



# Public Faith - Public Church

A Reflection on Faith and the Life of the Church from Protestants for the Common Good

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Some time ago, a north suburban member of Protestants for the Common Good was asked by his pastor why he wanted the congregation to do more to address public issues from the perspective of faith. After a pause, he replied, “Because I feel that the living of my faith is incomplete when it is limited to personal concerns. It seems that something important is missing.” This insight is the motivation for this brief paper.

## A Multi-Dimensional Faith

The prophet Micah writes, “What does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (6:8). This passage suggests that there are at least two distinct, but inseparable, dimensions of faithful living. First, there is a public, or social, dimension identified here as doing justice. Second, there is a personal, or interpersonal, aspect expressed by Micah in terms of loving kindness. In both cases, we are to walk humbly with God. That is, we are to let God guide both the public and the personal activities of our lives. This same distinction can be found in the well-known passage of the prophet Amos, who exhorts the people of God to “let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream” (5:24). Faithful living is not about justice or righteousness alone, but about bringing both together.

Jesus proclaims a similar understanding of the life of faith. Announcing his ministry in the words of Isaiah, he says, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, and to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord” (Luke 4:18-19). In this passage, there is an interpersonal element of preaching good news and healing, and there is a very public element expressed in terms of setting at liberty those who are oppressed and proclaiming the acceptable year of the Lord, the Jubilee year (see Leviticus 25).

In short, Micah, Amos, and Jesus make clear that our religious life is multi-dimensional. Living a complete life of faith means cultivating all dimensions of this faith, both the personal and the public. Yet, for many people, the public dimension of faith is especially difficult to live out. While there are many important reasons for this, perhaps the most notable among them is the emphasis on personal and interpersonal issues, and the avoidance of public issues, in the congregational life of churches. When churches do not preach or teach a public faith, when they do not emphasize public faith as an *essential* element of a full Christian life, it is not surprising that individual Christians experience difficulties expressing, or find themselves neglecting, this dimension of their faith.

## A Difficult Topic

Why do churches largely neglect public issues? Some would suggest that Jesus came to change hearts and not societies. Yet, this is a false option. When one’s heart is converted to the love of God and neighbor, one cares even more than before about how a neighbor is treated by laws and policies and about creating communities that mirror God’s love for all people. Moreover, scripture identifies again and again the public relevance of our love of God and neighbor, and the social statements of most denominations affirm this as well.

Others claim that mixing religion and public life violates the separation of church and state and so is unconstitutional. But the Constitution only prohibits laws that establish religion, not religious people speaking out about the laws and policies that govern their communities. The separation of church and state does not require the separation of religion from public life.

Perhaps the most likely reason that churches neglect public issues is the difficulties these issues can raise for the life of a congregation. These difficulties take at least three forms. First, raising public issues in terms of our faith might well suggest the need to question and to change some aspects of public life. Yet, many people, especially in middle and upper income communities, are the beneficiaries of the way things are now, and they might find calls for social change to be a threat to

their self-interest, or a criticism of their way of life. At the very least, a position of privilege reduces the motivation to seek social change. Second, public issues, especially when they take the form of legislative and policy debates, invariably give rise to disagreements. Churches may feel that this disagreement will also give rise to divisiveness in the life of a congregation, and so for the sake of peace in the church, public issues go unaddressed. Finally, public issues are often very complicated, and congregations may not feel qualified to bring these issues before their members in a responsible way.

All of these difficulties are real, but they are not insurmountable, and they certainly do not justify neglecting a central dimension of the life of faith. Our churches can teach us that justice is only a threat to the unjust, and that love of God and neighbor should replace the pursuit of self-interest. They can teach respect for those with whom we disagree, and that disagreement is not the same thing as divisiveness. Finally, churches can bring the experience and the expertise of their members and those in the wider community into the congregation to provide the kind of information that is necessary for members to give witness to their faith in public life.

## Five Steps to Public Ministry

Making public issues a more important part of congregations is not as difficult as it might seem. Most congregations are only five steps away from creating, or significantly expanding, their public ministry. However, following these steps requires a genuine commitment to promote public ministry on the part of clergy and lay leaders alike.

**1. Develop Leadership:** The lay members of a congregation can be the heart of its public ministry. While clergy will play an important motivating and advising role, lay members can provide much of the leadership, if only to communicate the importance of broad membership participation. Clergy should provide leadership in preaching and teaching the importance of public ministry and the public dimensions of faith.

**2. Create a Structure:** Public ministry needs to work its way into the structure of a congregation, perhaps as a task force or committee. This structure gives the ministry congregational legitimacy, it signals a congregational willingness to take responsibility for the ministry, and it avoids relying on the volunteer efforts of one or two individuals. While some congregations resist the idea of “another” committee, the need to offer members a multidimensional faith suggests that such a structural commitment is essential.

**3. Cultivate Mutual Respect:** Cultivating an atmosphere of respect for the opinions of others, especially those with whom we disagree, while remaining true to the gospel challenge, should be a central concern of public ministry in a congregation. The participation of all members in this ministry should be encouraged. This might necessitate bringing different positions on an issue into educational efforts. It might also require that the public ministry efforts refrain from explicitly endorsing particular positions, instead bringing issues before members for their individual endorsement.

**4. Educate about Faith and Public Issues:** Congregations should regularly provide opportunities for members to consider public issues in light of their faith. This would include biblical and theological education, as well as focused reflection on specific public issues.

**5. Identify Opportunities for Action:** Public ministry should identify ways that individuals can live out their faith in public life. These ways include speaking out on legislation, attending public meetings, and joining non-profit organizations. Volunteer work can be an important way to be in solidarity with our neighbor and to learn about public issues, but opportunities should be identified to respond to the systemic issues that make volunteer work necessary in the first place.

So long as poverty, racism, privilege, and indifference continue to be pervasive in our public life, the need for public ministry will remain urgent. With a renewed commitment to the public dimensions of Christian life, individuals and congregations can find a vital faith and advance the common good. **Contact Protestants for the Common Good to learn how PCG can be a resource for you or your congregation.**



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