

# From Public Church to Private Christian

By Rich Lusk

It is critical for the church to understand the broader social trends that have undermined her existence as a public and visible community if she is going to act and react in appropriately biblical ways in our (post)modern situation. The progressive privatizing of religion needs to be sketched out more fully than will be done here, but a few critical points may be made.

John Millbank has pointed out that once upon a time, there was no such thing as the “secular.” The “secular” was an Enlightenment construction, aimed at taking religion out of the public square and enthroning “reason” (another Enlightenment invention) in its place. In a spectacular coup of Christendom, Enlightenment philosophers and politicians took over the Western world almost as quickly as Darius knocked off Belshazzar. The secularists came out of the closet, and the Bible believers got shoved in.

The secularizing of the public square was attractive to Western societies for a variety of reasons. It is simplest to blame everything that goes wrong in the world on generic, garden variety sinfulness. To be sure, sin is always at the root of everything that goes wrong in the world. But a more precise diagnosis is needed if we are to know how to repent of our particular sins particularly, and work towards a solution.

The rise of secularization meant that religion would be compartmentalized in cultural life. Whereas religion had once been all-pervasive, permeating every facet of society, it came to be viewed as strictly an inward, interior, individual “heart matter.” It became a category that took its place *alongside* economics, politics, education, art, etc., rather than *underneath* them as their foundation and *above* them as their overarching guide. The older view did not deny the inwardness of religion, of course, but it connected the inwardness with outwardness, exteriority, and embodiedness. It was taken for granted that religion would have a social and cultural manifestation. Today, the outwardness and public-ness of religion has simply been shaved off.

Clearly, in the centuries following the Reformation, various political developments and philosophical trends pressured the church out of her socially influential position, or at least forced her to compromise if she intended to stay put. Key Enlightenment figures pointed to the religious wars and the need for a religiously neutral, secular state to keep the peace among different ecclesiastical factions. The argument was as simple as it was attractive: Religious convictions caused division; a secular state

would keep peace. Or as another has put it, the argument was “Religious passion destroys social peace.” And battle-weary people will do *anything* for a little peace.

Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, and following them, Thomas Jefferson and (to a lesser extent) James Madison, designed their political systems in such a way that religion was, by necessity, either reduced to a bland, generic, contentless “faith,” or was driven out of the public square altogether. Hobbes redefined the practice of hermeneutics so that religion would be subordinate to politics and Locke redefined the church into a voluntary organization. The net result was to transmute absolute religious verity over into subjective private opinion so that “what’s true for you may not be true for me.”

What the early Enlightenment thinkers of the eighteenth century began, Kant finished in the nineteenth century. Kant claimed he wanted to save science from Humean skepticism and make room for faith. But in so doing he psychologized science and divorced faith from the real, phenomenal world of history and politics. The only kind of faith Kant’s system could allow was pietistic, private, and contentless.

Whatever we might say about the faithfulness of the men who framed our political Constitution, there can be no question they unwittingly opened the door to the secularization of public life in America. They failed to be fully theocratic (with the notable exceptions of Patrick Henry and a few others) and we continue to pay the price. The forces of secularization and privatization continue to keep religious influence at bay and continue to keep the church sidelined on the margins of culture. The only Christianity that fits into the American framework is one that is sectarian and private – that is, it only exists between one’s ears and behind one’s eyes. This kind of ideological religion of mere belief is really more like ancient Gnostic spirituality than the public, institutional, and embodied faith that the Scriptures describe. After all, in the New Testament, the church is the New *Israel* – hardly the kind of thing that can be private, individualistic, or merely a matter of ideas. Biblical religion is not just doctrine, or a personal relationship with Jesus (whoever he is), but a holistic and communal form of life. In other words, it is *incarnational*.

Henry Van Til’s otherwise fine book, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture* illustrates the depth of the problem. Van Til defines culture as “religion externalized.” But this assumes religion is something essentially private and inward in its essential nature. Schleiermacher and Harnack couldn’t have said it any better! Nor could Marcion or Cerinthus! Van Til assumes religion is fundamentally an interior phenomenon that only moves out of the heart into the public realm as some secondary step. His principle is basically Gnostic: Externalization follows inwardness. While Van Til is right that all of life is religious, he is wrong that religion is initially discarnate. In reality, *religion is always already embodied*.

Van Til's definition of culture may be fine for mystics and spiritualists, but any faithful Christian should see right through it. Think about how someone becomes a Christian in the first place. The Christian life *begins* in the font of baptism. That is to say, true religion starts with a public, external, and communal action. You did not become a Christian in the privacy of your heart; you became a Christian in the presence of many witnesses when a pastor poured water over your head in the Triune name.

By divorcing personal faith from the context of the institutional church, American Christians allowed the state to claim a higher loyalty than the church. Now, we tend to be Americans first, Christians second. The church is there if we need it, but not really necessary to salvation or social well-being. It serves a good purpose, to be sure . . . but then, so does the local Kiwanis Club.

Even some of the best Reformed theologians have been guilty of individualizing the faith and relativizing the importance of the church. Abraham Kuyper's comments make one wonder if he ever read Book IV of Calvin's *Institutes*:

Calvinism, by praising aloud liberty of conscience, has in principle abandoned every absolute characteristic of the visible church . . . [This is] a liberty of conscience which enables every man to serve God according to the conviction and dictates of his own heart.

Kuyper's comments are profoundly mistaken both theologically and historically. The early Reformers in the Calvinistic vein – including Calvin himself and Bucer – fought for the freedom of *the church* to be reformed according to the Scriptural plan, not the freedom of *the individual* to do whatever was right in his own eyes. This relocation of liberty from the body of Christ as a public institution to the individual's private belief system was tragic.

Kuyper's comments reveal a movement in theology that had gained a full head of steam by the nineteenth century – the tendency to glorify the lone individual, apart from the church community, and to denigrate the visible church and the objectivity of the covenant, for the sake of a Platonic, ideal church that can be neither seen nor heard nor worshipped with on Sunday mornings. The only difference between Kuyper's view and that of the radical Quakers is their relative position on the trajectory. But, sadly, they are both riding out the same basic presuppositions. At least the Quaker position has the virtue of consistency.

This view that restricts religion to the inner recesses of the individual's heart has been pervasive among both liberal and conservative Christians. Both have conspired together, albeit in varying ways, to strip the public square naked of religious dress.

Two prominent examples from different ends of the theological spectrum in the nineteenth century demonstrate this. Both Fredreich Schleiermacher and B. B. Warfield shared in common the interiorization of religion. They both believed Christianity consisted in a fundamental inwardness. Both were committed to a principle of immediacy. Schleiermacher's theology came to be known as the "theology of consciousness" because that's where he located the seat of religion – in the individual psyche. He said the essence of religion was a *feeling* of absolute dependence upon God. No pastor, no sacraments, no church body were needed to arrive at this purely subjective feeling.

But B. B. Warfield's definition of Calvinism sounds eerily similar. Warfield argued the essence of Calvinism was the soul's *immediate* dependence upon God. In Warfield's desire to escape sacerdotalism, he seemed to have stripped the sacraments and church bare of meaning. According to him, God deals with the soul immediately – that is, apart from means, such as sacraments. Warfield viewed the Reformation as a battle between Augustine's doctrine of the church (complete with sacraments as mediators of grace) and Augustine's doctrine of grace (with its hardcore doctrine of predestination). But Warfield seemed to have overlooked that Luther and Calvin were just as committed to Augustine's ecclesiology as they were his soteriology! Once again revisionist history served the purposes of the privatizers.

Again, this overspiritualization is essentially Gnostic. Evangelicals and liberals, at least in this respect, are in agreement. They've both poured the content of Christianity (however they defined it) into a privatized, individualized mold. Indeed, this push towards inwardness has been the Achilles Heel of Protestantism almost from the beginning of the movement.

If Christianity is purely an internal, unmediated religion, then the church (as a corporate body) and the sacraments (as external rituals) are mere appendages, tacked on to the inward core of religion. But as has been pointed out by numerous theologians, if Christianity is purely an inward affair of the heart, the whole field of public life is handed over to the secularists. And that's true even when Christians enter the field of play, because they end up doing so as secularists themselves rather than as faithful Christians.

Thus, our low ecclesiology has radically deformed our faith. We have been just as complicit as the liberals in the secularization of our culture. The price we have paid for the "freedom" of religion has been the privatization of religion. In essence, we have transformed the cross into a flagpole; we now teach our children the Pledge of Allegiance rather than the Nicene Creed; we view the American nation rather than the institutional church as God's chief instrument in history; and we are more concerned with making the world safe for American democracy than discipling the nations. We

simply have not given adequate attention to the place of the church in society and now we are learning that the consequences of a low ecclesiology are hard to live with.

We must recover the robust, church-centered faith of the patristics, medievals, and Reformers. Georges Florovsky brilliantly summarizes:

Christianity entered history as a new social order, or rather a new social dimension. From the very beginning Christianity was not primarily a “doctrine,” but exactly a “community.” There was not only a “Message” to be proclaimed and delivered, and “Good news” to be declared. There was precisely a New Community, distinct and peculiar, in the process of growth and formation, to which members were called and recruited. Indeed, “fellowship” (*koinonia*) was the basic category of Christian existence. Primitive Christians felt themselves to be closely knit and bound together in a unity which radically transcended all human boundaries – of race, of culture, of social rank, and indeed the whole dimension of “this world.”

The church is not merely an adjunct to the gospel, tacked on as an afterthought or an unnecessary appendage. Rather, as Calvin says, “the one effect resulting from [Christ’s death] is, that there is a church.” The very goal of the gospel is the existence of a people living in restored fellowship with God and in harmony with one another. The church is not merely an agent or means to salvation; she is salvation (albeit only partially realized, for now). The church is to be the Garden of Eden restored – and on the way to its glorious consummation as the City of God (cf. Rev. 21-22). The church is nothing less than God’s new humanity and new creation. The church is central to the messianic project of bringing in the kingdom of God. The church is at the heart of the gospel and the life of grace. And only when the church recovers from her present identity crisis, and remembers who she is, will she be able to resume her once promising mission of discipling the nations. It’s time for the private Christian to step out of the closet and into the public church.