2009

God, Civil Society, and Congregations as Public Moral Companions

Gary M. Simpson
Luther Seminary, gsimpson@luthersem.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/faculty_articles

Part of the American Studies Commons, Political Science Commons, and the Practical Theology Commons

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/faculty_articles/277

Published Citation
God, Civil Society, and Congregations
as Public Moral Companions

Gary Simpson

World War II ended more than fifty years ago, but the rage of nations did not. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, rage now tends to erupt less often between nations, more often within a single national border. Today, in the midst of the culture wars, the rage of nations can be found internally in the United States, even in our heartland, which was demonstrated in the Oklahoma City bombing in the mid-1990s. The metaphors that saturate our daily discourse signal this raging: "the disuniting of America," "the melting pot at boiling point," "drive-by politics," "hate radio."

Some fifty years after America's victory abroad, will we suffer defeat at home? Will the noble American experiment of trying to be one nation simply overheat and explode? Something deeply moral is at stake in our nation's current rage. Conceivably, this rage, as a moral thermometer, measures both the thwarted hopes of the marginalized and the decreasing possibility for the good life of an increasing number of ordinary residents.

In the midst of this morally charged situation, how can Christian congregations hear again the call to serve in a public vocation? As we consider this prospect, three questions will guide our inquiry. First, where

might Christian congregations find a space in which they might attend to the public moral meaning of everyday rage? Such a public space is what we will refer to as civil society. Second, how can this public space of civil society be accessed so that its moral possibilities can be maximized? We will investigate communicative moral practice as the best model for accessing the moral possibilities of civil society. Third, on what basis are Christian congregations free to engage in communicative moral practice within civil society. Here we will probe the Trinitarian doctrine of the crucified God whose freeing agency empowers Christian vocation. What a communicative civil society needs, as it struggles with the moral meaning of our nation's rage, is the congregational vocation of public moral companion.\(^3\)

Civil Society: Enriching Our Impoverished Public Spaces

Already before the 1989 collapse of the Soviet Union, Central and Eastern European dissidents were focusing on the renewal of civil society. They did so even in the highly restricted areas that were dominated by Soviet control. Here we refer to civil society as "the space of un-coerced human association and also the set of relational networks — formed for the sake of family, faith, interest, and ideology, that fill this space." These dissidents cultivated their fledgling democracies by nurturing their diverse social networks of churches, unions, neighborhoods, movements, and societies "for promoting and preventing this and that."\(^4\)

3. The congregational vocation of public moral companion does not, of course, preclude other possible vocations. Furthermore, all congregational vocations stand intimately and distinguishably coupled with the congregation's fundamental missional identity as public witness to salvation through Jesus Christ (see Marc Kolden, "Creation and Redemption; Ministry and Vocation," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 14 [February 1987]: 31-37). The mission statement of my own institution, Luther Seminary, strives in a similar way to claim a distinguishable togetherness between ministry and vocation: "Luther Seminary educates leaders for Christian communities called and sent by the Holy Spirit to witness to salvation through Jesus Christ and to serve in God's world." My purpose in this chapter is to particularize the last phrase, "to serve in God's world," with a morally reflective and sociologically viable congregational strategy for the United States. For an especially winsome explication of the clause "to witness to salvation through Jesus Christ," see Patrick Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger: A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).

We have lived in the United States with such an approach to civil society for numerous generations, especially in the years since World War II. Most citizens have come to take it for granted in their everyday lives. But this neglect of attending to the dynamics of civil society has led to the impoverishment of public space. Our current increasing rage stands as a sign of the times of a diminished civil society.

The United States' emergence as a world leader during the twentieth century necessitated the cooperation of the two megasystems of modern life in our country: the democratic state and the market economy. Our victory in World War II had much to do — not everything, but much — with the successful cooperation of these two great systems. The success of these great systems in the war effort progressively drew, even seduced, large numbers of ordinary Americans to shift their focus: they began to fixate their attention and energies on the so-called "real world" of these great systems to the detriment of maintaining a public space of civil society.

This growing fixation by ordinary American people on the market economy and the democratic state draws on two rival Western heritages that were formulated over the last two centuries. Each of these intellectual heritages reveals something true about the pursuit of the good life in the modern era, but each does so by being too one-sided. The first heritage is the neoclassical republican tradition that was first proposed by Rousseau. He highlighted the moral agency of the citizen, and this has been the key for promoting democratic idealism ever since. In the republican heritage, the democratic political state is the public space of highest worth, and citizenship is the goal that all other moral agencies must serve.

The telling criticism of this heritage is not that democratic politics aren't good, for they surely are. Indeed, I would argue vigorously for the

democratic state as the best possible state in the modern era. Nonetheless, a problem remains. Paradoxically, even though the democratic state significantly touches the breadth of ordinary living, and for the larger part does so beneficially, it is not the everyday life of very many ordinary people. The attention, time, and energy of ordinary people is focused instead on earning a living.

Earning a living awakens the other great Western heritage, that of the market capitalist tradition. This heritage spurns the citizen's fixation on the democratic state and focuses it instead on the economy as the place where moral agency can bring about the good life. The marketplace becomes the space of highest worth. With market as the root metaphor, even the moral agency of economic production plays second fiddle to the consumerism that provides the good life. The controlling orthodoxy is that autonomous, personal, private choice is what drives the market for the benefit of all. Entrepreneurs cater to the choosing appetite of consumers, and they are esteemed as "much the best thing to be," as Michael Walzer puts it.⁵ It is to be a laissez-faire economy where, according to classic liberalism, economic production, consumption, and entrepreneurship must remain liberated from the state. Even the democratic state must keep its hands off the economy, thus the minimal state.

This one-sidedness of the market capitalist heritage shows up in several ways. Some come to the marketplace with far too few resources of their own to purchase the goods needed in order to participate effectively in our modern society. As a result, they feel left out and marginalized by the market economy. Many who come to the economic marketplace with enough resources to participate often do not sufficiently experience the good life in this space that they were looking for. Instead, they commonly experience a secular meaningless, even a heartless world. Many in this latter group search for a haven from the heartlessness of the marketplace, and they often end up in some cocooning space of private intimacy, such as the nuclear family or the familial-fashioned congregation. Disturbingly, far too many of them also find these private spaces to be just as heartless as the world of the economic marketplace or the democratic state. These encounters with heartlessness reveal that our private intimate spheres can be quite fragile. This is because they cannot flourish without being rooted in and accountable to the broader moral networks that constitute civil soci-

⁵ Walzer, "The Idea of Civil Society."
God, Civil Society, and Congregations as Public Moral Companions

ey. Furthermore, our private spaces too easily become colonized, whether under the consumptive strategies of the economic marketplace, or under the administrative necessities of the democratic state.

Tragically, neither of these two great heritages promotes an understanding of civil society, and thus each remains within its one-sidedness. This reality continues to contribute to the neglect and impoverishment of a morally significant public space. We revel in the cultural heritages of our everyday life-world. We coordinate our actions as groups according to perceived shared norms around them, and through them we develop individual and social identities. These are the key features of our everyday life-world: (a) our cultural embodiment, (b) our social integration, and (c) our socialization into citizenship and consumerism. These features have both an institutional dimension and a symbolic-metaphorical-linguistic dimension. Civil society as a public space corresponds to the institutional dimension of our everyday life-world. However, we have the potential, by enriching civil society, to diminish the colonizing effects of both the marketplace, with its medium of money, and the state, with its medium of administrative power. At the same time, enriching civil society could also provide the more private spaces of our everyday life-world with a richer moral milieu. This would stand in contrast to the most common pattern of today, in which each solitary individual or family is trying to stitch together its own moral spaces.

Congregations have traditionally exercised great influence regarding

6. Christopher Lasch's account of the family, *Haven in a Heartless World* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), remains flawed precisely because he does not account for the heartlessness of the family "haven" itself, leaving Lasch unable to locate and access the moral resources that families themselves desperately need today. See Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger*, for a trenchant account of the ideology of familial intimacy that infects much congregational life today.

7. See Wolfhart Pannenberg's theological analysis of "institutions" as an approach to the Reformation teaching about the "orders of creation" in *Anthropology in Theological Perspective* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 397-416. See also Carl Braaten, "God in Public Life: Rehabilitating the 'Orders of Creation,'" *First Things*, December 1990, 32-38. Robert Bellah and his associates correctly portray the difficulty that many Americans have in understanding how much of our everyday lives is lived in and through institutions; see Bellah, *The Good Society* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 3-18. Though much is good in this book, Bellah et al. also do not make "civil society" a theme. This remains a major flaw in their conceptualization of "the public church," where "God Goes to Washington" is the beginning of their analysis.
Gary Simpson

the symbolic-metaphorical-linguistic dimension in addressing the three basic tasks noted above that are associated with the everyday life-world. Still, in our contemporary situation, the ongoing survival of the life-world needs the institutional dimension that we have called "civil society." Here is where a plurality of institutional embodiments can come together for the mutual enrichment and recreation of a lively moral milieu. The multiplicity of struggling — and often isolated — institutions that are native to civil society are beginning to cry out to one another for help. Given a morally rich enough texture to civil society, even economic and government institutions could enter this space without dominating it. This would help bring valuable moral assistance to these institutions and their systemic worlds. By giving ear to these cries for help in developing a civil society, Christian congregations are recognizing a renewed calling, a public moral vocation. What kind of access is available to congregations for engaging the moral possibilities of civil society as they serve as public moral companions to the institutions of civil society?

Models of Moral Access to Civil Society

During those times when Americans have attended to civil society, three models have functioned to give institutions and Christian congregations access to its moral possibilities: the agonistic, the liberal, and the communicative. Historically, the first two have dominated the American imagination and practice; unfortunately, as we shall see, this has also contributed to the current impoverishment of civil society. In the agonistic model, the dominant practices of civil society revolve around a competitive struggle among rival versions of personal moral virtue. In this model each rival tradition presents itself as a pure, self-sufficient, and cohesive totality of virtue. A tradition vies for preeminence over other traditions by displaying its moral ideals as publicly as possible. Each strives to gain the support of the majority of citizens who begin as passive onlookers, continue as active imitators, and finish as admired moral masters. These agonistic practices tend to lead to the dominance of a single agenda of personal virtue, which, in turn, downplays those of rival traditions.

With the agonistic model, civil society remains particularly susceptible to the technological temptations of the now ever-present sound bite. Conventional clichés, simplistic stereotyping, and either/or scenarios fill the airwaves with simplistic moral assertions. Communitarian heritages often promote this model, as do certain Christian movements with a more sectarian slant. The advantage of the agonistic model is that personal virtues for practical face-to-face living are cultivated via the economy and politics; but these systems are themselves shielded from moral consideration. The social costs remain steep.

The liberal model of civil society originated in order to squelch the moral totalitarian consequences of the agonistic civil society. In the liberal model, moral discourse is subject to the constraint of neutrality whenever a single moral tradition asserts that its moral conception of the good life is superior to others. The constraint of neutrality prohibits three things: (a) agonistic trumping; (b) translating moral disagreements into a supposedly neutral framework; and (c) transcending moral disagreements by imagining some hypothetical circumstance. Instead of these approaches, moral traditions must agree not to disagree in public; rather, they must confine their moral disagreements to private spheres. Not only does this model privatize the act of disagreeing; it also privatizes the very terrain of controversial subject matters. The result is that liberal civil society accedes more and more relevant moral issues to the private-sector economy, or to lifestyle intimacy, or to the religious conscience. Along the way, the liberal model also privatizes the congregation. Paradoxically, the practices of the liberal model contribute to the withering away of the very space of civil society.

In the midst of these two traditional models of civil society, a new model — the communicative model — is emerging. A communicative civil society shares certain features with the other dominant models. Like the agonistic model and unlike the liberal model of neutrality, it welcomes questions of moral truth that have practical import for the everyday life-


world. Unlike the agonistic model, with its characteristic practices of elitist moral display and purist moral trumping, the communicative civil society's hallmark is that its claims to practical moral truth must be redeemed critically through participatory practices. Participatory practices empower institutions that are affected by a moral claim to have a say in the formulation and adoption of moral norms. Boldly stated, the communicative civil society "comes into existence whenever and wherever all affected by general social and political norms of action engage in a practical discourse, evaluating their validity."11

By elevating participatory aspects, the communicative model eschews the totalizing and colonizing tendencies of the agonistic model, but without succumbing to the liberal model of public moral neutrality. The communicative civil society develops the capacity for creative moral possibilities through communicative practices; it also focuses on the systematic distortions that often accompany the self-interested bias of any single moral tradition.12 Furthermore, the communicative model helps to overcome the rigid boundaries that have been built between the public and private by promoting their overlapping terrains.13

The Crucified God and Creative Agency

Behind this proposal for a communicative civil society breathes a Trinitarian doctrine of the crucified God and a communicative mode of creative agency. This represents our third line of inquiry toward a congregational vocation of serving as a public moral companion. The Christian doctrine of God historically has recognized a close connection between creation and God; Christian history also testifies to the fateful confusion — indeed, fusion — between the two precisely because of their close connection. When creation and God are confused, creative moral agency becomes

12. Communicative ethics, such as Reinhold Niebuhr's, exercises a sharply double focus on both human moral resources and self-interested limitations. See esp. his Moral Man and Immoral Society (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932), xxiv. Niebuhr's subtitle, A Study in Ethics and Politics, manifests the weakness of his account that overlooks the public space of civil society as well as the communicative access to that space.

74
instrumentalized: it becomes a mode of moral soteriology in which the fundamental human relationship with God is fashioned on human moral agency. Such an outcome would subvert our proposal for the public moral companionship of Christian congregations. Therefore, we need a preliminary critical inquiry into the Christian doctrine of God. Two classic times of confessing will fund our exploration: the Trinitarian creed of Nicaea and Martin Luther’s theology of the cross.

The Trinitarian Creed of Nicaea

The first confession to speak of the proper relationship between the doctrine of God and creation arrived with the Creed of Nicaea in 325 C.E. It was immediately defended by Athanasius, who was in disputation with the Arian doctrine of God and its soteriological significance of Jesus. The debate that ensued provided the down payment for a more thoroughgoing critique of a moral soteriology that was based in a creation-mediated doctrine of God. Such a critical perspective is helpful precisely because we propose that congregations have a public moral vocation for the sake of the created world.

Of course, Athanasius offers substantial and lengthy theological contributions toward the doctrine of God, and yet he establishes in a mere two paragraphs several lasting insights.14 We will concentrate on four points: (a) the logic in the doctrine of God; (b) the soteriological difference in the contesting logics of God; (c) the bitter root of the Arian logic of God; and (d) the soteriologically sweet fruit of the Trinitarian logic of God.

The primary identifying attribute of the Arian doctrine of God is “one God, alone un originate.”15 Athanasius notes that the meaning of “un-originate” is thereby logically indicated by its relationship to things originated, to things created. That is, the identity and name of God come by way of created reality. “[F]rom the fruit is the tree known.”16 The Arians


16. Here, in Ar. 1.35, as in other places, Athanasius cites Matt. 12:33.
agree. That is why, in their logic of God, they count Jesus as among things originated, a creature. He is the primordial, perfect creature through whom the rest of creation has its origin; but, as they emphasize repeatedly, he is most assuredly a creature and only a creature.17 The Arians will ascribe any biblical attribute to Jesus so long as Jesus remains always and only on the creature side of the Creator/creation divide.

When teaching this controversy regarding Jesus and the divinity of the Son, we theologians usually assume we are preaching to the choir, and that the choir already knows how bad it is to place the Son on the creation side of the divide. Fortunately, Athanasius does not hold such faulty assumptions. He realizes how seductive it is to name God as “the un-originated,” since true Christian piety recognizes God as Creator and also ascribes to God other attributes, such as “Almighty” and “Lord of the Powers.” To expose the Arians’ bait and switch of their doctrine of God for the Trinitarian doctrine, he must enter more deeply into the bitter logic of the Arian teaching.18

Athanasius’s first step is simply to place the two logics side by side. Arians name God “un-originated” because they know and identify the deity only from God’s originated works, with Jesus being the foremost of God’s created works. A Christian Trinitarian view names God as “Father” because it knows and identifies the deity of this God from the Son. Athanasius sees this Trinitarian logic of God present in such classical Scripture passages as Matthew 11:27 and John 14:9. The bitterness of the Arian “one God, alone un-originated” remains closely bound up with the soteriological implications of God being so named. “Soteriology is pitted against soteriology, and neither adversary thinks otherwise.”19 Athanasius and the Arians also agree that the Arian creature-centered soteriology is emphatically a moral soteriology.

18. Ar. 1.1
The soteriological difference in the contesting logics of God manifests itself in the phenomenon of “praise and honor.” These are Athanasius’s soteriological code words in our two paragraphs. Here Athanasius is at his best. “For if they [the Arians] cared at all about praise and honor for the Father, it was necessary — and this was better and greater — that they know and say ‘God the Father’ rather than to name him thus [the unoriginated].” For, as he continues, “the more the Word differs from originated things, so much more would the statement that God is ‘Father’ differ from the statement that he is ‘un-originated.’”

Following John 5:23, Athanasius comprehends deeply what the Arians ignore, namely, that whoever dishonors the Son will inevitably end up dishonoring the Father. “Praise and honor” are the anvil on which a creation-centered soteriology gets hammered out. He pursues the crux of his critique by canceling out the genetic source for the Arian logic of God. He wants to maintain a creature-centered soteriology and its warrant in a creation-mediated doctrine of God.

Athanasius never tires of pointing out that it is the Greeks who discovered the un-originated and who bequeathed their logic of God to the Arians. Not only is this identification of God unscriptural, but it is also suspect, “suspicious” in Cardinal Newman’s famous translation, for it has “variegated meaning” by which our thoughts are “carried in many directions” (Ar. 1.34). It is no wonder that if one would waver with the Unoriginated-mediated-through-the-originated, that one would also wobble in one’s “praise and honor.” It’s also no wonder that the Arians have so little “confidence” in their discourse of their doctrine of God (Ar. 1.33).

In the paragraphs that follow our two key ones, Athanasius continues to press the Arians about the indeterminate character of their soteriology and doctrine of God. The Arian logic leaves its followers trapped in the same cul-de-sac in which Greek religion had always dead-ended, that is, its fate, its fickleness, and the dishonoring of God that it engenders. Athanasius credits Paul in Rom. 1–2 for exposing this trap. Jesus as the incarnated divine Son of the Father is a “better and greater” story altogether, constituting the very trustworthiness of the deity and culminat-

20. Ar. 1.33.
22. Paul Tillich’s analysis of the Greek preoccupation with fate remains one of the most salient; see Tillich, The Protestant Era (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 3-15.
ing in everlasting praise and honor of God. Taken together, Athanasius’s defense of the Trinitarian logic of God offers us a substantial critique of a creation-centered doctrine of God. It also provides a budding hermeneutic of the trustworthiness of the Trinitarian God that is rooted in the logic of the reciprocal dependence of the Father and the Son (Ar. 2.64-72).

**Luther’s Theology of the Cross**

Luther’s theology of the cross picks up on this. First of all, it offers us an intensified and expanded critique of the confusion of creation and God, thus preparing for their proper relationship. Second, it provides a more fully developed hermeneutic of divine trustworthiness that freely empowers congregations for the vocation of public moral companion with the creative agency of “the crucified God.”

Luther’s retrieval of the biblically inscribed theology of the cross flowers in his twenty-eight theological theses known as the *Heidelberg Disputation*. And it flourished as the thoroughgoing criterion of his theology throughout his career. Luther contrasts the theology of the cross with the full-blown theology of glory that was officially enthroned in medieval scholasticism. However, he emphasizes, as his interpreters often do not, that the source of the theology of glory lies within the sinful human condition. Strictly speaking, then, his critique focuses less on the “theology” of glory than on “theologians” of glory, every old Adam and old Eve included. Not until Theses 19-21 of the *Heidelberg Disputation* does Luther forthrightly name the disputing modes of theology — of glory and cross. He carefully readies us for the conflict in the theses by criticizing the moral

---


soteriology of good works (1-12) and free will (13-18). In fact, his breakthrough is to notice the connection of a moral soteriology with the logic of the doctrine of God in the theology of glory.\textsuperscript{26}

The theologian of glory, Thesis 19 declares, is that person "who looks upon the invisible things [being] of God as though they were clearly perceptible in those things which have actually happened [in those things which have been made, created]."\textsuperscript{27} These invisible things of God (\textit{invisibilia Dei}) are, following Paul in Romans 1:19-20, God's power and divinity, wisdom, righteousness, goodness, and so forth. Here, in the glory theologian's logic of God, we hear the once-waning echo of the Arians' creation-mediated logic of God waxing eloquent again.

In the centuries following Nicaea, medieval scholastic theology had returned to and even perfected the logic of a creation-mediated doctrine of God. They did so by returning to the auspices of Aristotelian philosophical assumptions. As Peter Lombard says authoritatively in the \textit{Sentences}, "The human creature perceives the Creator in what is created in the world by virtue of the excellence through which the human towers above all other creatures and by virtue of the human creature's accord with all creation."\textsuperscript{28} This inductive reasoning from the effects to the cause, from the creation to the Creator, lies behind all cosmological arguments for the existence of God. It is a perspective that is available to the gentiles in their efforts to develop a logic of God. But the problem, as Paul notes, is that humanity, following such a logic, does not end up honoring God. As Luther acknowledges in Theses 19 and 20, honoring God comprises the truth of a "wise and worthy" humanity. So far, Luther's critique of a creation-mediated doctrine of God corresponds to Athanasius's.

Indeed, Luther enlarges Athanasius's critique of the creation-mediated logic of God. He notes that the creation-mediated logic of God inevitably eventuates in a moral soteriology that instrumentalizes creation, God, and creative agency. This connection becomes explicit in Theses 22-24. Here he focuses on the use — or rather, the misuse — by hu-

\textsuperscript{26} Von Loewenich makes this point in \textit{Luther's Theology of the Cross}, 19-20.
\textsuperscript{27} The bracketed translation comes from Moltmann, \textit{The Crucified God}, 208, and offers a better understanding of Luther than does the standard English-language American edition. See von Loewenich's valuable insights regarding the translation and interpretation of this thesis.
\textsuperscript{28} Cited by Moltmann, \textit{The Crucified God}, 209. Moltmann's explication of the assumptions and logic of the theology of glory is still one of the best available in English.
mans of the knowledge of and relationship with God available through the creation-mediated logic of God. First, that logic of God is not of itself evil. It is a wisdom that sees the invisible things of God in God’s created works as perceived by humans. This is true for Luther as it is for Paul, because God is the one who makes himself available through creation in order to be praised and honored. However, people misuse this knowledge of God and the accompanying moral knowledge of God’s law in the worst manner. Along with the innate capacities of “excellence” and “accord” that Lombard perceived in human nature, Luther targets the relational realities of “the old Adam” vis-à-vis God (Theses 18 and 21).

Luther notes that sinful humans usually take the credit for their goodness of creaturely life, and for the basic trustworthiness on which the created world appears to rest. Furthermore, being “so presumptuous” (Thesis 18), humans take credit for establishing their fundamental relationship with God based on the righteousness of their own moral agency. As a result, people become “increasingly blinded and hardened,” and eventually they end up “completely” so (Thesis 22). Creation-mediated knowledge of God and of the moral law is never pure. It is always woven tightly together with one’s own interest. In the case of sinners, their interests tend toward exalting the trustworthiness of human moral agency in establishing, maintaining, and completing the relationship with God. Thereby sinners instrumentalize God’s good created world, and, in effect, they even try to instrumentalize God’s own creative agency. Creation ends up suffering under such instrumentalization.

God’s creative and life-preserving “civil use of the law” can never be severed from what Luther and the Reformation call God’s “theological use of the law,” for “through the law comes knowledge of sin” (Rom. 3:20). 29 Luther incorporates this interpretive breakthrough regarding the law into Thesis 23: “The law brings the wrath of God, kills, reviles, accuses, judges, and condemns everything that is not in Christ.” It is at the end of the line of the theology of glory, of the creation-mediated knowledge of God. Here is where sinners encounter “the alien work of God” (Thesis 4) — deus absconditus (“the hidden God”), as Luther often puts it. Even Christ on the cross executes the judgment of God as “works are dethroned and the old Adam . . . is crucified” (Thesis 21). With this under-

29. For a classic discussion by Luther of the double use of the law, see his commentary on Gal. 3:19 (LW 26: 306-16).
standing, Luther intensifies Athanasius's critique of the creation-mediated logic of God.

Any proposal that extols the notion of the creational vocation of public moral companion, we believe, must first take this detour through a systematic critique of the creation-mediated logic of God. But our critical detour, while salutary, does not seem by itself to warrant our positive proposal. On the contrary, such a critique might be construed to warrant just the opposite, that is, congregational disengagement from the created world's public moral spaces. This has often been the case in the history of Christian theology. It is important that we keep the diagnostic seriousness of the critique coupled with the hermeneutic of the trustworthiness of the crucified God (Theses 4 and 7). 30

The theology of the cross does not culminate with the crucified Christ as God's alien work of crucifying sinners. Rather, notes Luther, "an action which is alien [opus alienum] to God's nature results in a deed belonging to his very nature [opus proprium]: he makes a person a sinner so that he may make him righteous" (Thesis 16). As Scripture often testifies, God works against appearances (Theses 4-6), "under the opposite" (sub contrario). 31 Despite the sinful misuse of the knowledge of God mediated through creation, God "willed again to be recognized in suffering . . . so that those who did not honor God as manifested in his works should honor him as he is hidden in his suffering" (Thesis 20). We have in the crucified Christ a second hiddenness of God that constitutes God's righteousness-creating, and thus God's trustworthiness. 32

30. As Pelikan notes, "To a considerable degree, the definition of sin in church doctrine appears to have developed a posteriori, by a process which, proceeding from the salvation in Christ and from infant baptism, made the diagnosis fit the cure" (The Christian Tradition, 1: 204).

31. Perhaps Luther's most famous statement in this regard comes from The Bondage of the Will. Summarizing "the nature of Christian faith itself," he says: "[F]aith has to do with things not seen [Heb. 11:1]. Hence in order that there may be room for faith, it is necessary that everything which is believed should be hidden. It cannot be more deeply hidden than under an object, perception, or experience which is contrary to it [sub contrario], . . . This is not the place to speak at length on this subject, but those who have read my books have had it quite plainly set forth for them" (LW 33: 62).

Luther vividly describes the trustworthiness of God’s righteousness-creating through the image of “the happy exchange.” Commenting on the power of faith, Luther says:

[F]aith unites the soul with Christ as a bride is united with her bridegroom. By this mystery, as the Apostle teaches, Christ and the soul become one flesh [Eph. 5:31-32]. And if they are one flesh and there is between them a true marriage — indeed the most perfect of all marriages, since human marriages are but poor examples of this one true marriage — it follows that everything they have they hold in common, the good as well as the evil. Accordingly the believing soul can boast of and glory in whatever Christ has as though it were its own, and whatever the soul has Christ claims as his own.33

With or without the phrase “the happy exchange,” and with or without the marriage imagery, the redemptive dynamic of the happy exchange remains central in Luther’s writing, especially in his sermons, lectures, and pastoral advice. For instance, in a 1516 letter to his fellow Augustinian monk George Spenlein, Luther urges him to “learn Christ and him crucified. Learn to praise him and, despairing of yourself, say, ‘Lord Jesus, you are my righteousness, just as I am your sin. You have taken upon yourself what is mine and have given to me what is yours. You have taken upon yourself what you were not and have given to me what I was not.’”34

A few months after the Heidelberg Disputation, Luther preached his famous sermon entitled “Two Kinds of Righteousness,” based on

33. The phrase “the happy exchange” (in German, der frohele Wechsel) appears in the German-language version of The Freedom of a Christian. Because the translation of The Freedom of a Christian in the standard English-language American edition was made from Luther’s Latin original, the precise phrase “happy exchange” does not appear in the American edition, though the marriage imagery does. The “happy exchange” phrase does appear in Bertram Lee Woolf’s English translation of The Freedom of a Christian because he translated from Luther’s German version (Reformation Writings of Martin Luther, vol. 1 [London: Lutterworth Press, 1952], 363).

34. LW 48: 12. On the power of faith, see Luther’s famous commentary on Gal. 3:6 (LW 26: 226-36). Robert W. Bertram offers the most insightful close reading of Luther’s redemptive dynamic as it appears in Luther’s famous 1535 Lectures on Galatians (“Luther on the Unique Mediatorship of Christ,” in H. George Anderson, J. Francis Stafford, Joseph A. Burgess, eds., The One Mediator, the Saints, and Mary [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1992] 249-62). Bertram also notes how the “happy exchange” redemptive dynamic appears in Luther’s explanation of the second article of the Apostles’ Creed in The Small Catechism.
Philippians 2:5-6. Here he uses the redemptive dynamic of the happy exchange to explicate “alien righteousness, that is the righteousness of another, instilled from without.” “Just as a bridegroom possesses all that is his bride’s and she all that is his, for the two have all things in common because they are one flesh, so Christ and the church are one spirit.” Later in the sermon, Luther highlights the bearing and extending character of the crucified Christ by contrasting him with that self-sufficient form of God that Christ “relinquished to the Father.”

We now stand at the precipice of another, often overlooked, aspect of Luther’s theology of the cross. This is the basis of soteriology in his understanding of the Trinitarian being of God. Luther extols the dependence of the Father’s mercy on the persuasive mediation of the crucified Son. He knows that the soteriological effects of the happy exchange between Christ and church believers are anchored in what the Crucified effects in the very life of God.

35. LW 31: 297.

36. LW 31: 301. See also Luther’s interpretations of Gal. 2:20 and 3:13, which are classic discussions of Christ’s bearing and extending (LW 26: 172-79, 276-88). See how David Fredrickson exploits the bearing and extending dynamic adhering in Paul’s slavery metaphor in Philippians 2 (in his essay in this volume).

37. LW 51: 277-80; LW 24: 252. One of Luther’s most famous discussions in this regard takes place in his interpretation of Gal. 1:3. “But why,” Luther inquires, “does the apostle add ‘and from our Lord Jesus Christ’? Did it not suffice to say ‘[Grace to you and peace] from God the Father’? Why does he link Jesus Christ with the Father?” (LW 26: 28ff.) Robert Bertram follows this line of inquiry by focusing on “that singular dependence of the divine Child upon the Parent, so powerful in its effect that in the process the Parent, indeed the whole Trinity, takes on a new identity and new associations. To ask for less god than that — but now the Christian answer is obviously shaping the question — not only risks moralism but risks underasking” (Bertram, “Putting the Nature of God into Language: Naming the Trinity,” in Carl Braaten, ed., Our Naming of God: Problems and Prospects of God-Talk Today [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989], 97). Jürgen Moltmann follows a similar line of inquiry: “I turned the question around, and instead of asking just what God means for us human beings in the cross of Christ, I asked too what this human cross of Christ means for God” (The Crucified God, x). Indeed, David Fredrickson finds this rhythm within the famous Christ Hymn of Philippians 2. Or again: “It is crucial to note that as the story unfolds God’s action comes after Christ’s. This fact, along with the ‘wherefore (διό)’ of verse 9, implies that God’s action in exalting Jesus and giving him the name beyond every name is God’s response to Christ Jesus’ innovative extension of participation in the divine community… The Christ Hymn therefore... narrates the actual formation of God’s will in response to the political agency of Jesus Christ” (64-65). See also Eberhard Jüngel’s explanation of the “twofold interruption” of the Crucified: “God interrupts the continuity of our life as the one who allows our sin and death to interrupt his
acter and shape of his trustworthy, bodily communion with sinners. The Father’s sending of the Spirit to raise the forsaken Jesus testifies to — indeed, constitutes — the Father’s favorable reception of the Son’s cruciform character as the Father’s own. Ultimately, Christian soteriology rests in the reality of the crucified God. It rests in the reciprocal dependence of the Father and the Son through the Spirit, as Athanasius emphasized long ago. 38

Luther probes the connection between soteriology and the doctrine of God while explicating the communication or sharing of attributes, the so-called *communicatio idiomatum*. These lie at the heart of the Trinitarian and Christological theology of the first four ecumenical councils. Luther’s explanation of the critique of Nestorianism by the Council of Ephesus in 431 C.E. is particularly pithy:

Now if I were to preach, “Jesus, the carpenter of Nazareth (for the gospels call him ‘carpenter’s son’ [Matt. 13:55]) is walking over there down the street, fetching his mother a jug of water and a penny’s worth of bread so that he might eat and drink with his mother, and the same carpenter, Jesus is the very true God in one person,” Nestorius would grant me that and say that this is true. But if I were to say, “There goes God down the street, fetching water and bread so that he might eat and drink with his mother,” Nestorius would not grant me this, but says, “To fetch water, to buy bread, to have a mother, to eat and drink with her, are *idiomata* or attributes of human and not of divine nature.” And again, if I say, “The carpenter Jesus was crucified by the Jews and the same Jesus is the true God,” Nestorius would agree that this is true. But if I say, “God

own life. . . . That is, man is defined by the eternal Father who allows himself to be interrupted by the crucifixion of his Son and, in this way, interrupts the continuity of our life; and, at the same time, in the loving unity of the Spirit with his Son, he enhances his life and ours” (“The Truth of Life: Observations on Truth as the Interruption of the Continuity of Life,” in R. W. A. McKinney, ed., *Creation, Christ and Culture: Studies in Honour of T. F. Torrance* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1976), 236. I am grateful to Jonathan Case for this reference and for the importance of this notion in Jüngel.

38. Wolfhart Pannenberg has undertaken the most thorough investigation of the nature and implications of the reciprocal dependence of the Father and the Son and especially the notion, largely undeveloped in the entire history of Trinitarian theology, of the Father’s dependence on the Son mediated in the history of Jesus. The underdevelopment of the reciprocity of the persons discloses “a defect which plagues the Trinitarian theological language of both East and West, namely, that of seeing the relations among Father, Son, and Spirit exclusively as relations of origin” (*Systematic Theology* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991], 1: 319; see 308-19).
was crucified by the Jews; he says, “No! For crucifixion and death are idomata or attributes not of divine but of human nature.”

Nestorius could not quite bring himself to Luther’s conclusion, that is, to the bold Christian confession of a crucified God. This is because, as Luther notes, he held too deeply to the Greco-Roman basic assumption “that God and death are irreconcilable. It seemed terrible to him to hear that God should die.” Luther even chastises the Council of Ephesus for its “far too little” confession in this regard. Therefore, Luther emphasizes that “only . . . if God’s death and a dead God lie in the balance” is our salvation accomplished.

The person and work of the Holy Spirit now come into the foreground, as Luther emphasizes in The Large Catechism. The salvation accomplished by the crucified God would “remain hidden,” even “vain” and “all lost,” if it were not for the agency of the Holy Spirit, who puts the accomplished salvation to “use” in us that it might be “enjoyed” by us and by God. Word and Sacrament are, of course, the publicly available media of the Holy Spirit’s agency in this regard.

The idea that through Word and Sacrament believers are incorporated into the communion of the Son with the Father finds its basis in the

39. LW 41: 101. Whenever Luther richly maximizes the communication of attributes, he is in essence beginning to burst the old Trinitarian wineskins with the fixation on the relations of origin to the neglect of the full reciprocity of the persons. Nevertheless, when Luther consciously turns to the doctrine of the Trinity, he remains largely within the strictures of the trajectory charted by Augustine (e.g., LW 15: 300-12). This situation warrants a more thorough exploitation, one that I hope to undertake in the future in the context of the connection between contemporary Trinitarian theology and the doctrine of the atonement.

40. LW 41: 102.
41. LW 41: 104.
42. LW 41: 103. Robert Jenson has a pithy way of putting Luther’s point: “Christology is, or should be, the thinking involved in getting over the self-evidencies about God that antecedent religion will in each case of the gospel’s missionary penetration have hidden in the minds of this new sort of believers. A Christological proposition is adequate just insofar as it outrages something comprehensively and radically that everybody at a time and place supposes ‘of course’ to be true of anything worthy to be called God” (Jenson, Unbaptized God: The Basic Flaw in Ecumenical Theology [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992], 120). Jenson rightly notes — though I differ with his analysis of “the basic flaw” — that for Luther the traditional interpretations of and conclusions regarding the communication of attributes were “too puny” (129).
personhood of the Holy Spirit as the very "condition and medium" of the personal communion of the Son and the Father.\(^{44}\) Furthermore, "free agreement" marks the very mode of the personal communion at the heart of the Triune life of God.\(^{45}\) Finally, this communion of free agreement of the Father and the Son with and through the Holy Spirit exists as a "communicative" free agreement, because in Scripture and for the Reformation, there is "no spirit that is not word."\(^{46}\) In the beginning was the "conversation" and the "conversation" was with God and the "conversation" was God. So Luther!\(^{47}\) Not surprisingly, this communicative free agreement of the triune God constitutes the source and mode of God's creative agency as well.\(^{48}\)

The Trinitarian life of the crucified God forms the basis for the communicative mode of God's own creative agency. So also, it forms our vocatioal participation in this mode of creative moral agency. We are now coming full circle. Christian vocation is freedom from our sinful instrumentalization of the created world that is effected by the trustworthiness of the alien righteousness of the Crucified and received by faith. In this vocational freedom, the entire created world remains the media and "masks" (larvae dei) of the triune God's creative agency.\(^{49}\) Furthermore, Christian vocation is freedom for our "proper righteousness," which always retains its "basis," "cause," and "source" in Christ's alien righteousness.\(^{50}\) In this vocational freedom we remain cooperators with God's creative agency (cooperatio dei) to bring temporal life into existence, to nurture that life, and to extend that life to all others.\(^{51}\)

50. LW 31: 298.
On this point *The Large Catechism* is striking:

Although much that is good comes to us from men, we receive it all from God through his command and ordinance. Our parents and all authorities — in short, all people placed in the position of neighbors — have received the command to do us all kinds of good. So we receive our blessings not from them, but from God through them. Creatures are only the hands, channels, and means through which God bestows all blessings. . . . Therefore, this way of receiving good through God's creatures is not to be disdained, nor are we arrogantly to seek other ways and means than God has commanded, for that would be not receiving our blessings from God but seeking them from ourselves. 52

Might there not also be emerging in our time and place, by God's own bestowal, a newly created and creative "good," that is, a communicative civil society? This imaginative possibility, of course, lies behind the proposal for the vocation of congregations as public moral companions. Such a vocation is, indeed, to the "praise and honor" of God.

**The Vocation of Congregations as Public Moral Companions**

Vocations are the places and ways that one and all participate in God's ongoing creative work. Through their vocations, people nurture and sustain temporal life in the world. In trusting the gospel of Jesus Christ, we acknowledge these locations as God's creative work on behalf of our neighbors and ourselves as God's creative companions. Like an individual, a congregation also has a variety of vocations to bring God's creative work to bear on the life of our neighbors and our neighborhoods. Congregations that build up a moral milieu that makes life in our public communities possible are living out just such a calling. Civil society is the location for serving out this vocation of being a public moral companion. And communicative moral practice is the best model for nurturing the modern moral milieu.

Vocationally, congregations participate in the moral life of civil society in two ways, one more internal and the other more external. Internally, congregations have often assisted families in the task of the moral formation of its members, particularly of the young, and this will continue as a

prime moral vocation of the congregation. However, as they engage in this vocation of moral formation, congregations sometimes fall prey to the temptation to view themselves as private Christian enclaves where they can protect themselves from the truth claims of other moral traditions. However, in our increasingly pluralistic public environment, multiple traditions now make claims on congregations. They bid congregations to offer justification, in the sense of ethical grounding, for the truth character of the moral formation imparted through congregational life. In this way a congregation exists, by default if not by design, as a meeting place of private and public life. 53

It is in the meeting of the private and public that congregations respond to their more external moral vocation as public moral companions. Today an increasing number of the institutions of civil society need moral companions who will accompany them in addressing the problems of contemporary life. Of course, this is a risky vocation, because Christian congregations do not have a corner on the moral wisdom needed in many conflicted situations. As a public moral companion, a congregation becomes an encumbered community, encumbered with the moral predicaments of the other institutions of civil society. However, Christian congregations are no strangers to an encumbered life, to a life of the cross. Herein lies the redemptive moment that characterizes every vocation, when the encumbered companionship puts a congregation's efforts of self-protection to death. 54

In summary, consider certain marks that characterize the congregational vocation of serving as a public moral companion. As public moral companions, congregations acknowledge a conviction that they participate in God's ongoing creative work. In a communicative civil society, congregations exhibit a compassionate commitment to other institutions and their moral predicaments. The commitment of moral companions always yields a critical and self-critical — and thus a fully communicative — procedure for moral engagement. Finally, as public moral companions, congregations participate with other institutions of communicative civil society to help create and strengthen the moral fabric that fashion a life-giving contemporary society.