

The Church in the Public Square
Brian K. Blount
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Greensboro, NC

Across the centuries, there has been much debate about the place and role of the church in the life of the body politic. Is the church a spiritual institution that should deal only with matters of the individual's broken personal relationship with God and healing that relationship? Is the church a spiritual institution whose area of concern is as vast as God's own arena of concern, the fullness of the created cosmos and the ways in which humans relate to that creation and to each other in the communities that are an integral part of that creation? As important as the question is the determination about who gets to answer the question. And on what basis should such an answer be made?

It is commonplace for persons of Christian faith to answer: Jesus. Jesus is the basis for how we answer that question. The problem, as I pointed out not too long ago in a sermon entitled, "Point Jesus Out," Christians don't really know Jesus. In the sermon I argued that we Christians point Jesus out by teaching and preaching the Gospel, the good news about Jesus. I know that sounds easy. But it's not. Not in the world we live in. It's not easy because people, even Christian people, don't know the stories that share the essence of the man they don't really know. In a Gallup poll of Americans some years ago, the results of the polling demonstrated the following tidbits:

--Only 37% of those interviewed could name all four Gospels.

-- Only half of adults interviewed nationwide could name *any* of the four Gospels of the New Testament.

-- Seven in ten (70%) were able to name the town where Jesus was born, but just 42% could identify him as the person who delivered the Sermon on the Mount.

How can a world know a man if they don't know the materials which testify to how the man lived and died? I am so weary of talking to folk who proclaim authoritatively that they

know what a Christian ought to do and be and yet they have such little knowledge of any of Jesus' teachings and actions that should be the foundation for Christian living. You've got to point Jesus out to a world of people who have come to somehow think they can be Christian without knowing Jesus, who have come to think they can know Jesus of Nazareth without knowing anything about or written in the Gospel stories that share his life and ministry. Who can have confidence that people who don't even know the names of the Gospels are actually reading the Gospels? *We* must point Jesus out. And *We* must start by knowing who Jesus is and what he stood for. And *We* can only do that if we know the scriptures that chronicle his life and ministry.

For the leaders of the Protestant Reformation the matter of scripture and its authority, particularly in relationship to the tradition and authority of the church, was a key concern. Scripture's authority was privileged above all other authority. This is one of the reasons why preaching is so central in the Protestant worship service. Other than the Eucharist meal, in most Protestant contexts, the interpretation of the word is key. Why is it key? Because in this central moment of worship, the scriptures are read, interpreted, and taught. Biblical interpretation through the preaching of the word became central for faith witness from the times of the earliest church. In this interpretative process, the early church was mimicking the practice of the synagogues, where the biblical word was interpreted. Synagogue, as much a gathering as a place. Gathering for what? Interpretation of the text. Jesus, of course, follows this practice himself. In the Gospel of Luke, at the beginning of his ministry, he does what the rabbis did; on the Sabbath he goes to a synagogue gathering, he reads the text, and he interprets the text. Luke 4:16: "When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read." As we read the biblical texts even today. "And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him." He takes the text and he reads the text as an interpretation of his own ministry. His life becomes the preached word in this case. And what is that preached word? "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's

favor.” Jesus claims that his ministry is about addressing poverty, critiquing prisons and championing prisoners, promoting health care, liberating the oppressed, and risking economic chaos by imagining a Jubilee year that wiped out human debt.

The word he preaches, the word he interprets by the way he lives is supposed to guide the people of the synagogue for the living of *their* lives. The word is bigger than the synagogue. Just as the word remains today bigger than the church. We start with the word. The church itself starts with the word. The question is, do we know the word so that we can be directed by the word?

In the early church, the gathering called the *ecclesia*, the word that was interpreted was not only the Hebrew Scriptures, which was the word that Jesus interpreted. The word, the scriptures also came to be the stories about Jesus’ ministry as the ministry of God’s Son. Just as Jesus had interpreted the scriptures of the Hebrew people, so Jesus’ followers interpreted the scriptures about God’s Son. Indeed, the creation of the New Testament Canon itself, formed in this context of text interpretation. Interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures in such a way that Jesus seen fulfilling those texts, as here at Luke 4:16. Then, Jesus becomes the central figure of the interpretation. Stories about him told, and interpretation of those stories, become the primary texts for the gatherings. So, how Mark, the first gospel to be drafted, come to be drafted. Stories of Jesus, in small units, told and reinterpreted. In community. These Jesus stories become the early church’s scriptures. Christian education is vital because it is through Christian education that believers have their greatest opportunity to read and study and interpret the texts. This is why church schools have been so important across the centuries. Church educators have taught the texts so that church members could appeal to those texts to make decisions about their lives. If we don’t know the texts, it means we have surrendered our ability to make informed scriptural decisions to church tradition and church authority. And that surrendering to church tradition and authority is one of the primary concerns of the Reformers upon whose work and beliefs the PCUSA church and many Protestant churches are today grounded. This is why to be a believer

one must be a reader and interpreter of texts. We cannot leave something so important to us to others, even our ministers, to do for us.

So, let's go back and think some about a question that is before us as we think about the work of the church in the body politic. Should the church be socially and politically involved? And when I say politically involved, I do not mean involved in partisan politics. I mean the engagement with issues in the body politic like social and communal justice. When you think of answering the question, how do you go about answering the question? Do you appeal to what your church's position is? What does the PCUSA say? What does my own local church say? Do you appeal to what your pastor or church educator think? Do you start there, with the church or with the church's authority? Or, do you start by thinking of scripture, reading scripture, and then appealing for guidance and direction from the church and your church authorities?

Let's do a test case. I want to answer the question of whether a believer should be involved with matters social and communal in the body politic. I would like to start with Jesus. For tonight, I'm going to start with the earliest Gospel written about Jesus and his ministry. I'm going to start with Mark.

What Mark did was to create a form of scriptural interpretation in book form. You notice that he starts in 1:1 by saying this is the story of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. But then, he appeals to scripture. The Hebrew Scriptures. He wants us to know that Jesus is the living interpretation of the Hebrew scriptures. So, in just the second verse of his book, he turns to the prophet Isaiah. Jesus' life and ministry will be presented as interpretation of scripture. If you don't understand the Hebrew scriptures you can't fully understand Jesus. This is why, of course, the study of the Hebrew scriptures is such a vital part of seminary and church education.

By the time Mark wrote, though, proper preaching in the gathering of believers was just preaching as interpretation of the Hebrew stories. Proper preaching was also the interpretation of the stories that were being remembered about Jesus as God's son. Mark took the stories that were being remembered in ecclesia and interpreted, and formed those stories into a narrative form, thus creating the "gospel" narrative that we now know so well. How did Mark put these

stories down. I tell my students to think about something they never think about: Polaroid pictures in a shoe box in the attic. Polaroids with family pictures. Has anyone in here ever gone up in the attic or in a closet or some other hidden place and found old Polaroids? I have. My parents have such pictures to this day. My children don't have that sense because they don't crawl up into my parents' attic to dig out the old shoe boxes full of pictures. In fact, they don't even think of pictures as printed things. In our house we have all sorts of electronic pictures on phones, on tablets, on the television, on electronic photo displays, but not a whole lot of printed pictures. And if they are printed, they are printed from a digital camera because either my wife or I wanted a picture printed. But there are certainly no polaroids. They don't know what a Polaroid is. I suspect they'd have to google it if I started talking about them. But some of you remember! You'd take the picture, a wet piece of photo paper would eject from the camera, and you'd wave it to dry it and as it dried, the picture materialized. It was magic. Instead of having to wait days to send your roll of negatives into to some camera store that would mail you back pictures, you got your picture instantly. Talk about technology in the fast lane. That was it for us. You had your family picture right then and there. And people tended to take their pictures and store them in places like old shoe boxes because there were no frames for Polaroid pictures. So, you go up in the attic, you find a shoe box, and there are hundreds of pictures in there. Now, what if I wanted to do something unusual. I send you up to get the box of Polaroid pictures and I tell you to lay them out, and create a family story from them. Tell the story in the way that makes the most sense, that describes how the family lives and grows. How do you know which picture comes first, which pictures go before and which go after? Some you can tell by the picture itself, right, people are older or younger and you can arrange the pictures that way. But you can't always tell. So, what do you do? Well, the best way to make sure is to turn the picture over and look at the date that was stamped on there. You can arrange the pictures in the right order by the dates. You know what happened first and second and third because you have the dates. But imagine if you didn't have the dates. Then you'd have to arrange the pictures by what seemed to best represent how you remember your family gatherings. Well, this is what Mark does. See,

he's got these images, these stories remembered about Jesus. Authoritative stories. Because knowing how Jesus lived becomes a guide for how Jesus followers are to live. This is why sharing the stories and preaching and teaching the stories is so important. Healings. Exorcisms. Authoritative teachings. Preaching. All of that. But Mark is writing many decades after Jesus' death and resurrection. So, he doesn't know what comes first and second and third all the time. So, he arranges his stories not chronologically, but theologically. He arranges them by what best represents how he understands who Jesus is and what Jesus' ministry was all about. So that Jesus' ministry can be then a guide for our living.

And you know what he does? He starts by saying this is the good news of Jesus Christ, this gospel story. And he says something about John the Baptist, but not a whole lot, because this isn't a story about John the Baptist. It is a story about Jesus. So, he mentions John quickly at the opening because John sets the stage at the Jordan River for Jesus. And when Jesus bursts on the scene, he declares that the Reign of God has come near in him, in his life, in his ministry, and it is time for people to change their lives and prepare to live in the coming glare of that Reign. It's time to get ready, people. And how do you get ready? Well, one might think here is a place where Mark will start off by talking about Jesus going off into doing some spiritual formation, going to some secluded place to think and study. Getting ready is all about spirituality and praying and finding private sanctuary with God.

But Mark doesn't put such stories about Jesus up front, even though he has such stories, because he has heard such stories. Jesus calls people, disciples, to follow him in his new life. What is this new life? Well, it is teaching with an authority that no one has seen before. It is exorcising demonic forces. It is healing unusual illness. And after this little taste of what his ministry is going to be like, he does go off by himself to pray. People are looking for him and when his disciples find him, they say, a little annoyed, Look, Jesus, people are looking for you. What's the deal? Why are you out here praying by yourself? It's as if the disciples think his ministry isn't about him being by himself in the dark praying, but about being with the people in the world who need him, being in the public spaces where there are public problems. Well, the

disciples, we know, are kind of dull minded in Mark. Some scholars call them "Duh-ciples." They often don't get things right and Jesus has to correct them. But this time they get it right. Jesus doesn't say, stop bothering me, or you don't understand what my ministry is all about, or look, my faith is about my private relationship with God not about my public engagement with the public, he says, okay, well, let's go to town, let's go to all the towns, because proclaiming my message in the town square is what I came out to do. Mark puts these stories at the start of Jesus' ministry so that we will understand them to be indicative about the whole of Jesus' ministry. And *what* are these stories that he piles up to start Jesus' ministry?

And here we go...Leper touching. The law says that lepers should not come into the company of God's people. They pollute the body politic. It is a breach of God's holiness and God's purity to be in their company. They are social outcasts. So, what does Jesus do? The very first leper he comes across, he touches. Before he heals him, he touches him. He could have healed him and then touched him. But he touches him first. As if to make a point. As if to say, the interpretation of the law is wrong here. The way the law has set up society is wrong here. It's unjust here. I'm going to give you an alternative way of thinking about what is just. It's not *just* to cast out; it is *just* to pull in. Even the people whom we are afraid to pull into community belong in our community. Jesus breaks the holiness and purity code of the time, he breaks the *law* of the time to make a point about living socially and communally in a more just way.

Remember the math you learned way back in elementary school. A negative times a negative equals what? A Positive right. But a Negative times positive = negative. Positive people don't engage negative people or negative circumstances, like the poor, like the broken, like the prisoners, like the outcast. They make you negative. But Jesus brings a new math, a kingdom calculus. Negative times positive equals positive. We who think we are positive ought to use our positive not to run and hide for fear of becoming negative, but to run and engage in the hope of creating a larger, more encompassing positive.

What comes next in Mark for Jesus? What does Mark want to say next is an opening, defining moment for Jesus? Jesus forgives the sin of a paralyzed man who was brought to him by his friends. The man can't walk, and Jesus looks upon him and says, your sins are forgiven. Well, this one looks like it is all about an individual's personal relationship with God. But here is why it is important to study these scriptures. There is something very political happening here. The scribes say Jesus is blaspheming against God. Why? What has he done that they would find so objectionable? So *blasphemous*? What's the problem? There's an indication when the scribes go on to say, only God can forgive sin. But, before Jesus came along, how did a person in first century Israel get his sins forgiven? By God? Yes, but someone acted on earth in God's behalf. Right? The sinner went to the temple and the scribes and priests told them, after they gave the proper sacrifices, that God would forgive their sins. See what Jesus has done? He has changed the politics of forgiveness. You don't need the sacrifices. You don't need the temple or the representatives of the temple. All you need is me! I can forgive sins by nothing but my word. And you don't need to do anything but come to me. ME! Instead of the temple and the scribes and the priests and the tradition. ME! You don't even need to ask me to forgive your sins. I'll just do it on my own. It's that easy. And that dangerous. That socially dangerous. He has replaced the temple and its economy of sacrifice and politics of sin forgiveness with *himself*.

What's the next polaroid that Mark puts here at the beginning of Jesus' ministry? Jesus calls tax collectors and sinners to be his followers. You don't think I would be making a social and a political statement if I went out of here and called people running ponzi schemes and people who had embezzelled other people's money or loan sharks and prostitutes to be my inner circle of seminary advisors? And then, after doing that, I go out with this inner circle of disciples and break the sabbath law about fasting and then break the sabbath law about working on the sabbath. The sabbath law was one of the most important laws in Israelite society. So much so that the law said that for breaking the sabbath a person could be stoned to death. Mark places two polaroids of Jesus breaking the sabbath right after each other right at the beginning of Jesus'

ministry. If the law is unjust, or the way people interpret the law is unjust, Jesus seems to be saying, *break* the law. That is a new way of looking at the matter of social justice.

By the time this last Polaroid moment is over, at Mark 3:6, the leaders of the people see Jesus as a political threat that must be publicly removed. The seeds of crucifixion are borne right here. Right from the start, Mark wants us to know that he thought Jesus' ministry was a *public* ministry, with social and political ramifications, that was treated by the leaders of the time as socially and politically explosive. Why? Because Jesus' public ministry was a ministry that was concerned about how the Reign of God was reshaping not just the synagogue but the body politic in First Century Galilee and that Jesus got into deep trouble for this public ministry. What God was doing inside Jesus' spirit was having a direct impact on how Jesus was socially and politically engaging the world. Right from the start then, in the earliest Jesus gospel, we are getting the sense that Jesus and the Reign of God that Jesus proclaimed was more than what happened in the community of believers following Jesus; it was about how that community could and should follow Jesus into transforming the world in which the church was situated. Jesus' Kingdom of God theology was a very publicly engaged theology. If we start with Jesus, we follow Jesus not just into the secluded mountains to pray, we follow him down the mountain into the public valleys to put that prayer power into social, religious, and political motion. **End of chapter 4, crossing the sea. Gentile cycle. Jesus breaking down boundaries that separated Jews and Gentiles, about ethnicity and race.**

Let's go back to the Jesus who described his mission in Luke by quoting Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to preach good news to the poor." Peasant Christians across the ages have seen this as Jesus' call to arms. In Luke, God actually shows social preference. Jesus lives and acts throughout his ministry in solidarity with the poor and oppressed, living as one of them, taking sides with them. Indeed, to hear him tell it in this Lukan version of the beatitudes at the Sermon on the Plain, the kingdom of God even belongs to them (6:20). Luke rejects Matthew's spiritualization towards a poverty of spirit; he's talking about the historical poor, the socially and economically destitute, and he's handing them the proverbial keys to God's

kingdom. As Duke New Testament Scholar Richard Hays puts it, “The servant’s vocation is to proclaim good news to the poor, the blind, the captives, and the oppressed. Thus, for Luke, Jesus’ messianic activity is the work of *liberation*, and the direct link of the gospel to the message of the prophets is to be found in the prophetic call for justice . . . ”¹

As you might imagine, there has been much debate over whether the church should be involved in matters social and political, like social justice, or whether the church should be exclusively focused on matters individual and spiritual. In fact, in its history, Union Presbyterian Seminary, has been involved deeply in that debate. When answering the question it might not surprise you that ultimately Union faculty found that the answer to the question lay not ultimately not with the church, but with the Bible. It begins, in the United States, as does much of southern Christianity, with slavery.

As I chronicle this discussion, know that I am depending a great deal on the history of Union Presbyterian Seminary that was written by one of Union’s Ph.D. graduates in church history, and adjunct professor on our Charlotte campus, William Sweetser. Dr. Sweetser begins by talking about Dr. Moses Hoge, one of the principal founders of the seminary.

Regarding the matter of social justice, particularly where the issue of race was concerned, while Dr. Hoge did not see himself as an agent of change, he also did not accept the status quo. Though he took personal action against slavery, he never called for abolition. For a time, Hoge and his second wife Susannah even owned slaves. Susannah had inherited the slaves following the death of her first husband. The new couple quickly became uneasy with slavery. They were disturbed by the deplorable housing slaves endured, how slaves were overworked, and the casual way slave families were ripped apart. They often spoke out against the abuse of slaves even when the offending owners were neighbors. They also used their own money to re-unite slaves who had married and were subsequently separated.² Hoge sat with sick and dying slaves, was

1. Hays, *The Moral Vision*, 116.

2. Thompson, *Her Walls Before Thee Stand*, 64.

available to talk with them, and he welcomed slaves into his home for communion.³ In his actions, then, a burgeoning witness for just, social change. Limited, fragile, tentative change.

Shortly before 1810, after freeing his slaves, Hoge founded Virginia's only chapter of the American Colonization Society. While he believed in the universal kinship of all people in God, he also felt that emancipated slaves and free blacks should not live in America but should be deported to an Africa most of them had never known. Universal kinship; not universal living arrangements.

John Holt Rice, another early shaper of Union Seminary, would follow Hoge into theological leadership at Hampden Sydney, where Union began. In 1821, Rice was named the seminary's theology professor by Hanover Presbytery. On the issue of creating change in the matter of racial justice, like Hoge, Rice had a complicated history. Licensed to preach by Hanover Presbytery in 1803, he was ordained to the service of the Cub Creek Church in Charlotte, VA, where he served for 8 years. He ran a farm with the work of a few slaves that his wife had inherited. Under his leadership, Cub Creek Church grew from 58 white and 55 slave parishioners to about 400 white and 100 slave members.⁴ Rice maintained that seminaries are beneficial to society as the agents of reform and improvement. As with Hoge, though, where racial justice was concerned, the matter was complicated.

Rice published many articles denouncing slavery in his magazines, but there are two for which he is best known. He wrote "Thoughts on Slavery" in *The Virginia Evangelical and Literary Magazine* in 1819, and "The Influence of Christianity on the Political and Social Interests of Man" in the same magazine in 1823. Rice was clear: "It is to be generally admitted that slavery is the greatest . . . evil which has ever entered the United States."⁵ And in 1823 he

3. Thomas, "Moses Hoge," 8.

4. Ernest Trice Thompson, "John Holt Rice," *Union Seminary Review* 43, no 1 (October-November 1932):177.

5. John Holt. Rice, "Thoughts on Slavery," *The Virginia Evangelical and Literary Magazine* 2, no. 7 (July 1819): 293.

lamented: “Would to God that I could enumerate among the achievements of religion, the universal and complete abolition of a practice so detestable and so horrid.”⁶

And yet, immediate emancipation was out of the question, “and perhaps domestic emancipation [would] always be impracticable.”⁷ Like Hoge, Rice believed that the long-term goal should be repatriation of slaves to Africa because “we never can give them here rights of citizenship.”⁸ Ultimately, with Hoge, Rice became a charter member of the American Colonization Society when it was founded in 1816. *He was criticized for his liberalism.*

Despite his “liberalism” on the issue, Rice helped craft a theological perspective called “the spirituality of the church” that, while it did not endorse slavery, did champion the belief that the church should have nothing to say on such critical social matters. Apparently, such change belonged exclusively to God.⁹ In fact, Rice accepted that the slave was property and that the New Testament either sanctioned chattel slavery in the American South as comparable to classical slavery, or said nothing about it. Rice wrote:

The reason why I am so strenuously opposed to any movement by the church, or the ministers of religion on this subject, is simply this. I am convinced that anything we can do will injure religion, and retard the march of public feeling in relation to slavery.

Slaves by law are held as property. *If the church or the minister of religion touches the subject, it is touching what are called the rights of property.* The jealousy among our countrymen on this subject is such, that we cannot move a step in this way, without wakening up the strongest opposition, and producing the most violent excitement. The whole mass of the community will be set in motion, and the great body of the church will be carried along.

Under this conviction, I wish the ministers of religion to be convinced that there is nothing in the New Testament which obliges them to take hold of this subject directly. In

6. Rice, *New England Memorials*, 474.

7. Rice, “Thoughts on Slavery,” 295.

8. Rice, “Thoughts on Slavery,” 295.

9. Morrison, “The Virginia Literary and Evangelical Magazine, 1818-1828,” 270.

fact, I believe that it never has fared well with either church or state, when the church meddled with temporal affairs. And I should—knowing how unmanageable religious feeling is, when not kept under the immediate influence of divine truth—be exceedingly afraid to see it brought to bear ‘directly’ on the subject of slavery. Where the movement might end, I could not pretend to conjecture.¹⁰

The theological “change” that came to be known after the Civil War as the “Spirituality of the Church” had deep and wide and unfortunate roots. In short, “The doctrine of the spirituality of the church held that the civil and ecclesiastical spheres of life were absolutely separate, to the point that one could have no comment on the other. Civil rights, for example, was considered political therefore outside the boundaries of church pronouncements. It was thought that Christians, hearing the Word of God rightly preached every Sunday, would make up their own minds and institute godly policies.”¹¹ Adherence to this principle ...kept the church from going beyond the express commands of Scripture in polity, theology, worship, and mission. It demanded a rigid confessionalism and freedom from contamination by the secular world and prohibited any voice on ‘social’ issues; the church could comment on ‘moral’ issues alone.”¹² This notion of the spirituality of the church had influence long after the end of the Civil War and the abolition of slavery. As Sweetser notes, “The southern Presbyterian minister was expected to ignore the growing Jim Crow mentality, child labor, disenfranchisement, and lynchings, thus to preach a dateless religion, one that is the same yesterday, today and forever.”¹³

Union’s professors not only helped shape the spirituality of the church movement, to its wonderful credit, Union’s professors also helped shape the movement that brought the spirituality of the church to an end, by creating the theological force that came to be known as biblical theology. Sweetser is succinct: “Walter Lee Lingle remained in the church and set in motion the forces that ultimately destroyed the Spirituality of the Church.”

10. Maxwell, *A Memoir of the Rev. John H. Rice, D.D.*, 307.

11. William B Sweetser Jr., *A Copious Fountain: A History of Union Presbyterian Seminary 1812–2012* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 165.

12. Sweetser Jr., *A Copious Fountain*, 166.

13. Sweetser Jr., *A Copious Fountain*, 231.

During a critical time in our country, when segregation and Jim Crow created the separate and unequal relationship between whites and blacks in this country, one of Union's and Davidson's heroes in the faith championed his understanding of Jesus from the scriptures as a Jesus directly focused on matters related to social justice.

In 1924, Union professor Lingle assumed the presidency of the General Assembly's Training School for Lay Workers in Richmond. He would go on to become the president of Davidson college. In 1929, at the request of the students, Lingle was invited to deliver what were apparently one of the most transformative set of Sprunt Lectures. His title: "The Bible and Social Problems." The published lectures had a huge influence on the church.¹⁴

Students flocked to Lingle's regular lectures at Union and PSCE. He taught the only class on social ethics in any Southern Presbyterian Seminary. The ministers who were in the forefront of changing attitudes in the PCUS, and thereby transforming the PCUS, attributed their own awakening to Walter Lingle. According to Sweetser, his genius was that he could apply the Social Gospel (whose primary concern was for the city) to rural communities.¹⁵

Lingle called for ministers to study the social problems of their communities and then preach about those problems from the pulpit. He urged them not to engage in partisan politics but to apply the social and ethical teachings of Christ. "I have a deep and abiding conviction that one of the greatest needs of the present time is that Christians should translate into life the social and ethical teachings of our Lord. They are the only solvent for the world's social problems."¹⁶

Lingle went on to talk about the need for a social consciousness for the Christian. "Social Consciousness is a consciousness of the fact that no man liveth unto himself and that no man dieth unto himself. It is a consciousness of the fact that we are all members of one body. To put it differently still, it is a consciousness of the fact that we are our brother's keeper. It is a growing sense of brotherhood. It is a consciousness of the fact that we are all a part of one great

14. E. T. Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, 3:265.

15. Flynt, "Feeding the Hungry and Ministering to the Broken Hearted," 85.

16. Lingle, *The Bible and Social Problems*, 7.

organism, and that if one member suffers, all suffer.”¹⁷ Such social consciousness should lead to Christian social service. Or in Lingle’s words: “Social service is a ministry to the physical and temporal needs of our fellow-men.”¹⁸ Lingle went on to point out that Jesus’ own ministry was based in social service. While I have pointed to the start of his ministry in Mark, Lingle points to the start of Jesus’ ministry in Luke, especially Luke 4:16.

Lingle notices that Jesus’ spirituality transfers immediately into social transformation. The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. The first move. I will change not only the spiritual but the social and civic lives of those who are broken. The second move. Changing the fortunes of the poor. Setting free those who have been captured. In an act of defiant social justice, setting the oppressed free. As Lingle said: “We may spiritualize this text as much as we will, and yet there is much social service in it.”¹⁹

Throughout his lectures, Lingle pressed home his point. Let me share a litany of his thoughts so you can hear his thoughts in his own words.

“When Jesus fed the hungry multitudes, opened the eyes of the blind, healed the sick, cured the lame, and ministered to their physical and temporal needs in any way, it was social service.”²⁰

“When Paul took upon collections all over Asia Minor, Macedonia and Greece for the poor saints in Jerusalem, it was social service.”²¹

“The Bible is full of social service from cover to cover. We may not like the name. Some of us may prefer to call it Christian service. Yet the fact remains that the Bible is full of the thing the present generation has chosen to call social service.”²²

Yes, he points out, the Bible has a personal message that is deep and powerful and it should be proclaimed. And yet, he argues, “At the same time we who believe in personal

17. Walter L. Lingle, *The Bible and Social Problems* (New York and Chicago: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1929), 15.

18. Lingle, *The Bible and Social Problems*, 18.

19. Lingle, *The Bible and Social Problems*, 18.

20. Lingle, *The Bible and Social Problems*, 18.

21. Lingle, *The Bible and Social Problems*, 18.

22. Lingle, *The Bible and Social Problems*, 18–9.

salvation are too apt to forget that the Bible has a social message.”²³ That social message comes directly and defiantly from none other than Jesus himself.

Yes, Jesus wants us to worship and bring our lives into right relationship with the will of God, Lingle concludes. But worship, he understood, as he recognizes that Jesus understood, is just the beginning of our faith walk. Worship energizes us in our own right relationship with God to bring the world into right relationship with God. And so he concludes: “Jesus wants us to worship God. He is not opposed to a form of worship. It is necessary to have some form through which to express our worship. But He is not willing for us to substitute a form of worship for Christian living. He expects to see our worship followed up by lives which are noted for their personal holiness and social righteousness. That kind of righteousness would solve most of the world’s social problems, and cure most of its social ills.”²⁴

Another important voice was Ernest Trice (E.T.) Thompson, a 1920 graduate of Union who later came to teach. After graduating from Hampden-Sydney in 1914, he went on to Columbia University to study sociology as he wanted to understand the world and how ministry related to it. As Sweetser puts it: Union was a rude awakening for Thompson. Thomas Cary Johnson thought that Union graduates should know only one theology: a scholastic Calvinism that reinforced the Spirituality of the Church. When he entered Union in the fall of 1915, what struck him was the contrast between T. C. Johnson and Walter Lingle. He remembers:

[Johnson] taught Dr. Dabney’s theology—just drilled it in us. He did not invite questions, did not teach us anything about any theological developments after the Westminster Confessions and the scholastic theologians, discouraged questions, he just sort of said “My task is to teach you one theology, the right one.”²⁵

In contrast, Lingle’s Christian Sociology class prodded students to consider the social teachings of the prophets and Jesus. Sweetser went on to say that “Thompson challenged his students to consider that the doctrine of the Spirituality of the Church was inadequate for the

23. Lingle, *The Bible and Social Problems*, 21.

24. Lingle, *The Bible and Social Problems*, 63.

25. Hobbie, “Ernest Trice Thompson: Prophet for a Changing South,” 106.

modern world. He also admired New Testament professor Eugene Caldwell. Caldwell was conservative, but was concerned with what the Bible taught. He encouraged his students not to be dogmatic, but to think for themselves.”²⁶ Note this: know the Bible and then use the Bible to think for themselves, beyond, and even, if necessary, in contradiction to church authorities.

Again, Sweetser: When Thompson returned to campus to teach in 1922, Union was still encased in the amber of Robert Lewis Dabney. Robert McNeill (B.D. 1942) remembers: “We were to preach on temperance but not prohibition, justice but not politics, greed but not economics, prejudice but not segregation.” He remembers that by the late 1930s it was difficult to get classmates to volunteer for the 17th Street Mission.²⁷ Thompson chipped away at Dabney’s influence by demonstrating how an ethical voice developed from a careful reading of the biblical texts could confront, not avoid, the problems facing church and society. He wrote a weekly essay on International Sunday School lessons. He wrote over 3,000 lessons, working into his 90s. He used these articles, according to Sweetser, to introduce Southern Presbyterians to biblical criticism and to apply Scriptural ethics to social conditions in the South, particularly the issue of race. As Sweetser concludes: “This approach caused Thompson to become controversial.” Thompson was accused of unorthodox, if not heretical teaching, in his classroom. This charge of heresy came because he promoted both the reunion of the Northern and Southern Presbyterian churches and because he promoted the idea that appropriate interpretation of the Bible did give the interpreter a voice to speak ethically to the social issues of the day. The then president of Union Seminary, Ben Lacy, supported Dr. Thompson, as did the General Assembly when the charges were brought even to that level. The challenge and successful defense of Dr. Thompson demonstrated the importance of allowing faithful reading of the biblical texts, and in this case, a faithful reading that indicated that the text did speak to matters social as well as spiritual.

26. *Interview with E. T. Thompson*, UTS Video History Project.

27. Robert McNeill, *God Wills Us Free: The Ordeal of a Southern Minister* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1965), 60.

The Christian church is supposed to represent, through its re-presentation of the ministry of Jesus, the movement of God's Rule here on earth in this latter day and in this latter time. *And yet*, the church remains the most segregated hour in America. *And yet* the church remains a problematic place for the advancement of women in ministry in so many ways. *And yet* the church is too often too strangely silent in the great cultural and political debates of the day. I hear the mega voice of prosperity from the church; what we need to do is dial up the volume for social justice. Not just in what we do but in what we are. Envision the end time, what the end time church looks like, and create it here. That is what gathering, praying, preaching, and eating in honor of the Lord is all about. *If the kingdom* is a church where white people and black people and Hispanic people and Native American people and Asian American people and all people worship before the throne together, isn't it our task to build that communal form of worship here on earth? *If the kingdom* is a place where social injustice is no more, where we are not all the resurrected same, but the multiform beauty in new life that we are in this old life, spiritual bodies of different colors, different ethnicities, different genders, different thoughts and yet one in our praise of God, ought we not to start the creation of that reality in the here and now, to drag that future hope back into the present, where there is unity in difference, and greater and more magnificent unity *because of* the differences? *If the kingdom of God* is a place where God's healing power is open to all, ought we not fight to create such a system of healing now. *If the kingdom of God* is a place where wealth and social status do not determine one's access to hope and prosperity, ought we not fight to make hope more accessible and prosperity more possible today? *If the kingdom of God* is a place where those who are weak are cared for by those who are strong, ought we not fight to care for those who can't care for themselves today? *If the kingdom of God* is a place where those who have share freely and generously with those who have not, ought we not figure out a way where we share our resources with the same proliferation and intensity that we share our opinions? *If the kingdom of God* is a place where all of reality is structured so that every one is equal before God and each other and that equality

has been structured into the very fabric of reality itself, shouldn't we Christians be working to structure a spiritual, social, economic, and political existence of equality in the here and now?

Imagine that. Imagine that the next time you pick up your Bible and read the Gospel stories about Jesus and his proclamation about the Kingdom of God and his living out the Kingdom of God. To read Jesus is to know Jesus. And the Jesus you will know through your reading of the Gospels is Jesus as prophet preoccupied with the proclamation and the proliferation of God's justice.