

## “I’m proud to be maladjusted”: Preaching Against the Tides

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### Introduction

In 2012, I went with my family to a church service on Martin Luther King day at Watts Street Baptist Church in Durham, NC. This morning James Forbes, the preacher of New York’s River Side Church, was invited to deliver a sermon. After his sermon this one quotation of King kept me thinking: “I’m proud to be maladjusted, to which I call upon all people of good will to be maladjusted.”<sup>1</sup> My question was: Do I not presume too easily that I would have walked with King from Selma to Montgomery? Would we have accompanied him? Today King is considered a hero, someone who defended a right cause. But—I asked myself—is the pedestal on which we place King not also a barrier for us to come into action and preach in maladjusted ways?<sup>2</sup> These days we ask ourselves: How can we engage the political tensions of today as Christians, particularly as Baptists? How do we engage this troublesome sphere of the public arena? Specifically in the Netherlands, where we witness the rise of populist parties who in response to the challenges of immigration, suddenly reconnect with a crumbling Christian heritage to support their own political agenda. In this contribution I like to explore the practice of preaching as a premier means (or, should I say ‘power’) of engaging the world: theological speech that shapes the politics of the church in the world. Prophetic preaching as providing church and world with an alternative.<sup>3</sup>

### King: A Preacher Against the Tides

Whoever studied the sermons of MLK—as he is often named—cannot but be surprised by the level of theological erudition, stimulating reading of Scripture, but moreover the in-depth conversation with the ideas of his time.<sup>4</sup> King did what he did, since he felt the vocation as a minister. He considered himself not an social activist, or social worker, or someone with political ambition: he was a minister of the Word, and, as such, he was compelled to address the issues of his time. And his premier means was speaking, sermonizing.

In these times, in which Christians are becoming ‘strangers’ again, I ask: can we learn from King how we can wear the prophetic robe? Are Baptist ministers still ‘under the prophets’? Stanley Hauerwas, in his most recent collection of essays, reflects on the preaching of King, who often hurried to preach and pray at places where bombs had just gone off, so that he could preach while the smoke was still in the air. To Hauerwas this is a vivid image of preaching today: “we exist in ‘a sea of words’ that results in a debasement of the speech we need if we are to preach truth.”<sup>5</sup> To regain this sense of preaching as truth-telling against the tides, King recovered the nonconformist tradition of truth-telling over against the powers that be, *against the tides*. For many, even those who shared his rejection of segregation—like Billy Graham—were troubled by his zeal and non-conformity.<sup>6</sup> Famous is the letter King wrote while

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr.

<sup>2</sup> See Jan Martijn Abrahamse, “I’m proud to be maladjusted’: Zijn we vandaag nog onder de profeten?,” *Kontekstueel* 32, no. 6 (2018): 17-20.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Stefan Paas, *Vrede stichten: Politieke meditatie* (Boekencentrum Essay; Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2007), 272.

<sup>4</sup> For a the collection of his sermons, see Martin Luther King, Jr. *Strength to Love* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, [1977], 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, with Robert Dean, *Minding the Web: Making Theological Connections* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2018), 164.

<sup>6</sup> See Darren Dochuk, “‘Heavenly Houston’: Billy Graham and Corporate Civil Rights in Sunbelt Evangelicalism’s ‘Golden Buckle,’” *Billy Graham: American Pilgrim*, eds. Andrew Finstuen, Anne Blue Wills, and Grant Wacker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 162-194.

imprisoned in Birmingham (16 April 1963) in response to a group of preachers who had reproached him for being an “outside agitator” who shouldn’t have come to Birmingham. He should have patience. King, in an astonishing mild tone, writes: “I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. . . , so I am compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town.”<sup>7</sup> A wait-and-see attitude, therefore, just does not fit the gospel. King confesses to be disappointed in the church which lost its prophetic voice and, instead, has become “an arch-defender of the status quo.”<sup>8</sup> King refused keep up the pace of the times, in order to be obedient to Christ. King, in a sermon known as “Transformed Non-Conformists” (Romans 12:2, 1954-maart 1963), he said:

Even we preachers have manifested our fear of being nonconformist. So many of us turn into showman and even clowns, distorting the real meaning of the gospel, in an attempt to conform to the crowd. How many ministers of Jesus Christ have sacrificed their precious ideals and cherished convictions on the altar of the crowd.

King employed the biblical story in such a way as to make sense of this world in light of God’s involvement. It is this story that makes the church maladjusted: “When we would seek to build our nations on military power and put our abiding trust in a policy of massive retaliation, Jesus reminds us that ‘he who lives by the sword will perish by the sword.’ Everywhere, and at all times, the love ethic of Jesus will stand as a radiant light to show up the ugliness of our stall conformity.” To interpret the role of the church in the world, requires people who can carry out, what can be called, “the task of interpretation.” To engage the world is read the story of Israel and of Jesus to ‘be able to discern what is best ‘(Phil. 1:10).<sup>9</sup> King made me aware that his ‘maladjusted’ attitude does not begin outside the church, but first in the gathering of people calling themselves church of Christ. For Christians are the world. Such a people need prophets to sustain them finding their vocation in the world.

King inspired me to preach against the tides. To preach maladjusted. Not against the world, but first against the church. But what should this look like? To keep myself from abstract theory, I consider a sermon I preached over a year ago in a Baptist church in a series on the Ten Commandments, for which I was entrusted with Exodus 20:7: *Do not misuse my name. I am the Lord your God, and I will punish anyone who misuses my name.* For our purposes I have translated and shortened it somewhat to better fit our purposes today.

### **A Sermon on Exodus 20:7**

We as church are rethinking the words of the Ten Commandments, given to Israel to come to know the God who raised them from Egypt.<sup>10</sup> A slave people, pulled straight out of the clay, in the middle of the Sinai dessert. The Ten Commandments, or rather, the Ten Words are God’s liberating words for slaves. Because, you can take Israel out of Egypt, but how to take ‘Egypt’ out of Israel? How do you sustain people to live free if they know nothing but slavery? These Ten Words show what it means to live freely with this God. This morning we have arrived at the Third ‘Word’. Seeing that there are only Ten Commandments, it is significant that this one is included: are there not more important things to cover?<sup>11</sup> At the same time we, in our day and

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<sup>7</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” in *Baptist Roots: A Reader in the Theology of a Christian People*, eds. Curtis W. Freeman, James Wm. McClendon, and C. Rosalee Velloso Ewell (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1999), 353.

<sup>8</sup> King, Jr. “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” 359.

<sup>9</sup> Stanley Hauerwas en William Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), 12; cf. See Jan Martijn Abrahamse, “Hoe Stanley Hauerwas mijn preek heeft ‘gered’: Preken als een oefening in christelijke hermeneutiek,” *Soteria* 34, no. 1 (2017): 36-43.

<sup>10</sup> John I. Durham, *Exodus* (WBC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan [1987], 2014), 278.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Mac S. Sandlin, “Blasphemy, Risk and The Name of God,” *Leaven* 21, no. 2 (2013): 1.

age, recognize that *The Name of God* is sometimes used as a license to commit the most horrible crimes. People who in name of what all that is holy terrorize our societies and way of living. Is the Name of God not a source of violence?<sup>12</sup> Hence, our question this morning: What kind of God warns us to use his ‘Name’? “What’s in a Name?” is the famous question in Shakespeare’s *Romeo & Juliet*. Names are strange things. It is one of the first gifts a newborn receives. One of the worst things what it could happen is slander or defamation. Names also create high expectations: will he or she *live up to his/her name*? Certainly, when you play football and your father is Johan Crujff. Or, children of Nazi-leaders who went through great lengths to dispose themselves of their given name. The weight of a name can be heavy. So, what does it mean for Christians to live with and for the Name of God?

First of all, what is so special to the Name? Like God introduced himself to Moses (Ex. 3:14), in the same way he introduces himself to the whole people of Israel in verse 2: *‘I am the Lord your God, the one who brought you out of Egypt where you were slaves.* The Name, Yahwe (יהוה), shows what kind of God he is: ‘I Am.’<sup>13</sup> The specific character of this name is that it does not shelter God from people, but rather connects with people.<sup>14</sup> It is a covenant name. Martin Buber therefore speaks of ‘*He Who will be there*’.<sup>15</sup> Different from the gods of Egypt, this God reveals himself as the Holy who is close. Not a vague promise, but as history: ‘He has brought them out of Egypt’. This God gives himself to an insignificant and oppressed slave people. In his Name he offers himself.<sup>16</sup> We choose names which we think are beautiful or fashionable. Sometimes they mirror our ideals of what we would like to be, like children point to their movie heroes ‘I am Captain America’. Yet the distance between what we aim to be, and who we are is big. Every day the news is filled with people, ‘big names’, who live a different life. Athletes, movie stars, religious leaders have used, abused, or embezzled. Politicians who claim to speak on behalf of the people, who present themselves as saviors of their nation, appear to have live dubious lives. The God who presents himself in these words does not blow his own trumpet. This God does not pretend. He lives up to his Name. There is no space between his name and his actions. He is who he is. Not at a distance, remote, from a safe space, unassailable, but liberating presence. His Name shows that this God is not made out of stone.

So why then this Third Command? Andrew Walls once said: “Theology is an act of adoration fraught with a risk of blasphemy.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, God’s proximity involves risk-taking.<sup>18</sup> This is for which the words we found in verse 7 alert us. The verb used, often translated with ‘use’ (שָׁפַט) actually means something like ‘to raise,’ ‘to take upon your tongue,’ or even ‘swear’.<sup>19</sup> Vain usage (שָׁפַט) is here not just meaningless, but actually *false* or *dishonest* (cf. Is.

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<sup>12</sup> See for example Paul Cliteur and Dirk Verhofstad, *In Naam van God: Elke dag een aanslag* (Amsterdam/Antwerpen: Houtekiet, 2018).

<sup>13</sup> It is questionable if this is indeed the right pronunciation, see Kendall Soulen, “Hallowed Be Thy Name! The Tetragrammaton and the Name of the Trinity,” in *Jews and Christians: People of God*, eds. Carl E. Braaten, and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003), 27-28; cf. David W. Baker, “Names of God,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch*, eds. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003), 362-364.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Rabbi Abba bar Mammal’s commentary on Exodus 3:13, see M.W. Vrijhof, “‘Ik word naar Mijn daden genoemd’: Over het gebruik van de Godsnaam in het jodendom,” *Vrede over Israël* 44, no. 2 (2000): 1-10.

<sup>15</sup> See Martin Buber, *The Prophetic Faith* (New York: Collier Books, [1949], 1977), 24-30 (28); cf. Gerard Wehr, *Martin Buber: Leben, Werk, Wirkung* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2010), 142-156.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Durham, *Exodus*, 288.

<sup>17</sup> Andrew Walls, “The Rise of Global Theologies,” see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rnl1EJFju8> (visited 4 May 2018).

<sup>18</sup> Sandlin, “Blasphemy, Risk and The Name of God,” 3.

<sup>19</sup> Durham, *Exodus*, 287.

59:4).<sup>20</sup> For his reason Israel treated this name, *HaShem*, with the greatest caution.<sup>21</sup> For who takes up this Name connects himself to God. The author of Ecclesiastes rightly notes: “Don’t talk before you think or make promises to God without thinking them through. God is in heaven, and you are on earth, so don’t talk too much” (Eccl. 5:2). No matter how close this God draws near, he is never within our reach. Where the First Commandment cautions us not to ‘add’ this God to our collection, the Second Commandment not to look for God in the stone statues you can buy in a garden center, so this Third Commandment warns us not to claim God with our words. How near this God may be, he is not (automatically) on our side. For then, he would just be like other gods, whose favor we could win or earn.

Maybe we’ve read this Third Commandment too much as a ban on foul language. However, blasphemy is not about *not* saying some words, but about using God’s Name as a disclaimer, or as leverage: “Blasphemy is speech that makes God part of our lies.”<sup>22</sup> Like Jesus, in his sermon on the mount, says: “Not everyone who calls me their Lord will get into the kingdom of heaven. Only the ones who obey my Father in heaven will get in” (Matt. 7:21). Holiness that does not need our protection, but our obedience. We as Dutch people tend to look with surprise at Trump’s America, where ‘God’ is claimed for a political agenda and the distinction between God and America (‘God’s Own Country’) seems to have disappeared.<sup>23</sup> We Dutch, who connect God’s presence with money—seeing our 2 Euro coins bears the phrasing ‘God with us’; we who have politicians vowing their allegiance to the state with the oath—‘so help me God Almighty’—, where we connect God’s presence with buildings, institutes, and a so-called Jewish-Christian culture. The Third Commandment teaches us that having the letter ‘C’ in a name or on a building is not a guarantee for God’s presence and proximity. All these sort of connections lead us back to ‘Egypt’, to slavery, since we declare ‘things’ holy. Things we then are prepared for to defend by fire and sword. We must never forget that German soldiers invaded the Netherlands in 1940 bearing *Gott Mit Uns* on their belt.<sup>24</sup> God’s Name is like a precious and fragile gift. It cannot be claimed.<sup>25</sup> The Third Commandment liberates us from the temptation to use God’s Name as a quality mark of our own speech and action. We are not called to defend the Name of God, but we are called to obey.

Still, the last part of our text horrifies us: “I will punish anyone who misuses my name.” But who, then, can go free? Who can say that there is no space between his or her speech about God and his/her life? The painful truth of the Third Commandment is our hypocrisy. The distance between us and God’s Name is too big. How is God there for people who, like we, slander his name by the way we live? The strange thing about this God is how he connects his Name with the blasphemous cross (Gal. 3:13:). That he who lived up to the Name, was crucified for blasphemy (Mark 14:64). The discovery of Christians is that God carried our hypocrisy. Jesus did not go free. God in Jesus desecrated himself (Phil. 2:4),<sup>26</sup> dying for blasphemers. For

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<sup>20</sup> Durham, *Exodus*, 287-288; cf. William L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids/Leiden: Wm. B. Eerdmans/Brill. 1988), 361-362.

<sup>21</sup> See A. van de Beek, *Mijn Vader, uw Vader: Het spreken over God de Vader* (Spreken over God 3.2; Utrecht: Meinema, 2017), 303-310. Only the High priest could once a year pronounce the Name during when reading Leviticus 16:30-31 (“This is the day on which the sacrifice for the forgiveness of your sins will be made in my presence, and from now on, it must be celebrated each year.”), see Johann Theron, “Blasphemy and the Sinlessness of Jesus,” in *Strangers and Pilgrims on Earth*, 271.

<sup>22</sup> Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *The Truth About God*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 199?), 48.

<sup>23</sup> “We will be protected by God.” Trump, “Inaugural Address,” (Washington, 20 January 2017); Cf. Stanley Hauerwas and Jonathan Tran, “A Sanctuary Politics: Being the Church in the Time of Trump,” in *Minding the Web: Making Theological Connections* (Eugene: Cascade, 2018), 113-126.

<sup>24</sup> See recently <https://lazarus.nl/2018/05/waarom-hitler-meer-theologisch-personeel-had-dan-je-zou-verwachten/#gs.nw5iC8Q> (bezocht op 4 mei 2018).

<sup>25</sup> Tomas Halik, *Geduld met God* (Utrecht: Boekencentrum, 2014).

<sup>26</sup> Ephraim Radner, “Taking the Lord’s Name in Vain,” in *I Am the Lord Your God: Christian Reflection on the Ten Commandments*, eds. Carl Braaten and Christopher Seitz (Grand Rapids: Wm. B Eerdmans, ), 93.

people using big words, but who are not up for it. For people who call God their refuge, but vote for politicians who aim to make Holland into a Christian Utopia (*heilstaat*). For people who claim that Jesus is their life, but at the same time worship their agenda as ‘god’. For people who call themselves Christian, but live to make their own name ‘great’. The Good News is that we cannot claim God’s name but takes hold of us.

What does the Third Commandment mean to us, who claim to gather in the Name of Jesus (Matt. 18:20)? What kind of community must we be in order to worthy of such a Name?<sup>27</sup> For whose Name do we live? Who of what we call ‘god’ does not necessarily needs to correspond with the God who reveals himself as *JWHW*? We, who live in a time of Big Words, of Powers that present themselves by telling ‘White Lies’, need to learn that God has made his Name on the cross (cf. Matt. 27:54). That means that Christians do not have live up to God’s Name by making themselves or their nations ‘great’. Our vocation is not to make God’s name true—Jesus did—but to show in God’s Name what it is to live forgiveness, reconciliation.<sup>28</sup>

### **Church and World: Never the Twain Shall Meet?**

How do we as Baptists engage the world we find ourselves? In the nonconformist tradition, in which Baptists find themselves, church and world are sometimes taken (too quickly) to be sheer opposites, such as for example in the theology of John Howard Yoder.<sup>29</sup> “East is east, west is west, never the twain shall meet.” However, as King showed us, church and world are often not so different. become maladjusted means the refusal to be just part of the world. Yet, at the same time, the way of the world affects what it means to be ‘maladjusted’ as church.<sup>30</sup> Accordingly, a sermon ‘names’ the world in the church, for the church to be church in the world. Preaching against the tides, means adjusting to God, and inviting both church and world to be part of it.

First, I tried to show the difference that this God makes for how we speak.<sup>31</sup> In the encounter with a God *who is what he does*, in whom there is no difference between speech and act, we discover our own hypocrisy as human beings. Big words do come easier than great actions. Language mediates our life in this world. Since, we do not only mirror the world by our language—its referential purpose—, but also produce a certain world of meaning. Language, therefore, is never neutral.<sup>32</sup> It navigates our actions. So when the church gathers around the Biblical Scriptures, it does so with the question: How should we speak so that we worship this God and we are worthy of his Name? Sermonizing is taking “wordcare” of the church. The prophetic role is to adjust the life of the church to a God who is named *He Who is There*. How do we speak about women and men, about strangers and refugees, about money, and the questions regarding the environment? Certainly when we discover the distance between our theological claims and our actions: male pastors abusing women, Christians against slavery

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<sup>27</sup> Chris Wright speaks of “reflective holiness” which becomes reality through the practice of virtues, see Christopher J.H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 2004), 39.

<sup>28</sup> See Jan Martijn Abrahamse, “Gathering the Pieces: Being Church in an Age of Fragmentation,” in *Discerning Churches: Baptist Ecclesiology, A Catholic Approach*, eds. Henk Bakker, Steven Harmon, Beth Newman, and Teun van der Leer (Free Church, Catholic Tradition; Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2020), fc.

<sup>29</sup> See notably Daniel Drost, “Diaspora as Mission: John Howard Yoder, Jeremiah 29, and the Shape and Mission of the Church” (PhD Dissertation, VU University 2019); and Stefan Paas, “The Counter-Cultural Church: An Analysis of the Neo-Anabaptist Contribution to Missional Theology in the Post-Christendom Context,” *Ecclesiology* 15, no. 3 (2019): 271-289.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Paas, “The Counter-Cultural Church,” 281: “In other words, it is impossible to define Christian beliefs and practices without having a thorough engagement with our context, and without reflecting on the degree to which Christians themselves are ‘made’ by this context.”

<sup>31</sup> See Jan Martijn Abrahamse, “Over de grens: Spreken over God tussen spot en spel,” *Kontekstueel* 34, no. 2 (2019), fc.

<sup>32</sup> See Abrahamse, “Hoe Hauerwas mijn preek heeft gered,” 39.

wearing clothes made by children in Bangladesh, etc. Christians should be modest when engaging this world. For the words we speak are often not supported by our own actions.

Second, I tried to dismantle our own Christian idolatry, by posing the question: On whose side is this God? The church presumes too quickly that God is on their side. Yet, the revelation that ‘God is there’, not necessarily means that we have his support. When we engage this world we should be careful with claiming to do this ‘in the name of Jesus’. Hence, my difficulty with songs such as ‘Onwards, Christian Soldiers’.<sup>33</sup> I recently read an article by the Jewish author David Novak, entitled “To Be an Minority”. Novak notes the theological problem of size and numbers. He says: “The difference is that a people who choose themselves usually do so in order to make conquest their task and purpose in the world, with God being on their side as some sort of cosmic facilitator (*Gott mit uns*, in the words of the World War I German slogan). But a people truly aware of their being chosen by God begin to understand that their task and purpose is to be God’s ‘portion’ in the world (Deut. 4:20).”<sup>34</sup> The self-evident way in which Christians stand up to defend a Jewish-Christian culture in God’s Name reveals their ‘true religion’ and worship: God *and* culture, ethnicity/color or economic prosperity, and so on. This *Und-Theologie*, as Karl Barth would call it, is nothing but idolatry.<sup>35</sup> The Dutch identity arose under the banner of the holy trinity ‘God, the Netherlands, and Orange’ to justify military power and war as service to God. Today we see a return to using Christian nomenclature to make a case of the politics of (ethnic) nationalism, militarism, sometimes even blunt racism and discrimination. These are ways of making God part of our lies. Last week, noted Australian New Testament scholar Michael Bird wrote a contribution to the *Washington Post* reflecting on the political divide in the US and their common claim upon Jesus’s legacy. He challenges us: “For people who are serious about following Jesus and how to live out their faith in him, it is not a question as to whether Jesus believes in our politics; rather, the real question has to be whether we believe in Jesus and in his kingdom as a challenge to our politics.”<sup>36</sup> Sermons call us to be on God’s side, instead of making God part of our own agenda’s and dreams. If we want to engage the politics of our times, we should start by preaching against the tides that are in the church.

Third, the church is not there to save the world. But to live as a people who live free of slavery, free of tendency to identify god with things we can see, or control. So, where does salvation come from? We should be careful to make political engagement another name for ‘salvation’. We are not there to make ‘the church great again.’ Jonathan Leeman in his book *Political Church* (2017) writes: “No constitution, no political campaign, no classroom lecture, no book of political theology will stop the inexorable march of death, heal the nations and produce a just and lasting peace.”<sup>37</sup> Rather, as a liberated people we seek to let our actions correspond to a God who is worshipped in liberating actions, that anticipate God’s full redemption. Political engagement is eschatological. It seeks to live a life worthy of God’s Name in our broken contexts.

Christian Political engagement needs ministers who are able readers—like Martin Luther King did—who read Scripture against the tides of the world as well as the interpretative

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<sup>33</sup> See Jan Martijn Abrahamse, “Niks geen voorwaarts Christenstrijders”: Over politiek zonder idealen” in *Fellows: Essaybundel Fellowsprogramma 2010*, ed. Geert Jan Spijker (Amersfoort: WI ChristenUnie, 2011), 5-10.

<sup>34</sup> David Novak, “To Be a Minority,” in *The Emerging Christian Minority*, eds. Victor Lee Austin and Joel C. Daniel (Pro Ecclesia Series, vol. 8; Eugene: Cascade Books, 2019), 52.

<sup>35</sup> See Karl Barth, “Het Eerste Gebod als Theologisch Axioma,” in *God is God: Voordrachten* (Kampen: Kok, 2004), 59-60.

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2019/11/13/jesus-isnt-interested-americas-two-party-division/> (visited 16 november 2019).

<sup>37</sup> Jonathan Leeman, *Political Church: The Local Assembly as Embassy of Christ’s Rule* (Studies Christian Doctrine and Scripture, vol. 2; IVP Academic Downers Grove, 2016), 392.

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community itself. In this we recognize the Scriptures as alternative story in which Church and World are differentiated but not separated.