



WEEK 7: "REPENTANCE AND HUMILITY AS POLITICAL WITNESS" BY JENNIFER MCBRIDE

[WATCH OR LISTEN TO THE SESSION: BIT.LY/2JMOTLY](https://bit.ly/2JMOTLY)

SYNOPSIS: The gospel is political because it concerns how we order our lives in relation to neighbor, strangers, and enemies. Christian discipleship is about following Jesus into the world as he embodies and proclaims the reign of God—a reign that is made concrete when we love enemies, welcome strangers, have mercy, seek peace, etc.

The politics of the Gospel offer a third way beyond partisan politics. But this third way is difficult in a culture that is so highly partisan, divided and, in many ways, marked by a triumphalism that contaminates all sides. Triumphalism, as Jennifer McBride defines it, is arrogant or self-righteous confidence in a set of ideas or beliefs that closes down productive learning—confidence in political or religious ideologies that is disconnected from embodied engagement with the world.

A non-triumphal witness is necessary for two reasons: 1. Flourishing of a common good in our pluralistic democracy, and 2. Faithfulness to the crucified Christ. But we also need a public witness that is bold, as we attempt to remain faithful to our Christian witness. How might we participate in our culture in a way that is both non-triumphal and retains our distinctive Christian witness? McBride suggests that it comes through a disposition of confession and repentance.

Confession – a pattern of speaking arising from humble acknowledgement of complicity in specific injustice and the church’s inherent entanglement with society’s structural sin. Repentance – the church’s concrete social and political engagement that arises from taking responsibility for such sin. Energized by courage and hope because the church can become a vehicle of concrete redemption and participates in God’s healing transformation of this world.

Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer views the Church as called out, chosen for a mission, but not specially favored, morally or physically. He asks, “How do we go about being ‘religionless-worldly’ Christians? How can we be ekklesia, those who are called out, without understanding ourselves religiously as privileged, but instead seeing ourselves as belonging wholly to the world? Christ would then no longer be the object of religion, but something else entirely, truly lord of the world.” The importance here is being in solidarity with the world.

If we are not morally superior to the world, McBride says, we need a public witness that is not based on privilege or asserting power over others. What does it mean to be chosen? The church is chosen to carry on the work of the incarnate crucified and risen God. The church’s election is not for itself, but the church is chosen to exist for others, for the world. And it does so, by taking the form or the shape of Jesus in public life.

Jesus belonged wholly to the world by taking the form of a sinner, culminating on the cross by taking

responsibility for sin. Jesus was in solidarity with sinners in three ways:

1. He assumed sinful flesh (Romans 8:3) (solidarity with humans).
2. He was baptized with sinners in response to John's call to repent. In being baptized by John, Jesus numbers himself with the transgressors.
3. Refusing to be called good, Jesus accepted responsibility for sin as a convicted criminal on the cross.

Bonhoeffer comments, "In an incomprehensible reversal of all righteous and pious thought, God declares Godself guilty towards the world, and thereby extinguishes the world's guilt; God treads the humble way of reconciliation and thereby sets the world free." Ultimately, Jesus displays a posture of repentance. Jesus' posture displays an active determination that judgement falls on him and not on others. This is the definitive expression of goodness and love.

We need to declare Jesus is Lord and participate in our culture through a disposition of repentance—demonstrating sorrow and confession for our own sinfulness and complicity in society's structural sin. This makes for a non-triumphal witness to Christ, a witness that breaks through partisan politics and establishes solidarity with sinners.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How do you think the Church should display power/influence in the public sphere? What have you seen that is effective in witnessing to the Gospel of Jesus?
2. What are some of the ways we unknowingly demonstrate "triumphalism," and how does it impact the way culture perceives us?
3. What motivates our need to feel morally superior to culture?
4. How could the practice of confession and repentance guide a church into more healthy engagement with culture?
5. What are some practical expressions of confession/repentance that you could imagine for your church and her witness to the world?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

Books mentioned by Jennifer McBride:

[*Whiteness and Morality*](#) by Jennifer Harvey

[*Letters and Papers from Prison*](#) by Dietrich Bonhoeffer

[*Ethics*](#) by Dietrich Bonhoeffer

[*The Cost of Discipleship*](#) by Dietrich Bonhoeffer

WEEKLY PRACTICE:

Think of a friend, family member, or acquaintance who is anti-religion or church. In a way that feels natural, have a conversation with them about their experience of you (as a Christian) or religion/church in general, and pay attention to moments where it might be appropriate to confess to them your failure to live out Christ's commands, and ask for their forgiveness.