

The witness of sinners: Theologian Jennifer McBride on the nontriumphal church

[David Heim](#) interviews [Jennifer M. McBride](#)

This article appears in the [December 11, 2013](#) issue.



© Julie Drewes

*Most Christians believe that churches are called to make a public witness to their faith, but they disagree sharply about what shape that witness should take. In her book *The Church for the World: A Theology of Public Witness*, Jennifer M. McBride evaluates the way Christians have engaged public life and offers an alternative vision grounded in the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. McBride, who teaches at Wartburg College in Iowa, is also coeditor of a collection of essays, *Bonhoeffer and King: Their Legacies and Import for Christian Social Thought*.*

You say in *The Church for the World* that Christian public witness has gone awry in the United States. How so?

The main problem is that Christian presence in public life tends to be triumphalistic. The purpose of Christian witness is to point to Jesus and the reign of God he embodies, but a triumphal presence actually contradicts Jesus' way of being in the world as depicted in the Gospels.

The triumphal character of Christian witness has contributed a good deal to how polarized our society and churches have become. Christians so thoroughly disagree about war, sexuality, ecological care, immigration and other issues that we wind up on opposing sides of the political spectrum. This is cause for great concern, because partisan politics ends up defining what is Christian; it shapes the way we think and speak about public issues.

It is possible, though, for Christians to take a stand on specific social and political matters without binding the church to partisan politics. We have biblical and theological resources to help us reframe issues and offer something new—a third way.

Do you have a certain group of Protestants in mind when you talk about a triumphalistic presence?

Fundamentalists, evangelicals and mainline Protestants all display some confusion about the public role of Christian faith in a pluralistic society. We haven't reflected enough on some basic questions of Christian faith, such as: What exactly is the content of the good news that Christians are to proclaim? What is the relationship between the church and "the world"? What claims should Christians be making about Jesus through our social and political engagement?

How is Jesus' way of being in the world nontriumphalistic?

We tend to think that as the sinless one, Jesus distinguished himself from sinners by setting himself up as a model of ethical perfection. But Jesus was in solidarity with sinners in at least three main ways that define his person and work.

First, as God incarnate, he assumed sinful flesh, as Paul says in Romans 8:3. He took on human nature's damaged state and through his body became intimately acquainted with the complexity and messiness of fallen existence.

Second, he begins his public ministry by being baptized with sinners in response to John the Baptist's call to repent and in this way "numbers himself with the

transgressors” (to use Isaiah’s language about the suffering servant).

Third, and finally, refusing to be called good (Mark 10:18), he instead accepts responsibility for sin as a convicted criminal on the cross. Throughout his ministry Jesus denies any claim about his own moral righteousness and instead actively accepts responsibility for the world’s sin and suffering on the cross out of love for fellow human beings.

Christians of most stripes, and certainly conservative evangelical Christians, would say that the cross of Christ and Christ’s suffering for sinners is at the center of their faith and theology. Why has it not been part of their public witness?

In white North American Christianity, the cross tends to function as a symbol for Jesus taking on my individual sin and forgiving me. It refers, in other words, to a central claim in a doctrinal system rather than to a way of life, a way of being in the world based on conformation to the incarnate and crucified Christ.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that witness to Christ is conformation to Christ; it is the church taking the shape of Jesus in public life. Bonhoeffer takes literally Paul’s claim that the church is “the body of Christ” (1 Cor. 12)—the physical manifestation of Jesus in the world—so in order to witness to Christ faithfully, the church must mirror Jesus’ own public presence. When we examine Jesus’ public presence we see that his whole way of being in the world was marked by the cross; he took “the form of a sinner” in his life and in his death in order to be in solidarity with fellow human beings. It is by being in solidarity with sinners that Jesus brings about reconciliation. This is not a picture of Jesus that churches often emphasize.

What does this mean for the shape of Christian witness to Jesus?

Because Jesus redeems the world in the form of a sinner, the church participates in God’s healing transformation of this world in the same way—by being present in public life not as standard-bearers of morality but as repenting sinners seeking to accept responsibility for social sin and injustice. A political witness grounded in the cross accepts responsibility for sin out of the same divine love for human beings.

It seems that the church, as you see it, is not so much called out from the world, or standing against it, as it is deeply embedded in it—and embedded in the world’s sinfulness.

Bonhoeffer asked a question that I find helpful for thinking about this. He asked how Christians can be the church, people who are “called out” or chosen for a particular mission, without understanding ourselves “religiously as privileged.” Bonhoeffer suggests that Christians instead “belong wholly to the world” by recognizing our solidarity with other human beings in sin and redemption. “Christ would no longer be the object of religion,” he says, “but something else entirely, truly lord of the world.”

Christians communicate to others that we are specially favored when we position ourselves as judges over society and standard-bearers of morality. For about 30 years Protestants of all stripes have turned public witness into battles over morality. This presumption not only contradicts the great Protestant truth that “no one is righteous” but God (Rom. 3:9), it also contradicts Jesus, who did not present himself as a model of moral righteousness but belonged wholly to the world by taking the form of a sinner in public life.

Polls suggest that many Americans, especially of a younger generation, are indeed put off by triumphalistic Christian stances. But isn't any attempt to take a position, whether on abortion, or war, or food stamps, inherently triumphalistic insofar as it comes down on one side of a debate rather than another and says one side is more right than another?

My answer hinges on the church's *disposition*. A nontriumphal witness is rooted in a disposition of confession of sin and repentance. By *confession of sin* I mean a pattern of speaking that acknowledges Christians' inherent entanglement with society's structural sin and our complicity in specific injustice. By *repentance* I mean concrete social and political activity that arises from the church community taking responsibility for that sin.

Political activity that stems from a felt need to repent is my answer to the question of how witness can be at once bold and humble. It is bold because it takes a stand on particular issues affecting the welfare of other human beings. It is humble because it points fingers away from others and toward itself.

What younger generations are turned off by, it seems to me, is an attitude of moral superiority or judgmentalism that accompanies many attempts at public engagement. Through an alternative mode of confession and repentance, Christians present themselves before others not as models of righteousness but as people in need of constant conversion. This disposition takes seriously Jesus' command in the

Sermon on the Mount, “Do not judge [others],” even as it allows Christians to make certain ethical judgments about injustice in society.

Some critics of contemporary religion say that it’s a mistake for the church to try to have a political witness. James Davison Hunter, for example, has written that churches in the U.S. have been too much defined by their attempt at political witness. How do you see it?

My concern isn’t whether the church should have a political witness, but again with how the church is engaged in public life.

Christian faith is inherently public or political because it concerns how we order our lives in relation to the good of others—in relation to neighbors, strangers and enemies. Discipleship is about following Jesus, who embodies the reign of God; it is about living into God’s social order “on earth as it is in heaven.”

A definitive moment in Bonhoeffer’s life came when he recognized that Jesus actually wanted the Sermon on the Mount and his other teachings to be obeyed concretely—in social and political life. And as historian Victoria Barnett has shown, in Germany the Confessing Church’s resistance to Nazism was severely weakened by the fact that too many members of this church movement didn’t think the gospel was “political.” They were focused instead on their own institutional preservation against Nazi influence in church matters.

Your examples of witness in *The Church for the World* point to intentional Christian communities, if not quite neomonastic ones. How would your theology of christological witness apply to the more ordinary type of congregation in the U.S.? Put another way, how much is your vision of witness dependent on a certain vision of the church?

I am certainly suggesting that Protestants reimagine how we “do church,” but I also think that every congregation already has the resources and call to enact repentance in public life. The identity and function of congregations traditionally revolves around what seems to me to be a narrow understanding of worship, the worship service itself or a particular worship style. The two communities I examine in *The Church for the World* are intentional in that they are the outcome of a different focus—Christians taking seriously their identity and mission as the body of Christ in the world.

When church communities organize themselves around a common work of repentance, the worship—including the prayers, songs, sermons, Bible studies and service—become less general and more concrete since they grow out of specific concern for the oppressed and marginalized, be it the homeless, the prisoner, the immigrant or the exploited worker.

Confession and repentance may be embodied communally in a variety of ways, and every congregation has the capacity to discern the content of its confession and its repentant activity, which together become the community's redemptive public engagement. A church community's vocation may arise over conviction about a specific sin it has committed as a local body, such as past and present racism. Or members within the church body may be convicted of an environmental or socioeconomic injustice and may turn the congregation's attention toward ways that they may begin to live in a manner that resists unjust powers.

Can you give us an example of a church that is doing this?

The Eleuthero Community is a Christian community founded on the recognition that the way North Americans live is unsustainable and damaging to the environment and the world's most vulnerable populations. Based in Maine, Eleuthero members came together from Washington, D.C., and Portland to examine the ways their own embedded theologies and incomplete readings of scripture had contributed to unjust consumption habits, to learn from the ecologically astute culture of Maine and to seek sustainable ways of living. Members of this community see themselves as undergoing continuous conversion to the life of Christ as they fashion right relationships with the earth and with a population of Sudanese refugees.

A couple of moments in their first year exemplify their disposition of confession and repentance. In 2006, when their pastor spoke up at a town meeting on the Iraq war and used particularly Christian language about God's love in Christ and God's judgment on human sin—and included himself in that judgment—the mostly secular audience cheered. Afterward, a diverse crowd of secular citizens, devout Christians, and people who described themselves as having lost their faith gathered around him to talk.

The community also sought common ground with environmental groups through confession and repentance. When they contacted organizations to see about ways they could work with them, the members would make a point to say that as

Christians they hadn't paid enough attention to ecological issues but would like to learn. The fact that Christians had been some of the main opponents of environmental work always came up in those first meetings. But because of the community's disposition, the exchanges would lead to productive conversations and open up new possibilities for partnership and reconciliation.

The life and writings of Bonhoeffer have clearly been a major resource for you as you have thought about Christian public witness. What is it about Bonhoeffer that is so helpful?

Bonhoeffer was a deeply theological thinker who was concerned with how the gospel is to be lived in concrete ways. This combination of theological sophistication and concern for concreteness is unique.

Most academic thinking on, say, Christology or ecclesiology tends to be too abstract to be of use to the average Christian. Likewise, most Christian engagement with concrete social and political issues bypasses the rich resources of theological thinking, flattening Christian faith into ethics. When faith is reduced to ethics in this way, it is often based on shallow readings of scripture that bolster opinions we already have, leaving Christian faith with little transformative power for us or for society as a whole.

I especially appreciate Bonhoeffer's focus on Jesus and on the "this-worldliness" of faith. All of Bonhoeffer's theology may be understood as a Christology motivated by his overlapping interests in the church as community, in discipleship and in ethics.

What I find most helpful about his Christology is how it encourages and fosters love for this life in all its complexity. Christians cannot offer a redemptive public witness if they don't genuinely love living in this world with all its joy and sorrow. While he was in prison Bonhoeffer wrote: "It is only when one loves life and the earth so much that without them everything seems to be over that one may believe in the resurrection and the new world."