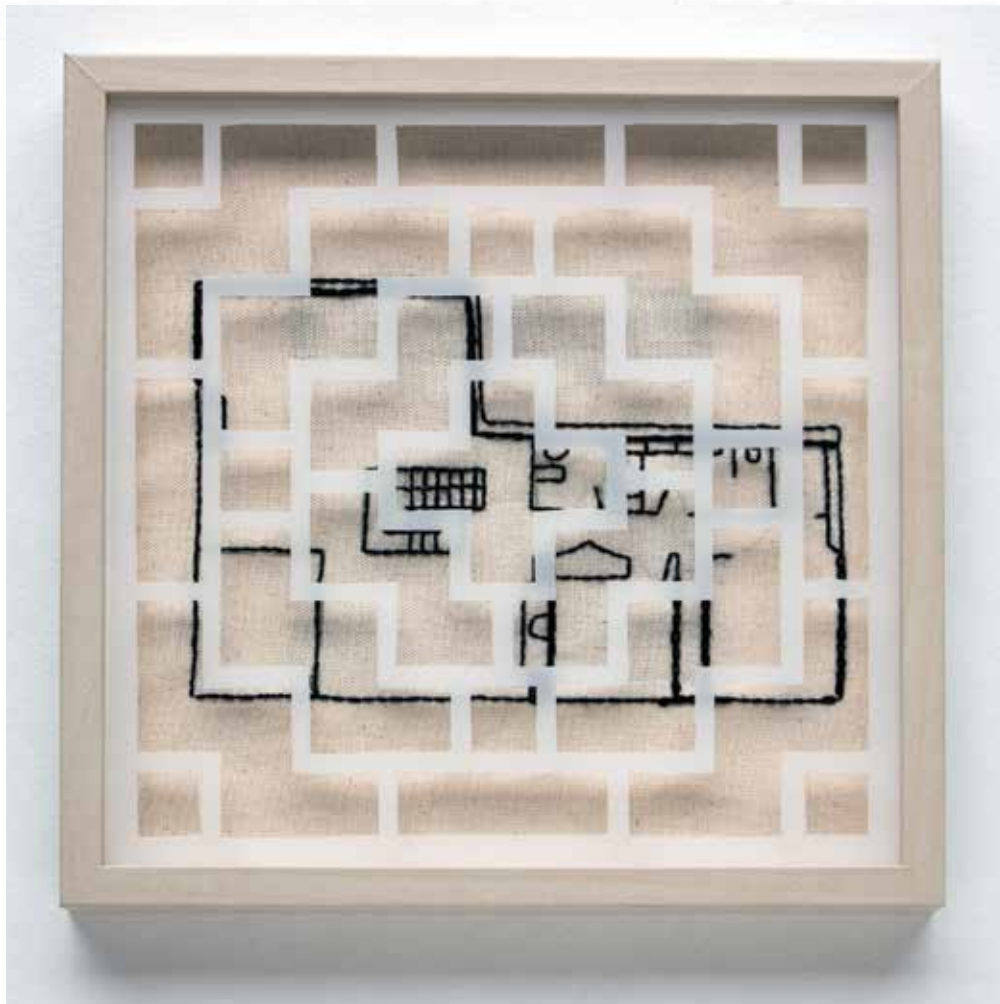
In the Fabric of Space and Time
wax resist dyed canvas
2019
approx. 12 x 25 x 5 feet



Cloud By Night
(from Azimuth series)
digital collage
2021
11 x 14 inches



Above: Yuán Fèn
wax resist dyed canvas
2020
64 x 32 inches (each panel)



Left: *Generational Atlas* (from
Making Home Series)
cotton canvas,
embroidery thread, vellum
2020
9 x 9 inches

The Bible and Politics: An Interpretive Labyrinth

Safwat Marzouk

The weaponization of the Bible in the politics of North Africa and West Asia (NAWA) quite often leaves preachers puzzled on how to interpret, preach, and teach these texts in their contexts. Overwhelmed by the region's complicated history and afraid of saying the wrong thing or being mislabeled, many pastors choose to avoid the matter altogether. Those who are aware of the layers and complexity of the politics of the region sometimes feel helpless given the continuous colonial and imperial policies that fuel conflict, stir violence, and cause mass displacements. The complexity of the situation and the sense of hopelessness do not deter politicians or religious fundamentalists from employing the Bible for their political agendas; therefore, church leaders must develop an interpretive framework that empowers them to interpret the Bible in a nuanced way as they read or watch the news.

Thirty years ago, I went to a seminary in Cairo, Egypt, to become a pastor. My vocational goals shifted quickly when I started asking myself questions around interpreting the Old Testament as an Egyptian Christian in light of the Arab Israeli conflict. I reflected on how I have been socialized in the church to read the Old Testament in a particular way and how that interpretive tradition relates to how Egypt is portrayed in the Bible. Over these three decades, I have wrestled with many questions and, as you can imagine, without finding final answers, I have tried many interpretive methods to make sense of how to read the Bible as an Egyptian Christian without reaching lasting conclusions. The journey of learning how to live with the questions has brought so much depth to my understanding of my faith and identity. The following paragraphs will

give you glimpses of the questions that I ask when I reflect on the relationship between the Bible and politics. It might feel like a labyrinth. But I hope that my journey and questions offer you companionship as we seek to faithfully witness to the good news to all creation.

With Whom Do We Identify When We Read the Bible?

Like many readers of the Bible within the realm of the church, I grew up identifying with the insiders of the biblical narrative (biblical Israel and the followers of Jesus). Why not, since I am a Christian and the Bible is scripture for me? Without faith identity, these texts would be merely great world literature. After all, biblical texts are read as the faithful witness to God's revelation. Yet, the stories of the insiders are always intertwined with outsiders. In the Old Testament, there are the Egyptians, the Canaanites, the Philistines, the Amalekites, the Assyrians, and the Babylonians to name some of the dominant actors. Ancient empires of Egypt and Mesopotamia were replaced by the Roman Empire, which dominated the world as the texts of the New Testament were composed and circulated. In the New Testament, those who were the insiders started to be portrayed as outsiders. Even though many of the authors of the New Testament were from a Jewish background and Jesus himself was a Jew, Jews who did not follow Jesus, for example, and particularly the Pharisees, were depicted as the outsiders. As the stories of those who are insiders were remembered, narrated, and written, there was always an other entangled in their narratives. That other was represented and constructed by the authors of these stories. Even

Safwat Marzouk is associate professor of Old Testament at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, Virginia.

though these stories were written in order to speak about God's work in the world and in the life of these faith communities and were not written to be shared with those outsiders, eventually, when Egyptians, Mesopotamians, and others converted to Christianity, these texts became scriptures for them. The interpretive question then was how to engage these texts as sacred ones considering the political realities and diverse ethnic identities of the readers of these scriptures.

With whom the reader of the biblical texts identifies is a critical interpretive question.

With whom the reader of the biblical texts identifies is a critical interpretive question. Even though this is a critical question for Jews and Christians who live in North Africa and West Asia, it is also relevant to readers of the Bible globally. For example, when one reads the story of the Exodus, does one identify with the oppressed Israelites or the Egyptian oppressors? In the story of Jericho, does one identify with the conquering Israelites or with the almost annihilated Canaanites? On what basis does one answer this question? Does one identify with the insiders of the story, erasing the temporal gap between the actors of the biblical story and the contemporary ones? Does one create a typology based on ethnic identities? Does one create a typology based on the plot of the narrative? What difference does it make to enter the text in multiple ways through the perspectives of the different characters represented in the story? How are the realities of the characters constructed in the stories similar or different from the realities of the readers of the texts?

Allegorical, Literal, Historical Interpretations

Jewish and Christian interpreters across the centuries have wrestled with how to make scriptures relevant to their audiences. One of the prominent moves of that interpretive journey has been allegorical interpretation. Since Philo and Origen of Alexandria, biblical texts in general, and more particularly the Old Testament, have been read to be referring to something else beyond their literal sense. For example, Origen suggested that

Jericho represents the world and its desires that believers should overcome, while Rahab represents the church, and the crimson cord stands in for the blood of Jesus that saves people from damnation. One observes here that Origen tried to deal with the violence embedded in the text by spiritualizing it. For him, this war is a spiritual one. Allegorical interpretation did not deny the literal sense of the biblical texts, but it always argued that the details of the text point to a transcendent framework of reference that moves beyond the letter. Allegorical interpretation emerged in a context in which biblical texts were dismissed by philosophers as mere myths. Allegorical interpretation tried to redeem the text as scripture for its audience using the intellectual framework available to them in the form of a Platonic philosophy that believed that there is a more ideal reality behind the material one. In doing so, allegorical interpretation did not situate the biblical texts in their historical, political, and social contexts. They did not ask what the text might have meant to the original readers and authors. Furthermore, in a context in which the biblical texts have been misused and abused for political purposes, allegorical interpretation does not address the contexts of oppression in which the material realities of the oppressed stand in real tension with God's intentions for a world of wholeness and flourishing. Spiritualizing the text becomes a way to escape the day-to-day struggles of the oppressed. It creates a dichotomy between the physical and the spiritual, denying a reality in which the embodied, the spiritual, and the political are all intertwined and all part of being human. Allegorical interpretation focuses so much on the journey of the soul and leaves the body behind it to be tortured, starved, and abused.

Unlike allegorical interpretation that downplays the political aspects of the biblical texts, dispensationalist and Christian Zionist interpreters of the Bible created a map for world politics by way of mixing literal and symbolic interpretations of biblical texts. These interpretive approaches claim that the Bible predicts the end of the world. By jamming together passages from Revelation, Daniel, Ezekiel, and Zechariah to mention a few, they create an apocalyptic map of world events, including the establishment of the state of Israel, the rebuilding of the temple, the great tribulation, the Parousia, and the millennial reign of Christ. *The Late Great Planet Earth* by Hal Lindsey is a classic

example of this interpretive approach. Even if not stated explicitly, in this interpretive worldview, wars and displacement are means through which God fulfills God's plan for the world. Human and nonhuman creations are instrumentalized as tools. The suffering, dehumanization, and destruction of the many for the sake of the elected few is normalized. Funds flood in for militarization, political propaganda, and campaigns to push the region of North Africa and West Asia to the brink of explosion. This worldview is structured around a binary opposition between us and them, good and evil, with the assured presumption that "we" are in the right and everything that is not "us" is evil that needs to be tamed, if not completely eliminated.

The starting point for interpreters of the Bible is to acknowledge the historical and cultural gap between the context of the texts and their readers across the centuries. We can consider reading the Bible as if we are reading someone else's mail.

The question of how the Bible relates to modern-day politics is a challenging one. If allegorical interpretation turns away from the political or social realities of the readers of the Bible, focusing primarily on the "spiritual" meaning of the text, dispensationalist interpretations impose a rigid political agenda under the assumption that the biblical texts are predicting future world events that have been predetermined by God. Of course, biblical texts were often intertwined with the politics of their day. They offered perspectives on social, political, and mundane matters. Thus, it is natural for contemporary readers to ask about the relationship between the biblical texts and modern-day politics and social issues. Furthermore, granted that faith communities continue to read the Bible as scripture with the assumption that it continues to offer theological insight and ethical reflections, some sort of symbolic reading that transcends the historical gap between the text and the reader is inevitable.

The starting point for interpreters of the Bible is to acknowledge the historical and cultural gap between the context of the texts and their readers across the centuries. We can consider reading the

Bible as if we are reading someone else's mail. Despite the continuous nature of some aspects of the social and political struggles that shaped the biblical texts, their differences with the world beyond them are also evident. The social and political realities of the sixth century BCE or the first century CE should not be simply transposed to the social and political realities of the twenty-first century. Faithful interpretation of the Bible asks two questions: What did these texts mean to their first audience? And what do they mean in our contemporary contexts, granted the recognition of the gap that we just named? The Bible is a child of its culture. Any theological and ethical engagement with it in relation to contemporary questions and challenges requires two postures: sympathy and criticism, suspicion and trust. The pages of the Bible are filled with harmful ideologies, but also filled with messages of hope, mutuality, goodness, peace, and justice. For contemporary readers to make sense of the biblical traditions, they need to learn how to travel to the world of the text, and they need to acquire the skills of discernment around continuity and discontinuity. Taking the Bible at face value is not the faithful way to read it. Engaging the Bible critically is not a sign of arrogance. A serious way of engaging the Bible treats the Bible as an other that should not be idealized or demonized. This other is welcome but not at the expense of the self. Encountering this other is revealing and should not be submerged under the self.

The Bible Is Full of Diversity; How Do We Discern?

We are accustomed to treating the Bible as a book. But in reality the Bible is more like a library or an archive that contains not only various genres but also diverse theological perspectives that sometimes complement one another and in many other cases stand in tension with one another. Yes, there is a continuity within each Testament and across the Testaments, but the overwhelming nature of the biblical texts is that of diversity and paradox. The biblical texts were written, redacted, and compiled over a long time. They engaged a changing world. They spoke of a relational God who is active in the world but also allows for human freedom and imagination. The biblical texts also reflect various social groups who have had diverse experiences of the world and the divine. Social location and political identities have shaped the theologies embedded in

the biblical texts. No wonder, then, that we end up with disputes among interpreters of the Bible. These disputes are not only a result of the experiences that shaped the readers but are also a result of the diversity of these scriptures themselves.

The biblical texts, for example, will have competing views around the relationship between the people and the land. Do they possess it by dispossessing its native inhabitants, as we see in the book of Joshua? Or do they live peacefully with the inhabitants of the land, sharing resources and looking after one another despite their ethnic and religious differences, as we see in the ancestral stories in the book of Genesis? What are the boundaries of the land? Does God use the empire to fulfill the divine will as we see in some of the prophetic texts? Or does God bring judgment over the empire as we see in other prophetic texts and an apocalyptic book like Daniel or Revelation? Does God condone violence as we see in many biblical passages, or does God achieve divine plans utilizing nonviolence? Does God favor one group of people over against other peoples or is God a universal deity that relates to all creation in diverse ways that do not preclude peculiarity?

These texts were not envisioned to be brought together in a collection when their authors or traditionists composed or preserved them. They are together as a result of a long process of redaction, compilation, and canonization. This is a challenge that faced biblical interpreters once these books existed side by side. Interpreters tried to make sense of their diverse perspectives on the same issue. The majority of approaches over the past two centuries have shed much ink into harmonizing diverse biblical theologies. Diversity was seen as a threat or a problem to be solved. Many recent approaches that resulted from modern and postmodern readings of the Bible started to approach diversity in scriptures as something to be celebrated and not an issue that needs to be eliminated.

Given the diversity of theological claims and ethical commitments embedded in the biblical traditions, readers of the Bible will need to land somewhere as they navigate contemporary ethical and theological dilemmas and debates. How would a reader of the Bible discern what to believe and how to live in relation to the biblical witness and the realities of the modern world?

1. A starting point is to ask about the function of these texts in the lives of the communities that

have produced them. Why did they write them, and why did they preserve them?

2. It is crucial to acknowledge that humans conditioned by time and space will always be limited by the horizon of our context. All readers of the Bible have presuppositions. No one reads the Bible as a blank page. All readers of the Bible are biased, selective, and inconsistent. The presuppositions condition the approaches we take to the Bible. Having presuppositions and biases makes the readers of the Bible selective about what they resonate with and what they feel uncomfortable with. Reading the Bible through our cultural contexts is not something that we should try to suppress. It is not opposed to being a faithful interpreter of the Bible. Instead, it is an honest approach to the Bible. Yet even though we cannot escape being conditioned by our context, we should still examine and be critical of what we bring with us to the text. Reading the biblical texts is a dynamic process that entails an ongoing journey of transformation.
3. What are the theological or ethical voices with which the reader feels right at home? Why? What happens if one listens to the uncomfortable voice? The benefit of this dialectical approach is that even if one ends up choosing one voice because it is impossible to represent all voices at once, one's choice will be nuanced and sympathetic even if one disagrees with other views.

Readers of the Bible do not read the biblical texts in a vacuum. Aside from personal and cultural presuppositions, there are historical events and changes that complicate the processes of interpretation. Adherents of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam read overlapping scriptural narratives and traditions. The interrelated histories of these religious traditions have witnessed various harmful approaches toward the other religious groups, including antisemitism, islamophobia, or persecution of minoritized Christians. Reading scriptures in light of these complicated histories is a perilous but critical process. Ideologies of sexism, racism, homophobia, ablism, colonialism, and anthropocentrism, to name a few, have misused the Bible and other theological traditions to exclude anyone who does not fit in what has been perceived to be part of the constructed normativity. Even if readers of the Bible try to simply engage it for spiritual nurturement, the harm and

The texts of the powerless became the texts of the empire when Christianity and the empire became conflated. Reading and appropriating the biblical traditions in a contemporary theological or ethical debate should always ask about power relations in the texts and among the diverse readings of the texts.

destruction that have been done over the centuries in the name of God will continue to haunt them, exposing the horrors that others have experienced.

In light of interreligious conflicting readings of the scriptural traditions and oppressive ideologies, when one encounters diverse biblical perspectives and seeks to discern how to live ethically in this broken world, one should ask if their reading and appropriation of scriptures are consistent with the good news. Many Christians use the teachings of Jesus as the compass, the center, the lens through which they discern. I prefer the language of the good news, lower case, so it would not be confused with the gospel, because Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have their peculiar versions of the good news. Thus, in an interreligious setting, one should slow down and reflect on their engagement with scriptures, wondering if it brings good news not only to oneself but also to others. Is one's reading a life-giving and inclusive one or an exclusionary and oppression-perpetuating reading?

Much of the biblical traditions emerged out of contexts of empire. Some of the biblical traditions were accommodating to the empire and its ideologies, while the majority of the biblical texts reflect subversive or confrontational resistance by the powerless against the hegemony of the empire. The texts of the powerless became the texts of the empire when Christianity and the empire became conflated. Reading and appropriating the biblical traditions in a contemporary theological or ethical debate should always ask about power relations in the texts and among the diverse readings of the texts. The texts that were meant to resist the empire have now become the very texts that the empire uses to suppress, dispossess, displace, act violently toward, and control the oppressed. Analyses of power relations within the texts are as crucial as exposing and reflecting on power relations among reading communities. Here, employing an intersectional lens to reading the Bible would be extremely helpful and illuminating. How are different parts of identity at interplay, conflict, or shape the politics and ethics of the texts and their

interpretive communities? What do these texts say to the powerful? What do they offer the powerless? How is power measured? Who gets to decide who is powerful and who is powerless? Is powerlessness real or imagined, historical or ongoing? Does one ignore their privilege as they read the text and cast themselves in the place of the oppressed while they are the oppressors? Is there a way to acknowledge complexity and escape binary oppositions and still become an ally to the oppressed?

A critical question that we should continue to ask is what is the ethical responsibility toward the other who is constructed in the texts and the other who is constructed in the process of interpretation. Is one reading out of fear, bigotry, and selfishness, or is one reading out of love, a desire to heal, and construct a new reality with the other? Does our interpretation continue to make the other voiceless and invisible? Does our interpretation essentialize those who are different from what has been perceived as the norm? Does our interpretation explicitly or implicitly exclude others, demonize them, and condone physical or verbal violence against them? Does our interpretation recognize their humanity and seek the well-being of the other despite the differences?

That Feels Overwhelming. Where Do We Go from Here?

All these interpretive questions may feel overwhelming. One might even argue that preaching and teaching the Bible at the church should be simpler than this. Others who genuinely care about the world feel hopeless in the face of the enormity of suffering and the complexity of history. The biblical witness has never been simplistic. The Bible itself is very complex. One may want to opt for simplicity because they can afford it or because they want to numb themselves in the church. But worship is not about escaping reality or affirming familiarity because the truth is uncomfortable or too complicated. The biblical traditions witness to a God who chooses to be involved in this complicated world. The core of the

Christian witness is that of incarnation, an embodied divine relationship with a broken world that longs for love, restoration, and healing.

At the heart of the biblical witness
is the covenantal relationship
between God and the world.

At the heart of the biblical witness is the covenantal relationship between God and the world. Exclusionary perspectives and inclusive perspectives on this covenantal relationship may participate in perpetuating violence in the world. Exclusionary perspective finds self-assertion and safety by claiming to be the only way to God. Rejection of the other is an attempt to have control over God and the world. And the only way for the other to be welcomed is for them to convert, assimilate, and become like us. An inclusive perspective tries to deconstruct exclusionary perspectives by eliminating boundaries altogether. This perspective tries to perpetuate tolerance by minimizing difference and peculiarity. What is needed in interpretive processes

that are interreligiously constructive is to negotiate sameness and difference in ways that allow for the self and the other to be seen as equals in a mutual relationship of giving and receiving as they seek to relate to the divine and the world around them.

The covenantal relationship also helps faith communities and readers of the Bible to navigate painful realities in the world. In this covenantal relationship, the powerless is not voiceless or powerless. Instead, they recover their agency when they cry out prayers of lament. Their lament is sometimes directed toward God and other times toward humans who have afflicted them with immeasurable suffering. Thus, the covenantal relationship holds God accountable, convicts the oppressor to repent, and empowers the powerless as they seek to restore their agency. It is in light of this relationship that one should reflect on how to preach the Old Testament or the Bible as a whole in a way that empowers the powerless, calls on the oppressor to be transformed, and urges God to do God's part in transforming the brokenness of this world that is plagued with hatred and violence and that longs to wholeness, healing, justice, and harmony.

Approaching Christian Nationalism with Queer Theologies

Mark Douglas

In *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy*, Philip Gorski and Samuel Perry offer seven value statements that they use to measure an individual's adherence to Christian nationalism in order to define the term:

1. Founding documents like the Declaration of Independence and the US Constitution are divinely inspired.
2. The success of the United States is part of God's plan.
3. The federal government should declare the United States a Christian nation.
4. The federal government should advocate Christian values.
5. The federal government should enforce a strict separation of church and state.
6. The federal government should allow the display of religious symbols in public spaces.
7. The federal government should allow prayer in public school.¹

These value statements may get at individual adherence to Christian nationalist views, but they don't really define Christian nationalism.² Indeed, defining "Christian nationalism" is part of the problem. If Christian nationalism links religious identity to national identity, how—if at all—is it distinct from the kind of generic churchy patriotism that puts American flags in PC(USA) sanctuaries and patriotic tunes in *Glory to God*? If Christian nationalism centers on a particular (false) narrative about the United States' origins as a "Christian nation," then how does this particular origin narrative carry so much more political clout than other origin narratives? If Christian

nationalists think that Christian values should be at the center of American public life, why do the values they espouse look so little like those described by the writers of the New Testament? If Christian nationalism is understood primarily as a political force, why does it feel more like a kind of diffused (if consecrated) reactivity? The problems with defining Christian nationalism so pile atop one another that some scholars have simply turned to other language; prominent Christian ethicist David Gushee, for instance, favors "authoritarian reactionary Christianity."³

In a moment, I want to suggest that the difficulty in defining Christian nationalism is part of what has made it hard for the wider ecumenical church to confront—but also that this difficulty, examined, may be a way to work towards its dismantling. And that one theological approach that may prove interestingly promising in such dismantling will involve marshalling the wisdom of queer theology. Prior to that, though, I want to make three points that highlight this problem with definitions.

First, when we talk about Christian nationalism—and, for that matter, White Christian nationalism—we are not talking about a single, monolithic thing, nor something that everyone feels equally deeply about, nor something that doesn't change over time. Indeed, I think I can pick out at least three strands of Christian nationalism in the US today—a Roman Catholic strain visible in Catholic integralism and the so-called Trad Cath movement; a Reformed strain tracing from R. J. Rushdoony and visible in Stephen Wolfe's *The Case for Christian Nationalism*; and a Pentecostal strain visible in the New Apostolic Reformation and Seven Mountains Movement. While these three strands may overlap in some of their goals, they are definitely not the same. Indeed,

Mark Douglas is professor of Christian ethics and director of the master of theology degree at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia.

I suspect that short of their shared commitment to those overlapping goals, if you were to put representatives of the three in a room, throw in a knife, and lock the door, only one would walk out.

Second, while Christian nationalism seems to be finding a home in the wider Christian church, it isn't wholly clear to me that Christian nationalism is either growing out of the leadership of the wider church nor broadly funded by that wider church. Public Religion Research Institute's (PRRI) 2023 survey of Christian nationalism notes that "[w]hite evangelical Protestants are more supportive of Christian nationalism than any other group surveyed," with nearly two-thirds of them qualifying as either Christian nationalist sympathizers or adherents, whereas a little over a third of white mainline Protestants and Catholics could be identified as such.⁴ To read through mainline denomination websites, the concern for—and, often, rejection of—Christian nationalism is sustained. To talk to pastors in mainline and some evangelical congregations, though, is to encounter concern that it is now more difficult to preach on political topics than it used to be because statements that come across as opposing Christian nationalist views are expressions of political partisanship rather than theological integrity or denominational fidelity. And in a society in which more people are willing to choose—or leave—a church based on their political positions, such pastors feel trapped between competing obligations.⁵

And, third, while there are good historical, philosophical, sociological, and even theological reasons for us to add the adjective "White" to the phrase "Christian nationalism,"⁶ such an addition may be worth resisting. Among the reasons to hold off on adding that adjective is that Christian nationalism is, itself, multicultural. As the PRRI survey notes,

A majority of "other Protestants of color," a group consisting primarily of Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) and mixed-race Protestants, also qualify as either sympathizers (32%) or adherents (20%). Approximately four in ten Hispanic Protestants (23% sympathizers and 20% adherents), Black Protestants (24% sympathizers and 14% adherents), and Latter-day Saints (33% sympathizers and 5% adherents) also lean toward supporting Christian nationalism.⁷

With those points in mind, especially as they reveal the slipperiness that comes in defining and dealing with Christian nationalism, let me suggest a strategy that doesn't so much try to pin Christian nationalism down as reveal why its slipperiness is what needs attention.

With those points in mind, especially as they reveal the slipperiness that comes in defining and dealing with Christian nationalism, let me suggest a strategy that doesn't so much try to pin Christian nationalism down as reveal why its slipperiness is what needs attention. Toward that end, let me suggest that the church and its scholars turn to emerging insights from queer theology, particularly as those insights relate to the uses of parody and camp. Parody and camp shine light on slippery surfaces and, in so doing, undermine arguments about their stability, durability, and utility.

Because this strategy may feel strange—especially as I suspect there are very few Christian nationalists in the US who would look at queer theologians with any sympathy or understanding—I want to begin by suggesting three features of at least most expressions of queer theology that sit behind and shape its use of parody and camp. These are the centering of desire, the troubling of identity, and the subverting of conventional narratives.

Begin with the centering of desire. Much of what passes for engagement with Christian nationalism sounds like an argument in which one marshals the resources of history, reason, and theology and then aims them at an interlocutor in hopes of displaying the rational superiority of non-nationalist forms of faith and politics. Such an approach asks, "Why do you think that?" and transitions, fairly quickly, to "Here's why you shouldn't think that." The slipperiness of Christian nationalism, though, makes reason-based projects like this difficult because the terrain is unstable; moreover, the offensive defensiveness of Christian nationalists drives their retrenchment during such arguments. The effect of such efforts regularly tends to play better to the choir than with one's interlocutors—an effect which, while often unintentional, ends up displaying the kind of performativity that is part of the problem.

If one begins with desire, though, the starting questions sound more like, “What do you want and why do you want that?” Responses to those questions have the potential to surface forces that drive Christian nationalist sensibilities, which forces tend to be more stable than the reasons that Christian nationalists give for holding their positions. Such an approach may reveal overlapping drivers for behavior between Christian nationalists and their interlocutors. Indeed, this approach may even, hopefully, help to distinguish those who believe the narratives of Christian nationalism from those who are simply using those narratives for other political ends.

While queer scholars are not the only ones to renew attention to the interconnectedness of theology, politics, and desire, they have been among the scholars most deeply attentive to desire. This is certainly in part because they have frequently had to give a defense of their desires and the legitimacy of their desires as a precondition for entering public or scholarly debate. It is also, though, because, they have recognized the power of desire in shaping moral and political projects. One thinks here of Audre Lorde’s classic “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power”⁸ but also of a range of more recent publications, including several of the essays in *Sexual Disorientations: Queer Temporalities, Affects, Theologies*⁹ or Linn Tonstad’s *Queer Theology: Beyond Apologetics*.¹⁰ Centering desire—particularly when those desires are viewed by many in society as misguided, distorted, or immoral (which descriptors have been directed at both queer people and Christian nationalist people)—has the potential to introduce depth and empathy into debates that have been more characterized by facile performance and defensive antipathy towards the other.

Centering desire alone, though, neither adequately shapes responses to Christian nationalism nor names some of the depth and breadth of queer theology. So to a focus on centering desire, I would add the way some contemporary queer theologies focus on troubling settled identity and the equally troubling attendant claim that pinning down our identities is a first and vital step towards resolving political issues.¹¹ And here I am thinking not only of the way that queer theology has complicated questions of identity by adding letters to the “alphabet soup” of identity (LGBTQIA+), but the way that such additions are meant to destabilize conventional identity-based politics.

Take, for instance, recent work by Mark Jordan. Not only does Jordan chafe at identity politics; he argues that the way some scholarly approaches to identity have been reduced to identity politics has happened only because such scholarship has been badly misconstrued. So, for instance, in exploring intersectionality as espoused by Kimberlé Crenshaw—whose work has been read to multiply identity rather than complicate it—Jordan argues that

[u]nfortunately, intersectionality can be misunderstood as the *sum* of different identity markers, each identical to other markers of the same kind and all identical as identities. But we falsify our punishing or privileging divisions when we treat them as coordinate numbers on a universal grid. The reduction of intersectionality to a sum is roughly the opposite of what earlier writers like Audre Lorde or Kimberlé Crenshaw meant.¹²

Whatever else identity does, Jordan reminds us, it cannot be done through reduction or addition because identity is neither sufficiently stable, sufficiently transparent, nor sufficiently singular to allow for such calculus. “Our lives need speech that is more adequate and evocative than the terminology of identity . . . [and my] complaint against identity-names is that they are not new enough. They are flat, boring, unimaginative, pseudoscientific, and overbearing.”¹³ For Jordan, the issue is not that we should avoid naming things; it is that meaningful naming has to be a protest against reduction and complacency. Names, as all metaphors, need to carry a whispered “and yet is not” within them—and in a time when naming is so weaponized, that whisper needs to be louder.

In light of this, Christian nationalism’s first sin may not be its inherent heresy; it may be its slothfulness. It starts with naming—whether of itself or the others it opposes—and assumes that such names are adequate to the purposes of drafting teams and mapping agendas. It relies on such shorthand to inflate its own virtues and to bowdlerize its opponents’ playbook. It presumes not only that the power of naming is a kind of power over but that the power of naming is instrumentalizable in the first place. If centering desire might help make sense of Christian nationalism’s drivers, troubling identity can help make nonsense of one of Christian nationalism’s more potent weapons.

To centering desire and troubling identity I add a third feature of many queer theologies that is pertinent to this context: the subverting of conventional narratives; indeed, the subverting of conventions of narrativity. Posing questions about what James Hoke calls “chrononormativity”¹⁴ and its attendant claims about how to live in time and advance into the future funds queer visions of futurity that escape the confines of linearity even as they surface often nefarious political uses of time. So many narratives of temporality are weaponized against queer persons and queerness that it is worth taking a step back and asking whether we have construed time and narrative in ways that consistently favor some over others. These narratives of temporality include “having children is how we signal our trust in God’s future” (so we should support traditional family structures), “we are now facing an apocalyptic threat” (so we have permission to violate the Golden Rule when dealing with people not like us), and “America was once great and can be made great again” (so we can build our politics on nostalgic falsehoods of the days of sexual binaries).

Even beyond subverting conventions
about time and narrativity, queer
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plot devices of narrative.

Even beyond subverting conventions about time and narrativity, queer theology also subverts the characters and plot devices of narrative. Many modern narratives assume conventional answers to surprisingly complicated questions: Who counts as an agent—let alone a hero or a villain? What forces drive agents to behave the way they do? What are the results of any action going to be? How do those results reveal a moral order to the universe? These questions and their tacit conventional answers need to be subverted; they need to be challenged because those tacit answers exclude, penalize, and harm. Queer theology doesn’t disorient because it favors a kind of frivolous vertigo; it disorients because too many orientations—sexual or otherwise—get used to reinforce structures and systems that do real harm to real people.

Elsewhere, I have argued that social media is reshaping Christian nationalism by favoring its abbreviation of its own faulty telling of American

history in order to emphasize its political agendas.¹⁵ If this is the case, then queer subversions of conventional narratives about agents, motives, consequences, and temporality may actually surface the subliminal commitments of Christian nationalism—especially its commitment to strained versions of American history. Said differently, queer theologies invite us to name and question the norming power built into telling history rather than attempt to simply tell a better history. When Christian nationalists don’t actually care about the religious views of the founding fathers, getting into a debate with them about such views is energy wasted. And when Christian nationalists reveal that they care more about coating their political purposes with a veneer of sanitized history, it makes more sense to focus on those purposes than the veneer.

Yet these three features of queer theology—whether in isolation from each other or stacked on top of each other—don’t necessarily suggest what it might look like to use the wisdom of queer theology to dismantle Christian nationalism. What I want to suggest here is that these three features come together in queer emphases on parody and camp. After all, if Christian nationalism is really a kind of parody of Christianity, then turning to parody and camp in response constitutes a kind of intellectual aikido: it uses its opponents’ own strategies and strengths against it.

What, then, are parody and camp as they have been promoted within queer theologies? They are ways of intentionally distorting conventional narratives and identities in order to bring to the surface not only the drivers (i.e., desires) but also the distortions, incoherences, and lacunae that were already at work in those narratives and identities. They point to the absurdities not only of assuming that we know the way the world works but that our assumptions can be justified by appealing to a natural order of things within that world. That is, queer uses of parody and camp invite us to ask, “What made us think that order of things was natural, that we had access to it, and that we weren’t projecting ourselves into those questions?” but without the ostentations of taking ourselves and the world around us seriously and somberly in order to address such questions. Indeed, parody and camp broadly hint—in a kind of “wink-wink, nudge-nudge” way—that being serious and somber are, themselves, parts of the conventional narratives and identities that need to be exposed and challenged. Don’t just dress; drag. Don’t just walk; sashay. Don’t just dance; vogue. Don’t just be

an individual worth being loved; be a character who assumes that others should love them.

I think those of us who are cis and straight miss the purposes of queer uses of parody and camp when we treat them only as opportunities for queer persons to affirm their own loves, express their own identities, and tell their own stories. The queer uses of parody and camp also intend for us to question just how much we understand our own desires; just how stable we think our own identities are; just how much our own narratives are cause for harm to self and others.

Unsurprisingly, most queer theologies that attend to parody and camp have focused on matters of sexuality and gender; these are, after all, the matters that queer theologians have not only foregrounded but, mostly, had to address and defend. What I am suggesting here, as I move towards a conclusion, is that parody and camp need not be focused only on matters of sexuality and gender; they can also be focused on things like Christian nationalism.

Part of the way they do so is by offering, paradoxically, a subtle and precise way to introduce joy and laughter into topics that are both weighty and common through modes that emphasize exaggeration and hyperbole. They display things not so much acutely as obliquely: still on a slant but not with a sharp point; still angularly but in wide angles rather than narrow ones. Such an approach, when done well, doesn't so much laugh at others as evince laughter with others. That is, parody and camp self-indict without self-condemning; they challenge their audiences without mocking them; they induce discomfort but in the mode of an amusement park ride rather than a traffic accident.

Nobody—including Christian nationalists—wants to be laughed at, but pretty much everybody enjoys a good laugh. And laughter, after all, has the capacity to circumvent the barriers to communication that can be driven by distrust of others and deep self-doubt. Think of the way that *The Colbert Report* parodied conservative opinion shows in a way that, say, *Saturday Night Live's* "Weekend Update"—or even *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*—does not. Both types of parody are funny, but the latter preaches to a choir whereas the former avoids character-breaking winks at the audience about how enlightened we all are compared to "them."

Camp then adds a transgressive quality to parody. It introduces exaggeration and heightens artifice through an aesthetic that shapes non-weaponized mockery. Everyone, and everything,

gets to be a little bit distorted within camp and, in the process, gets freed from wearying (and perhaps even overwhelming) obligations associated with maintaining socially acceptable desires, tightly framed identities, and politically cramped narratives. It invites not only parody's laughter but shoulder-releasing, hair-unbinding, life-relaxing release. That it can also make us queasy—think about some of the grosser scenes from John Waters's movies—may say more about our need to stay existentially clenched in a world we fear will undo us than it does about anything like a natural gag reflex. Camp is a Bronx cheer oriented towards a narcotized world more than an expletive directed at a particular group.¹⁶

Introducing camp into engagements with Christian nationalists doesn't so much ask, "How can we get someone to change their minds while still protecting their dignity?" as tacitly ask, "Can we all be a little less dignified around here in the hope that we can all find a bit more belonging?"

Introducing camp into engagements with Christian nationalists doesn't so much ask, "How can we get someone to change their minds while still protecting their dignity?" as tacitly ask, "Can we all be a little less dignified around here in the hope that we can all find a bit more belonging?" Camp is, perhaps ironically, what Christian nationalists wearing "Deplorables" T-shirts are performing—especially if they're wearing "I'm an adorable deplorable" tees (albeit in unhelpfully tribal ways). And camp definitely helps mitigate the stench of self-righteousness and moral superiority that too many of us who decry Christian nationalism emit. After all, Christian nationalism can leave even Christian nationalists nervous about who or what may out them on their own impurities. In the right setting—which is to say a setting shaped by parody—camp invites in rather than calls out.

Will queer theology-inflected expressions of parody and camp succeed in dismantling Christian nationalism in the US? Maybe: such expressions at least have the potential to go viral, aligning the power of social media towards ends that build up rather than break down. Randy Rainbow is, at least in his better musical numbers, both funny

and disarming. Making responses to Christian nationalism attractive—in the literal sense of that word—is a start toward making Christian nationalism unappealing.

Maybe parody and camp won't fully dismantle hard-core US Christian nationalists, many of whom are less shaped by the adjective than the noun and so more oriented towards power politics than movement building. After all, not every response to Christian nationalism is going to work. Maybe, though, we should at least concede that as we try out new responses to Christian nationalism, we should want to favor the ones that keep us engaged and thinking—especially when staying engaged and thinking are in short supply. Even if parody and camp don't convert hardcore Christian nationalists, they may inhibit others from thinking that Christian nationalism offers much of interest by way of coherence, control, and community.

The trick will be shaping parody and camp that don't scorn or alienate. And that, probably, will take some practice. But all of life is practice; this is just practice directed towards addressing a particular problem which has been too slippery for some of us to get a good hold on.

Notes

1. Philip S. Gorski and Samuel L. Perry, *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022). The fifth of these values is awkwardly stated; it argues that Christian nationalists would *not* favor a strict separation. The authors' desire for consistent sentence structure (no sentences phrased in the negative) inhibits the rhetorical and substantial clarity of their argument.
2. To be fair: there are ways I can describe (or, better, distort) my own Reformed theological convictions to support at least three or four of those statements).
3. David P. Gushee, *Defending Democracy from Its Christian Enemies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2023).
4. Public Religion Research Institute, "A Christian Nation? Understanding the Threat of Christian Nationalism to American Democracy and Culture," February 8, 2023, <https://www.prri.org/research/a-christian-nation-understanding-the-threat-of-christian-nationalism-to-american-democracy-and-culture/>, accessed on February 5, 2025.
5. Aaron Earls, "Churchgoers Increasingly Prefer a Congregation that Shares Their Politics," Lifeway Research, November 1, 2022, <https://research.lifeway.com/2022/11/01/churchgoers-increasingly-prefer-a-congregation-that-shares-their-politics/>, accessed on February 5, 2025.
6. See, e.g., Anthea Butler, *White Evangelical Racism: The Politics of Morality in America* (Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press, 2021); Gorsky and Perry, *The Flag and the Cross*.
7. PRRI, "A Christian Nation?" Related, Gorski and Perry note that a growing number of non-white, non-Christians identify themselves with Christian nationalism. It all but sets up a *Saturday Night Live* skit: "White Christian Nationalism is neither white nor Christian nor nationalist. Discuss."
8. Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," in *Sexualities and Communication in Everyday Life: A Reader*, ed. Karen E. Lovaas and Mercilee M. Jenkins (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2007), 87–92.
9. Kent L. Brintnall, Joseph A. Marchal, and Stephen D. Moore, eds., *Sexual Disorientations: Queer Temporalities, Affects, Theologies* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018).
10. Linn Tonstad, *Queer Theology: Beyond Apologetics* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2018). I note that thoughtful theologians who do not identify as queer but are nevertheless shaped by and engaged with queer theology regularly highlight the role desire plays in queer theology. See, e.g., Adrian Thatcher, *God, Sex, and Gender: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).
11. Think, for instance, about how many of us include our pronouns in our email signatures or Zoom names as a way of broadcasting identity-claims as we enter spaces with others.
12. Mark Jordan, *Queer Callings: Untimely Notes on Names and Desires* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2024), 8.
13. Jordan, *Queer Callings*, 16.
14. James N. Hoke, "Unbinding Imperial Time: Chrononormativity and Paul's Letter to the Romans," in Brintnall et al., *Sexual Disorientations*, 68–89.
15. See Mark Douglas, "Calvin, Complicity, and Communication: Reformed Reflections on the Rhetoric of Contemporary Christian Nationalism in the United States," in *Emder Beiträge zum reformierten Protestantismus*, ed. Matthias Freudenberg and Marco Hofheinz (Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2026).
16. The queer uses of camp have long been a subject of scholarly attention, and I can hardly do justice to that scholarship here. Start, perhaps, with Susan Sontag's 1964 essay "Notes on Camp" and proceed from there. I'd suggest Marcella Althaus-Reid's work both reflects on and can, in moments, display camp. Though not from a theological perspective, see Fabio Cleto, *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999). More recently, see Katrin Horn, *Women, Camp, and Popular Culture: Serious Excess* (New York: Palgrave, 2017).

How Shall We Sing the Lord's Song in *This* Land?

Patriotism, Partisanship, and Worship
Music in American Christianity

Joshua Taylor

Introduction

On July 1, 2017, the First Baptist Church of Dallas Choir and Orchestra performed a new song, “Make America Great Again,” as part of the “Celebrate Freedom” concert held at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. The event drew national attention after President Donald Trump tweeted the performance multiple times, prompting both praise and criticism across the political spectrum.¹ Shortly thereafter, the song was licensed by Christian Copyright Licensing International (CCLI), making it accessible to choirs and worship leaders across the United States.

Although the song—free of direct references to religion, partisan politics, or Trump himself—was presented at a patriotic concert and not within a worship service, the optics of a church choir singing a president’s campaign slogan reignited long-standing questions about the place of patriotic music in Christian worship. In an interview with *The Christian Post*, First Baptist’s senior pastor, Rev. Dr. Robert Jeffress, responded to the criticism, saying, “There is no difference in singing ‘Make America Great Again’ than there is in singing any other patriotic song, like the ‘Star-Spangled Banner.’”²

Religious music has often centered on national identity and geographic place. In Psalm 137, the exiled Israelites famously ask, “How can we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” Separated from Jerusalem—the site and inspiration for many of their psalms—they wrestled not with the validity of national identity in worship but with how to express it faithfully outside of its original context. Their question invites our own: Is the worship of God shaped by place and national identity? And if so, how should faithful worship engage these realities?

In the American context, sacred music has long reflected national ideals. But in recent decades, this music has at times hardened into partisan expression and even idolatry. Understanding the deep historical intertwining of sacred song and civic identity offers a vital lens through which to examine the theological and political formation that takes place in worship today. Churches are, intentionally or not, political actors.

At the same time, the very term *America* is fraught with complexity. It does not acknowledge the identities of Indigenous peoples whose lands were taken to establish the United States, and it risks conflating the United States with the entirety of the North American continent. This paper recognizes these tensions and the histories they represent. For the sake of clarity, however, the term *American* will be used hereafter to refer specifically to the United States of America and its citizens.

With these clarifications in place, we may return to the central question: So how shall we sing the Lord’s song in *this* land? Rather than simply ask whether patriotic music belongs in worship, this article asks: How do we sing such music faithfully? What lyrical theology are we imparting through patriotic song?³ The church’s song is an ecclesiological act—one that informs the church’s imagination of what it means to be Christian in a particular time and place.⁴

A quick Google search reveals countless opinions about patriotic music in worship. Regardless of one’s stance, the practice persists.⁵ Most mainline Protestant hymnals include at least some patriotic or nationalistic songs.⁶ This article does not advocate for or against the inclusion of such music. Instead, it explores how patriotic music can either support

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or hinder worship that rehearses the kingdom Christians are called to receive and proclaim.⁷ It also examines how such music can either cultivate or suppress multivocality—the ability of worship to reflect the diverse voices within the body of Christ.

Revolution, Identity, and the Sacred Soundtrack

Before, during, and after the War of Independence, both sacred and secular music helped shape American national identity. As Richard Crawford observes in *America's Musical Life: A History*, “one claim in particular was trumpeted in song after song . . . our side is virtuous and right, the other side corrupt and wrong.”⁸ The texts of these songs often entwined worship and wartime rhetoric, enlisting God in the cause of national struggle.

Isaac Watts's 1719 translation of Psalm 100 began with the verse “Sing to the Lord with joyful voice / Let ev'ry land his name adore; / The British isles shall send the noise / Across the ocean to the shore”—a poetic allusion to the naval might of the British Empire and the thunder of its cannons.⁹ On the other side of the Atlantic, William Billings's “Chester” was unambiguously pro-American: “When God inspir'd us for the fight, / Their ranks were broke, their lines were forc'd, / Their ships were shatter'd in our sight, / Or swiftly driven from our coast.” The hymn ends by asking what offering should be brought in thanksgiving for God's intervention. Crawford notes that “Chester's text carries a proud, bitter dose of anti-British feeling that actually flirts with blasphemy by enlisting God on New England's side.”¹⁰

Beyond individual songs, entire collections and hymnals also reflected emerging American identity. William Billings is often regarded as a founding father of American music, and his *New-England Psalm-Singer* (1770) was unapologetically patriotic. It was engraved by Revolutionary figure Paul Revere, published by sympathizers of American independence, and became the first collection of tunes by an American composer.¹¹ These works helped define a new national voice in music—both literally and culturally.

Civil Religion and National Hymns

The invocation of God in nationalistic song has continued well beyond the Revolution. Julia Ward Howe's “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” written after visiting Union troops during the Civil War, is one

enduring example. Carlton Young, editor of *The United Methodist Hymnal*, has called it “the USA's second and more singable national anthem,” noting its association with women's suffrage, temperance, two world wars, Vietnam, the civil rights movement, and countless political rallies.¹² These songs, deeply embedded in the American psyche, function not only as patriotic anthems but as expressions of civil religion.

That tradition continues into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. From Congress singing “God Bless America” on the steps of the Capitol on 9/11 to the First Baptist Church of Dallas's performance of “Make America Great Again,” religious music is often employed to reinforce or critique national identity. These performances range from solemn observance to overt political spectacle—each side at times claiming divine favor, each using music as a vehicle of both unity and division.

Lee Greenwood's “God Bless the U.S.A.” is perhaps the most enduring example of this convergence. Associated with conservative politics and adopted by numerous presidential campaigns since the 1980s, the song has become a cultural touchstone.¹³ Katherine Meizel writes that the song “seems to be embedded in the nation's collective subconscious, called perennially to mind at times when feeling ‘proud to be an American’ tops our cultural agenda.” She adds that the song “showcases the kind of passionately civil-religious discourse that has characterized the administration of America's millennial transition.”¹⁴

John Rosamond Johnson and James Weldon Johnson's “Lift Every Voice and Sing” invites a different kind of reflection. Written in 1899 to commemorate Abraham Lincoln's birthday and later adopted by the NAACP as the “Negro National Anthem,” the song has long played a central role in African American public worship and protest.¹⁵ In a moment of rising political partisanship, both of these anthems reflect how religious and patriotic song can either enforce or expand the boundaries of civic belonging.

Worship Music as Formation

The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, himself a trained musician, frequently described hymn singing as a form of resistance.¹⁶ Bonhoeffer understood music as a force that could either serve or subvert political power.

Similarly, Marva J. Dawn emphasizes the church's double calling: to be in the world but not of it. "Believers in Jesus are called to live in the world. We do not escape it to avoid its contaminations and problems," she writes. "But from the inside, we seek to understand it so that we can minister to its needs. Simultaneously, we struggle to reject its values and stay outside its temptations and idolatries."¹⁷ Worship, including the songs we sing, is a central site of that tension. Music can reinforce cultural assumptions—or it can prophetically challenge them.

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Taken together, these examples reveal that sacred music in America has never existed outside political life—it has always participated in shaping national identity and belief, whether through hymnals in the Revolution or campaign songs in the twenty-first century. This is not just a matter of content, but of formation. Worship—especially through music—forms how Christians imagine God, neighbor, and nation. What we sing and how we sing it creates theology as much as it reflects it. The next section explores this formative power more fully, asking what kinds of citizens—and what kind of church—the presence of or absence of patriotic music in worship shapes.

Worship Music as Political Formation

The ancient axiom "lex orandi, lex credendi, lex vivendi"—"the law of prayer is the law of belief is the law of life"—paired with S. T. Kimbrough's definition of lyrical theology (see endnote 3) suggests that the music of worship not only reflects the political and theological beliefs of the church but also actively forms them. In his book *Becoming What We Sing*, David Lemley writes:

Who we are, and how we relate to one another, is a confluence of believing, belonging, and behaving. Our worship together, then, in which we are gathered for a transforming encounter and commission,

should call on us not only to recite but also to embody: to intend, to perform, to portray . . . we are participants.¹⁸

Musicking—Christopher Small's broad term for musical participation—becomes one formative element within an ecological system of practices that shape not only theological but also political identity.¹⁹ In this light, music in worship is never neutral. It is the convergence point of cultural, political, and theological landscapes.

Recent political science literature affirms that the relationship between political ideas and religion is also not a one-way street; rather, religion shapes political values, and political values shape religious practice. In their article "The Politics of Church Shopping," Shar R. Hafner and Andre P. Audette observe that "the specific religious family and congregation that an individual chooses to attend may impact their political values, their likelihood of participating in politics, and the manner in which they engage politically."²⁰

Given this reciprocal influence, the use of patriotic or politically charged music becomes a contributing factor in the political formation of worship participants. As liturgical scholar Don E. Saliers notes, "musical forms—especially though not exclusively texted musical forms—articulate communal emotions that the particular attributes of God and aspects of human life before God require."²¹ In many contemporary churches, this convergence of liturgy, theology, and politics may be most evident in the relationship between Contemporary Worship Music (CWM), evangelicalism, and far-right political ideologies.

Contemporary Worship and Political Identity

The role of Contemporary Worship Music (CWM) in shaping political identity has been well documented by ethnomusicologists and cultural historians. In *No Sympathy for the Devil*, David Stowe emphasizes how contemporary Christian music has been instrumental in forming evangelical cultural identity, linking its widespread adoption in congregational worship to the broader project of aligning evangelicalism with conservative American values.²²

This alignment is not incidental. As studies in political science and sociology show, the growing entanglement of conservative politics with the Christian Right has driven some people away from

organized religion altogether.²³ Yet CWM continues to function as a potent vehicle for advancing a particular ideological vision within evangelical spaces. Kristin Kobes du Mez, in her book *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation*, argues that the rise of conservative evangelical dominance relied not only on political alliances and strategic institutions but “critically, by dominating the production and distribution of Christian consumer culture.”²⁴ In this context, music becomes more than artistic expression—it becomes ideological infrastructure.

The influence of CWM extends beyond song selection or musical style to the very language it employs. In a recent *Call to Worship* article, “Militant Masculinity in Contemporary Worship Music,” T. J. Shirley observes that even the use of the word “Lord” carries political and theological weight within evangelical worship, often reinforcing hierarchical power structures and authoritarian divine imagery that mirror political ideals.²⁵ Worship, in this framing, not only honors God but subtly instructs congregants in how power and authority should operate.

What emerges, then, is not merely a question of which songs are used in worship, but how music functions as a conduit for political ideology—particularly through the mechanisms of consumer culture.

What emerges, then, is not merely a question of which songs are used in worship, but how music functions as a conduit for political ideology—particularly through the mechanisms of consumer culture.²⁶ As David Lemley argues, the economic and social choices individuals make around worship music are shaped by larger forces, becoming part of a “formational process” that influences how people relate to God, to one another, and to the world. These choices are not confined to aesthetic preferences but are deeply embedded in the marketplace of Christian identity. It is here, at the intersection of worship and consumption, that the church begins to function as a political actor within the consumer arena.²⁷

Church as Political Actor and Consumer Arena

Churches function as spaces of encounter where ideas of citizenship, belonging, and national identity are shaped—making them not only theological communities but also political actors and agents within consumer culture. In their article “Immigration, Places of Worship and the Politics of Citizenship in the US South,” Patricia Ehrkamp and Caroline Nagel examine how civic engagement and citizenship values are cultivated within faith communities. Their research suggests that the embodied practices of worship—such as music, ritual, and communal movement—can generate political agency, spark civic debate, and shape moral and social narratives around belonging.²⁸

Given this, and in light of the influence of Contemporary Worship Music outlined in the previous section, it becomes increasingly difficult to understand the church as anything other than a political actor. Music—patriotic or otherwise—functions as a tool of both formation and influence within that political role.

This realization returns us to Marva Dawn’s theological framework: how can the church live in the world but not be of the world? The question of whether or not to include patriotic music in worship is anything but binary. Dawn writes:

To maintain this dialectical tension of being in and not of, the Church’s worship must be upside-down (at least in the world’s eyes)—turning the culture’s perspective on its head (thinking from God’s revelation rather than human knowledge), teaching an opposite set of values (loving God and others instead of self), enabling believers to make authentic differences in the world.²⁹

The challenge, then, is not simply whether patriotic music should be included in worship, but how churches reflect theologically on the implications of doing so. The convergence of cultural and theological landscapes creates both risk and possibility.³⁰ To answer the question “How shall we sing the Lord’s song in *this* land?” requires further theological discernment.

Theological Reflections: Bonhoeffer and the Danger of Music Untethered from the Word

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's limited but incisive writings on music provide a meaningful entry point for theological reflection on patriotic song.³¹ Having witnessed firsthand how music was co-opted as propaganda under the Nazi regime, Bonhoeffer understood both the persuasive power of music and its potential to resist. In one lecture he remarked, "The ancient Christians [protesting against the rule of state power] were still singing even as they were being thrown to the lions."³² Worship, in this frame, is not passive expression but active theological and political resistance.

This raises the question: how should music be understood within the context of worship? Bonhoeffer critiques what he called "thinking in two spheres"—the separation of sacred and secular life—and insists instead on a theological unity.³³ For Bonhoeffer, music's value is not defined by its genre or context, but by its connection to the Word of God.³⁴ In *The Prayer Book of the Bible*, he writes that what alone is important "is that we begin anew with confidence and love to pray the Psalms in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."³⁵

While Bonhoeffer's framework may feel more restrictive than the diverse musical repertoires found in many postmodern worship settings, his core conviction—that music unmoored from the Word can become spiritually dangerous—remains a powerful challenge for worship planners and congregations.³⁶ Music, he suggests, is the "work" of theology, but when grounded in Scripture, it offers a "foretaste of heavenly music."³⁷

Bonhoeffer's insights echo those of Augustine, who wrote:

I feel that when the sacred words are chanted well, our souls are moved and are more religiously and with warmer devotion kindled to piety than if they are not so sung. All the diverse emotions of our spirit heave their various modes in voice and chant appropriate in each case, and are stirred by a mysterious inner kinship.³⁸

David Lemley expands on this theological posture by emphasizing that worship is never merely

performance. He writes, "Theologically, we pose questions about performance as worship because we assume worship is more than a song alone. Music is one act that focuses our response to God, but worship is a life offered to God in every thought and deed. Worship is also part of a participatory geography that gives it meaning: the kingdom of God."³⁹

Taken together, Bonhoeffer, Augustine, and Lemley suggest that evaluating the use of patriotic music in worship must move beyond surface aesthetics or cultural preference. The central concern becomes theological: Does this music cultivate a connection to the Word? Does it support God's reign or reinforce worldly power? Does it resist injustice or merely reinforce cultural dominance? These are the critical questions as we now turn to worship as protest—and the danger of idolatry in patriotic song.

Singing in worship is not only an act of praise—it can also be a form of theological resistance.

Worship and Music as Protest

While patriotic music often celebrates the nation and its ideals, worship music has historically served another function: protest. Singing in worship is not only an act of praise—it can also be a form of theological resistance. Walter Brueggemann puts it succinctly: "The worship of God's people is praise, not only toward God, but also against the god."⁴⁰ Marva Dawn echoes this, asserting that true worship confronts rival powers—whether political, economic, or cultural—that claim ultimate authority.⁴¹

Dietrich Bonhoeffer recognized this in the witness of the early church. As noted earlier, he described how the first Christians were "still singing even as they were being thrown to the lions." For them, worship was not cultural affirmation but defiance in the face of empire. Marva Dawn expands on this insight, warning that when worship affirms dominant ideologies without critique, it ceases to be faithful and becomes "liturgical compliance." Faithful worship, she argues, must resist the idols of the age—consumerism, nationalism, and militarism among them.

These insights raise urgent questions: When we sing in worship, are we praising God? Protesting against false gods? Or reinforcing the narratives of empire? The answer depends less on musical style and more on theological substance.

At this point, it is worth revisiting “Lift Every Voice and Sing.” The hymn exemplifies worship as both remembrance and resistance. It does not glorify national perfection; instead, it names struggle, hope, and the enduring longing for justice. In doing so, it offers a model of patriotic song that resists triumphalism and invites theological depth.

This stands in contrast to Lee Greenwood’s “God Bless the U.S.A.,” which strikes a more triumphalist and uncritical tone. Is one right and the other wrong? Bonhoeffer’s theology offers a helpful criterion: the faithful song is the one that points not to the past glories of a nation, but forward to the reign of Christ. “We are not allowed to look back except to the cross of Christ,” he writes. “Nor are we allowed to look into the future except to the Last Judgment. And so we have been made free to praise and to sing!”⁴²

How, then, shall we sing the Lord’s song in *this* land? Theological reflection suggests that the answer lies in choosing music that resists idolatry—especially the idolatry of nation—and instead centers worship on the reign of God.

The Risk of Idolatry: When Nation Becomes God

Any inclusion of patriotic music in worship carries the inherent risk of exalting the nation above God—a violation of the First Commandment.⁴³ Beyond theological concerns, such music can also propagate harmful tropes tied to racism, xenophobia, or the demonization of “the other.”

Katherine Meizel, writing on the cultural power of patriotic music, notes that during its early popularity, “‘God Bless America’ embodied the longstanding conflict between the nation’s xenophobia *du jour* and the significance of immigration in its lovingly cultivated American Dream.”⁴⁴ Scholar Gabriel Rossman similarly critiques Henry Ford’s racialized support of “old-timey” music in the 1920s, portraying it—and the patriotism it carried—as the essence of white America, while implicitly associating other musical genres with leftist politics.⁴⁵

Hymnologist Carl P. Daw Jr. raises another concern in his commentary on “America the Beautiful.” He notes that the third stanza—“pilgrim feet [that] . . . a thoroughfare for freedom beat / across the wilderness”—glorifies the westward expansion of European-based culture at the expense of Native American communities.⁴⁶ As discussed earlier, T. J. Shirley’s analysis of the term “Lord” in

Contemporary Worship Music also highlights how liturgical language can reinforce nationalistic and hierarchical worldviews.

Taken together, these examples underscore the ethical and theological hazards of patriotic music in worship—particularly when it reinforces national identity without critique. And yet, patriotic music is not inherently incompatible with Christian worship. Its long tradition and emotional resonance with many congregants make it a meaningful part of worship for some communities. This tension calls for careful discernment.

The question, then, is not simply whether such music should be used, but how it might be used faithfully.

Toward a Faithful Use of National Song in Worship

The question is no longer whether patriotic music belongs in worship, but how it might be employed in ways that honor God without exalting nation above kingdom. As hymnologist Carl Daw rightly observes, such songs must be framed theologically, not triumphantly. Reflecting on “America the Beautiful,” he writes:

The principal concept that needs to govern the singing of this national song in worship is that it is a prayer rather than a football cheer. The central expression of this understanding comes in the repeated “America, America!” of the third phrase, which is not to be sung boastfully but longingly and with deep affection, mindful of this country’s need of God’s protection and direction.⁴⁷

Daw’s insight underscores a crucial point: God—not the nation—must remain the center of Christian worship.⁴⁸ When patriotic music is framed as humble prayer rather than national pride, it can support rather than subvert the worship of God.

In addition to theological framing, worship leaders should be attentive to multivocality and diversity, asking whose voices are amplified or marginalized through the use of national songs. The text “This Is My Song,” by Lloyd Stone and Georgia Harkness, offers a compelling model:

This is my song, O God of all the nations,
A song of peace for lands afar and mine . . .
But other hearts in other lands are beating

With hopes and dreams as true and high as mine . . .
Oh, hear my song, O God of all the nations,
A song of peace for their land and for mine.⁴⁹

Rather than idealizing one nation, this hymn expresses love for one's homeland while acknowledging the equal worth and beauty of others. It offers a rare instance of patriotic music that nurtures global solidarity, not exceptionalism.

Finally, and most importantly, worship must serve the purpose of forming citizens of God's kingdom. As David Lemley writes, "Worship forms Christian identity and community according to the Triune life of God. Communion with God is the goal and means of spiritual formation and is the measure of authentic worship."⁵⁰ Patriotic music that distracts from that aim—rather than deepening it—must be reevaluated. What we sing in worship should shape our loyalties toward Christ's reign, not toward any temporal power. These practices, rooted in theological intentionality, invite the church to sing the Lord's song not as national performance, but as kingdom proclamation.

Conclusion

How shall we sing the Lord's song in *this* land? Carefully, faithfully, and with theological discernment. Like the exiled Israelites in Psalm 137, the question is not whether national identity belongs in worship, but how it relates to developing the deeper identity as followers of Christ. Many congregations include patriotic music to honor veterans, commemorate national holidays, or express gratitude for civic freedoms. These intentions are not without merit or precedent.

Yet the danger is real: when national song becomes liturgical habit rather than theological witness, it risks crossing from commemoration into idolatry. Worship is not merely cultural performance; it is spiritual formation. The songs congregations sing—especially those tied to national identity—shape not just emotions but imaginations, theologies, and loyalties.

For this reason, churches must take care. Discernment is required not just about what music is included, but about the story that music tells. Does it point us toward Christ's reign, or toward the glories of the nation? Does it invite us into gratitude and justice, or triumphalism and exclusion? This is not an easy balance. It requires pastoral sensitivity,

theological courage, and a willingness to challenge long-held assumptions.

To sing the Lord's song in *this* land is possible—but only if the church's song resists the gods of nationalism and civil religion, and instead directs all praise, hope, and allegiance to the One who reigns over every land, every people, and every nation.

Notes

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2. Samuel Smith, "Robert Jeffress: Singing 'Make American Great Again' No Different Than Singing National Anthem," *The Christian Post*, July 6, 2017, www.christianpost.com/news/robert-jeffress-singing-make-america-great-again-no-different-than-singing-national-anthem.html/.
3. Lyrical theology is a term first used by S. T. Kimbrough Jr. in 1984 to describe theology that is couched in poetry, hymns/songs, and liturgy. It is characterized by rhythm and is expressive of emotion and sentiment. It often includes a digestion of theological concepts and ideas in brief, sometimes telescopic, terse lyrics. See S. T. Kimbrough, "Lyrical Theology: Theology in Hymns," *Theology Today* 63, no. 1 (2006): 22–37.
4. David Lemley, *Becoming What We Sing: Formation through Contemporary Worship Music* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2021), 16.
5. The author searched "using patriotic music in church." The results came from sources ranging from seminaries, bloggers across the theological spectrum, and individual congregations explaining their inclusion or exclusion of patriotic music.
6. The *Glory to God* hymnal contains four—"My Country, 'Tis of Thee," "America the Beautiful," "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," and "Lift Every Voice and Sing" as well as "Eternal Father, Strong to Save," known more commonly as the "Navy Hymn." These same hymns, minus "The Battle Hymn," were included in the 1990 *Presbyterian Hymnal* under the heading "National Songs." While not included in the Presbyterian or United Methodist hymnals, the US national anthem appears in over four hundred hymnals according to Hymnary.org.
7. Lemley, *Becoming What We Sing*, 14.
8. Richard Crawford, *America's Musical Life: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), 68.
9. First published in Isaac Watts's collection titled *Psalms of David* in 1719.
10. Crawford, *America's Musical Life*, 44.
11. Ryan Luhrs, "First New England School," *Canterbury Dictionary of Hymnology*, n.d.

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13. Katherine Meizel, “A Singing Citizenry: Popular Music and Civil Religion in America,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 45, no. 4 (2006): 497–503.
14. Meizel, *A Singing Citizenry*, 497.
15. Carl P. Daw Jr., *Glory to God: A Companion* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2016), 343.
16. Andreas Pangritz, *The Polyphony of Life: Bonhoeffer’s Theology of Music*, ed. John W. de Gruchy and John Morris, trans. Robert Steiner (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2019), 14.
17. Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for This Urgent Time* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995), 17.
18. Lemley, *Becoming What We Sing*, 26.
19. Lemley, *Becoming What We Sing*, 2.
20. Shar R. Hafner and Andre P. Audette, “The Politics of Church Shopping,” *Politics and Religion* 16, no. 1 (March 2023): 73–89, 74.
21. Don E. Saliers, “Liturgical Musical Formation,” in *Liturgy and Music: Lifetime Learning*, ed. Robin A. Leaver and Joyce Ann Zimmerman (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 387, quoted in Lemley, *Becoming What We Sing*, 53.
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23. Hafner and Audette, “The Politics of Church Shopping,” 74.
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25. T. J. Shirley, “Militant Masculinity in Contemporary Worship Music,” *Call to Worship Journal* 55, no. 3 (2021): 13–19, 17.
26. Lemley, *Becoming What We Sing*, 5.
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28. Patricia Ehrkamp and Caroline Nagel, “Immigration, Places of Worship and the Politics of Citizenship in the US South,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 37, no. 4 new series (2012): 624–638, 624–625.
29. Dawn, *Reaching Out*, 17.
30. Lemley, *Becoming What We Sing*, 2.
31. Pangritz and de Gruchy, *The Polyphony of Life*, 10–11.
32. Pangritz and de Gruchy, 14.
33. Pangritz and de Gruchy, 10.
34. Pangritz and de Gruchy, 18.
35. Pangritz and de Gruchy, 18.
36. Pangritz and de Gruchy, 28.
37. Pangritz and de Gruchy, 29.
38. Augustine’s *Confessions*, Book 10, Chapter 33, Section 50, 208.
39. Lemley, *Becoming What We Sing*, 2.
40. Walter Brueggemann, *Israel’s Praise: Doxology against Idolatry and Ideology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 29–53.
41. Dawn, *Reaching Out*, 11.
42. Pangritz and de Gruchy, *The Polyphony of Life*, 14.
43. Daw, *Glory to God: A Companion*, 341.
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45. Gabriel Rossman, “Elites, Masses, and Media Blacklists: The Dixie Chicks Controversy,” *Social Forces* 83, no. 1 (September 2004): 68.
46. Daw, *Glory to God: A Companion*, 342.
47. Daw, *Glory to God: A Companion*, 343.
48. Dawn, *Reaching Out*, 76.
49. © 1932, renewed 1962 by The Lorenz Corporation. Stanza 3 © 1964 by The Lorenz Corporation.
50. Lemley, *Becoming What We Sing*, 25.

What Is a King?

Sermon Preached November 24, 2024

Fairview Presbyterian Church in Lawrenceville, Georgia.

Melissa McNair-King

John 18:33–37

Both the first and fourth grades at our elementary school have been studying the American Revolution in history class this fall. So for the past few months I've been hearing a lot about the king of England, the Articles of the Confederation, and the US Constitution. Our whole household is learning about checks and balances and the branches of government. In first grade there's a lot about Thomas Jefferson, Lewis and Clark, and even Sacagawea! I don't think I could even say Sacagawea when I was in the first grade, much less explain her significance.

There was a crossword puzzle for the fourth grade that I had to google half the answers to because there was no word bank and one of the answers was (now please imagine this many squares in the crossword) "popular sovereignty." Which I doubt most adults could accurately define.

But it's been an interesting topic leading up to *this* day when we talk a lot about kings and Christ THE King. Because what I have gathered from elementary US history is that having a king is usually a bad thing.

We don't want a king. We want to escape the tyranny of a king. And here we are using "king" as a metaphor and a title for the person we love the most, on whom we have staked our whole salvation.

Observing Christ the King Sunday started about a hundred years ago, in the 1920s. It was a time when changes were sweeping through Europe. The

end of World War I had given rise to strong feelings of nationalism in European nations—this sense of staunch loyalty to one's own nation. Country first kind of thing.

Dictators were rising to power—especially Mussolini in Italy. He was using a secret police force to silence anyone who disagreed with him or opposed him, and within about five years of his appointment as prime minister (in 1922) he had consolidated the government's power for himself as a dictator, commanding total control and allegiance. Mussolini is thought to be the inventor of fascism—this ideology by which the government has total control, and power is held very tightly by a small group to such an extreme that individual freedoms are no longer meaningful or tolerated.

So in 1925, when Pope Pius XI signed a statement to initiate the church's celebration of this day we know as Christ the King Sunday, it was a bold move. Remember that popes live in Italy, as did Mussolini. The statement was a churchwide declaration that in the face of dictators and any earthly rulers there is only one true King. **Christ** is our king, and Christians are to follow him as Lord, and none other. Pope Pius wrote that he wanted Christ the King Sunday to give Christians courage. His goal was to strengthen all of us in the knowledge that Christ must reign in our hearts, minds, wills, and bodies.

So today, with Christians across the globe we insist again that Christ is the One we give our allegiance too, even when there is so much else competing for our devotion or loyalty.

Melissa McNair-King is the program manager for Presbyterian Association of Musician's Child of Blessing program and has previously served as a pastor for congregations in Arkansas, Virginia, and Georgia.

"Then Pilate summoned Jesus, and asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?'" It's a strange conversation, to say the least.

"Are you the king?" Pilate asks.

"Who wants to know?" says Jesus.

"Well, your own people handed you over. What did you do?"

"My kingdom is not from this world."

"So . . . you are a king?"

Is he a king or not?! Pilate doesn't seem to be very concerned with whether Jesus committed a crime; he just wants to know what kind of leader Jesus is, because he sure doesn't act like the kings we know. And of course, Pilate wouldn't really want competition for his reign in Judea.

I wish I could tell you that once Pope Pius XI established Christ the King Sunday so that we would all remember who our real Lord is, the Christian church was able to stay on track. But by 1933, eight years later, the Vatican and the Third Reich had signed an agreement with one another. Even though Pius XI was critical of the things Hitler was doing, he still signed a treaty with him and allowed a cardinal to negotiate its terms.

But if that sounds bad, then wait until you hear what the Protestants were doing.

Part of Hitler's strategy was to unify the Protestant churches in Germany so that he could send his message to them with greater ease and authority. And it worked. Soon the majority of Protestant churches were under his thumb. The growing hatred toward the Jewish community, people with disabilities, immigrants, and anyone else who could be called "inferior" was largely spread through Christian pulpits. It's easy to be seduced by the culture around us, easy to become afraid by scare tactics and propaganda.

Then Pilate summoned Jesus and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" I guess it was hard to tell, since even Jesus' own community had betrayed him. "Are you the King?"

In the midst of everything that was happening in Europe, a handful of Christians were brave enough to take a stand. Theologians like Karl Barth helped write a confession called the Theological

Declaration of Barmen. It stated that Christ is always head of the church, and not the Fuhrer, not Hitler. We now include that confession within our own Presbyterian book of faith statements, the *Book of Confessions*.

One of Barth's colleagues, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, was a German Lutheran pastor who also strongly resisted the Nazi regime. Two days after Hitler was installed as Germany's chancellor, Bonhoeffer gave a radio address that warned Germans of slipping into idolatry of this leader; Bonhoeffer was soon taken to a concentration camp. His resistance eventually cost him his life.

"So . . . you are a king?" Not only is Christ a king, he is *the* King. But as Jesus answers Pilate, he tells him that his kingdom is different. "My kingdom is not of this world," Jesus says.

Jesus' power does not depend on military strength. His authority is not claimed by violence. His leadership does not try to overpower or frighten; instead, Jesus' whole ministry is about lifting up the lowly and comforting the outcast.

He *doesn't* look like the kings we know—he isn't trying to rack up wealth or glory for himself; instead, he freely hands over his life. He wears thorns as a crown. His throne is a cross. His words are forgiveness and life and peace. It is a completely new definition for what strength actually looks like. And if we are part of *that* kingdom, then our lives should resemble it.

Who is our king? Would Pilate be able to tell? Or would he need to ask Jesus again: Are you sure you are a king? Even your own people have walked away.

Friends, I pray that on this Christ the King Sunday, on this day that falls in the midst of Thanksgiving, family gatherings, and holiday preparation . . . *and* in this season of political division, deep fear, and endless violence, we would turn our eyes to our true king again.

Take on the humility he modeled. Show love in the face of hatred. Tend to those who are hurting. Stand up with those who are outcasts. Offer your life toward the kingdom that is not of this world, until the day when God's will is done "on earth as it is in heaven." Thanks be to God.



Benjamin Wildflower

Benjamin Wildflower
Mary Punching Beast
benwildflower.com

Call to Worship

Ideas

Confronting White Christian Nationalism

Frequently Asked Questions

1. *What is Christian Nationalism?*

Christian nationalism is a political ideology that seeks to merge Christian identity with American civic life and national identity. It asserts that the United States was founded as a Christian nation and should continue to be governed according to what its proponents see as Christian values or biblical principles.

Core Beliefs of Christian Nationalism:

- America is divinely chosen or specially blessed by God.
- U.S. laws and policies should reflect Christian beliefs, often from a conservative evangelical perspective.
- Christianity should have a privileged place in public life (e.g., in government, schools, monuments).
- The Founding Fathers intended for the U.S. to be explicitly Christian in governance (this is historical revisionism).

2. *How does Christian Nationalism undermine the church and Christianity?*

- Conflates religious and political authority in an idolatrous way
- Contradicts the teaching and example of Jesus
- Undermines pluralism and religious liberty
- Belies the New Testament, which offers no biblical precedent for a Christian nation
- Promotes oppression and exclusion of those deemed "unworthy"
- Distorts the mission of the Church from love of neighbor to love of power
- Confuses the kingdom of God with earthly nations and earthly power with spiritual calling
- Reduces Christianity to a narrow cultural identity over the universal tradition Jesus stands for

3. *Is the United States a "Christian nation" and can Christian theology be at the root of American public policy?*

The U.S. Constitution does not establish Christianity—or any religion—as a national religion. In fact, the First Amendment explicitly prohibits the government from establishing a religion and protects the free exercise of all religions:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances. ~First Amendment, U.S. Constitution

The first component of Christian nationalism is belief in a Christian nation. According to an article in *Christianity Today*,¹

Christian nationalism is the belief that the American nation is defined by Christianity, and that the government should take active steps to keep it that way. Christian nationalists assert that America is and must remain a "Christian nation."

4. *What qualifies as a Christian Nationalist action?*

One component of Christian nationalism is a political ideology that believes Christianity should have primacy in the public square in order to address so-called immorality. Christian nationalists do not call themselves by that name and do not work from a shared playbook. But the kind of policies that they espouse tell a clear story:

- Reinstating prayer in public schools
- Changing school curriculum to include biblical education
- Banning books from libraries if you disagree with the content
- Pushing for anti-immigrant policies that aim to stop demographic changes
- Discriminating against LGBTQ+ people, and more

5. *How does Christian Nationalism harm other people? Where does racism come in?*

Christian nationalism harms people by advancing a narrow, exclusive vision of American identity—Christian, white, conservative, and patriarchal—that marginalizes or actively discriminates against others. Christian nationalism is not just focused on holding Christianity above other faith traditions; rather, it uses state power to privilege Christians at the expense of all others.

Robert P. Jones, president and founder of Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), explains in his 2023 book, *The Hidden Roots of White Supremacy*² that the United States was founded with a paradox at its heart, at once striving for a democratic society, but doing so on a foundation of mass racial violence through which the indigenous population was replaced. This paradox, Jones explains, survives today in the form of white Christian nationalism, privileging white Christians above all other US citizens.

6. *Are there other religious nationalisms?*

Religious nationalism is not exclusive to Christianity. It's a global pattern where religion becomes fused with political identity, ethnicity, and power, often leading to exclusionary or supremacist ideologies. The core issue is not the religion itself, but how it's co-opted for political and nationalist goals.

Prepared by GACEIR,
General Assembly Committee on
Ecumenical and Interreligious Relations



¹ Paul D. Miller, "What is Christian Nationalism?" *Christianity Today*, February 2021.

² Robert P. Jones, *The Hidden Roots of White Supremacy* (Simon & Schuster, 2023).

God of All

A Liturgical Witness Against Christian Nationalism

Call to Worship

adapted from Psalm 96

O sing to God a new song;
sing to God, all the earth.

**For great is the Creator and greatly to be praised;
God is to be revered above all gods.**

For all the gods of the peoples are idols,
but God made the heavens.

**Say among the nations, "God reigns.
The world is firmly established;
it shall never be moved.**

God will judge the peoples with equity."

Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;
let the sea roar and all that fills it;
let the field exult and everything in it.

**Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy
before the Creator, for God is coming,
for God is coming to judge the earth.**

**God will judge the world with righteousness
and the peoples with truth.**

Call to Confession

Come, draw near to the One who made you, the One who is beyond borders, beyond control and coercion. Come, draw near to the One who judges the world with righteousness, inviting us to be a people of truth and equity, reflecting the diverse abundance of God's grace.

Prayer of Confession

God beyond borders,

**though we are made in your image,
so often we have tried to create you in ours.**

We have adorned our country's flags
with the image of the cross,

**desecrating that place where you conquered
state power and sin once and for all
with our own idolatrous nationalisms.**

We have confused our political preferences
with your divine will.

**We have even dared to believe you love us best.
What a mockery we make of your message
of letting of letting the children of all nations
come to you, Jesus.**

What harm we have caused upon bodies and faiths
seen as less faithful, or less American,
or less patriotic than our own.

**What violence we have worked
in our collusion of state and religious power,
the very same violence you subvert on the cross.
Forgive our comfortable and profitable idolatries,
and burst forth from all the boxes
we have forced you into, bringing in your wake
abundant life for all people, for all nations.**

(silent prayer of confession)

Amen.

Assurance of Pardon

Hear the good news, and let it dwell in your body:

How things are, or how they have been, is not how they must always be.

The God of all nations is at work still, growing flowers in the cracks between the walls we build. All creation bears witness to a God beyond borders, a God on the move still working through ordinary people, like you and me, to claim and create abundant life for all people, for all nations, for all faiths. God is not held captive by our ideologies of idolatry; we need not be, either. We are a people made new! A forgiven people. A diverse people of grace in many languages. Thanks be to God!

Scripture

Isaiah 56:1-8

John 18:28-40

Acts 10:34-38

Revelation 22:1-5

Prayers of the Congregation, Community, and World

Loving God, you created all of humanity in your image, holy, beautiful, blessed. We thank you for founding the church through the power of the Holy Spirit and for welcoming us into the great cloud of witnesses and communion of saints, a sacred unity that knows no bounds.

You have charged us, as your people, to work for your reign on earth as it is in heaven. And since we have not yet brought that about, since that time has not yet come, we ask your forgiveness for when your name has been used not for love, peace, and truth, but misused and distorted for hatred, violence, misinformation, and greed. This has taken the form of racism, bigotry, misogyny, colonialism through the doctrine of discovery, and far too many abuses of power. We confess that these are in direct contradiction to the love and teachings of Jesus, which undermines the mission and joy of the church.

Rekindle within us a passion for the best of our history, the wisdom of our tradition, so that we might share the promise of resurrection with the world, and not the sin of Christian nationalism. For yours is the glory that empowers us to act as one, united in love, to correct our course and embody your grace, as we make a way in the wilderness for your love to spread to all the ends of the earth.

This we pray through the Holy Spirit and in the loving name of the risen Jesus Christ, Amen.

Liturgy by

Rev. Dr. Whitney Wilkinson Arreche and

Rev. Dr. Jacob Bolton

with influence from Cole Arthur Riley

Prepared in 2025 by GACEIR,

General Assembly Committee

on Ecumenical and Interreligious Relations



“I’ve Been Wondering . . .” Why Is the American Flag Not Displayed?

Christopher Q. James

The following is an example of what I call “I’ve Been Wondering . . .”: FAQs about Worship.” These are brief(ish) explanations about worship and our liturgical space that appear periodically in the worship bulletin of the New Hope Presbyterian Church, St. Charles, Missouri.

Why is the American flag not displayed in our worship space?

The short answer to this question is “symbols matter.” We gather as we do each week to worship the triune God. We gather as Christians (or at least aspiring Christians), and we incorporate particular items to facilitate our worship. Pastor and theologian Gordon Lathrop calls them “holy things.” Water, bread and wine, and the Word are the primary holy things that facilitate our worship, and they are carried by the baptismal font, the Lord’s Table, the pulpit. These holy things are all symbols that point to something beyond themselves, and they enable us in our worship to enact the story of salvation. These holy things tell something about who God is and who we are as a result.

Not only what symbols we use but how we use them matters. There is seldom only one right way to use these symbols, these holy things, but the way a particular congregation uses them speaks to what it believes about God. And the way we use them also forms us, shapes us, and communicates what we believe. For instance, here at New Hope we have chosen to put our baptismal font in the middle of our space so that we literally gather around it when we worship. These waters that wash us and welcome us into the Christian faith stand at the very center because we are always being welcomed into the Christian community over and over again. Whether you were baptized a hundred years ago or

just last week, these waters continue to welcome us and tell us we are beloved children of God. The Lord’s Table is on the same level as the congregation and set for a meal every time we gather to feed us on Christ’s very self as nourishment for our journey of faith. And the pulpit bears the book that contains our story as God’s people from which we hear over and again who we are because of who God is.

At times throughout the year we employ other items symbolically as well, all of which convey meaning. The Advent wreath grows in light each week as we anticipate the coming of Christ at Christmas. During Lent, we remove live plants and adorn the space with sticks to connote the dry wilderness of the Lenten journey as Jesus makes his way to Jerusalem and the cross. The Paschal candle is lighted at the Easter vigil to proclaim that the light that is Christ shines in the darkness of death and the darkness does not overcome it. Symbols matter. They tell us who we are and shape us into the people we aspire to be. They communicate the essential truths we hold most dear.

So back to that question about the flag in the worship space. Certainly, the American flag is an important, powerful symbol, but it has nothing to do with Christianity. The American flag (or for that matter, the flag of any nation) in worship alongside the holy things risks equating, however unwittingly, an unholy alliance between nationalism and religion that never leads anywhere good. Christianity is transnational and, as Christians, our citizenship is far broader than that of any one nation. We must always take care that the symbols we employ in our worship serve to form us in ways that unite us together with the church universal.

Christopher Q. James is the pastor of New Hope Presbyterian Church in St. Charles, Missouri.

Service for Dedicating Solar Panel Array

John Sawyer and Members of Bedford Presbyterian Church

This liturgy was used at Bedford Presbyterian Church in a service, "Bright Hope for Tomorrow," for the purpose of dedicating a solar panel array on Sunday, May 18, 2025.

Opening Sentences

Psalm 36

Your steadfast love, O Lord,
extends to the heavens,
Your faithfulness to the clouds.

**Your righteousness is like
the mighty mountains,
your judgements are like the great deep;
you save humans and animals alike,
O Lord.**

How precious is your steadfast love, O God!
All people may take refuge in the shadow
of your wings.

**They feast on the abundance of your house,
and you give them drink from the river
of your delights.**

For with you is the fountain of life;
In your light we see light.

Prayer

God of the universe,
the heavens declare your glory.
You have come to be with us in Jesus Christ,
and by the power of the Holy Spirit
you are present with us now
in the risen Christ.
We thank you for all the gifts
that have brought us to this day.
We give you thanks for this church,
planted on this land

and dedicated to your honor and glory.
Thank you for the work of many hands
that crafted this place,
for contributions of money and material,
labors of love and commitment.
Bless the work of our hands, O God,
that this place may offer your welcome
to many diverse people,
that all who seek you here
may know your presence in their lives.
By your grace and according to your will,
may the good news of Jesus Christ
be truly proclaimed
and the sacraments rightly administered,
that the body of Christ may be nurtured here
and strengthened for Christ's service
in the world.
In Jesus' name we pray. **Amen.**

We give thanks that:

- Our solar panels are expected to produce about 100,000 kilowatt-hours of electricity annually. *(That's enough to power about 9–10 average US homes for a whole year—or run a refrigerator for over 1,100 years!)*
- When operating at full power, the system has a total capacity of 74,340 watts (or about 74 kilowatts). *(That's like having 740 100-watt lightbulbs turned on simultaneously.)*
- Before installing electric heat pumps, our annual electricity use was around 50,000 kilowatt-hours. *(So the system produces about twice what we used to consume.)*
- The panels produced 2,437 kilowatt-hours of

John Sawyer is the pastor of Bedford Presbyterian Church in Bedford, New Hampshire.

clean energy in the first week alone.
(That's enough to do nearly 100 loads of laundry daily for a week.)

- Any extra electricity we don't use gets returned to the power grid, and we earn credits on our electric bill.
- We'll also receive payments for the clean energy generated through Renewable Energy Credits (RECs).
(These are financial rewards for producing clean, renewable electricity.)
- Self-generated solar energy will drastically reduce BPC's electric bill, reduce usage of fossil fuel generated electricity, and reduce demand on the grid infrastructure.

Prayer

God of light and life,
We give you thanks for the rising and setting
of the sun,
a rhythm by which to live and work together
as many have done before us.
In the midst of uncertainty about what
the future holds,
grant that the energy produced
by the sun's rhythm
might be a blessing to all who come after us.
Walk with us into a future in which
we might honor you
by caring for your wondrous creation,
sustaining that which sustains us.

We give thanks for the generosity
of members and friends
that made this project a reality.

We give thanks for those who labored
long and hard
analyzing data, crunching numbers,
raising funds,
and working to install these solar panels.
We give thanks for those who work
in science and technology,
innovating for good stewardship of the earth.
Just as many hands came together
for this project,
unite us in cooperation with each other
that we might continue the work
of environmental justice,
convinced of our interdependence.
In Jesus' name we pray. **Amen.**

Time of Remembrance and Celebration

*Time is observed for worshipers to name out loud
or in another form (written or silent) memories
from the process to this day or words
of thanksgiving.*

Doxology

OLD HUNDREDTH

**Praise God, from whom all blessings flow.
Praise God, all creatures, here below.
Praise God, above, ye heavenly host.
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.**

May God bless you and keep you,
and be the light to shine upon you, now and forever.
Go from this place to continue the work of
stewardship and care.
Thanks be to God! Alleluia! Amen.

Call to Worship

Columns

On Liturgy: Political Work

Elizabeth S. Shannon

On a bright late August morning, after just dropping off our toddler at preschool and while pushing an empty stroller home, I prepared to cross a major north-south corridor through our neighborhood. Seemingly out of nowhere a police car screamed past me, lights and sirens blaring. Then came another. A few blocks to the west I saw two more. As I moved in that direction one after another appeared, along with a few fire trucks and ambulances.

When I made it the three-quarters of a mile home, I said to my spouse, with fear and trembling, “Something’s going on to the south.” It was a few more minutes, between my scrolling the local social media and our turning on the local news before we first heard the phrase “active shooter.” It wouldn’t be much longer before we knew the shooting was at the large Catholic K-8 school near us, not much longer still before the whole world learned of the Annunciation Catholic Church and School in South Minneapolis. My spouse and I spent the morning debating rushing back to preschool to pick up our child, knowing full well she was safe, and going to get her was about our needs and our pain, not hers.

We spent the next few days fielding kind and loving texts and phone calls from friends and family wondering just “how close” we were to yet another horrific act of gun violence. The truth of the matter is that we were too close. But not because our dog goes to the veterinary practice across the street from the school or because we often shop at the grocery store where reporters camped out. We were too close because every single time another one of these news stories breaks, we are all simply too close.

The following Sunday the pastor of our church, like so many others, struggled to find words and make meaning out of such senseless violence. He faithfully led us in praying for our community, for parents and children, for healthcare workers and first responders, for teachers, and for those affected by senseless violence across the globe. And during fellowship hour after church it was clear that few of us knew how else to respond. Few of us knew what else we could do. Few of us knew how to process our rage, our trauma, our fear, our heartache.

It’s hard to imagine there’s not a preacher in the country who hasn’t received some sort of comment, either in the fellowship hall or by phone call, email, or appointment, accusing them of being too political. Too political when they talk about poverty, too political when they talk about housing, too political when they talk about war, too political when they talk about immigration, too political when they talk about gun violence. But if we’re going to hold fast to liturgy being the work of the people, then it would seem more problematic if our preachers weren’t talking politics.

If we are going to be people who live in the world and engage with the world, then we are going to be people who confront politics. If we are going to be people who look to the good news of the gospel, then we cannot deny the ways Jesus engages with politics. If we are going to faithfully preach, pray, and sing together, then we cannot ignore the way that preaching, prayer, and song can function politically. The gospel is political; it can’t not be. Our liturgy is political; it can’t not be. It’s disingenuous at best and unfaithful at worst to deny that being followers of Jesus, being people who worship the crucified

Libby Shannon is a minister member of the Presbytery of the Twin Cities Area. Currently she is working on a master’s degree in social work and chasing her toddler.

and risen Lord, is to be political. It's not political because of who we vote for or which relentless and morally questionable fundraising emails we receive. Rather, the Christian faith is political because we live in a culture and world in which to choose not to be political is to choose not to see, not to hear, not to be moved by the hardships and heartaches that surround us and not to understand that we have been called by God to be present in them. When we as institutions or as individuals make the choice to turn a blind eye or to cross to the other side of the road or to simply disengage, we make a choice to not see the people whom God loves the most, the people God centers, the people for whom God's heart breaks.

Our liturgy, the work we are called to, individually and collectively, deserves our most faithful actions. It deserves to be engaged in the politics that surround us because our communities deserve what we can offer. Our communities deserve our churches showing up for them, advocating for them, listening for the stories that need to be told, making space for the ways our lives can be improved or enriched or nurtured.

I live in a community experiencing acute grief over a preventable, horrific, and gut-wrenching

situation that could have very well never happened had we been more engaged in politics—the politics of gun access, the politics of mental health care, the politics of violence. And now our community wrestles deeply with how to respond. We wrestle deeply with what it means to offer not only our “thoughts and prayers” but our advocacy for policy changes and actions.

As I joined my neighbors and hung teal and blue ribbons on our front stoop, the colors of the Annunciation School, a neighbor asked if it all felt a little performative. I told him, “Of course it's performative, but what else is there right now?” All I have to offer is the performance of my grief and my anger, the performance of my showing up in solidarity with our community, the performance of demanding my elected officials do something in response to the deep pain all around us. The political is personal, and performance can be a productive way to process complex emotions and circumstances. When we engage with the world around us in prayer, in song, in preaching, in sacraments, and in faithfully showing up for our neighbors, we are doing the holy and sacred work of liturgy.

On Music: Setting an Expansive Table

Patrick Evans

In *Call to Worship* volume 59.2, I wrote about the PC(USA) congregation that called me when I had both feet out the door of any church after many years as a church musician. That congregation had done the difficult gospel work of setting a welcoming table for everyone in their rapidly changing neighborhood instead of clinging to the nostalgia of the “good old days” and giving in to thinking of their mission as a fortress or museum. I also wrote of how much I had learned from wonderful musicians about the deeply sacred work of respectfully listening to and learning to sing from the wide range of global hymnody. I learned about singing global hymnody in a way that doesn’t commodify the gifts of non-Western communities of faith but deeply engages diverse cultures and musical styles. This hymnody invites us to listen carefully to texts which illuminate visions of God and God’s people in ways many of us would never have imagined from our social locations. It allows us to pray with both secure and marginalized peoples worldwide as we humbly receive these gifts of grace—gifts which strengthen our faith and draw us closer to God each time we join our voices in singing them together.

In the congregation I currently serve, as in many congregations, members are aware that we are living in a time in the United States when the parent of an adopted teen from Guatemala (who is a legal US citizen) is spending sleepless nights and anxious days wondering if their beloved daughter will make it home from school, soccer, or the grocery store without being abducted, detained without due process, or even deported to the country of her birth (with only a three-month residence before adoption)

or another country where she neither speaks the language nor has any ties.

Our churches are no longer the sanctuaries they had previously been for those vulnerable among us, as this administration has rescinded the longstanding “sensitive locations” policy, which for more than a decade provided protections for churches, hospitals, and schools from government immigration enforcement actions. So many of us, members of our faith communities, neighbors, and co-workers, are living in a state of nationalist-generated hegemonic anxiety, regardless of immigration or citizenship status, and for good reason, given the devastating consequences of our government’s current policies. This is not a political statement but a simple recitation of current events.

What then shall we sing in the face of such aggression and distress? Drawing from the example of John Bell of the Iona Community, when talking about worship practices with groups of people, I often ask, “Who are we setting this table for?” We set a table for ancestors in faith, the people who founded this congregation and our faith tradition. We set the table for all the saints who rest from their labors in this congregation, who provided this space. We set the table for the people who regularly worship in this space and engage in service to the church and community. We set the table for the people we can imagine might join us one day (this is often, of course, a dream of families with young children, generous givers, and reliable volunteers). We set the table for people living right outside the doors of the church, in houses and neighborhoods nearby. We set the table for those who are unhoused, who may sleep in our courtyards on cold nights,

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as we strive for a time when all persons will have safe housing. We set the table for the people who come in late at night and clean the very space we're worshiping in, who may speak very little English and may be victims of the current deportation mania. During the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving, we often reference "the faithful of every time and place who forever sing to the glory of your name . . ."¹ Are we doing all we can to set the table for the faithful of every time and place?

If we are truly setting this table for the faithful saints of *every* time and place, might we intentionally join our voices in faithful song in the languages of those vulnerable around us as a sign of a truly deep, hospitable welcome that risks something, a welcome that changes both the guest and the hosts? Whether or not the vulnerable among us would risk coming to worship, surely we should sing in prayer and solidarity for justice and fair treatment in society.

The Gloria from Argentina "*Santo, Santo, Santo*," the first line of which constitutes the hymnal's name, includes verses for each person of the Trinity, which can be prepared and led in a call-and-response form. Singing the verses responsively in English and in Spanish is a way to join us in one voice. For an English-speaking congregation, a leader might sing the Spanish text first before the congregation repeats it. It might also be helpful to sing the Spanish verses at a slower tempo for English-speaking congregations. Repeating this over successive weeks might build familiarity so that other Spanish verses could be added one at a time.

The choir or a soloist might sing "*Santo, santo, santo. ¡Mi corazón te adora! Mi corazón te sabe decir: ¡Santo eres Señor!*" For the second iteration, the congregation could sing in English: "Holy, holy,

holy. My heart, my heart adores you! My heart knows how to say to you: you are holy, Lord!"² Then the soloist, choir, and congregation could sing it together in Spanish, having heard the pronunciation the first time.

It is important to give an English-speaking congregation tools to sing the Spanish text respectfully. It may also be important to cultivate a worship culture in which imperfect attempts are allowed as we learn. God does not require perfect Spanish or perfect English. It is most important that we join our voices with the faithful of every time and place. This beautiful song of praise could be used as a refrain in a prayer or could be sung in numerous other moments in the Service for the Lord's Day.

Of course, this is just one example of a piece of global music that may help to unite voices in song across differences in identity and experience. With concise musical and textual guidance and clearly articulated theology, expanding congregational singing in historically white congregations to include music from beyond national and increasingly nationalistic borders is vital for such a time as this. This must be done with sensitivity and respect, without tokenizing or appropriating another's identity. We sing as a way to stand in solidarity and prayer together in the face of injustice, misunderstanding, and hate, to enact the realm of God by setting an expansive table.

Notes

1. *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2018), 126ff.
2. *Santo, Santo, Santo/Holy, Holy, Holy: Songs for the People of God*. © 2018 GIA Publications, Inc.

On Preaching: Homiletical Hospitality

David Lower

Wow! What was that? And how do we get more of it?" These words of Beyza, a Turkish Muslim woman leader, rang like the church tower bell that tells the neighborhood something significant is happening. She was responding to a Sunday morning worship service that felt new and wondrous to the Presbyterians in the room, too. It was the second Interfaith Advent Service of Lessons and Carols at Saint Luke's Presbyterian Church in Dunwoody, Georgia, an experience made possible by the commitment of Jewish, Muslim, and Christian friends to share life together. The service welcomed our interreligious guests to be present for a Sunday morning holy season worship tradition, read Scriptures we hold in common, and help the word of Advent hope be preached.

On this day, the symbols in the sanctuary included the familiar rose window, the table, the empty cross, and the light of Christ. But these were joined by new sights: different faces and instruments, yarmulkes and hijabs. This worship service was distinguished by its participants and by its context, as divisions and cries for justice raged across the globe over the excruciating Israeli-Palestinian conflict in Gaza. The weight of the world, though, at least for an hour one December morning, felt buoyed by the proclamation of Advent hope and the story of saving grace that would come to be fully alive in Jesus. "That may be the most moving experience I've ever had in Christian worship," said more than one church leader that morning, including me. "I had no idea Christianity could be like this," a guest confided.

This collective sense of wonder led us seamlessly into the service's heart: the compelling Advent promise, which found its fullest expression in the lessons, carols, prayers, and our collaborative sermon. In this moment, I was joined by Beyza and Rabbi Spike as we reflected together on Advent as God's "coming toward" us—a holy movement that awakens our anticipation of its fulfillment. We remembered God's gracious, faithful, and active nature in history as cause for our hope in a new world where love will reign and mercy, justice, and peace will flourish.

Building on our shared proclamation, the voices of our interreligious friends brought new clarity to the gospel's shape and size. Our theological differences seemed so small compared to the act of living compassionately and hospitably together. Rabbi Spike offered, "What's happening right now is a good starting place for hope." He reminded us of the first creation story: "God made light before the sun, the moon, and the stars. That light is goodness and hope that permeates and sets the basis for everything. It shines on our path together and is reflected in how we live in hard-earned friendship."

Beyza highlighted the dual meaning of Advent: God coming toward us, and we coming toward God—both essential expressions in her Islamic tradition. "When we remember God, it shapes us," she said—an Advent proclamation if I've ever heard one. As an illustration, she asked us to imagine preparing our home as if Jesus were coming today. What would we do to make him comfortable and welcome? Hospitality, she reminded us, is how we receive both neighbor and God.

David Lower is the senior pastor and head of staff at St. Luke's Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, Georgia.

It was then I realized that the way we were preaching had itself become a symbol of our proclamation. God moves toward us, we move toward God—and that movement was alive before our very eyes. The pulpit, too small to hold three people at once, gave way to a table of welcome in front of the communion table, with the light of Christ behind us. The words we exchanged were faithful to the great story of God that comes alive in Jesus. Yet even more, the medium itself preached: the medium of co-preaching across boundaries can embody God's gracious welcome more vividly than words alone. As Marshall McLuhan said, "The medium is the message."

This experience clarified a conviction for me: our homiletics can—and sometimes should—intentionally embody hospitality. As a practice of homiletical hospitality, this Interfaith Advent sermon made room for a broader, deeper proclamation of the gospel than I could have offered alone. The experience revealed that such preaching was not just a creative idea but a theological stance: hospitality as the shape of preaching, breaking open the walls we build and letting the light of God's promised future spill in.

Homiletical hospitality is especially vital in congregations of privilege like the one I serve. By inviting others to share in the act of proclamation—preaching with colleagues, members, or neighbors—we model humility and relinquish control, making space for God to work. Paul wrote to the Romans that hope is hard-earned, forged through struggle. For people like me, and the primarily white, affluent congregation I serve, privilege itself can be laid down

in service of this more inclusive gospel. Homiletical hospitality is a faithful struggle: relinquishing control, stepping down from platforms of advantage, and assuming a posture of humility in which God can work and by which God can lead.

This call to humility offers a word of encouragement in our time of global conflict, systemic injustice, fractured trust, and spiritual fatigue. The temptation is to retreat into self-protection, to guard our pulpits and build higher walls. But humility—the kind Paul names as fertile ground for hope—can be practiced, modeled, and experienced in worship, especially when we risk opening the pulpit to others.

At its heart, homiletical hospitality is making room—for other voices, other stories, and the Spirit's surprising work. The pulpit becomes a table of welcome, proclamation a shared meal, enriched by the presence of others. Jesus' ministry was marked by shared tables and unexpected guests, where blessing flowed in every direction. Preaching that embodies this incarnational pattern is preaching that shines light into darkness—a light that, as Rabbi Spike reminded us, existed even before the sun.

The incarnation is God's own act of hospitality: making room in the divine life for humanity. When preaching dares to imitate this welcome, it becomes more than words from a pulpit. It becomes an open table set on the front porch of the kingdom, a sign that the gospel is alive and hope is already here. It has become clear to me that our preaching can both say and do so, and we all need more of it.

On the Arts: Proclaiming the Realm of God

Deborah Sokolove

Christian worship has always had political implications, whether for or against the current rulers. This is not to say that everything has been seen through a partisan lens, but rather that how Jesus is depicted in both words and images reflects what Christian communities believe about the connection between what he says and does and the relationship between the powerful and those who are sick, poor, or otherwise without power.

Early stories about Jesus show him, like the prophets before him, on the side of women, foreigners, and other marginalized people. This is as clear in the visual images that have accompanied Christian gatherings and adorned Christian burial sites from at least the second century onward as it is in the Gospel records and other books of the New Testament. Indeed, one of the most common early symbols is an abstracted, linear depiction of a fish (*ichthys* in Greek), which believers understood as an acronym for the Greek words meaning “Jesus Christ Son of God.” Since “Son of God” was one of the titles of the Roman emperor, this simple image was, among other things, a political claim that the crucified and risen Christ is sovereign over all human rulers.

Following a long tradition in which inscriptions, murals, mosaics, and stained-glass windows speak even when the preacher is silent, images in bulletins or on screens today often proclaim the upside-down world of the parables, in which beggars are invited to sit in the front row and workers who arrive late in the day are paid the same wage as those who started work early in the morning. The visual theme for Advent 2023 in my church was Benjamin Wildflower’s print *Magnificat*,¹ in which

the artist depicts an angry woman raising her fist against injustice while crowned and robed in stars. As she stands with one booted foot on a skull and the other subduing a serpent, she is surrounded by a mandorla, which identifies her with Our Lady of Guadalupe, a vision of Mary, the mother of Jesus, that originated in Mexico and has become central to the self-understanding of many people from South and Central America. The mandorla that surrounds her in Wildflower’s print is adorned with words from Mary’s impassioned prayer in Luke 1:46–55, “Fill the hungry, lift the lowly” and “Cast down the mighty, send the rich away.”

Living in accordance with the ethos depicted in his art, Wildflower gives permission to use his downloaded images freely in church bulletins and PowerPoint presentations. As the FAQ on his website states,

You are welcome to use these images for not-for-profit purposes. Pay if/what you wish. Please include my name somewhere, e.g. “cover image by Benjamin Wildflower” or a caption below the image that says, “*Magnificat* by Benjamin Wildflower.” I’m not picky about how you credit me, but please do credit me so people who like the art can find more of it and buy it from me.²

Like Wildflower’s *Magnificat*, the works of other artists who depict biblical characters in contemporary situations often preach the gospel of compassion for prisoners, strangers, and outcasts. In Advent 2024, we used Kelly Latimore’s *Dorothy Day and the Holy Family* as the visual theme. Painted

Deborah Sokolove recently retired as the director of the Henry Luce III Center for the Arts and Religion at Wesley Theological Seminary, where she is now professor emerita of Art and Worship.



Benjamin Wildflower
Magnificat
 benwildflower.com

in 2021, this narrative image is set in a modern city street illuminated by a full moon, a few stars, and the lighted windows of multi-story apartment buildings. In the foreground, a grey-haired woman gestures towards an open door over which hangs a sign saying, "Mary House, The Catholic Worker." The golden light pouring from the door creates a welcoming path for a dark-skinned man and a lighter-skinned woman holding a toddler, all dressed in well-worn, hooded, winter coats. While the painting is in a modern style, the artist nods to the icon tradition by placing halos around the heads of all the figures, with the Greek monogram identifying the child as Christ.

On her website, Latimore offers a quotation from Dorothy Day, who said she wanted to change the world to make it easier "for people to feed, clothe,

and shelter themselves as God intended them to do" by working for better conditions and crying out for the rights of both the worthy and the unworthy poor. Latimore adds,

Let us remember the poor, the sick, the dying, the grieving, the unemployed, those unable to pay rent this week, the homeless, those persecuted simply because of their race, gender, sexual orientation, creed, or nationality, the unjustly imprisoned, the refugee, and the immigrant. To dismiss the image of God in anyone is a complete denial of the incarnation.³

Another artist whose works for the church ask viewers to reconsider their preconceptions about the biblical stories is Margaret Adams Parker. In her sculpture *Mary as Prophet*, Parker shows Mary and Elizabeth as two pregnant women, one young and one old, as a reminder of the powerlessness, courage, and compassion of these two biblical characters. Commissioned by Virginia Theological Seminary as a connecting link between the ruins of the 1881 chapel that burned to the ground in 2010 and the new chapel consecrated in 2015, *Mary as Prophet*, invites viewers to recall that Mary and Elizabeth were ordinary women who were caught up in the political and social concerns of their day. On her website, Parker notes,

Depicted as African women, Mary and Elizabeth embody the Seminary's ties with churches in Africa and reflect the composition of the Anglican Communion. . . . The Archbishop of Canterbury, consecrating the sculpture, remarked that he sees these same women in refugee camps and other areas of conflict and deprivation.⁴

While this sculpture is outside the chapel rather than within its walls, its reminder of the church's mission to care for outsiders and for people in need finds echoes in the preaching from the pulpit and in the hearts and minds of all who view it on their way into worship. I was honored to be present at the service in which the new chapel and the sculpture were consecrated, and recall that when Archbishop Justin Welby gave the sermon, he spoke of justice and mercy, saying that hope-filled people who find forgiveness for their own failings can "transform

a world in which otherwise darkness seems to extinguish light, fear surrounds and despair-filled suffering encompasses the weakest and the poorest.”⁵

Like the early, profoundly political symbols of the people who remembered the stories about Jesus, many artworks that are used in Christian worship today continue to proclaim that the upside-down world of the parables and the prophets is the true realm of God.

Notes

1. Benjamin Wildflower, *Magnificat*, <https://benwildflower.com/products/magnificat-print/>.
2. Benjamin Wildflower, <https://benwildflower.com/pages/faq/>.
3. Kelly Latimore, *Dorothy Day and the Holy Family of the Streets*, <https://kellylatimoreicons.com/products/dorothy-day-and-the-holy-family-of-the-streets/>.
4. Margaret Adams Parker, *Mary as Prophet*, <https://www.margaretadamparker.com/ShowWork>.
5. “Archbishop Preaches at Virginia Theological Seminary,” October 13, 2015, <https://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/archbishop-preaches-virginia-theological-seminary/>.

Kelly Latimore
*Dorothy Day and
the Holy Family of the Streets*
kellylatimoreicons.com



Margaret Adams Parker
Mary as Prophet
Virginia Theological Seminary
Photo credit: B. Cayce Ramey

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PDS 21162-25-003
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