

Toward a Reformational View of Total Christian Involvement, part 1

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The greatest issue facing the church of the twentieth century concerns the church's definition of its own nature and mission. While the church through the ages has defined repeatedly the triune nature of God, the full authority of Scripture, the person and work of Christ, it has not yet reached an adequate resolution of the problems involved in its own self-definition.

One of the obvious results of this failure at self-definition is the widespread disharmony felt in virtually every sector of the body of Christ. Since the church does not know itself, it does not know how to recognize itself. Since the church does not understand its own task, it cannot unify about a single task. The present study does not presume to offer a final solution to the complicated problems involved in the church's definition of its own nature and mission. It intends only to offer some observations which hopefully may lead to a solution to this particular problem.

Essential to the church's understanding of itself is an understanding of its relation to the broader scope of God's work in the world. One of the most tragic errors of the modern church involves the church's assumption that all which God does in the present world must be funneled through the assembled body of believers. An effort must be made to make some careful definitions, distinguishing the church from other equally valid workings of God in the world today. The following definitions, although admittedly tentative, may offer some relief to these points of tension.

I. DEFINITIONS

At the outset, it may be helpful to attempt to distinguish between the church and the kingdom of God.

A. The church

While various efforts have been made to define the church, a simple and safe method may be to define the church in terms of its relationship to the Trinitarian God. The church is: the elect of the Father; the redeemed of the Son; and the renewed of the Holy Spirit. Immediately it should become obvious that to speak of the church is to speak of a people. Identification of the church with a building may be proper in colloquial language, but it never will find substantiation in the theological framework of the New Testament.

The church consists of those who have been elected of God before the foundation of the world, those for whom Christ died, those renewed by the inner working of the Holy Spirit of God. They are new creatures in Christ, breathing of a vital life which comes from immediate relationship with God Himself. They exist in a fashion incomprehensible to those who are not the church. More particularly, they exist as a united body. They gather together to offer their worship to God. They build up one another in the faith. They offer testimony to the truth of God among themselves and to the world. Their specific domain of responsibility is that of the revelation of God embodied in the person of Jesus Christ and interpretation in Holy Scripture. Theirs is a particular task which no other organization in this world may perform. To them is given the treasure of the Gospel, and the task of spreading that treasure to the world. The church finds its concrete expression in congregations, sessions, presbyteries, and assemblies.

B. The Kingdom of God

At this point it would be helpful to define a little more carefully the terms "church" and "kingdom." The ekklesia speaks of the "called out ones," or more specifically the "ones called together." The people of God are called out to be together as the people of God.

The basilea refers to a realm broader than simply a people. It refers to a rule or a reign, to a kingship or a domain. As in the case of the church, a triune definition of the kingdom may be of help.

God the Father sits enthroned over his eternal kingdom. From beginning to end He has reigned supremely and unchallenged. No force operating in this world ever has been free of the domain of God the Father. The kingdom of the Son may be called the Messianic kingdom. This kingdom refers more specifically to the rule which Christ himself was established since his coming to earth. This kingdom continues to grow in the midst of a wicked and perverse generation.

At the heart and core of the eternal rule of God and the Messianic kingdom of Christ is the inward rule of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of men. Notice the words of Christ in Matthew 12:28: "If I by the Spirit of God cast out demons, then the kingdom of God is come." The demon-possessed soul finds deliverance through the rule of the Spirit of God initiated in the inner heart. The Holy Spirit begins the rule of God in its seed-form through the act of regeneration. According to the teaching of Jesus himself in John chapter 3, no man can "enter" or "see" the kingdom apart from rebirth (John 3:3, 5). The emphasis of these verses rests on the initial contact of a man with the kingdom of God. Prior to the point of renewal by the Holy Spirit, a man exists within the domain of Satan, under the authority granted the wicked one by God.

This rule of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of men provides the open door into the broader realm of the kingdom of Christ. This Messianic kingdom may be defined as that area in which God's actual rule over evil comes to concrete expression in time and history. It may be distinguished from that eternal kingdom of God which always and at all times operates over God's enemies.

With these definitions in mind it may be possible to move further and ask the question, what is the precise relationship among these various manifestations of "kingdom" and "church?"

II. RELATIONSHIPS

1. The church has as its peculiar responsibility the expounding of the revelation of God to the people of God. Its task is to gather in and to build up the saints of God. Contrary to much modern theory, situations are not the only things which change attitudes. Pure environmentalism cannot answer the complicated question of human motivation. In fact, the change of heart is the most essential way to change the attitude. According to Scripture, God has ordained the foolish-ness of preaching as the means of changing men. C.H. Dodd's study of the apostolic preaching recorded in the book of Acts has much to say at this point. Those elements characteristic of first century proclamation must dictate to the modern church the content of its proclamation. Sadly today, the modern church assumes that the world knows the truths of the Christian gospel and so therefore does not bother to proclaim the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises, the super-natural intervention of God in human history by the birth of Jesus Christ, the historical death and resurrection of the savior for the sins of his people. Sadly, the call to significant repentance and faith is not being issued by the church.

Often, in this connection, the question is raised, what is evangelism? Generally the implication is left that evangelism by word is not adequate, and that evangelism by deed may prove to be more effective in the modern world. It is, as a matter of fact, quite interesting that those who are most concerned to see the church involved in the realm of social questions are those most interested in doing away with the officer of the diaconate that office designed specifically for a ministry of mercy.

Yes, the proclamation of the gospel by the church must be a proclamation by deed as well as by word. It should be noted, however, that this deed-proclamation as well as the word-proclamation must be carried forward in well-defined limits by the church. When the responsibilities of the members of the kingdom of God are considered, a much broader responsibility will be noted. But at this point it is of great value to become aware of the fact that the church must exercise self-inflicted limitations. In studying the office of deacon as presented in the New Testament, never does the diaconate appear as a social club aimed at rectifying the social ills of the world. Instead, its ministry is limited. Primarily, it functions to relieve the saints of God. When and if the diaconate ministers to the world-at-large, its ministry must be related directly to the proclamation of the gospel. But so far as the New Testament church is concerned, the diaconate confines its exercises to Christian brethren.

2. The relationship of the church to the kingdom of God is a basically simple one. The church provides the impetus to the kingdom. The church supplies the guidelines for the permeation of the total structures of society by the members of Christ's kingdom.

Kingdom-members then mobilize in their efforts to overcome every area of human life for Christ's sake. Individually and in organizations, members of Christ's kingdom develop theoretical foundations for action, and practical ways of implementing that action. The implications of the gospel for the totality of human life must be faced courageously and lived out sacrificially.

This distinction between the church and the kingdom clearly must be distinguished from that crippling individualism which has marked American Christianity. The day of nomadic individualism has passed from the scene of history. Massive urbanized humanity may be confronted only by Christian coalitions. Therefore let those Christians involved in the political life of the nation come together to determine the implications of the Christian gospel for world-wide Communism, for Israeli-Arab border disputes, for selective service and right-to-work laws. Let these Christians speak to the world, not as though the world were Christian but as though the world were men in God's image now shattered, but nonetheless living under the great epoch of God's grace toward an entire universe. Let Christians, living in a society with many social and economic injustices, organize to alleviate the plight of suffering man. Let Christians having responsibility for educational institutions unite to develop a thoroughly Christian education.

While the church exercises restraint in its ministry of word and deed, limiting itself more specifically to that special revelation of God found in the Scriptures, no limit should be placed on the proclamation by word and deed of the members of Christ's kingdom. The subject matter of their concern is the entirety of God's creation. Their deeds extend to the totality of human life and existence. Not one inch of his entire world may remain unchallenged by the lordship of Jesus Christ.

3. It is quite obvious that the Messianic kingdom of Christ includes both his church and the work of his kingdom members. Christ's kingdom begins by being planted within the hearts of men as a result of the proclamation of the gospel as the church assembles for worship, edification and witness. The rule of Christ over man manifests itself through the working of the Holy Spirit in renewing and sanctifying the hearts of men. At the same time, the church does not exhaust the kingdom of Christ. Sadly the church today has assumed that all the labors of the Messianic kingdom must be funneled through its assemblies. Sadly the church has taken upon itself a role too great for its resources. Sadly the assembled form of Christ's people has lost faith in the working of Christ outside its own assembly halls. The result of this tragic assumption by the church of all that which rightly belongs to the Messianic kingdom is two-fold: first, the most essential task of the church, which is to concern itself with that particular revelation embodied in Christ and incorporated in Scripture has been neglected; and, secondly, by wresting from the kingdom members their initiative in every realm of human existence, the church has robbed kingdom members of their proper and effective role among the world today.

When the church develops a willingness to function within the limitations of God's purpose for its existence it will be able to develop proper concentration on its unique mission. Then it also will be able to provide impetus for members of Christ's kingdom in their massive efforts to claim the world for Christ.

The kingdom of Christ therefore embodies more than the church. The kingdom of Christ may be defined as that realm in time and history in which the sovereignty of God actively operates to overthrow evil. Scripture speaks plainly of a kingdom of evil, a kingdom of Satan, a kingdom of the rulers of the darkness of this world. Satan's kingdom is a powerful one. Its power finds representation not merely in overt acts of violence. It permeates even the social, economic, political, and educational structures of the world today. The entire "course of this world" derives its impetus from Satan himself.

Against this kingdom of Satan the Messianic kingdom of Christ struggles. Receiving its impetus and direction from the church, working individually and in groups as servants of the Lord Christ, the kingdom of Christ assaults every structure and seeks to bring every thought of man into sub-mission to Christ. Christian political organizations direct their efforts toward bringing the secular state into conformity with God's intention for the state. Christian social group strain their efforts to seek social justice among men. Christian educational organizations demand that every philosophy be brought into submission to the lordship of Christ.

4. Although Satan does maintain a kingdom, and although men do not yet see all things subjected to Christ, yet the ultimate sovereignty of God at all times over all that transpires in his creation must be recognized. Satan operates only within well-defined limits. God's rule always is a present reality. The eternal kingdom of God subsumes every activity of men and nations under its domain at all times, from the beginning of history until its end. At the same time, the eternal kingdom of God has definite future dimensions. I Corinthians 15 describes the future expectation which may be held concerning the eternal kingdom of God:

Then cometh the end when He shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father; when He shall have put down all rule and all authority and power. For He must reign, until he hath put all enemies under His feet (I Corinthians 15:24, 25.)

At the end of time the kingdom of Satan shall be squeezed out fully. The kingdom of Christ shall dispel the last remnant of darkness, and the Messianic kingdom shall become equated with the kingdom of God. God then shall be all in all, and the kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever.

Thus we may see something of the interrelationship of the kingdom and the church. Nothing is more essential for the church today than a recognition of these various ways of God's working in the world. The church must see that its assembly does not exhaust God's intended way of working in the world. The church must rediscover its unique role in relation to the Messianic kingdom and the eternal kingdom of God. So long as the church assumes to itself all the prerogatives which belong to these various ways of God's working in the world, its central task and calling, its unique mission to the world shall be dissipated.