

2015 KCML Inaugural Lecture

# Contextual and Public Theology

Passing Fads or Theological Imperatives?

Dr Stephen Garner

Head of Theology

Laidlaw College

[sgarner@laidlaw.ac.nz](mailto:sgarner@laidlaw.ac.nz)



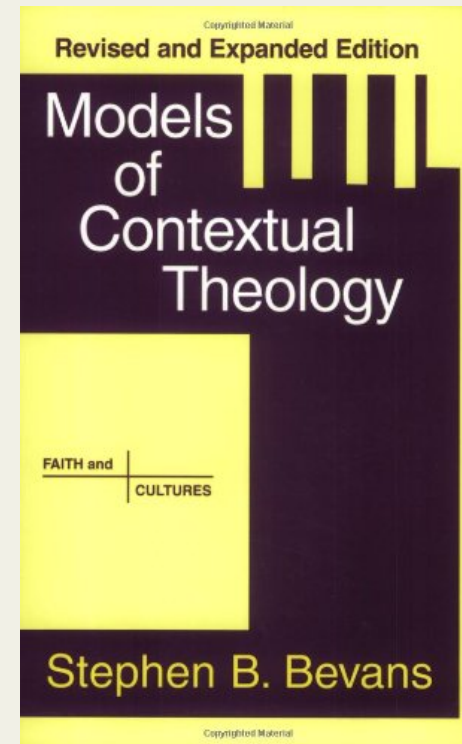
# Overview

- Introduction
  - Setting the scene
- Contextual Theology/Theologies
  - Thinking about ‘context’
  - ‘Praxis’ as key
- Public Theology/Theologies
  - Which ‘public’?
  - What ‘voice’?
- Some further thoughts...

# Bevans on Contextual Theology

‘There is no such thing as “theology”; there is only contextual theology: feminist theology, black theology, liberation theology, Filipino theology, Asian-America theology, African theology, and so forth.’ (p.3)

‘[t]he contextualization of theology—the attempt to understand Christian faith in terms of a particular context—is really a theological imperative.’ (p.3)



# Forrester on Public Theology

Public theology is “theology which seeks the welfare of the city before protecting the interests of the Church, or its proper liberty to preach the Gospel and celebrate the sacraments.”

- Duncan B. Forrester, "The Scope of Public Theology," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 17, no. 2 (2004): 6.

# Two views of theology

Bevans proposes two views of theology

- “Classical” Theology
- “Contextual” Theology

# Classical theology

- Theology as an ‘objective’ science of faith
- A double focus (*loci theologici*) in the reflection on faith:
  1. Scripture
  2. Tradition
- Content of these two is unchanging, and ‘beyond’ culture and history

# Shift towards 'experience'

- Sees another *locus theologicus*
  - present human experience
- Recognition of that, with its dimensions of culture, history, contemporary thought forms, human experience – context – is a theological source
- Contextual theology draws on this

# Doing theology contextually...

1. The faith experience of the past must be taken into account
2. Theology is only authentic when when “what has been received is appropriated, made our own”



# Context – “individual and contemporary-collective experience”

- Three-fold matrix
  1. The experiences of individual or group personal life
  2. Personal/communal experience is mediated by culture
  3. Social location
- Social change

# The shaping of contextual theology

## External factors

- dissatisfaction with classical approaches to theology;
- critiques of traditional theological interpretation being oppressive;
- a perceived focus on individualism (especially with respect to salvation);
- the influence of the social sciences;
- post-colonialism.

## Internal factors

- Christianity as incarnational;
- Trinitarian expressions of the faith;
- Charismatic and Pentecostal emphases on the Holy Spirit;
- Of reality possessing a sacramental nature;
- Visions of a truly universal church as engaging with all levels of human experience.

# Contextual Theology

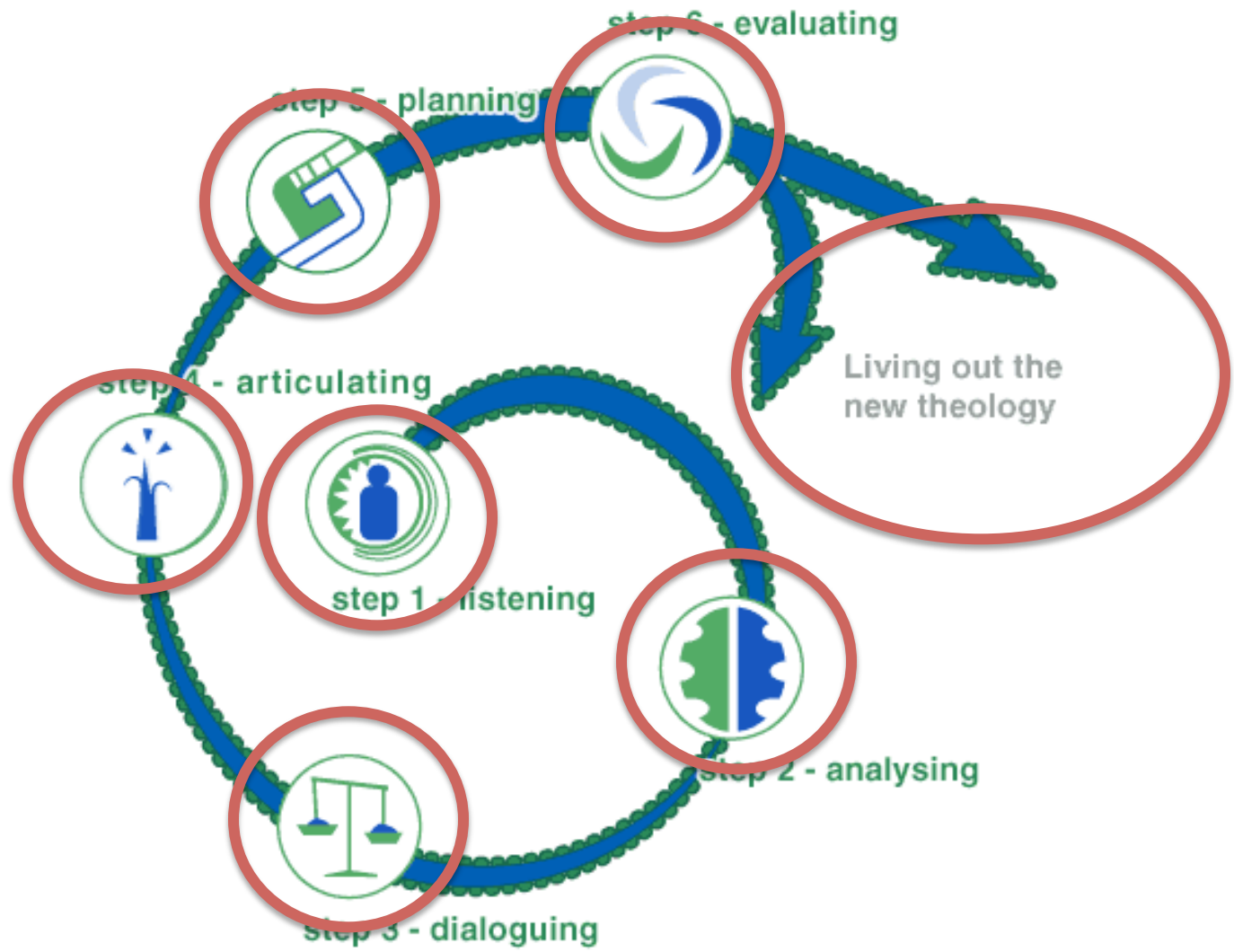
**Experience of the Past**

**Experience of the Present**



- Recorded in Scripture
- Preserved, defended in Tradition

1. Personal/communal experience
  2. Culture
  3. Social location
- Social change



# Public theology is...

theology which seeks the welfare of the city before protecting the interests of the Church, or its proper liberty to preach the Gospel and celebrate the sacraments. Accordingly, public theology often takes 'the world's agenda', or parts of it, as its own agenda, and seeks to offer distinctive and constructive insights from the treasury of faith to help in the building of a decent society, the restraint of evil, the curbing of violence, nation-building, and reconciliation in the public arena, and so forth...

- Duncan B. Forrester, "The Scope of Public Theology," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 17, no. 2 (2004): 6.

# Public theology is... (cont)

It strives to offer something that is distinctive, and that is gospel, rather than simply adding the voice of theology to what everyone is saying already. Thus it seeks to deploy theology in public debate, rather than a vague and optimistic idealism which tends to disintegrate in the face of radical evil.

- Duncan B. Forrester, "The Scope of Public Theology," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 17, no. 2 (2004): 6.

# Key assumptions

## 1. Jesus Christ is Lord of All

- Rejects the secular limitation of religion to the private sphere.

## 2. Christian beliefs about God, and about human nature and destiny, and the values that arise from these, are so true that they should shape public policy.

- Chris Marshall, "What Language Shall I Borrow? The Bilingual Dilemma of Public Theology," *Stimulus* 13, no. 3 (2005): 12.

the task of living within a pluralistic and fallen world will generate questions, anxieties and challenges to which the gospel must be seen to respond; and that the credibility of Christian truths must be argued in ways that fulfil prevailing standards of intellectual coherence.

- Elaine L. Graham, Heather Walton, and Frances Ward, *Theological Reflection : Methods* (London: SCM Press, 2005), 139.



# Tension

- Post-Enlightenment liberal secularism
  - Access to public space available under principle of democratic participation
- but the issue is then whether your message is:
  - *Credible*
  - *Intelligible*
- How should we speak in the public spaces?

# Two main approaches to public theology

## 1. Common currency approach

- Appeal to a kind of shared public truth or common ground

## 2. Distinctive discourse approach

- Appeals explicitly to the unique narrative and symbolic resources of the Christian tradition
- ‘Out-narrate’ other narratives

## 3. A third way?

# Where does this leave us...?

- Context is not optional
  - It is inherited in our theology
  - It is present in the theology we create
  - It is the environment we live our faith out in
- Balancing past and present (and future)
  - Finding the right emphasis
- Praxis
  - Faith seeking understanding
  - Experience informing faithful reflection