

## COMMON GRACE, LIKE SENSE, CERTAINLY NOT AS COMMON AS IT SHOULD BE\*

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**ABSTRACT:** *This paper was written to discuss whether or not to agree with the claim that ‘The question is not whether the church has a political right to speak politically, but whether it has a theological duty’ and to provide an appropriate rational. In answering this I use one of the supporting lectures for the unit which suggests that preaching, as understood by the Second Helvetic Confession (SHC), provides the method for engaging with the public square. I offer a particularly Pentecostal critique of this approach with a view to effectively and fruitfully engaging the public square.*

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### Introduction

This paper will argue that although the church *does* have a theological duty to speak politically, the question of theological duty needs to be broadened to discuss what and how we should speak. The paper will briefly illustrate the opportunity to engage in the public square through extant political structures that enable speaking; I suggest these are implicitly relegated by the question. Secondly, as the main focus, it will offer a summary and critique of Holmes’ homiletical views, which are germane to his suggestions for approaching the public square, by which he proposes a mode of speaking in the public square, largely resting on the central plank of the SHC that “preaching the word of God *is* the word of God.”<sup>1</sup> Throughout this critique it will offer an alternative perspective to suggest pneumatological adjustments as they relate to public theology.

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Holmes, Lecture 1.2: “Living like Maggots? Theological Public Theology,” 4. An expanded version of his lecture has been subsequently published in Stephen R. Holmes, “Living like Maggots,” in ed. Nigel G. Wright, *Truth that Never Dies*, ed. Nigel G. Wright (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2014), 152-168. References will point to the published edition where possible should the reader wish to access this insightful chapter.

## Political context

It is possible to infer from the quote in question that political structures are relegated in importance relative to theological presuppositions. However, it is the contention of this paper that the political context of the UK, providing a somewhat representative and broadly democratic<sup>2</sup> context the very existence of such a system demands involvement. Even if the speaking is only a quinquennial vote, speaking is more or less a given.

Pressure groups, lobbyists, and campaigners can influence this system offering their contributions to the drafting of legislation and the formation of policy. The nature of the clamour demands that these contributions are intelligent, coherent and meaningful or they will inevitably become lost in the polemic that consistently becomes the lowest common denominator of British political debate in the public square as evidenced by the regular example of Question Time broadcast on television in the UK, which rarely misses the opportunity to descend to this level.

Granted our system of standing committees, select committees, and an increasingly powerful executive, in the form of Cabinet,<sup>3</sup> can render the legislative business of parliament moot, even though committees seek to offer quality scrutiny, call for evidence, and have recently enjoyed a higher media profile<sup>4</sup> influencing public opinion.

This morass of process creates a necessity and opportunity to speak to issues as they arise. As Graham suggests,

As the servant of humanity in the image of God, the Church never cedes ultimate authority to any temporal power, but is called to exercise forms of critical solidarity with institutions that further the virtues of justice, solidarity and human dignity.<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately the voices that are often raised on behalf of the church can be perceived as shrill efforts to Christianise society, demanding of the audience conformity, without adherence to,

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<sup>2</sup> We have our representatives chosen for us to choose and turnout at elections fluctuates around the 60% mark, serious questions could be raised about the mandate, effectiveness and quality of this type of democracy.

<sup>3</sup> For an interesting analysis of the complex relationship between the power of parliament, prime minister, and cabinet see the report by the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, “Roles and powers of the Prime Minister – First report of Session 2014-15.” <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmpolcon/351/351.pdf>, accessed on 14/02/2014.

<sup>4</sup> See the phone hacking scandal, expenses scandal, bankers various scandals questioned by the Home Affairs Select Committee, Public Accounts committee.

<sup>5</sup> Elaine Graham, “From Where Does the Red Tory Speak? Phillip Blond, Theology and Public Discourse,” *Political Theology*, Vol. 3:3 (2012), 303.

or experience of, the transformation required to catalyse, appreciate and maintain that view.<sup>6</sup> It is the contention of this paper that the very existence and availability of these political realities demand of the church an appropriate and meaningful articulation of its beliefs, as and when they have something to contribute to the conversation. The bigger question is how this is to be achieved; here we turn to one possible solution offered by Holmes.

### **Holmes' homiletics**

Holmes' task in the lecture is to discuss the possibility of the plural public square hosting a shared rationality. He uses advances in homiletics to reflect issues at stake in engaging the public square. Critiquing in particular the contribution of Craddock whose work creates a condition whereby "the world becomes primary, not the Word. And the world we find is confused, fragmented, shattered and multiply partial."<sup>7</sup>

Attributing this to postmodernity Holmes' diagnosis is complete. Having established this, Holmes establishes his main remedial source, Bullinger's (et al.) 1536 Second Helvetic Confession (SHC), or at least parts of it, to assert that the "preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God."<sup>8</sup>

For the purposes of brevity I will confine the majority of my critique to agency, method and material.<sup>9</sup> That established I point out that the job of preaching is generally undertaken indoors with a largely like-minded gathering, hopefully occasionally penetrated by an interested outsider. This is different in every way to the imagined public square; which is by nature a plurality of divergence and competition, it is at least dialogical or even 'polylogical'. Thus, in its location, atmosphere, intention and purpose it is different. This does not invalidate the proposal that homiletics can offer valuable insight in this but it does at least render problematic a clear 'this is that' transfer of meaning.

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<sup>6</sup> See 1 Cor. 2:14. Please note this is no allusion to Holmes, who can never be accused of this approach, as his work in other areas speaking to public issues can attest: however I think he unintentionally provides grounds for less careful individuals to do so.

<sup>7</sup> Holmes, *Maggots*, 157. This constitutes an awkward response to the instruction regarding primacy of Matt. 20:24-28; Luke 22:24-27 and Mk 10:41-45 as the ethos and praxis of believers.

<sup>8</sup> Not least of which is where this statement leaves John 1 that, the word of God is a person, and that the continuing embodiment of the Word of God through the Body of Christ as the church is the living embodiment of the Word in so far as it seeks to continue to faithfully respond to the direction of the Spirit. Also, I am aware that my own bias as a Pentecostal will always wish to ask what of the Spirit? Nevertheless a pneumatological element is essential to an authentic delivery of the Word of God.

<sup>9</sup> Henry Bullinger, "The Second Helvetic Confession" 1566, <https://www.ccel.org/creeds/helvetic.htm>, accessed on 13/02/2015. Chapter One para. 4.

## Agent

Holmes' source, the SHC, asserts that, "the Word of God does not propose itself for discussion"<sup>10</sup> rooting proclamation in a certainty that previous preachers, measured by the SHC<sup>11</sup> and critiqued by MacDiarmid and Craddock, failed to achieve. Holmes insists that this failure is simply down to the inadequacy of the preachers "if measured strictly by the canons of the *Confessio Helvetica Posterior*."<sup>12</sup> However, a reading of the Confession reveals that it allows for a broader view than Holmes'. Contrary to Holmes' assertion that the agent of the delivery of the Word can affect the product, the SHC asserts that once delivered it is the Word that should only be regarded because, "even if he [the lawfully called minister] be evil and a sinner, nevertheless the Word of God remains still true and good."<sup>13</sup>

The formula of the SHC precludes the relevance of not just the skill or aptitude of the agent, but even their spiritual condition. The SHC adopts a Reformed equivalent of *ex opere operato*, making preaching the Word efficacious due to the nature of the Word itself. In this Holmes adopts something akin to a Donatist position arguing that the efficacy is dependent on the skill, rather than holiness, of the agent. Herein is the contradiction of Holmes' argument, as at the same time as affirming the power of the Word he acknowledges that that power has been hamstrung by the inadequacy of the preacher. Given that the Confession precludes the interference of the agent, we are left to question the nature of the proclamation itself.

It is my assertion that it is inconceivable that there can ever be an efficacious enough preacher both sufficiently bold, skilled and holy enough to achieve the same effects as those attributed by Holmes to the Word that causes worlds to spring into being and the prophet who sees transformation unfold. Further, I would suggest that it is only in the context of Spirit inspired, revealed and enabled proclamation that any transformation can occur.<sup>14</sup> Of course the SHC includes references to the Holy Spirit as the partnering agent of the reception of the preaching,

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<sup>10</sup> Holmes, *Maggots*, 162.

<sup>11</sup> Bullinger, *SHC*, Chapter One, para 4.

<sup>12</sup> Holmes, *Maggots*, 163.

<sup>13</sup> Bullinger, *Confession*, idem.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. 2 Peter 1:20-21. Space prohibits articulating a foundational pneumatology for preaching adapted from the work of Amos Yong's work engaging with other religions from a faithful pneumatological foundation which incorporated careful listening to discern, "who the Holy Spirit is relative to the world as a whole and what the Spirit is doing in the world." Amos Yong, *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh: Pentecostalism and the Possibility of Global Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 17. Suffice to say a different posture will be adopted in this starting point.

however crucially, not in the preparation, the rationale or the delivery.<sup>15</sup> In these Genesis creative examples that Holmes cites to demonstrate the power of the Word of God, it is God himself who is the agent of delivery in creation, or in the case of prophetic utterances, the Spirit through man, not an extant text.<sup>16</sup> Thus it is the particular temporal, particular spatial, and particularly sovereign, inspired operation of Deific proclamation that is actually being cited by Holmes. Not the anthropocentric, other in time, other in place example of any and all human, culturally vulnerable proclamation thereafter.

### **Proclaiming – the material and the method**

Holmes' position established above suggests that faithful proclamation of the Word, as the Confession expects, is sufficient for transformation. This point raises a number of questions; does this include all proclamations of the Word? Is there a perfect hermeneutic and homiletic that attains the chimera of a fully faithful proclamation? As Macchia puts it, "The Scriptures are inspired, though not in the sense of representing a static deposit of revealed truths that we can systematise into idols of ink and paper.... [w]e must learn to dialogue, to grow, or to change, not to pontificate."<sup>17</sup> Pentecostal theologian Macchia also commends a similar position to Craddock's that includes the essential element of adopting a dialogical approach. This is closer to the position that Holmes allows when he describes a stance that is "secure of its grasp of the truth, it would patiently and indulgently entertain questions" that he asserts Craddock fails to articulate.<sup>18</sup>

In constructing such an approach, Rowan Williams states, "the truth of the deposit of Christian tradition is not some absolute and supra-historical given, but the viability and verifiability of Christian resources in creating an authentic and liberated humanity."<sup>19</sup> Thus Williams articulates a way forward in our view of the public square stating that it "...will consistently battle against the 'inertia' of mass society, repeatedly challenge its patterns of power

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<sup>15</sup> Bullinger, *SHC*, Chapter 1, Para. 5.

<sup>16</sup> Holmes, *Maggots*, 162.

<sup>17</sup> Frank D. Macchia, *Baptised in the Spirit, a Global Pentecostal Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 244. Space forbids an adequate treatment in this area but Neville explicates an exhaustive taxonomy of approaches to deploying Scripture in public theology "illustrating the value of inner-biblical critique" this seems appropriate given that to have all possible scriptural and theological responses prepared for an ever changing context is nigh impossible. David Neville, "Christian Scripture and Public Theology: Ruminations on their Ambiguous Relationship," *International Journal of Public Theology*, 7 (2013) 5.

<sup>18</sup> This quote is not in the published development of the lecture. Holmes, *Lecture 1\_2, 3*.

<sup>19</sup> Rowan Williams, "Liberation Theology and the Anglican Tradition" In *Politics and Theological Identity: Two Anglican Essays*, ed. David Nicholls and Rowan Williams, (London: The Jubilee Group, 1984) 7-26. 12.

and dominance, in an effort to push the mechanisms or mass society towards operating in favour of the disadvantaged.”<sup>20</sup>

I want to avoid the charge that preaching is “accountable to the world.”<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, it is desirable that the particular ‘unfreedom’ that Williams speaks of must be confronted with the theological concept of liberation so that proclamation is understood. Demonstrating something of the pneumatological foundation I suggest above, Williams asserts that

The sharing of the gospel, the communication of life-in-Christ, demands from those who would share it an intense attention to the society they find themselves in. And there is no avoidance of this sharing: if the gift of God is to created humanity as such, there can never be any justification for restricting its diffusion or refusing to interpret it to new and strange situations.<sup>22</sup>

I suggest that it is the reconciliation of the Word of God to humanity that is the Word of God. It is the continual task of interpretation by the inspiration of the Spirit, articulated through incarnated expression in a particular temporal and spatial location to each issue in the public square, thus, re-enacting the embodiment of the Word, echoing John 1:14, where the word is depicted as becoming flesh.<sup>23</sup> During this conversation it is expected that there is disagreement, or as Williams, describes it, “a process of analysis and challenge and conflict.”<sup>24</sup> These are, according to Williams the constituent elements of dialogue in the public square.<sup>25</sup> Having said that, Holmes’ robust critique of Craddock’s homiletic applied to the public square is valid; whether Craddock meant it to be applied in this way and if the application is therefore fair is another matter.

This is closer to the Pentecostal distinction between the written word, ‘*logos*’ or ‘*gramma*’ and the ‘*rhema*’ the spoken word. The latter is the word that which is defined as having durative significance, it is the ‘statedness’ or expression of the Word.<sup>26</sup> In scripture it is the stuff of life

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<sup>20</sup> Williams, *Liberation*, 15.

<sup>21</sup> Holmes, 3.

<sup>22</sup> Williams, *Liberation*, 10.

<sup>23</sup> Although this passage refers to the ministry of Jesus, I suggest that the active ministry of the Holy Spirit provides an explicit, concrete pneumatology which includes, but is not limited to a ministry of incarnation or embodiment through acting believers. See John 14:15-16, 21-23.

<sup>24</sup> Williams, 9.

<sup>25</sup> Although not explicitly directed at public theology, his comments refer to the confrontation of a given state or societal structure on behalf of a body of people for the purposes of articulate theological values. In these terms it seems reasonable to transfer meaning.

<sup>26</sup> O. Procksch, “*le/go, lo/gos, rhema, lale/o*” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, eds., Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans., Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1985), 505-507. This is often use in LXX interchangeably with logos, in the same way I am not suggesting it supplants logos, but supplements it, as with the homiletical point, and *a fortiori*, public theology!

(Matt 4:4), that which Mary treasured (Luke 2:19), spoken by angels (Luke 2:15) John the Baptist (Luke 3:2), for Paul it cleanses and makes for a sword (Eph 5:26; 6:17), and more importantly for the purposes of this discussion in the public square it is the catalyst of hearing (Rom 10:17). It is not only the declaration of the written word, the principles of which being intelligently applied, as Williams suggests, but also the deploying of the words that are being spoken by God into a given temporal and spatial context that contain the transformative power.

## Conclusion

This paper has argued that the given political structures of the UK context provide the mechanism of engagement that needs to be used. However, while agreeing broadly with Holmes, I would want to suggest an explicitly pneumatological, interpretive approach to speaking politically. I would add that it is clear from his own work through his blog and other social media that Holmes has demonstrated a fruitful and effective methodology in engaging with the public square; however his argument in the lecture does not allow for less intelligent, considerate and gracious agents who take his method without his grace. Therefore, I suggest that the question is not whether there is believed to be a theological warrant but how should it be done and with what. Further, space prohibits dealing with what the goal of speaking is; if it is to dominate rather than contribute, perhaps we should remember with Neville that,

For those sensitized to the reality that conquest, war, slavery and both racial and gender inequalities have been defended on biblical grounds, the simple fact that something is biblical is insufficient to provide it with theological and moral sanction.<sup>27</sup>

And therefore for this reason I would that we as preachers would remain, “quick to listen [and] slow to speak...” (Js. 1:19).

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Neville, “Christian Scripture,” 21.

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