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“Discerning Truth in the Public Square”

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1965 Vatican II decree on “The Apostolate of the Laity”

Celebrates the “intrinsic value” of “[a]ll those things which make up the temporal order,” listing “family, culture, economic matters, the arts and professions, the laws of the political community, international relations, and other matters of this kind.” These derive their value from the fact that “God saw that all He had made was very good” (Gen 1:31,” and it describes these areas of creaturely engagement as having “a special dignity as a result of their relation to the human person, for whose service they were created” by the One who was pleased “to unite all things, both natural and supernatural, in Christ Jesus ‘so that in all things He may have the first place’ (Col. 1:18).”

Three-fold Creational mandate
(Gen.: 28):

Procreative: “Be fruitful and multiply”

Cultural: “Fill the earth and subdue it”

Earth-keeping: “Have dominion”

God’s Post-Fall Two-stage Renewal of
Cultural Purposes:

The Call to Israel: “My people”—to show forth in worship, politics, farming, economic arrangements, the arts, sexuality, family life

The Call to the Church: “Whatever you do in word and deed.”

Newbigin's prescribed actions

(1) *Proclaiming:*

"We have a Gospel to proclaim. We have to proclaim it not only to individuals in their personal and domestic lives....it must be heard in the conversations of economists, psychiatrists, educators, scientists, and politicians. We have to proclaim it not as a package of estimable values, but as the truth about... what every human being and every human society will have to reckon with."

Newbigin's prescribed actions

(2) *Learning;*

"We are missionaries, but we are also learners, only beginners... So mission is not a one-way promotion but a two-way encounter in which we learn more of what the Gospel means. We are learning as we go."

Newbigin's prescribed actions (3) *Engaging in dialogue*

"To affirm the Gospel as public truth is not to assert dominance but to invite dialogue... for the witnessing community does not know in advance what the message will entail, what will be the consequences of its acceptance in the several areas of human life."

Kosuke Koyama

The missionary must always be aware of being "sandwiched between Christ's saving reality" and the "other-than-myself reality" of the neighbors to whom the Gospel is being addressed, engaging in "two kinds of exegesis: exegesis of the Word of God and exegesis of the life and culture of the people among whom [the missionary] lives and works." This two-way exegesis allows the missionary to take the questions asked in a given cultural context "to the enlightenment and judgment of the Word of God."

Lewis Smedes: English Course

taught by a teacher who

“introduced me that day to a God the likes of whom I had never even heard about – a God who liked elegant sentences and was offended by dangling modifiers. Once you believe this, where can you stop? If the Maker of the Universe admired words well put together, think of how he must love sound thought well put together, and if he loved sound thinking, how he must love a Bach concerto; and if he loved a Bach concerto, think of how he prized any human effort to bring a foretaste, be it ever so small, of his kingdom of justice and peace and happiness to the victimized people of the world. In short, I met the Maker of the Universe, who loved the world he made and was dedicated to its redemption. I found the joy of the Lord, not at a prayer meeting, but in English Composition 101.”

Calvin on “Secular” thinkers

When we observe good insights at work in “secular writers,” we should “let that admirable light of truth shining in them teach us that the mind of man, though fallen and perverted from its wholeness, is nevertheless clothed and ornamented with God’s excellent gifts. If we regard the Spirit of God as the sole fountain of truth, we shall neither reject the truth itself, nor despise it where it shall appear, unless we wish to dishonor the Spirit of God... Those men whom Scripture [I Cor. 2: 14] calls ‘natural men’ were, indeed, sharp and penetrating in their investigation of inferior things. Let us, accordingly, learn by their example how many gifts the Lord left to human nature even after it was despoiled of its true good.”

Abraham Kuyper on “internal” workings of (non-salvific) common grace

On display “wherever civic virtue, a sense of domesticity, natural love, the practice of human virtue, the improvement of the public conscience, integrity, mutual loyalty among people, and a feeling for piety leaven life.” These phenomena are so obvious that we must choose between two options: “either surrender our confession of the deadly character of sin, or hold on to that confession with all our might, but then also confess along with it that there is a common grace at work that in many cases restrains the full, deadly effect of sin?”

Examples from Practitioners:

- *Ralph Winter, Producer, “Star Trek series,” First remake of “Planet of the Apes,” “X-Men”
- *David McFadzean, Writer for “Rosanne,” Producer of “Home Improvement”
- *Robert Lane, retired CEO, John Deere International



The Need for Cultural Discernment:

*David Tiede on “street language” wisdom”

*Newbigin: Much public falsehood

*Kuyper: Common grace and Antithesis

Framework for Discernment:

The Yoder distinction: “Created but fallen” vs. “Fallen but created.”

H. Richard Niebuhr:
Under the conditions of fallenness “culture is all corrupted order rather than order for corruption... It is perverted good, not evil; or it is evil as perversion and not as badness of being.”

Leslie Newbigin

“We can commit ourselves without reserve to all the secular work our shared humanity requires of us, knowing that nothing we do in itself is good enough to form part of that heavenly city’s building, knowing that everything—from our most secret prayers to our most public political acts—is part of that sin-stained human nature that must go down into the valley of death and judgment, and yet knowing that as we offer it up to the Father in the name of Christ and in the power of the Spirit, it is safe with him and—purged in fire—it will find its place in the holy city at the end.”