

During the 2015 Schaff Lectures at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, Luke Bretherton presented “Poverty, Privilege, and Participation in the Healing Rule of Christ.”

Watch the lecture on the Seminary’s website: www.pts.edu/Schaff15_Videos. There are two videos available under the theme “Healing Babylon: Hospitality, Common Life, and Nature of Faithful Citizenship,” though this study guide only covers the lecture “Poverty, Privilege, and Participation in the Healing Rule of Christ.”



Session 1: Lament, Praise, and Listening

Watch the lecture from 2:42 to 15:20.

- Bretherton claims that change always starts with a cry, and he calls us to participate in the movement from lament to praise. These two—praise and lament—are two sides of the same coin. Praise without lament is triumphalism, and lament without praise is despair.
 - Have you ever been part of a faith community that knew only one side of this coin: triumphal praise or despairing lament? Describe your experience.
 - How do you best enter into praise and lament individually?
- Another two-sided coin is our need to listen. Bretherton teaches that we must listen to the word of God in Scripture, and we must also listen to the cries of our neighbors who are suffering.
 - Which practices have been most helpful in enabling you to listen to the word of God?
 - Describe a time when you listened closely to the cries of those who suffer and better understood their lived experience.
- Reading from “Tent of the Presence,” Bretherton describes that the word anger comes from a Norse word for grief. The two are closely related, as grief often comes when something we treasure is lost, or when we feel the gap between the way the world is and the way it should be. This grief naturally gives way to anger.
 - Describe something—perhaps a loss or an injustice—that has recently brought you to grief and anger.

Session 2: Politics and Public Lament

Watch the lecture from 15:21 to 27:29.

- Bretherton reveals two common obstacles to our hearing and feeling others’ grief: the *politics of respectability* and the *politics of polarization*. The politics of respectability are marked by a strict divide between public and private life (and the notion that deeply felt emotions belong in the private category). It can also manifest as a church culture that emphasizes politeness. The politics of polarization, Bretherton teaches, follow a reliable formula: find an enemy, polarize the good and bad, remove all complexity, and take on a messianic role.
 - Describe a time when you experienced the politics of respectability.
 - How did this culture make it difficult to hear the cries of grief and anger from those who were suffering?
 - How have you felt the forces of polarization in the pattern Bretherton describes?

- According to Bretherton, democratic politics have an important role to play in our experience of public lament. We must hear who is consistently losing so that other (more privileged) people may gain. The kind of lament that makes this knowledge possible is neither dirge nor denunciation, but “structured grief” with an orientation toward hope.
 - Who is consistently losing in your neighborhood? City or region? Nation?
 - Who is benefiting from those people’s suffering?
 - Bretherton shared a video from a North Carolina fair wage campaign as an example of this “structured grief” that can move people to action. What are other examples you’ve encountered, and to what action did they lead?

Session 3: Our Response to Poverty

Watch the lecture from 27:30 to 43:59.

- We are taught to listen to and care for those in “poverty,” but Bretherton wonders if we always know what this word means. He suggests four primary meanings: **destitution** (marginalization and a lack of basic needs); **powerlessness** (a lack of agency and a state of vulnerability to others’ oppressive actions); **affliction** (suffering due to illness, emergency, loss of a loved one, etc.); **humility** (the poor in spirit who are ready and open for God’s kingdom).
 - When have you witnessed or lived one or more of these versions of poverty?
- Bretherton’s ingenious suggestion is that the Christian iconography of sorrow may help correct our typical responses to poverty. Often when we look upon images of suffering, we are moved to a mindset of philanthropy, remaining separate from (and above) those who suffer. But when we behold images of Jesus’ suffering, we are instead moved to repentance (because we are reminded of our own complicity in his suffering), and this repentance leads to a new relationship with the crucified one.
 - Can you relate to Bretherton’s description of our typical responses? Have you looked upon images of suffering and been brought only to a removed, benevolent philanthropy?
 - How have images of Christ played a role in your acts of worship? Regardless of your answer to that, what do you feel when you look upon images of Jesus’ crucifixion?
 - What would it mean for you to look upon people’s suffering and respond in the way you would normally respond to images of Jesus?

Session 4: What to Do with Privilege

Watch the lecture from 44:00 to 54:38.

- Bretherton defines *privilege* as the status of having special rights, prerogatives, attributes, or benefits beyond what is generally available to people. It is given, not earned, and it leads to unfair access to power for some people but not others.
 - How have you concretely benefited from privilege? Or, if more applicable, how have you concretely been denied rights or benefits because of other people’s privilege?

- He offers an important clarification about those who have been given privilege: they are not automatically **culpable** for other people's poverty, but they are always **responsible** for addressing that poverty and working against structures of domination.
 - Do you agree or disagree with this twofold statement? Why or why not?
 - In your current context, what actions can those with privilege take to work against structures of domination?

- As we seek to use our privilege to work against structures of domination, Bretherton points us to three of Jesus' offices as helpful frameworks: prophet, priest, and king. Prophecy calls for humility and repentance that can lead those with privilege to renounce possessions beyond what they need. Priesthood entails the right use of wealth, power, and privilege to build up God's people. Kingship (which he admits is problematic) suggests that divine favor is providentially given so that it can be used generously to establish justice. In this view, property is not renounced but reoriented for the common good.
 - How do you experience the creative tension between prophecy and kingship when it comes to using our privilege?
 - What has been the most helpful or challenging concept for you from this lecture? What new practices, commitments, or beliefs will you adopt?