

## **An extract from the book “The Mission of God’s People” by Chris Wright.**

### **PEOPLE WHO LIVE AND WORK IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE**

We ended the last chapter thinking about those who are sent and received as itinerant Christian missionaries – those who travel across borders for the sake of the name of Christ and are supported by the giving and hospitality of Christian churches. But the mission of God’s people is far too big to be left only to missionaries (just as the ministry of the church is far too big to be left to those we commonly call “ministers”).

The great majority of believers do not get sent out as traveling missionaries in the traditional sense, and this seems to have been as true in the New Testament church as today. Most Christians live in the ordinary everyday world, working, making a living, raising families, paying taxes, contributing to society and culture, getting along, doing their bit. In what sense, if any, is the life of believers in that realm – what we will call the public square – part of the mission of God’s people? Does such routine ordinary life have any purpose other than to give us opportunities to bear witness to our faith and to earn enough money to have some to spare to give to missionaries and “real mission”?

That is the question we will think about in this chapter – the mission of God’s people in the public square. I am using that expression in its broadest sense. Another term might be “the marketplace”, again in a wide sense – not just “the market” as a purely economic or financial mechanism, but the whole world of human cooperative effort in productive projects and creative activity: work, trade, professions, law, industry, agriculture, engineering, education, medicine, media, politics and government – even leisure, sport, art and entertainment.

The Old Testament word for all this was “the gate” – the public square in every town or village where people met and did their business together, of whatever kind. This is the world of human social engagement and activity, where most of us spend most of our time.

### **GOD AND THE PUBLIC SQUARE**

Is God interested in the public square? Many Christians seem to operate on the everyday assumption that God is not. Or at least, they assume that God is not interested in the world of everyday work for its own sake, as distinct from being interested in it as a context for evangelism. God, it would seem, cares about the church and its affairs, about missions and missionaries, about getting people to heaven, but not about how society and its public places are conducted on earth.

The result of such dichotomized thinking is an equally dichotomized Christian life. In fact it is a dichotomy that gives many Christians a great deal of inner discomfort caused by the glaring disconnect between what they think God most wants and what they most have to do. Many of us invest most of the available time that matters (our working lives) in a place and a task that we have been led to believe *does not* really matter much to God – the so-called secular world of work – while struggling to find opportunities to give some leftover time to the only thing we are told *does* matter to God – evangelism.<sup>1</sup>

Yet the Bible clearly and comprehensively, in both Testaments, portrays God as intensely interested in the public arena of human social and economic life – interested, involved, in charge, and full of plans for it.

Let’s think of some key assertions that the Bible makes about God’s involvement with

the human marketplace. In each case we will think of some questions that these assertions raise for Christians who live and work there. This will then give us a biblical platform for thinking about the mission of God's people in that context, both in terms of our engagement in the public square and also of our confrontation with the anti-God forces at work within it.

What, then, does the Bible say about God and the public square, the world of all human work in all its amazing diversity?

### **God Created It**

Work is God's idea. Genesis 1 – 2 give us our first picture of the biblical God as a worker – thinking, choosing, planning, executing, evaluating. So when God decided to create humankind in the image and likeness of God, what else could humans be but workers, reflecting in their working lives something of the nature of God?

Specifically, God laid on human beings the task of ruling the earth (Gen. 1), and of serving and keeping it (Gen. 2), which we explored in chapter 3. This enormous task required not only the complementarity and mutual help of our male-female gender identities, but also implies some other fundamental economic and ecological dimensions to human life. God has given us a planet with vast diversity of resources scattered all over its surface. Some places have lots of fertile soil. Other places have vast mineral deposits. There is, therefore, a natural necessity for trade and exchange between groups living in different places in order to meet common needs.

That task in turn necessitates economic relationships, and so there is the need for fairness and justice throughout the social and economic realm. There must be justice both in the sharing of the raw resources with which we work, and in the distribution of the products of our work. The biblical witness is that all of this great human economic endeavour is an essential part of God's purpose for human life on earth. Work matters because it was God's intention for us. It was what God had in mind when he made us. It is *our* part in *his* creation. As we saw in chapter 3, it is part of our mission as humans.

The first question we need to ask those who seek to follow Jesus in the marketplace is: Do you see your work as nothing more than a necessary evil, or only as the context for evangelistic opportunities? Or do you see it as a means of glorifying God through participating in his purposes for creation and therefore having *intrinsic* value? How do you relate what you do in your daily work to the Bible's teaching about human responsibility in creation and society?

Work, then, is not the result of "the curse". Of course, all work is now affected in myriad detrimental ways by our fallenness. But work itself is of the essence of our human nature. We were created to be workers, like God, the worker. This has been called the "cultural mandate". All that we are and do in the public sphere of work, whether at the level of individual jobs, or of the family, or of whole communities, right up to whole cultures and civilizations over historical time, is connected to our createdness and is therefore of interest to our Creator. The public square and marketplace are, of course, polluted and distorted by our sinfulness. But then that is true of all spheres of human existence. Our fallenness is not a reason to excuse ourselves from the public arena, any more than the fact that sickness and death are ultimately the results of sin is a reason for Christians not to become doctors or conduct funerals.

### **God Audits It**

We are all familiar with the function of an auditor. The auditor provides independent, impartial and objective scrutiny of a company's activities and claims. The auditor has access

to all documents and evidence. To the auditor all books are opened and all decisions made known; from him no secrets are hidden. That, at least, is the theory.

According to the Bible, God is the independent judge of all that goes on in the public square. The Old Testament speaks repeatedly of YHWH as the God who sees and knows and evaluates. This is true in the most universal sense and pertains to every individual (Ps. 33:13 – 15).

But it is specifically true of the public square. Israel was reminded repeatedly that God calls for justice “in the gate”, which is, in contemporary terms, the marketplace, the public arena. Amos probably surprised his listeners by insisting that God was actually more interested in what happened “in the gate” than in the sanctuary (Amos 5:12 – 15).

Furthermore, God hears the kind of talk that would go on either in the hidden places of the greedy heart, or in the confidence of a business deal. Amos, again, pictures the divine auditor listening to the muttered dark intentions of the corrupt business people of his day (Amos 8:4 – 7). And to those who think that God is confined to his temple and sees only what goes on in religious observance comes the shock that he has been watching what goes on the rest of the week in public (Jer. 7:9 – 11).

God is the auditor – the independent inspector of all that happens in the public arena. What God therefore demands, as any auditor should, is complete integrity and transparency. This is the standard that is expected of human judges in their exercise of public office. The case of Samuel is revealing, as he defends his public record and calls God as witness – as his divine auditor (1 Sam. 12:1 – 5).

The second question we need to ask of all those who seek to follow Jesus in the marketplace is this: Where, in all your activity, is the deliberate acknowledgment of, and submission to, the divine auditor? In what way does accountability to God impinge on your everyday work?

### **God Governs It**

We often speak of “market forces” and of the whole realm of business and politics as if they were all independent, as “a law unto themselves”. “The Market” (often with a capital M) is objectified and given a kind of divine, autonomous power. At any rate, at a personal level, we feel we are at the mercy of forces beyond our individual control, forces determined by millions of other people’s choices. Or in some cases, as the financial crisis of 2008 – 2009 demonstrated, millions of people seemed to be at the mercy of the wild and irresponsible choices of a few, which equally appeared to throw the whole “Market” out of control and into panic.

The Bible has a more subtle view. Yes, human public life is made up of human choices, for which human beings are responsible. So in that sense, all that happens in the marketplace is a matter of human action, choice and moral responsibility. Yet at the same time, the Bible puts it all under God’s sovereign government. By stressing the first (human choices) as well as the second (God’s ultimate control), the Bible avoids sliding into fatalism or determinism. It affirms both sides of the paradox: humans are morally responsible for our choices and actions and their public consequences; yet God retains sovereign control over final outcomes and destinies.

Many Bible stories illustrate this. The story of Joseph oscillates between the sphere of the family and the public arena at the highest level of state power. Joseph is involved in political, judicial, agricultural, economic and foreign affairs. All the actors in the stories are responsible for their own motives, words and deeds – whether good or evil. But the perspective of the author of Genesis, through the words of Joseph, is crystal clear (even though it enshrines a tantalizing mystery):

But Joseph said to them, “Don’t be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.” (Gen. 50:19 – 20)

Moving to prophetic texts, it is significant that when prophets turn their attention to the great empires of their day, they affirm YHWH’s government as much over *them* as over his covenant people Israel. Furthermore, all their public works are included, the marketplace as much as the military.

The third question we have to ask of those who follow Jesus in the marketplace is: How do you perceive the governance of God in the marketplace (which is another way of seeking the kingdom of God and his justice), and what difference does it make when you do? Is it really the case that “Heaven rules” on Sundays, but The Market rules from Monday to Friday (with Saturdays as a day off for gods and humans)?

Isaiah 19:1 – 15 puts the whole of Egypt under God’s judgment, including its religion, irrigation, agriculture, fisheries, textile industry, politicians and universities.

Ezekiel 26 – 28 is a sustained lament for the great trading city of Tyre, while chs. 29 – 32 pour similar doom on the great imperial culture of Egypt. In both cases, the public marketplace of economic and political power is the focus of God’s sovereign activity.

Daniel 4 portrays the arrogance of Nebuchadnezzar gloating over his city: “Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?” (Dan. 4:30). But the verdict of God is that his whole building project has been borne on the backs of the poor and oppressed, as Daniel points out: “Therefore, Your Majesty, be pleased to accept my advice: Renounce your sins by doing what is right, and your wickedness by being kind to the oppressed. It may be that then your prosperity will continue” (Dan. 4:27).

The lesson Nebuchadnezzar had to learn is the one we are pressing here: God governs the public square, along with all else. Or, in Daniel’s more graphic words, “Heaven rules...the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes” (Dan. 4:26, 32).

## **God Redeems It**

A common Christian assumption is that all that happens here on earth is nothing more than temporary and transient. Human history is nothing more than the vestibule for eternity, so it doesn’t really matter very much. To this negative comparison is added the idea, drawn from a mistaken interpretation of the language of 2 Peter 2, that we are headed for total obliteration of the whole earth and indeed of all the physical creation. With such a prospect, what eternal value can possibly attach to the work we do in the local or globalized public square here and now?<sup>2</sup>

But the Bible presents a different prospect. God plans to redeem all that he has made (because “he has compassion on all he has made”, Ps. 145:9), and included within that will be the redemption of all that *we* have made with what *God* first made – that is, our use of creation within the great cultural mandate. Of course, all that we have done has been tainted and twisted by our sinful, fallen human nature. And all that flows from that evil source will have to be purged and purified by God. But that is exactly the picture we have in both Old and New Testaments. It is a vision of redemption, not of obliteration; of the restoration and renewal of creation, not its replacement with something else.

Of course the Bible presents the public square, human life lived in society and the marketplace, as riddled with sin, corruption, greed, injustice and violence. That can be seen at local and global dimensions, from sharp practices at the market stall or corner shop, to the massive distortions and inequities of international trade. As Christians, we need a radical

understanding of sin in its public dimensions, and we need to see part of our mission as being called to confront that prophetically in the name of Christ (as we will discuss below). But for God, the corruption of the public square is not a reason to vaporize it, but to purge and redeem it.

Isaiah 65:17 – 25 is a glorious portrayal of the new creation – a new heavens and a new earth. It looks forward to human life that is no longer subject to weariness and decay, in which there will be fulfillment in family and work, in which the curses of frustration and injustice will be gone forever, in which there will be close and joyful fellowship with God, and in which there will be environmental harmony and safety. The whole of life – personal life, family life, public life, animal life – will be redeemed and restored to God-glorifying productiveness and human-fulfilling enjoyment.

The New Testament carries this vision forward in the light of the redemption achieved by Christ through the cross, and especially in the light of the resurrection. Paul comprehensively and repeatedly includes “*all things*” not only in what God *created* through Christ, but what he plans to *redeem* through Christ. It is clear in this text that “all things” means the whole created order in both descriptions of the work of Christ (Col. 1:16 – 20). Because of that plan of cosmic redemption, the whole of creation can look forward to the future as a time of liberation and freedom from frustration (Rom. 8:19 – 21).

Even the text that is often used to speak of the destruction of the cosmos (when in fact, in my view, it is actually portraying redemptive purging),<sup>3</sup> immediately goes on to the expectation of a justice-filled new creation (2 Peter 3:13).

And the final vision of the whole Bible is not of our escaping from the world to some ethereal paradise, but rather of God coming down to live with us once again in a purged and restored creation, in which all the fruit of human civilization will be brought into the city of God (Rev. 21:24 – 27, building on Isa. 60).

The “splendour”, “glory” and “honour” of kings and nations is the combined product of generations of human beings whose lives and efforts will have generated the vast store of human cultures and civilizations. In other words, what will be brought into the great city of God in the new creation will be the vast accumulated output of human work through the ages. All this will be purged, redeemed and laid at the feet of Christ, for the enhancement of the life of eternity in the new creation.

Does that not transform our perspective on a Monday morning?

Here is what I wrote on this topic elsewhere:

All that has enriched and honoured the life of all nations in all history will be brought in to enrich the new creation. The new creation will not be a blank page, as if God will simply crumple up the whole of human historical life in this creation and toss it in the cosmic bin, and then hand us a new sheet to start all over again. The new creation will *start* with the unimaginable reservoir of all that human civilization has accomplished in the old creation – but purged, cleansed, disinfected, sanctified and blessed. And we shall have eternity to enjoy it and to build upon it in ways we cannot dream of now as we will exercise the powers of creativity of our redeemed humanity.

I don’t understand *how* God will enable the wealth of human civilization to be redeemed and brought cleansed into the city of God in the new creation, as the Bible says he will. . . But I know I will be there in the glory of a resurrection body, as the person I am and have been – but redeemed, rid of all sin, and raring to go. So I believe there will be some comparable resurrection glory for all that humans have accomplished in fulfilment of the creation mandate – redeemed but real.

Ancient kings served as the primary authorities over the broad patterns of the cultural lives of their nations. And when they stood over against other nations, they were the *bearers*, the *representatives*, of their respective cultures. To assemble kings together, then, was in an

important sense to assemble their national cultures together. The king of a given nation could bear, singly, a far-reaching authority that is today divided among many different kinds of leaders: the captains of industry; the molders of public opinion in art, entertainment, and sexuality; educational leaders; representatives of family interests; and so on. That is why Isaiah and John link the entrance of the kings into the City with the gathering-in of the “wealth of nations.”

We lament the “lost civilizations” of past millennia, civilizations we can only partially reconstruct from archaeological remains or in epic movies. But if we take Revelation 21 seriously, they are not “lost” forever. The kings and nations who will bring their glory into the city of God will presumably not be limited only to those who happen to be alive in the generation of Christ’s return. Who can tell what nations will have risen or fallen, or what civilizations will have become “lost” by then – like the lost civilizations of previous millennia? No – the promise spans all ages, all continents, and all generations in human history. The prayer of the Psalmist will one day be answered – for all history past, present and future,

May all the kings of the earth praise you, LORD,  
when they hear what you have decreed.

May they sing of the ways of the LORD,  
for the glory of the LORD is great. (Ps. 138:4 – 5)

Think of the prospect! All human culture, language, literature, art, music, science, business, sport, technological achievement – actual and potential – all available to us. *All of it with the poison of evil and sin sucked out of it forever.* All of it glorifying God. All of it under his loving and approving smile. All of it for us to enjoy with God and indeed being enjoyed by God. And all eternity for us to explore it, understand it, appreciate it, and expand it.<sup>5</sup>

All human history, which takes place in the public square of human public interaction, will be redeemed and fulfilled in the new creation, not just abandoned or destroyed. All human productive work, then, has its own value and eternal significance, not just because of our understanding of creation and the mandate it laid upon us, but also because of the new creation and the eschatological hope it sets before us. With such a hope, we can heartily follow Paul’s exhortation: “Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain” (1 Cor. 15:58); we know that “the work of the Lord” does not mean just “religious” work, but any work done “as unto the Lord”, including even the manual labour of slaves (Col. 3:22 – 24).

So a fourth question arises for the follower of Jesus in the marketplace: In what ways is your daily labour transformed by the knowledge that it is all contributing to that which God will one day redeem and include within his new creation?

If that, then, is God’s view of the public life and work of the marketplace, what ought to be the attitude, role and mission of God’s people in that sphere?

We have to respond at two levels. On the one hand, we are called to *constructive engagement* in the world – because it is God’s world, created, loved, valued and redeemed by him. But on the other hand, we are called to *courageous confrontation* with the world – because it is a world in rebellion against God, the playground of other gods, standing under God’s condemnation and ultimate judgment.

The challenge of the mission of God’s people is to live with the constant tension of *doing both with equal biblical conviction*. It is essentially the challenge of being “in the world but not of it”. Fortunately the Bible, as always, comes to our aid by giving us plenty of examples of what that means.

## MISSIONAL ENGAGEMENT IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE

God's people are called to engagement in the created world. The Bible teaches us various ways in which engagement by believers in the "secular" public square is entirely consistent with God's calling and God's mission for his people.

### Positioned to Serve the State

There are some things that might give a person an advantage for seeking high political office. There are others that we could not possibly recommend. Being trafficked as a slave to a foreign country and reported "missing-presumed-dead" back home? Not a good start. Being taken prisoner by an invader and ending up with other children as part of a despised ethnic minority in an enemy land? Unlikely. And what about joining the abducted sex-slaves of an oriental despot? Hardly.

Just so, however, begin the stories of *Joseph*, *Daniel* and *Esther*, and they all ended up serving at top levels in pagan imperial governments and proving that even in such positions they could serve God and God's people. The contrast between the beginnings of their stories and the positions they later found themselves in points to one common factor – the hand of God. None of them chose the post they occupied, but certainly Joseph and Daniel both acknowledged that it was God who put them there for a purpose. So what do we learn from them?

*First, they accepted the realities* of the public sphere they became part of, in spite of all its ambiguity. Daniel and his three friends accepted a massive degree of cultural adjustment before they reached a line that they would not cross (Dan. 1). They accepted Babylonian names, Babylonian education in the Babylonian language, and entered Babylonian employment. Joseph obviously learned the language of Egypt so fluently that his own brothers did not know he was not a native (Gen. 42:23). Esther, though she had little choice in the matter other than martyrdom for refusal, accepted a cultural practice that must have been profoundly distasteful, and with Mordecai's help came to see it as an opportunity to save lives.

*Secondly, they worked constructively and conscientiously* for the government and for social benefit. Even Daniel's political enemies could not fault him on this score:

...the administrators and the satraps tried to find grounds for charges against Daniel in his conduct of government affairs, but they were unable to do so. They could find no corruption in him, because he was trustworthy and neither corrupt nor negligent. (Dan. 6:4)

One can imagine that life for ordinary Babylonians was better when Daniel was in charge of civic affairs. In the case of Joseph, we know that many Egyptian lives were saved by his wise administration, before any of his own family were saved from the famine (Gen. 41). Esther's achievements were for her own people, of course, but the principle of using office for good ends is clear.

*Third, they preserved their integrity.* For Joseph it was his moral integrity, though the trust of his employer was also a key factor (Gen. 39:7 – 10). For Daniel and his friends, it was their loyalty to their covenant God and refusal to cede such total loyalty to the king (such as eating from his table probably signified) that was their sticking point. Later it came to more overt matters of idolatry, but again their integrity stood firm.

In the New Testament, the evidence for believers in political service is thinner, but if one can build an argument by inference, it seems likely that since Paul can speak of the Roman governing authorities as "God's servants", using words otherwise used for Christian ministry (*diakonos* twice in Rom. 13:4 and *leitourgos* in v. 6), he would not have disallowed Christians from serving in political office. Political and judicial service can both be service of

God. Erastus is a good example of this, as we will see in a moment.

### **Commanded to Pray for the Government**

In the next chapter we will consider prayer as a dimension of the mission of God's people, but it is fitting at this point to mention that God's people in both Testaments are commanded to pray for the state where they are, not just for other believers, whether Israelites or Christians.

The first example comes from that shocking letter of Jeremiah to the exiles in Babylon.

In writing about the ministry of the state [in Rom. 13:4 – 6], Paul twice uses the very same word which he has used elsewhere of the ministers of the church...*Diakonia* is a generic term which can embrace a wide variety of ministries. Those who serve the state as legislators, civil servants, magistrates, police, social workers or tax-collectors are just as much “ministers of God” as those who serve the church as pastors, teachers, evangelists or administrators.

Also, seek the peace and prosperity [*šalom*] of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper [lit., ‘in its *šalom* is *šalom* for you’]. (Jer. 29:7)

It was probably hard enough for the exiles to imagine that it was even possible to pray to YHWH *in* Babylon, let alone that they should pray to him *for* Babylon. They knew exactly what they wanted for Babylon (Ps. 137:8 – 9), and they knew whose *šalom* they should be praying for (Ps. 122:6).

But “No,” says Jeremiah. “Once you’ve accepted that you are there because God has put you there (and thus stop thinking of yourselves *in transit* and become residents; vv. 4 – 6), you have an ongoing *mission* – the Abrahamic mission of being a blessing to the nations. And that includes praying for them – as Abraham prayed for Sodom and Gomorrah.”

I’ve no proof at all, but I like to think that Daniel was among those who heard this letter of Jeremiah and did what it said:<sup>7</sup> “Daniel was a man of prayer; daily he prayed three times” (another song remembered from my childhood; cf. Dan. 6:10). Who was at the top of his prayer list? Nebuchadnezzar, would you believe? How else can you explain the fact that when Daniel heard that Nebuchadnezzar (the man who had destroyed his city and slaughtered his countrymen) was for the chop, he did not gloat, but was so upset he struggled even to tell the king the truth. But he did tell him, along with some careful advice as to how he could avoid his fate (Dan. 4:19 – 27). Where did such concern for the archenemy of his people come from, if not from prayer? It’s hard to go on hating somebody (let alone praying the ending of Ps. 137), if you’re praying for them every day.

The New Testament counterpart to this command specifies prayer for all forms of governing authorities, which in Paul’s day would have been almost entirely unbelieving, pagan men and women (with a few exceptions like Erastus, as we will see below).

I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone – for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. (1 Tim. 2:1 – 4)

From a missional point of view, we should notice how seamlessly Paul moves from such prayer for political authorities to the saving power and spread of the gospel.

## Commanded to Seek the Welfare of the City

Returning to Jeremiah's letter to the exiles, that first phrase demands a closer look: "Seek the *šalom* of the city to which I have carried you" (Jer. 29:7a). *Šalom*, as is well known, is a wonderfully broad word. It goes beyond peace as the absence of conflict or war, to all-around welfare or well-being. It speaks of wholeness of life and the kind of prospering that the Old Testament included in the blessing of God as the fruit of covenant faithfulness.

While teaching pastors-in-training in India, I took a group to different churches in Pune each Sunday and then asked them to reflect on their observations later, back in class. We compared the prayer times. In one church in the Anglican tradition, the prayers were mainly formal and liturgical, to the point, and not very prolonged. In a charismatic fellowship, the prayers were loud, spontaneous, and very long. However, it was noticeable that in the first case, the prayers covered the world, and named the leaders in state and national governments, whereas in the second, the prayers were almost entirely inward-focused on the church members themselves. I pointed out that in relation to 1 Timothy 2, one church avoided any "lifting up of holy hands" (v. 8), but they did at least obey vv. 1 – 2, whereas the other church had hands lifted up till our arms ached, but no prayer "for kings and those in authority". Which was being more "biblical"?

It really is remarkable that Jeremiah urges the exiles to seek such blessing for their Babylonian neighbours.

"But they are our enemies!"

"So what? Pray for them. Seek their welfare."

It is a short step from this amazing instruction that Jeremiah gave the exiles to the equally jaw-dropping mission that Jesus lays on his disciples: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt. 5:44).

It must have been such advice that created the freedom that Daniel and his friends felt to settle down in Babylon and accept jobs in its government service. And their position in such office was clearly not "just a job". Nor are we told that it was some form of "tent-making" to help them earn a living while they held Bible studies in the office or evangelistic meetings in their homes. For all I know, they may have done that – they made no secret of their faith, as the rest of the stories show.

Paul did not normally mention the present, secular occupations of the other Christians who are mentioned in his letters. In doing so in the case of Erastus, he was able to provide an example for his readers of the role that the well-to-do Christian could undertake in seeking the welfare of the city. The filling of this public office by Erastus was an outworking of the role of the Christian as a civic benefactor referred to in Romans 13:3 – 4 and 1 Peter 2:14 – 15. He was engaging in the time-consuming office of *aedile* during the year in which the letter to the Romans was written... Erastus was a Christian of substantial means, active in two spheres. After he "ministered to Paul" in Ephesus as part of the apostolic team, he was sent into Macedonia to the churches. He subsequently engaged in civic duties in Corinth... The office undertaken then by Erastus in Corinth for the year demanded commitment and accountability for it was no sinecure as the duties show.

If this is correct, then there was no dichotomy in the thinking of the early church between gospel/church ministry and seeking the welfare of Corinth as benefactors. This conclusion... appears to find confirmation in the person of Erastus... Paul wrote in such a way as to imply that the secular and spiritual welfare of the city were two sides of a single coin and not separate spheres. The combination of these activities in this prominent Christian citizen may never have been perceived by him as incompatible or autonomous entities for Christians. Both roles were concerned with the welfare of those who lived in the city. They were what Paul saw as an imitation of the ministry of Christ who, in Acts 10:38, was

recorded as “having gone about [undertaking] benefactions or doing good works”.

But what the text emphasizes is that they were first-class students, model citizens and hard-working civil servants, and they were distinguished for trustworthiness and integrity. Even the king recognized that his own interests were being served by such people. The “welfare of the city” was what they pursued, as Jeremiah said they should. And in doing so for a lifetime, opportunities to bear witness to the God they served, and to his moral demands, judgment and mercy, came along at key points – one in each of the first six chapters in fact.

Coming to the New Testament, there is one person who probably held high civic office and was also a Christian believer – and that is *Erastus*.

Erastus was one of Paul’s helpers in his church-planting ministry (Acts 19:22), but when Paul wrote his letter to Rome from Corinth, Erastus is included in the closing greetings, where he describes himself as “the city’s director of public works” (Rom. 16:23). The phrase strongly suggests that Erastus held the post of *aedile* in this important Roman city, a political office in the Roman administration that carried major responsibilities, requiring considerable personal wealth and a strong civic generosity.

Serving God and serving the community in public office were by no means incompatible. In fact, such public service and benefaction were part of what Paul strongly encouraged Christians to engage in, through his repeated emphasis that they should “do good” – a single verb (*agathopoein*) that had exactly that technical meaning in the Roman empire: public service as a civic benefactor.

### **Commanded to Earn a Living by Ordinary Work**

It seems that some people in the churches Paul planted had come to the view that ordinary work was no longer of any value, and so they became lazy, and then spiritualized their idleness with fervid expectations of Christ’s return. Paul shared their convictions about Christ’s return, but not their work-shy opting out of normal human responsibilities:

Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: You should mind your own business and work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody...Warn those who are idle. (1 Thess. 4:11 – 12; 5:14 )

Paul had no hesitation in appealing to his own example in this regard, as one who had supported himself from his own labour in the marketplace. Paul’s lengthy exhortation in 2 Thessalonians 3:6 – 13 is worth reading in full – it clearly addresses an issue that Paul felt strongly about. Christians should be diligent workers.

I was leading a Langham Preaching seminar in Argentina. Over breakfast I was chatting with the main organizer of the event – the leader of the national movement. I commended three men in particular who were helping to lead and teach during the seminar – all of them Argentinian Christians in secular professions, but committed to Bible teaching. My friend immediately said, “Yes, they are good preachers, but that’s not all. They are good husbands, good fathers, and good citizens.” I asked her why she included the last item. “Because,” she said, “they are committed to staying here in Argentina, not trying to get to the United States. They are honest, they work hard and they pay their taxes. They are a blessing to our country.” That’s authentic, biblical, Abrahamic, Pauline, integral mission in the public square. It blessed my heart.

Paul’s frequent exhortations to “do good” should not be construed merely as “being nice”. As we mentioned above, the term also carried a common social connotation of public service and benefaction.<sup>9</sup> Christians should be among those who bring the greatest public good to the public arena and thereby commend the biblical gospel.

Christians are to be good citizens and good workers, *and thereby* to be good witnesses. Work is still a creational good. It is *good* to work, and it is good to *do good* by working. All this is part of the mission of God’s people too.

And in the letters of Paul, one does not get the impression that new converts were expected to leave the occupations they had in the secular world and go out as missionaries – though obviously a few did. On the contrary, Paul seems to envisage most of them still there, working and earning, paying their taxes (Rom. 13:6 – 8), and doing good in the community. One imagines the Philippian jailer back at his post, Lydia carrying on her textile business, and Erastus somehow combining his ministry as “mayor of Corinth” with helping Paul’s ministry too.

Such people had a missional engagement in the public square, living out the gospel there. Their kind is needed just as much in the twenty-first – as in the first-century world.

## **MISSIONAL CONFRONTATION IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE**

Living out the gospel, however, while it has to be done in engagement with the world, inevitably brings conflict with the world, and the public square is the arena for that confrontation. The mission of God’s people involves stepping into that confrontation with our eyes open, our heads engaged, and our spiritual armour in place.

### **We Are Called to Be Different**

So we are to be engaged in the public square, the local and global marketplace. But we are to do so as *saints* in the marketplace. We are those who are called to be holy, which means different or distinctive. In chapter 7 we explored in some depth the theme of distinctiveness in biblical theology, starting out from the initial call to Israel to be different from the cultures of Egypt or Canaan:

You must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live, and you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you. Do not follow their practices. You must obey my laws and be careful to follow my decrees. I am the LORD your God. Keep my decrees and laws, for the man who obeys them will live by them. I am the LORD. (Lev. 18:3 – 5)

And we saw that this essential distinctiveness is what holiness actually meant for Israel. It was grounded in the holiness (i.e., the distinctive otherness) of YHWH, and it was to be worked out ethically in everyday, ordinary, social life – the public square – as much as the private home. Leviticus 19, beginning with the demand that Israel should be holy as the Lord their God is holy, goes on to articulate a whole range of contexts in which that holy difference is to be seen – contexts that include personal, familial, social, judicial, agricultural and commercial realms.

The distinctiveness of God’s people in the Bible is not merely religious (we happen to worship a different god from most other people), but ethical (we are called to live by different standards). And this includes public as well as private morality, though they cannot really be separated.

The twin sayings of Jesus about being “salt” and “light” in the world (Matt. 5:13 – 16) are still crucial insights into what it means to have missional involvement in the world.<sup>10</sup>

A strong contrast is implied. If disciples are to be salt and light, then the world must be corrupt and dark. The whole point of the metaphors depends on this contrast. Jesus compares the world to meat or fish that, left to itself, will very quickly become putrid. The primary use of salt in his day was to preserve meat or fish by soaking it in brine, or rubbing salt thoroughly into it. And Jesus compares the world to a room in a house after the sun goes

down. It gets dark. Lamps have to be lit to avoid damage and danger. So, the world in which we live – the public square – is a corrupt and dark place. In this sense salt and light are both *missional* (they are used for a purpose) and *confrontational* (they challenge decay and darkness, and transform both).

If a piece of meat goes rotten, it's no use blaming the meat. That's what happens when meat is left out on its own. The question to ask is, Where is the salt? If a house gets dark at night, it's no use blaming the house. That's what happens when the sun goes down. The question to ask is, Where is the light? If society becomes more corrupt and dark, it's no use blaming society. That's what fallen human nature does, left unchecked and unchallenged. The question to ask is, Where are the Christians? Where are the saints who will actually live as saints – God's different people, God's counterculture – in the public square? Where are those who see their mission as God's people to live and work and witness in the marketplace, and pay the cost of doing so?

Moral integrity is essential to Christian distinctiveness, which in turn is essential to Christian mission in the public arena. Integrity means that there is no dichotomy between our private and public "face"; between the sacred and the secular in our lives; between the person I am at work and the person I am in church; between what we say and what we do; between what we claim to believe and what we actually practice. This is a major challenge to all believers who live and work in the non-Christian world, and it raises endless ethical dilemmas and often wrenching difficulties of conscience. It is indeed a battlefield – internally and externally. But it is a struggle that cannot be avoided if we are to function with any effectiveness at all as salt and light in society.

### **We Are Called to Resist Idolatry**

But why are Christians called to be ethically distinctive in the public square? The answer is that we have a different view of the world itself. We dance to a different tune, march to a different beat. Or to return to chapter 2, we are living in a different story.

We see the world as the creation of the one single transcendent God of the Bible, and thus we reject the seductive gods who crowd the public arena today as much as they did in the Athenian *agora* in Paul's day. In fact, we see the world from two perspectives, both biblical, but sometimes difficult to hold together (though that is what we are seeking to do in this chapter).

On the one hand, we view the world in the light of Col. 1:15 – 23. This is the world created by Christ, sustained by Christ, redeemed by Christ. It is God's world, Christ's inheritance, and our home. It is where God has put us to live for his glory, to witness to his identity, to engage in the care of creation and whatever productive work enhances the world and pleases God. And so we live in this world by the biblical story reviewed in chapter 2, which sets the whole of human life, work, ambitions and achievement within the context of God's creation, redemption and future plans. The public square is part of this world, and we engage in it under God and for God.

But on the other hand, we know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one. We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true. And we are in him who is true by being in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.

Dear children, keep yourselves from idols. (1 John 5:19 – 21)

This is the world as John commonly sees it – the world of human and satanic rebellion against God, the world that hates God, hates Christ and hates God's people, and would kill all three if it could (and in the case of Jesus, thought that it had). And the public square is part of this world too and displays all its ugliness – the ugliness of human sin and of demonic evil

and the unholy combination of both in the gods and idols that usurp the place of the one living God. This is the world we are *not* to love, because its sinful cravings draw us away from our love for God and into fundamental idolatry (1 John 2:15 – 17).

That is why John, having assured us that in Christ we know the living and true God and that “the reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work” (1 John 3:8), concludes with his warning to stay away from idols. For idols are all around us, not least in the public square, the marketplace, the world of work.

Work is a creational good, but the Bible is well aware of the temptation to turn work into an idol – when we live for what we can do and achieve, and then derive our identity and fulfillment from that. This is even more so when work is driven by greed. Paul equates covetousness with idolatry: break the tenth commandment and you break the first (Col. 3:5; cf. Deut. 8, esp. vv. 17 – 18).

The idolatries of career, status and success are all connected to one of the most dominant gods of the public square (in the West at least, and wherever it extends its cultural tentacles) – consumerism. Other idols abound, of course, which we cannot analyze in depth here – idols of ethnic superiority, national pride and patriotism, individual freedom, military security, health and longevity, beauty, celebrity. Some of these idols inhabit the media or state propaganda, others permeate the world of advertising, many just walk around unnoticed and unchallenged in the assumptions and conversations that fill the public arena 24/7. Their power is all the greater at that level.<sup>11</sup>

To live for God in the world of the gods is inevitably to face conflict. The mission of God’s people in the public square is, therefore, a calling to unremitting spiritual warfare. And the first act of that warfare is to recognize the enemy – that there even is an enemy. The trouble is that Christians are children of their culture too – wherever that culture may be – and may be blissfully unaware of the extent to which the public square they inhabit daily is infested with spiritual realities that are opposed to God and the gospel.

Discerning the gods of the public square is a first crucial, missional task. Being equipped to resist them is the next.

It is significant that Paul’s classic exposition of spiritual warfare comes immediately after his instructions about Christians living in marriage, family and the workplace. In all these realms, there is a battle to be fought if we are to be able “to stand” (rather than sink or swim with the tide), and to fulfill our role as messengers of the “gospel of peace” (Eph. 6:15, echoing Isa. 52:7). It is in the whole of life, including the public square, that “our struggle [lit., “our wrestling match”] is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Eph. 6:12).

This is not the place for detailed analysis of “rulers, authorities and powers”, and there are plenty of other resources on them.<sup>12</sup> Personally, I reject two opposite extremes: those who “demythologize” them as simply a cipher for human structures, political powers, economic forces, or social conventions; and those who view them as exclusively spiritual, demonic beings, with no connection to the world of political or economic powers and forces. It seems to me that both aspects are biblically valid.

There is a reality of satanic and demonic presence and work within the world, and it operates in and through human agency. This is especially true in collective human arrangements where it seems that some structures or forces take on “a life of their own”, greater than the sum of human wills involved.

It is in the public arena where such combined spiritual and human power is at work that Christians are called to live and work, to recognize and resist the idolatry that surrounds them, and to stand against it, offering a witness and a signpost to the good news of the kingdom of God through which, by the power of the cross (see ch. 6), those idolatrous

powers have been defeated.

## **We Are Called to Suffer**

Warfare causes suffering, spiritual warfare being no exception. Those who take up the mission of God's people by simply living, working and witnessing in the public square so dominated by the gods of this world, who choose to live by the distinctive ethical standards that flow from their biblical worldview, who confess Jesus as Lord, and not Caesar or Mammon – such people will suffer in one way or another.

The biblical material relating to the suffering of God's people – individually and collectively – is too vast even to do nothing more than list relevant passages. What is unavoidably clear is that suffering is an integral part of the lives of multitudes in the Bible who were *faithful* to God's calling and their mission. I say this because there is a distorted popular theology that deems suffering to be a sign of lack of faith or the result of some disobedience. The friends of Job are alive and well and vocal in some forms of prosperity teaching and evangelical piety. Of course God's people suffered when they sinned, but many suffered for being faithful.

Jesus warned us that it would be so, and, in another of those jaw-dropping pronouncements of his, told his disciples to rejoice about it, since they could look back for good biblical precedents and look forward to the approval of God:

Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matt. 5:11 – 12)

Acts records that suffering reared up quickly among the early believers, but they did exactly what Jesus said by rejoicing in the privilege and continuing to witness (Acts 5:40 – 42). From those early days, the story records that the persecution kept on getting worse, while the church kept on growing – two facts that we are doubtless meant to see as integrally related.

For Paul, the expectation of suffering was built into his commissioning (Acts 9:16), and since he had been one of those inflicting it on the believers, he knew what would be coming his way – as it did. But it was more than just an incidental sideeffect of his missional calling in a hostile world. For Paul, it seems, his suffering was actually part of the proof of the validity of his apostleship and of the truth of the gospel he preached. His paradoxical claims in 2 Corinthians 11 – 12 climax in his famous words, “for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (12:10). These claims are not masochism or bravado, but authenticating testimony to the power of the gospel.

Peter, who had known a thing or two about suffering for Jesus, writes more about this theme than any other in his letter. The thrust of his words of encouragement in 1 Peter to those who were suffering for their faith can be summed up in three phrases: *no surprise* (4:12), *no retaliation* (2:21 – 22), and *no giving up* (3:13 – 17; 4:19). Above all, his readers should be inspired by the example of the Lord Jesus Christ, for whose sake they were suffering.

The kind of suffering that Paul and Peter refer to certainly took place in the public arena, but Revelation makes it even more plain that the global marketplace will be among the prime contexts for the battle between God and the idolatrous, bestial forces that oppose God and God's people. The notorious word about the “number of the beast” in Revelation 13:16 – 18 is not an apocalyptic nightmare involving tattoos, bar codes or credit card numbers, but a chilling exposure of the kind of exclusion from the marketplace that can be expected for those who refuse to bow down to the idolatry that controls it.

The glue that united Paul's thought and life with the message he preached and the mission he conducted was his suffering as an apostle of Jesus Christ. Paul's suffering was the vehicle through which the saving power of God, climactically revealed in Christ, was being made known in the world. To reject the suffering Paul was therefore to reject Christ; to identify with Paul in his suffering was a sure sign that one was being saved by the "foolishness" and "stumbling-block" of the cross.

The place of suffering in service and of passion in mission is hardly ever taught today. But the greatest single secret of evangelistic or missionary effectiveness is the willingness to suffer and die. It may be a death to popularity (by faithfully preaching the unpopular biblical gospel), or to pride (by the use of modest methods in reliance on the Holy Spirit), or to racial and national prejudice (by identification with another culture), or to material comfort (by adopting a simpler lifestyle). But the servant must suffer if he is to bring light to the nations, and the seed must die if it is to multiply.

But there is a dimension to all this that is not usually pointed out. Many books on mission warn about the necessary suffering of God's people that is inevitable for those who are faithful to their confession of Christ. Persecution and martyrdom are the stuff of mission history and mission experience to this day. The neglected element is *the suffering of God*.

The mission of God's people is our participation in the mission of God. So the suffering of God's people in mission is a participation in the suffering of God in mission. And the mission of God is God's determination, through the whole biblical narrative, to bring about the redemption of his whole creation from the ravages of sin and evil. For God, that involved the long trek through the centuries of Israel's faithlessness and rebellion – bearing it, judging it, mending it. Then it led to the ultimate suffering – when God in Christ bore the sin of the world on the cross. Since then, God has suffered with his people as they have borne the cost of being messengers of his kingdom to the ends of the earth.

Finally we note that God, in order to enable a new creation which transcends the present order of suffering and death, engages in such a giving of self that only one of the sharpest of human pains known can adequately portray what is involved for God. But such an event is not thought of solely in terms of the internal life of God. God's suffering is the heavenly counterpart to the suffering of the earthly servant of God. The suffering servant takes upon himself the suffering of God and does what is finally necessary for the forces of evil in this world to be overcome: suffering unto death.

Elsewhere I have written the phrase, "the cross was the unavoidable cost of the mission of God." Given, then, that the one who bore the cross told us to take up our own crosses to follow him, there is an unavoidable cost for those who identify themselves with the suffering mission of the suffering God – a cost that will one day be vindicated with the final victory of the one who, "for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart" (Heb. 12:2 – 3).