

CHURCH IN SOCIETY  
(An Orientation)

Lack of Perspective

Becoming completely engrossed in the practicalities and immediacies of everyday life seems to be the unwritten law of this Now Generation. Time for a realistic appraisal or a relaxed and communally christian reflection on the direction in which our twentieth century is going is not available anymore, especially not when modern man has lost the biblical point of orientation and the true horizon of faith, and is subsequently swept along by the swift currents of daily events, movements and developments of ideas.

The spiritual restlessness of our Go Age has affected also the churches and their leaders. Together with many other members of the church, ministers particularly face the perennial danger of becoming so involved in the many-facetted duties of the church that they tend to become ecclesiastical introverts, people who are no longer keenly aware of the kind of world or society they live in and who are therefore unable to see aright the nature, place and task of the church in human life, society and history.

A church which has become so busy with her own internal programs and problems that she cannot be effectively concerned about the meaning of the business of the world at large has degenerated into an irrelevant institution and fallen into an aloofness which paralyzes her message and role in life. Such paralysis numbs her sensitivity on numerous private and public spiritual issues of life outside the assumed ecclesiastical confinements. The inevitable result of the churches' spiritual numbness to the spirit of the non-ecclesiastical world is that they will not be able to resist effectively the strong suction power of the confusion and relativism rampant everywhere; moreover, they will be seriously handicapped in refuting the grave accusations by the world for their irrelevance in contemporary life.

As soon as we lose sight of man's central place and basic task in creation and in human history (viz., as obedient children of God to be instrumental in the unfolding of the meaning of God's creation to His glory), we allow the origin and purpose of human life to be determined solely by a sin-bent and sin-riddled mankind. We are no longer rolling along within that stone-cut-out-without-hands which, according to the vision of the prophet Daniel, rolls with an accelerating speed down God's holy mountain into Durah's valley, pulverizing that outwardly glittering but inwardly brittle statue of human pride and self-aggrandizement. We have ceased to follow in that wide wake of redemption which has become so clearly manifest through the cross, the open grave, and the blessed, pierced hands of the ascended and reigning Lord who has commanded His mighty Spirit to blaze a trail of peace, justice and truth in the hearts and lives of His children.

Then we have stopped walking in holy formation behind our Leader and Master and have joined instead those dark forces of evil which seek to disturb the hushed silence of holy fear by means of their taunting apostate hilarity in scoffing God and their devilish frolic in defying the Creator.

Total lack of and improper orientation, ineffectiveness, rigidity and stagnation are some of the most serious evils of the church in present-day society. Hollow slogans and abstract generalities, used absent-heartedly by formalistic churches, have elicited the world's reaction of wanting, not without some justification, to unmask the hypocrisy and to stress the irrelevance of churches in society.

## New Perspective Needed

In the light of this lack of perspective, it is all the more urgent that we, in grateful response to God's love in Christ, learn to discern and obey the will of our Father. This requires that we realize ever more keenly that only through Spirit-worked sanctification are we able to continually reform, reshape and reformulate our total way of living, in complete subjection to God's redemptive claims upon our lives and society. Before long established, unbiblical ways of thinking and acting can be broken down and replaced by new, biblically normed ways, heaven and earth have to be moved in our hearts and lives first.

Then, when some progress has been made in man's heart in this new direction and when some true and dynamic principles have been obtained, it will still remain a very demanding task to relate these new directive ideas in a genuinely cultural-historic manner to all the practical situations in life, including our thinking about these given life-situations. In addition to the tremendous force of commonly and long accepted thought - and act - constructions, which are not in conformity with the laws of the Kingdom of God, there is also that darkness in man's sinful heart which causes him to stumble along in blindness and pitiful confusion. Because sin is not only individual and personal but also communal and collective, only by means of a concerted effort on the part of a community of belief-conscious Christians is it possible, in principle at least, to be liberated from the entangling network of sinful ways of living and thinking.

To claim that there can be a consensus about the norms for our behaviour while there is disagreement concerning the practical application of these principles is highly misleading and false. The former excludes the latter; and the latter implies a practical denial of the former. We may never lose sight of the fact that norms are truly principial only when they are also practical, i.e., when they can be responded to, obeyed and applied. Otherwise we cannot admit that all human practices or deeds are of necessity dictated by either true or false principles. Life is one. Not two. Not divided. Every human deed is integrally connected in one way or other with what man believes or disbelieves in his heart concerning God, this creation, and man's relationship to the former as well as his place within the latter. Man cannot live outside his inescapable, ministerial status in which he is divinely commanded to perform his God-given assignment. A sinner is a sinner, not because he is no longer under any obligation, but because he distorts his life's assignment as given to him by God. It is not to the honour of God, nor to the benefit of man, nor to the welfare of society that we try to live in two directions at the same time, that there is no congruity or consistency between our way of living on Sunday and on weekdays, between our Scripture meditation and the monotonous work at assembly lines in mammoth factories, between our singing hymns and attending lectures.

To be sure, often compromises have to be made, due to the sinfulness of our culture. But all christians should be in agreement as to the nature, scope and direction of these compromises. A compromise is never made in a vacuum, in a neutral no-man's land. A compromise is no compromise, unless it is made in a principled or normed context. It remains, therefore, always a question of the basic direction into which the nature and scope of the compromises force us to move. Our answers lead us either sanctifyingly closer to God, to each other and to the meaning of creation, or they lead us deceptively away from God towards peace-destroying powers in a sinful and chaotic world.

We live in very critical days. Christianity is being attacked from left and right, from without and within. The severest attacks come from those who, during their 'theological' training especially, became disgusted with a stuffy, arid scholasticism. In reaction to this they stuffed their minds and hearts with all sorts of unscripturally philosophic delicacies dished up on their theological platters by contemporary secularized scholarship. God is dead, they claim, after they have first reduced Him to a mere, fallible, human concept! The next inevitable step, of course, is to change the Word of God to make it sensible to modern man. It has to be re-interpreted by rational or irrational scholars according to their respective axioms. The Ten Commandments are out-dated. Easter and Good Friday become mere symbols of God's incarnation at Christmas. The love of God in Christ is identified with an absolutized horizontal inter-human relationship. 'God' is actually no more than a capitalized HUMAN BEING. The existing churches are irrelevant anachronisms, to be gotten rid of as soon as possible. There is talk about the good news of atheism and the secular meaning of the Gospel. Some reduce God's Revelation to its purely 'sociological' meaning. An increasingly growing Anglo-Saxon movement in philosophy confines the meaning of God's Word to the linguistic-analytic signification. Functional differences of commitment and belief are said to be merely functional, secondary, outward matters of degree only, differences which can be solved by sociological planners, by semantic philosophers and by (ir)-rational people in 'sacred' halls of secularized 'uni'-versities.

The christian community is called upon to (re)-articulate, in an up-to-date manner, the genuine meaning of true religion, viz., as the biblically normed, total way of man's living, the manner in which he works, thinks, decides, eats and believes as an obedient child of the father. The redemptive uniqueness of such a life must come to clear expression and be concretely brought into rapport with and applied to the consciousness of our contemporary age. The biblical witness, which is both personal and communal in character, must be applied in such a way that it begins to touch and affect the very nerves and veins of all our religiously motivated cultural movements in society. All false dilemmas and unrealistic problematics which so severely plague and hinder a healthy development of our life and society will have to be shown up for what they are: imagined, false, destructive, idolatrous.

To accomplish this, it is necessary that the Spirit of Christ take such a firm hold on our hearts and lives that we will be compelled in gratitude to God to live as truly liberated captives of the Lord. In our captivity to the Lord we have obtained the freedom to stand at the proper 'distance' from the on-going rush of life, to oversee the entire panorama of human life and discern the religious direction into which the manifold cultural-historical movements are moving. Only from this distance is the christian community in a position to open up new perspectives, to proclaim practical principles, and to indicate prophetically the new course which our total society must take. Unless this is done, peace on earth, joy to the world and goodwill toward men are only sentimental, dreamy lyrics, sung once per year in spiritually weak churches and on financially powerful shopping-plazas.

One of the most serious hindrances for the power of redemption to affect all of life directly is the unbiblical and continual attempt by churches and church leaders to make the living Word of God something that is relevant only for church-life. The Word of God, the Bible, has been made into a mere pulpit-book. To be sure, it is a pulpit-book. However, it is much more than this because it is God's Word of Life for all of life. It is God's Revelation which must norm and direct all of creational, human living. When the Word of God is identified with a pulpit-book and is made applicable only to church confessions, sermons, theological textbooks, church laws, church life and church activities, it loses its redemptive

and society. Self-confined churches, monopoly-claiming preachers and speculative theologians do not reflect the Light for the world but prevent the Light from shining into a world of confusion and despair.

### Erroneous Perspectives

When we look at the history of our Western world in the Light of God's Word, we readily discern that the latter has not always had the rightful place it deserves. The consequences have been disastrous for mankind, and especially for our Western civilization in which Christianity came to its fruition. Until today society has remained almost completely untouched and unchanged, not by churches, pulpit-bibles and theological textbooks, but by the Word of God itself as fully revealed in Jesus Christ for the redemptive restoration of all of life.

The answers which have been given to the crucial question of the relationship between the cultural activities of man and the only two possible religious directions in his life have usually been false. The nature and the role of the Word of God in the lives of the redeemed and in the life of society have been misunderstood, to the detriment of the place and task of the church in society.

1. When being-a-christian is identified with belonging to and participating in a particular church, the nature of the relationship between a christian and the world is going to be exactly the same as that between that church and the world. This has had very bad repercussions on the relationship between the Bible and the world. The lack of awareness of the distinction between the religious antithesis, which is present everywhere in life, and the precise nature of the relationship between the church and society caused these two matters to become so confused that the religious antithesis became practically synonomous with the structural and mutual relationships between the churches and society at large.

As a result of this reduction and distortion, one of the early patres, TATIAN, thought of the relationship between the christian, or church, and the world, or society, in terms of the fundamental religious antithesis. Hereby the world outside the church was prevented (in principle!) from truly seeing, touching, handling and hearing the Word of God. The implied heresy in this differs only in degree from that to which TATIAN later in his life resorted when he got completely stranded in the sectarian, world-estranged movement of Encratism. It is remarkable that another early church leader, TERTULLIAN, whose views on the "church and world" were comparable to those of TATIAN, fell into a similar heresy when he joined the sectarian movement of Montanism which also defied and tried to escape life in society.

2. To replace this absolutistic separation, another attempt was made to solve the problem of the relation of the church and world. It swung over to the other extreme: basically there is no difference between them. The difference which does exist between church and society is only one of a degree of clarity of insight and awareness. JUSTIN MARTYR was the proponent of this view par excellence. He identified the goodness of God with human (rational) activity and thus robbed the Word of God of its revelatory, normative character. JUSTIN saw no distinction anymore between God's Word and man's sinful response to it.

3. A third solution to the problem was suggested by BASIL of Caesarea and JEROME. They conceived of the abiding relationship between christianity and the world in terms of the unique permission which God granted to the people of Israel to take along and use for the building of the tabernacle of Jahweh the gold and silver treasures of the pagan Egyptians. What Israel did with these material things from Egypt, the christian could do with the views and ideas of the heathen world. Thus without being biblically critical (again, this was excluded in principle!) all the cultural products or ideas of the pagan world were thought to be service-able or accept-able to the church in general and ancillary to theology in particular.
4. A last solution which became classic in the history of Western Christianity, is the scholastic distinction between nature and grace. This distinction applies to all of life: state-church, society-christianity, reason-faith, temporal-eternal, imperfect-perfect, body-soul, human will-faith, emporor-pope, practical-principial, carnival-fasting. This nature-grace dualism started already at the Synod of Orange (529 A.D.) when the sacramental grace of baptism was conceived of as something natural in the semi-Pelagian sense. It received its definitive, classic formulation in the views of THOMAS AQUINAS. Ever since it has exercised a controlling influence ~~at~~ only upon subsequent Roman Catholic but also Protestant thinking, preaching, and acting.

These four solutions still exist today. The first one calls for world-flight; the second, world-conformity; the third, co-existence; and the last a carefully formulated imperialism or domination of the church over the lower and imperfect society.

#### Biblical Perspective

In distinction from these four artificial solutions, we do well to look for a radically different answer. This is possible when we continue to deepen and express more clearly the approach to this whole matter as first suggested in a principally biblical manner by AUGUSTINE. During the later period of his life he emphasized the need to define or describe the world, not in terms of itself, but rather in terms of the goodness of God. Hereby he was able to confess that the world was less than good and that man was totally darkened by sin.

JOHN CALVIN profited greatly from this insight. Avoiding principally the extremes of both the Anabaptistic world-flight attitude and the later Arminian world-conformity mentality, he stressed that, whereas man is sinful and does not possess any inherent goodness, God's creational laws are nevertheless good and through them God's general revelation works as a restraining grace in this world.

This radically biblical approach was followed and deepened at the end of the previous century by ABRAHAM KUYPER who saw that the world-embracing sovereignty of God manifested itself in God's common grace over all mankind. Hereby the possibility, legitimacy and responsibility of cultural-societal life was given for Christ-believers. This life cannot and may not exist in and by itself, alongside of or next to Christianity.

In the very midst of the world, at the heart of society, at the center of all cultural pursuits the religious antithesis comes to expression. This does not make the church superfluous. On the contrary! Kuyper's reformational work began in the church, but it did not stop there. That was only the beginning. The fundamental issue and problem at stake in life is not the same as, but much more fundamental than, the question of the relationship of churches and society.

Here we have the most significant break-through thus far concerning the problem of Christianity and the world. The real antithesis is a religious clash between two totally different directions in the heart commitments of the depth-level of human existence. The frightening echoes of this fundamental clash can, are, and must be heard, not between the historically organized church and the historically unfolding world or society, but rather within both of these; i.e., also within the world! At the very heart of all societal-cultural activities and movements, God's redeeming grace in Christ through the Spirit presupposes in the 'world' of regenerated men God's creational revelation through which he manifests His restraining grace and makes societal life a possibility, yes, a continually maintained reality.

It is only within the context of one God, one Revelation, one Christ, and one creation that we can begin to see the place and task of an integrally religious and creationally undivided mankind which is subjected to all the creational laws, including those for an historical development of society; a mankind which is called upon to respond obediently to the new Law of God's regime in Christ. Only after we have seen these truths, are we able to deal with the nature, place, and task of the church in society.

The preceding orientation was necessary in order to guard ourselves against becoming side-tracked as well as from falling into the false problematics which have arisen out of a serious misconception both with respect to the meaning of Christianity and the world, and to the mutual relationships between them: as if these were two separate entities, existing side by side, without being intrinsically related to each other. We have to warn ourselves and each other against the temptation of allowing some kind of split-attitude in life, also in our thinking about life; otherwise part of life will remain unre-formed by the new Life in Christ, and consequently all of life will inevitably be de-formed, distorted, twisted, pulled out of its creational context. Also in our Anglo-Saxon world, this divided pattern of acting and thinking about church(es) and society has left such deep impressions and has become so tenacious that, unless we dissociate ourselves from it with all our might, any attempt to reformulate the unique, leavening effect of the christian religion is at the very outset already doomed to failure. Whatever will then be said about the problem will have to be a mere restatement, slightly modified and a bit up-dated maybe, of the traditional, misconstrued views. In the light of the full biblical Revelation there is no room for any kind of (arid) scholasticism. What is demanded is nothing less than putting on the whole Gospel-armour, in order to be able to battle against every kind of life-destroying subjectivism and comfort-robbing (semi-) rationalism which lie at the basis of the four compromising solutions mentioned earlier.

It is an undeniable fact and a sign of our times that of the three leading, cultural-historical movements in Western civilization, namely Humanism, Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, the former has left the biggest impression upon public life in forming and determining its patterns. Then follows Roman Catholicism. And Protestantism trails miserably behind. Yet, when we look at what these movements could and should contribute for the

whether they be socialists, communists, atheists, liberals, materialists and whatever you have decide what must be done in the world or society at large, the Roman Catholics peek half-critically and half-approvingly across the humanists' shoulders, and the Protestants squabble at a distance about how to save another 'soul' and whether this 'saved soul' may smoke, play cards, attend a theatre or dance; and they are often engaged in time-consuming and energy-robbing theological hair-splitting and in minute and often false problematics which are really unrelated to the mainstream of our dynamic, contemporary life. The main reason why Protestantism trails behind lies in the perennial danger of withdrawing from life and seeking refuge in a personalistic Christianity which does not affect society, or a type of mysticism which defies reality, or a subjectivism which can no longer hear God's revelation nor duly recognize its normative character for man's life in this world.

There is much restlessness today within Protestantism about those who declare that God, the Bible and the church are dead. To be sure, there are good reasons to become highly concerned about those who seek to unnerve the Gospel for modern man. But why did Christianity not become restless during the previous centuries when God and His Word and the church were declared to be dead and irrelevant with respect to the fields of scholarship, industry, statecraft and the rest of society? Have all those who were ordained to speak from pulpits maybe not silenced the voice of the Almighty God, instead of prophetically amplifying it for all of life?

When many church leaders cannot or will not express themselves in any way on existing cultural movements, they usually resort to the practice of abstaining from saying anything at all. They keep silent about the burning issues of the day. The irony and tragedy of this approach, however, is this: saying nothing speaks volumes: the Word of God is by implication made to be irrelevant and a faith-life is fostered which is unrelated to the full orbit of life. The Word of God appears to have no message for the vast world outside the secluded church.

Once we have seen and have learned to admit that the aloofness of Christianity from the world implies co-responsibility for the direction into which our civilization is moving, it is no longer possible to sit back in self-complacency. The church must be concerned about the concrete issues of life in which believers in Christ live and with which they are daily confronted. Comfort and direction must be provided for them, so that they may be enabled and encouraged to confess the Name of Christ before men.

Merely 'souls' are never saved. It is always people, persons who hear and must respond to the Gospel of salvation. When the Saviour talks about saving and losing one's soul, He does not mean the internal soul in distinction from the external body, but rather the whole person as an indivisible unity, as a creature, as a sinful creature. Reaching out with one's arm and hand to give a glass of water to someone in need may make a difference of eternal life and death when the Lord comes back at the end of days.

Also merely "individuals" are never saved. Sin and salvation are according to the Bible never merely personal and individual. They are also communal and societal. They enter into all the multiple relationships in which a person stands to other persons, to movements, and to things. This makes the second part of Christ's summary of the law, to love one's neighbour as oneself, so concrete, so meaningful and so demanding in everyday life. The Bible teaches plainly that when sinners are redeemed by grace, genuine peace

must follow, first of all with God, but then also in all the inter-human relationships. Among those who are of the household of faith there must come agreement, harmony, properly restored relationships. This will cause a basic clash between those who believe and those who do not believe in Christ. The Christian will honour God's love, and therefore refuse to cover-up fundamental differences, and seek to convince unbelievers that their road leads to disharmony and death, and that the Way, the Truth, and the LIFE can be found only in Christ.

When we reduce the meaning of Biblical redemption to salvaging the souls of individuals only, we under-estimate, if we estimate at all, the plaguing problems and questions which "saved, individual souls" experience when they are subjected, as students for example, to a completely secularized curriculum of education; or as citizens are compelled to cast their votes for two or three equally unacceptable political parties; or as labourers are forced to join labour unions which are in principle pitted against the class of capitalists, strike almost around the clock, and hold their business meetings on Sundays; or as an audience are victimized by brain-washing commercials and slanted programs on radio and television.

It is so easy to write off this bad, wicked world and tell sinners to flee to Jesus Christ for rest and strength. Rest from what? Strength for what? We are not saved from the world but from the sin in this world, in order to be used as men of God to reclaim this Father's world. It is so easy to condemn the wickedness in this world! But what are we, as Christ-believers by the grace of God and through His Spirit, planning to do about it? Leave it as it is? Are we not called upon by God Himself to seek a radical re-alignment of the existing situations, dilemmas and problems? Is a positive response not unavoidable for all those who love to become ever more sanctified, and who pray to be new creatures in Christ the Creator? Is not much of our preaching, teaching, discussing, singing, and praying in the churches centered on the life-hereafter, up-yonder, then, on the other side of the Jordan River? And is this not an ecclesiastically approved and clerically fostered escape? Is it not our duty to obtain eternal Life, in complete dependence upon God and in communion with all the believers, already now, here, on this side of the grave, in this world of God? Are our pews not indeed too comfortable and cozy for us Sunday-Christian, clean-shaven, well-dressed, emotion-stirred, Heavenly-Jerusalem-singing saints?

Before we express ourselves further in a suggestive manner on the nature, place, and task of the church(es) in society, we must first make a few comments about the biblical meaning of the Kingdom of God. This will help us to obtain a better and more correct perspective on this whole crucial issue.

### Kingdom of God

In the proclamation of the Word, in the ecclesiastical confessions, including those of Reformed Protestantism, and in our Bible discussions and devotions the centrality and great importance of the Biblical Revelation about the Kingdom of God or Kingdom of Heaven, as Matthew often refers to it, are not sufficiently recognized. It is not without significance that at least the first three Gospel writers, and by implication also the apostle John, describe the very beginning of the Mediator's public ministry as the proclamation of the Kingdom of God. Think of all Christ's parables about the Kingdom. He commanded those who would follow Him to go out and make known to the world the Kingdom of God. This revealed reality is clearly implied in the closing verses of the Gospel according to Matthew, in the



book of Revelation, and also in most of the New Testament epistles. In the Old Testament there are numerous references to it in the book of Psalms, in many prophecies, in the manner in which the people of Israel were commanded by God to live. It is presupposed and demonstrated in the incomparable Exodus of God's people out of Egypt and even previous to this in the catastrophic deluge at the time of Noah. The relevancy of this Kingdom of God for everyday, practical life is beautifully and very pointedly described in the book of Proverbs.

Throughout the Bible it is clearly revealed that the Kingdom of God is not to be conceived of in terms of a specific territory or terrain in life, but rather in terms of God's sovereign control and power over all things and all creatures, especially over all human beings. This control extends over unbelievers, forces of darkness, satan and hell. Though much is done in sin and out of rebellion against His will, nothing can be done apart from His rule. Negatively, this Kingdom of God comes to clear expression in human history in God's divine over-ruling, calling to a halt, curbing and even squashing sinful powers which seek to deny God and defy the meaning of God's lawful creation. The power of this Kingdom of LIFE maintains itself over against and in the face of forces of corruption. It is by virtue of this fact that the end of sin is death! This glorious kingdom of God manifested itself in the great Deluge through which God reaffirmed His claims upon this whole creation and upon mankind and made room for His own glory. Time and again this pattern was repeated in one way or other throughout the entire history before and after Christ lived on earth. These heaven-worked re-formations of God were aimed at the further realization of His Kingdom in history, and are all rooted in and related to His granting new life, causing a "new creation", and establishing a new mankind through Jesus Christ.

The Kingdom of God is cosmic and universal. It encompasses all things and all people. It manifests itself positively in the obedient believers and negatively in the disobedient unbelievers. This is clearly indicated by Christ's parable in Matthew 13 about the wheat, sown by the Lord, and the weeds, sown by the stranger, which grow up together until the day of harvest. The rebellious are included as weeds, strangers, slaves, captives, or intruders who against their wishes sooner or later must capitulate to God's faithfully maintained and the Christ-centered law for human life and creation. Not by right in Christ but by usurpation they are 'in' this Kingdom until the harvest time. Then the weeds will be uprooted, bundled, thrown far away and burned. They will become outcasts. As excommunicated enemies they will be ousted from the eternal Kingdom of God and subjected forever to the wrath of God.

Until the definitive manifestation of the Kingdom, there is room for God's grace in Christ to turn evil into good, to enforce His will for the salvation of sinners, and to rule and overrule mankind through His impinging Kingdom. This includes God's maintaining of all creational ordinances which make life possible and which, when deformed by human sin, must be re-formed through the believers' obedience to God, so that these ordinances will become what they were intended to be: the patterns of the Kingdom of God, the means through which God enforces His rule over us and in us. God's regime in Christ does not and cannot come to expression apart from the creational ordinances. They are the servants of the Lord, as we are told in Psalm 119. They make a truly human, creationally embodied response (positive in the case of believers and negative in the case of unbelievers) possible.

What is sometimes referred to as 'common grace' in the 'world', in distinction from 'special grace' in the 'church', we are now in a position to see as being inseparably related to God's providential control over all creation which in its abiding lawfulness reveals in one way or other something of the majesty of God. Basically God's revelation in creation and in the spoken and inscripturated Word is one. God's full revelation, manifested also in His creational handiwork, is rooted in Christ.

The Kingdom of God must be seen in terms of God's royal regime which He extends in Christ to those who believe unto redemption and to those who disbelieve unto the savour of death. Here we have the mystery of the manifest dynamics and victory of the glorious Kingdom of Heaven upon earth.

### Church

The people of God, the new mankind, the rightful citizens of this Kingdom are those who seek to enter it through the only door, i.e., Christ the Lord. This new, covenanted and covenantal people are gratefully caught up in the sanctifying struggle of reaching in faith from out the present, sin-affected 'not-yet' for the ultimate goal of the complete perfection of the saints who 'already now' may possess the comfort of the final outcome. In the wake of this Kingdom the soldiers of the cross march on, the citizens of the Kingdom are ready to serve and the redeemed in Christ glorify God, also and precisely in the whole fabric of their creational life and activities.

In the Bible these believers are referred to and described as a holy nation, a blameless people, a Spirit-filled temple of God, the Bride of the Bridegroom, the new building with that all-important Cornerstone, the new creature, the called-out (elected) nation, the wonderfully constituted Body of Christ, the little flock which heeds the comforting and warning voice of the great Shepherd. This is the CHURCH in its fullest and deepest sense. It is made up of all the believers who walk before the face of Jahweh and who desire to act always and everywhere as obedient children or citizens of the Kingdom of God. They are in the gracious grips of the incomparable force de majeure of God's forgiving love in Christ and thus enabled, in principle, to see aright and acknowledge all the creational laws for them personally and communally in their private life and public life in society.

There is nothing mystical about this Church. It is not a phantom. It is a glorious reality, made up of flesh and blood, of human creatures who are known by God and who know themselves to be living members of the new mankind in Jesus Christ. It is so real and glorious that it defies denominational confinements and all sorts of man-made, super-imposed distinctions, such as visible-invisible, institute-organism, outward-inward, individual-universal or personalistic-hierarchic.

The Church cannot be seen apart from the Kingdom of God. This does not mean, however, that they can be identified; nor that they may be contrasted to each other. They are not two mutually exclusive entities, as many pietists or fundamentalists tend to believe. Neither are they two different ways of saying the same thing, as especially Roman Catholics and many Anglicans like to maintain.

As far as the direction of both the Church and the Kingdom is concerned they are alike: glory to God through the obedience of the children of the Light. But the nature and scope of the Kingdom is different and more encompassing than that of the Church. The Church is that new reality in and through which God manifests and demonstrates His Kingdom. The first time that Jesus talks about the Church is in Matthew 16 and 18. Until this time He had been proclaiming and demonstrating the gospel of the Kingdom of Heaven. Now He sets His face to go to Jerusalem. He takes His disciples aside to instruct them about the two fundamental ground-pillars or norms for the Church in the fullest sense of the word and not in the present day denominational sense: they must confess Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God; secondly, they must from out of this confession exercise mutual discipline and, if necessary, excommunicate all those who seek to destroy the new community of believers. In obedience to these two basic ground rules for the new fellowship of God with man in Christ, the Kingdom can enter the lives of the redeemed and into history, thus making manifest the renewal of all things in Christ.

Those who belong to the Church as living members of Christ's Body and as living stones of God's temple are the children of the Kingdom of Heaven for whom God's sovereign Rule is not a threat but a refuge. They know that they are in their father's world. They will in the freedom that is given from sin and in the freedom that is granted for service seek to obey God's Kingdom everywhere. Driven on by God's sanctifying Spirit, they will want to open up the true meaning of all life, including public life in society, and thus fulfill their given life assignments in the world.

#### church(es)

Our starting point for dealing with the nature, place and task of the church understood in its denominational sense in our highly differentiated society, does not lie in churchism or denominationalism. We must rather begin with a biblically orientated and creationally justifiable view of man, human life and society with due recognition for historical developments and perspectives. As with so many terms, we often use words in a variety of ways without always keeping in mind their different connotations. This usually leads to confusion in practical life. When one closely observes the ways in which the term 'faith' is used by everyone of us, he will readily admit that it has more than one meaning. It can have at least three different meanings. For the sake of clarity and to avoid unnecessary confusion, we do well to point out the three ways it is commonly used.

1. FAITH as the Spirit-worked gift of God in our hearts whereby we are regenerated, turned around and brought back to God.
2. Faith as the content of what we believe. For the regenerated person this is the full revelation of God as recorded in His Word and fully revealed in Jesus Christ. Therefore, faith can refer to specific church confessions which have arisen in history. For the unbeliever the content of what he believes is something else, something imagined in his unbelief, something other than the Word of God.
3. Faith as that specific human act of believing, in distinction from other human acts such as thinking, financing, loving, judging, laughing and sleeping. None of these different human activities can be isolated from or identified with one another. Faith, in the sense of an act of believing, is typically human, creational, and therefore characteristic also of unbelievers! It belongs inherently to man's creatureliness. When man fell into sin he did not lose this capacity as Roman Catholics believe. It remained intact, even after man sinned. If this were not so, unbelievers would not be able to give concrete (sinful) expression of what they

idolatrously believe in their hearts. If man did not have this capacity, he could not believe in something or someone who is immediately beyond his act of believing. This act refers either to the true or to a false revelation, and expresses either a true or a false religious heart-commitment.

Now that we have distinguished these three meanings of the term faith, we must also indicate their respective relationships. We then discover that FAITH is the gracious gift of God which sets our life going in the right direction, viz. obedience. This enables the redeemed to use his act of believing in such a way that it opens up and refers beyond itself to God in Jesus Christ. Consequently the content of what he believes is the truth, viz., all that which God has revealed.

In the case of the unbeliever his heart remains closed; it moves away from God. This sinful, not wanting to live by grace through (the gift of) FAITH has immediate effects on the content of his human act of believing. The unbeliever will believe in something creaturely rather than in the Creator; he will believe in something around him or in himself. The inevitable result of such unbelief is a grotesque distortion of the meaning of one's life and the whole world. There ensues a narrowing of perspective which borders on the ridiculous. It is as foolish and vain as trying to pull oneself up by his own bootstraps. When the Lawgiver for life is no more duly acknowledged, man becomes in a variety of ways a law unto himself. Isaiah 40 and Romans 1 and 2 give us the divinely inspired description of the irony and horribleness of the unbeliever's idolatry: he makes gods out of wood, stone and steel; and after he has made them, he bows in honour before them! Today we do not see the many graven images Paul saw in Athens. Man has become more refined, due to his cultural development. The idol gods are still there but in a different form. They have become the various ISMS in our modern world: humanISM, socialISM, rationalISM, scientISM, secularISM, materialISM, pragmatISM, etc., etc. There is also today a symbol for the 'unknown God': it is the 'mathematical X' and the 'analytic'.

Man remains a religious creature, even as a sinful covenant breaker. He retains his typical human capacity to believe in something or someone. The antithesis does not mean that some people have the ability to believe and others do not. All men believe. The difference exists in what they believe, and this is determined by whether or not the gift of faith has been received in their hearts.

#### Nature of the church(es)

The recipients of the regenerating gift of faith are all one in the Lord through the Spirit. They are the New Mankind, the Body of Christ. This communal oneness in the Lord finds its first societal manifestation or expression in the organized community of believers who through the same gift of faith in their hearts are able to confess the true content of faith. In a particular way they congregate for special worship and for the strengthening of their total faith-life. They proclaim, confess, unfold, and teach the inscripturated Word of God. They administer the sacraments and exercise mutual faith-discipline. They establish liturgies, formulate confessions, administer finances, erect church buildings, set up church laws, organize various societies, elect consistorial office bearers, obtain bank accounts, place announcements in newspapers, etc., etc. The church arises in society in an historical manner. It enters the whole fabric of human life. This can be pointed out in a variety of ways: lawyers draft the charter of incorporation, banks receive the monies and pay interest, the department of

tax-revenues prescribes a certain number to be used for tax exemption, contractors erect the buildings, magazines allow a few columns for church news and issues, televisions schedule ecclesiastical programs, neighbourhoods hear the gospel. Thus one could go on indicating that the one Church with one hope, one Lord, one baptism, one faith, and one God and Father finds her first and most articulate expression in the local churches which vary from each other denominationally, ethnically, culturally, historically, and nationally.

No one will dispute the existence of these consciously organized, confessional group-entities or faith-communities with their own peculiar activities, teachings, aims, membership, and tasks. They are concrete societal manifestations of that which deep down motivates man in his heart. When that motivation is no longer biblical the confessional faith-communities can no longer be called churches. Yet they remain faith-communities. The churches are then replaced and antithetically opposed by the faith-communities of unbelief which believe in liberalism, moralism, materialism, humanism - to mention but a few.

In the view of contemporary Roman Catholicism a society without the church is an imperfect society, a society which is robbed of its real meaning and purpose. This is a direct consequence of the Roman Catholic view that man, when he fell into sin, was robbed of his ability to believe in something or someone, and thereby became imperfect, incomplete. The implied dualism in this view excludes, at the very outset already, even the possibility of beginning to see and account for the creational embeddedness of churches. As human faith-communities, churches are not new creations, but the first empirical manifestations of the re-constitution of mankind in Christ Jesus. They are closely connected with, integrally related to, and uniquely intertwined with the whole fabric of creational existence and human society. If this were not so, churches could have no real history; they could not be organized; they could not be in this world; they would be docetically unrelated to human society and history, and thereby they would demonize society and dechristianize themselves.

It is true that the (locally) organized churches are 'institutions of renewing grace', but not in a Roman Catholic sense. That they are instrumental in the work of God's Spirit to proclaim His Word and administer the sacraments does not make them 'divine'. Only God is divine. Churches remain human, i.e. creaturely qualified. Man, human relationships, creation have to be served. This includes the typical human activity of believing.

It is often said that a person becomes religious when he joins a particular church. If this is so, religion has been reduced to mean merely church-membership, so that one can either have or not have religion. Consequently, religion is no more any man's true or false way-of-life! Life is not religion anymore. "Being religious" is then the same as "being a christian", and both expressions become synonomous with "membership in a particular church". Though these three are, for the Christ-believer, inseparably related to one another, they are not to be equated. Daily Kingdom-life entails much more than having one's membership (papers) in a certain denominational and local church. And one should not lose sight of the fact that also the un-believer's way-of-life (e.g. sinfully refusing to join, or to be joined to, the church) is of necessity and in its very essence religious in character! There is in man that irremovable, built-in ministerial status, that inescapable God-appointed ordinance to be creatures of the Creator as covenantal vice-gerents. Also the sinner has to live before God's Face or under His laws: a sinner is a covenant-breaker. God's Word cannot be broken. Man has been placed in the unavoidable situation of being subjected, responsible to the law of God, not only in the

This general 'office' of all men is not to be identified with the office of believers, because otherwise we can no longer see that unbelievers are sinners by virtue of the fact that they, standing in this general office of all mankind, corrupt and distort it. Neither should man's general office, after it has been erroneously equated with the office of believers, be confused with ecclesiastical offices, as is done in Romanist practise. The christian religion is centrally present in all individual and communal activities of christians, and therefore, also outside historically organized churches as e.g. in the family, state, industry, education, etc., etc.

Special church offices are not distinct from other offices because the former alone are biblically instituted. This would imply that all man's other specific and official responsibilities have their origin in the will of man and not in God's creationally and scripturally revealed Will. The Bible talks about specifically instituted offices also for the State and the family. Many christians have seen and duly acknowledged this. However, they then go on to claim that outside these three officially instituted communal life relationships, authority is conferred upon or delegated to office-bearers by the will of man. In this very subtle form of Biblicism, there is a religiously dualistic, secular way of thinking which cannot do justice to the biblical injunction that all of life must be subjected to the authority of Christ. A christian society is in principle excluded, unless we believingly take into account the creationally embedded and scripturally directed, practical principle of sphere-sovereignty.

The atonement of Christ and the Spirit's gift of faith whereby the sinner is turned around, converted, are 'new creations' which God gives to penitent sinners. Through these redemptive gifts of God human faith-communities become christian, and thus churches arise as renewed creational realities. Organized churches are the first societal manifestations of a mankind that is newly rooted in Christ and activated by the Spirit of God.

Only within the context and perspective of a biblically orientated and creationally founded view of man and society can we see clearly the nature of organized churches. Churches have their origin in heaven, i.e., in the renewing grace of God in Christ through the Holy Spirit. But the manner in which they manifest themselves, the structural embodiments in which they are concretized do not fall 'supra-naturally' into this 'natural' world. No, these are natural, i.e., creaturely and human. Also the Bible or God's Word has entered human history: it has been printed; it can be read, quoted, handled, touched, and seen. And in this sense also the churches are concrete, human, creational and, thank God, not mythical phantoms. It is the nature of the Word of God to direct redeemed man on the path that leads to life, viz., genuine human existence, also historically, organizationally and administratively in the locally organized communities of faith.

It is most confusing to think that when the New Testament talks about 'Church' it has in mind what we mean by our denominational or historically developed churches. Usually the New Testament refers to and talks about the church in the sense of the redeemed people of God or the renewed mankind in Christ. At other times the New Testament uses this word to indicate the new mankind in a more or less restricted or locally concrete sense, viz., the established churches or communities of believers in such and such a place or city. It is this meaning of the church we have in mind in our discussion at this time.

But here again we have to learn to think genetically and historically, not statically. The locally established churches at that time were, though in essence the same as the Christ-centered churches today, outwardly and organizationally quite different. Between then and now there are nineteen hundred years of historical development, not only in the formation but also in the de-formation of churches. The remarkable thing is that during the history subsequent to the New Testament the essential nature of the churches has become more clearly manifest. Not to recognize this, not to see the unfolding process of the church in (and together with) society, not to give a realistic analysis of the nature of the churches as they exist in our society will have the effect that our comments about the church will sound vague, seem to be abstract and appear to be unrelated to the presence and life of churches in society.

The nature of established christian communities of faith or locally organized churches, can be described tentatively in the following way: they are specific, genuinely human, societal communities of Christ-believers which are founded in history, uniquely qualified by man's faith-act, and made possible by the re-directing gift of faith in man's heart whereby his built-in ability to believe is opened up so that he can discern and acknowledge the God-given norms for and contents of what he believes, viz., the Word of God in Christ, the proclamation of His Word, and the specific church confessions which have been adopted and will be drafted in the future.

#### Place of the church(es)

Religion is man's true or false way of life, expressed everywhere in life, even in eating, drinking, loving, buying, and reading. Religion, therefore, can never be localized or limited to one particular human deed. It stands for the fundamental direction in which man lives and for the propelling force of his heart-commitment. As such it can never be theoretically grasped or analytically formulated. Rather, it expresses itself in the spiritual direction in all man's activities, including all his specific faith activities.

Religion and confession must be distinguished from each other. Those who maintain that the cultic faith-act with its articulated confessions is the same as religion with its life-directing power, are always tempted to deny or minimize the need for church organization. They tend to disparage officially instituted church functions and look down upon the relevance of church order. Spiritualistically, they deny the importance of creational ordinances. Being a Christian implies, in principle at least, being opposed to organizing and structuring churches in a creational and human manner.

It is also possible that the opposite take place, viz., religion be reduced to organized church life. The inevitable result of this approach is a christian religion which in self-asserting fashion claims for itself totalitarian, ecclesiastical power over the rest of society. Think, for example, of the Roman Catholic idea of the Corpus Christianum during the Middle Ages. Today it is present in the attitude that all non-ecclesiastical organizations become christian only by virtue of the fact that they are somehow affiliated with or subsumed under a direct or indirect authority of the church(es).

Here again we discover that our view on the place of the church in life is very intimately connected with our views on what society is in general.

The established church exists in society. It belongs to society, is a part of it, and plays a very crucial role in it. As an established community, it is co-ordinate with many other organized distinct 'entities' in society. To deny this is to deny the concrete nature of the church and its place in life and society. The biblical view of human existence, including human society, demands that all things are seen as religiously rooted in Jesus Christ. Nowhere in temporal creational life can the essential meaning and the ultimate authority be found or located. Not in the state nor in politicians; not in unionized labourers nor in labour leaders; not in families nor in parents; not in any created thing, such as wood, stone or metal; not in human ideas; not in drugs or textbooks; not in wives, husbands, children, money, talents. It is found only in Him through Whom everything was created. This excludes the possibility of finding it in organized church communities or in church leaders. God is and must be all and in all through His Son who came to redeem and restore all things (see Genesis 1, John 1, Colossians 1, Ephesians 1, I Corinthians 1, and Hebrews 1). In Him all things hang together. Through Him the creational principle of sphere-sovereignty is a very practical principle, and not just a humanly devised model superimposed upon a dis-ordered reality. This principle is a God-given law for creation and society which man must learn to see and recognize. In spite of man's sinful denial of it, sphere-sovereignty maintains itself. It is the ground and condition for a proper historical development of society, including the organized church communities within society. All human authority and freedom must be seen in the light of God's full Law as fulfilled and revealed in Christ. This Law or Will of God is to be found not only in Scriptures but also in creational ordinances. God, not man, is the revealer of all true meaning and authority. Man is the recipient of this through the freedom he has in Christ. There is only one God, and only one Revelation with its two inseparable facets, viz., the creational and scriptural. The one God gave man an indivisible calling: honouring Him in all things, not just in established churches, but also in state, family, school, industry, art, hospitals, etc., etc. -- all of which have in our society mutually exclusive authorities, and are yet at the same time mutually dependent upon one another for the proper development of their own specific authorities and responsibilities. In a harmonious society peace is not something confined to only an individual's inner soul!

A christian view of society, human life, and history differs radically from a non-Christian. A real socialist and a communist allow no room in society for churches in the sense of outwardly organized christian communities of faith. Churches are poison; they are detrimental for the welfare of society. For a humanist, the instituted church is the same thing as religion: both can easily be dispensed with. For the Roman Catholic, the church in and by itself is the most perfect society, resembling the Kingdom of God upon earth in the midst of a lower and imperfect society. For the reformational Christian, the place of the church in society can be seen only by means of a scripturally directed analysis of the real structure of society in terms of the unique principle of sphere-sovereignty. Ecclesiology, the study of the church, must fall within this scope and approach.

The Kingdom of God, the Church of Jesus Christ as the new mankind, and the historically established churches are closely related to one another and are all redemptively linked together; yet they must be clearly distinguished from each other. There is something unique about the organized



church. No return is possible for those who have been excommunicated by God Himself from His Kingdom, i.e., the true flock of Jesus Christ. Yet for those who are excommunicated from churches through ecclesiastical office-bearers, there is always during this life the possibility of readmission. We should also remember that according to I Corinthians 5:13, God judges not only inside but also outside the confines of the church.

The question is often raised regarding the relationships between church and world. In other words: what is the place of the church in society?

Three answers to this question occur again and again. The first, is provided by spiritualistic pietism: withdraw the church from life and society. The second is the answer of a compromising christianity: compartmentalize or departmentalize the church in an attempt to seek by adaptation and accommodation a peaceful co-existence with the world. The third suggests the solution of submerging the church in the world so that the church actually disappears altogether behind and in such things as civic responsibility, humanitarian concern, participation in pickets and civil marches, distorted democracy, social re-urbanization, and the secular city.

These three approaches can be described as secular, as long as we keep the two meanings of the term 'secular' in mind. It can mean an apostate refusal to accept and submit oneself and all of life to the life-directing Word of God. Such religious secularization is never acceptable to the christian community, and in the measure in which it is implied in the three suggested solutions they are all equally objectionable. However, the word 'secular' can also mean something else, something good and beneficial for both church and society, viz.; freeing life and society from the external control of established churches over all human endeavour. Through a healthy de-ecclesiasticizing of life, in conjunction with the process of historical differentiation in society, room has been created for many organizations and associations to arise and exist apart from external jurisdiction of rigidly and hierarchically organized churches, and it has become increasingly more apparent what the real place of the churches in society should be.

We shall now try to describe the place of the church in society from three possible points of view. All three will presuppose what has been said earlier about the nature of the uniquely established communities of christian faith.

First, it may be maintained that the churches have a leading role in society. They can be the most influential societal communities. Because they are re-directed faith-communities and man is an indivisible human being whose life cannot be fragmentized, there must of necessity come a deepening and opening-up of the meaning and christian faith-directedness of life and society. In this sense the churches are by no means irrelevant and poisonous for society. They are extremely important and a healing power for societal life everywhere. The fundamental reformation of life which begins with man's religious re-directedness finds its first organized awareness and societal expression in man's personal and communal, typical faith-activities.

Secondly, it is also possible to indicate the same thing by thinking of the churches as standing on the perimeter of life and society: at the horizons of all human activities and societal movements, they provide necessary perspectives, the open windows to the Word of God. Active christian faith-life,

Bible study, communal praise- and prayer-life, and other specific church activities are the work of the Holy Spirit, the presence and guidance of Jesus Christ, and the grace of God the Father in order to penetrate concentrically inward toward the most essential presuppositions and motivations everywhere in human behaviour.

Thirdly, we can think of churches as standing at the very center of life and society. Now the influence of the churches is not thought of as going inward from the perimeter to the center, but as going outward from the center to the horizons of life and history.

By means of these three ways of indicating the essential place of the churches in society, we can avoid locating churches erroneously either outside human society by means of withdrawal, or in an isolated segment of society by means of partial accommodation, or in society itself by means of complete submergence in it. In summary, the established church is first of all in society; secondly, it is a unique and distinct, societal, christian faith-community; thirdly, it is inseparably connected with the entire fabric of creational existence, so that its impact must be felt everywhere in life. This brings us to the unique task of the church in society.

#### Task of the church(es)

The church is the 'first fruit' of salvation, experienced by those who have been redeemed by God's grace. The scope of this redemption is not confined to the inner 'soul' in distinction from bodily and societal life in business, education, politics, recreation and art. On the contrary! It is the task of organized churches to proclaim and administer the life-restoring and society-redeeming freedom in the all-authoritative Lord Jesus. As the avant-garde of the Kingdom of God, the church must act in such a way that God's glorious dominion is made known to all and in all things. His rule must be honoured by man in all cultural and societal responsibilities. Man is mandated to give positive expression to all creational norms of life and society. These norms can be seen and duly acknowledged only when man places all his duties and tasks in the Light of the life- and society-directing Word of God. In this manner all things, movements, and deeds should be structured after the pattern of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Churches are not called upon to legislate or promulgate binding laws for all society. They may legislate only for their own ecclesiastical institutions. It is the task of churches to provide fundamental directives of faith for every zone of life; to steer the unfolding of society in the right direction; and to prophetically guide the development of ideas, deeds, and cultural movements through a keen faith-discernment of the underlying directive and spiritual tendencies in our age in the Light of the biblical message. All of life must be in the light-rays of God's Word because it alone can illuminate the situations and problems in life. It does this through a human faith-life that has been re-directed and opened up.

No church can remain silent. Churches are structurally embedded in this creational life. Even when they refuse to proclaim a relevant message, they are proclaiming a message! Their message then is one of saying nothing, of keeping the windows of faith closed, and of allowing a sin-riddled world and a confused society to struggle along amidst great darkness. A church which thinks it is able to remain aloof from public life is no longer a church but a sectarian distortion of the church.

It is the task of churches to proclaim salvation to those who do not (yet) believe in Christ. But they must also administer the Word and Sacraments to and provide pastoral care for those who already believe in Christ. Through God's liberating Word and the work of the Spirit, Christ-believers have to learn to conquer all sinful hindrances that barricade the radical break-through of the new life in Christ. A Christian may not condone sinful inconsistencies with respect to the goal and purpose of his life. He may not try to live in two, religiously exclusive directions: one in his personal-family-church-life and another in his political-educational-business life. No religious schizophrenia is ever permissible.

According to the Bible, conversion and repentance are always inseparably connected, privately and publically, personally and communally, with man's calling in life, with his specific tasks, with his concrete duties. When we lose sight of this very significant aspect of the Biblical message of salvation, we distort the full nature and scope of redemption in Christ. Then man's many responsibilities outside the confines of his Sunday church life are placed beyond the pale and effectiveness of Christ's atonement. The grace of God can then no longer effectuate harmonious relationships in society. A total life of obedience to the sovereign God over creation and all society must always stand central in the interest and aims of the church.

In this manner the church will not have a chance to be(come) irrelevant. Neither will the church be a stand-in-the-way for civilization. She will be an indispensable blessing for all society. Sinners will be compellingly invited to enter the Kingdom, to live according to the life-restoring Word of God, to sit down at the life-sustaining table of the Lord, and to be spiritually equipped to seek God's glory and the best for the world. There is no time for the church to attempt to 'churchify' all of life. To assume the opposite attitude, viz., of standing outside life, will not be possible any more either. We had better learn the hard lessons taught by the history of churches within modern civilization, especially in our own Western world. For generations, for example, Christians in Germany believed and taught that the church existed all by itself in its own, self-enclosed realm, outside and above that lower realm of the state or society. Within the context of such a dualistic approach, the proclamations of the church were at the very outset already prevented from effectuating a re-formation of the fundamental principles of political life and the rest of societal life. The church created a vacuum in life which soon sucked in the apostate views of Naziism. Satan will not allow any house to be empty! When Hitler attained sufficient political power and his ideas caught on to the political imagination of the nation, he began to dictate to churches and church leaders what they could and could not proclaim. They had to re-align themselves, or be expelled from the third Reich or else land in concentration camps.

Another striking example of this we find within our own Anglo-Saxon world. Devout, tithing church members seem to have no qualms of conscience whatsoever to support with their signatures compulsory check-off dues and to participate in picketing in a context of the Marxistic principle of the class-struggle (overtly confessed in the constitutions of many labour unions). What is so disturbing about this is that the churches do not even become upset but remain pretty well silent. They do not seem to understand their role in life. In their silent corroboration they victimize their own members to remain and become increasingly more religiously secular. And what about all those 'christian' citizens who want to vote for the socialistic New Democratic Party in Canada for the simple reason of 'giving them a chance too'?!

These are only a few examples (which could easily be multiplied) of the kind of inconsistencies that result from a lack of insight into the nature, place and task of the church in society. The only way to eliminate these inconsistencies is for the churches to learn from their past experiences and the present plight of the world, to subject themselves completely to God's redeeming Word, and unceasingly to make known to the world the Word of Life for all of life. Through prophetic testimony to the Spirit-filled Word of the Lord proper meaning and direction can be given to all our cultural movements and societal organizations. There is no other effective solution for the present crisis of a hell-resembling life of murder, crime, corruption, perjury, violence, immorality, etc., etc. Outside the Way, the Truth, and the Life there can be no true peace, honesty, justice, love, service, and purity.

The biblical antithesis between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness causes fierce struggle in the hearts of all sinners, especially of those who want to be obedient to God. The presence of this struggle at the depth-level of human existence makes itself felt in organized church communities and should become evident more and more also in all the rest of life. Until Christ returns, nowhere in this life, not even in organized churches and in the lives of individual Christians, will there ever be a genuinely human and sinless situation. Until that time, compromises will have to be made; not with the intent of losing that which is christian, but rather with the intent of retaining what is biblical and changing what is yet sinful. This requires that we fully acknowledge the unique nature of the Word of God: it is Light and not a mixture of light and darkness. Whenever sin and darkness are mentioned in the Bible, it is always in the context of either their being condemned by God or of their having been conquered through the crucified and risen Christ. The Word of God is not just a de-scription of sinful life. It is the divinely given pre-scription for life in order to remove that greyish mixture of good and evil in the world. This Word of God the churches are called upon to proclaim to all people in all situations of life. Christian discernment implies detecting the spiritual direction in which our society is moving: away from or towards God? Towards destruction or towards salvation of our society, nation and world?

Christ's seven letters to the churches in Asia Minor, as recorded in Revelation 2 and 3, provide us with clear-cut directives.

The nature, place and task of churches are all closely interrelated. It is impossible to see the nature of churches in our society only in terms of the God-given regeneration in man's heart and in man's overt faith-life. We must also take into consideration the structural interwovenness of churches in the whole fabric of creatureliness; then we are able to begin to do justice to the historical dimension of churches. Apart from this a concrete understanding of the task of churches is not conceivable. It is of utmost significance to think historically, also in our discussion of the task of the church in society. When society was less differentiated and individualized (cf. New Testament times), the task of the church, although basically not different from what it is today, was much broader and more inclusive than now. In a relatively undeveloped society the duties of established churches included, directly and indirectly, e.g., education, diaconal assistance to the unemployed, care for the physically and mentally ill, even social recreation. However, in the measure that society developed more and more into distinctly qualified societal communities, organizations, movements, and associations, the primary and unique task of churches has become much more evident. This is a great blessing. We must be grateful for this obtained freedom from a great number of duties which were actually secondary, and we must learn to concentrate on the primary responsibility of the church to preach and administer the Gospel.

With the rise of independently organized hospitals, educational institutions, relief associations, political, industrial and communicational agencies, organized christian faith-communities have been able to spread the Good News with a phenomenally accelerating speed to more people in the whole world than ever before!

Before and after the rise of the ecclesiastical reformation in the sixteenth century, and during the subsequent political and industrial and social revolutions in Western civilization, churches have generally been at a loss as to their distinct calling in society. The main reasons are many: the perspective of the all-encompassing and dominating Kingdom of God was lost sight of; life and society remained divided into two artificially separated realms; the church tried to find herself in one of these two areas; the message of salvation was reserved almost exclusively for the inner soul of the individual believer; as 'religious' introverts, church members focussed their attention upon their own 'souls' and the 'souls' of other individuals. Meanwhile life rushed on. Society expanded and unfolded predominantly at a pace and according to the pattern and structural principles of humanistic ideologies.

Christianity fell into the temptation of individualizing and 'soul-izing' the meaning and scope of sin and redemption. Christian faith became irrelevant for the real issues of life, for the spiritual forces at work in society, for the ills and tensions in public life. So much so, that unbelievers have some legitimate reasons to claim that churches are not only irrelevant but also dead, at least as far as the practical problems in society are concerned. It is ironic and extremely sad that at a time in the history of mankind, when churches could concentrate more than ever before upon their unique and primary task, they did not capitalize on these opportunities. To be sure, many Christ-believers are fully aware of this; God make them more faithful yet in the opening of the Scriptures and the prophetic proclamation of the "Thus says the Lord God" to a world and society which are in desperate need of reformation in Christ! However, they are greatly outnumbered by those Christians who do not see this as yet. But this is no reason for despair. On the contrary!

### Conclusion

Society may not be written off as being essentially evil. Neither is it neutral. Nor is it a static, unchanging reality. According to the Word of the Lord, it is God's human instrument through and in which He wants to form and historically make manifest the contours of the glorious Kingdom. Redeemed mankind is called upon to respond to its assigned task in this life in complete obedience to the Lord of Lords. This implies refusing to allow any attitude of withdrawal, accommodation or submersion. We must be engaged in a critical analysis of our past history, a thorough re-orientation in our present world, and also a frank acknowledgment of the societal and unique, cultural place and historical power of churches. Otherwise, the proclamation by organized churches of the Word of God will remain seriously handicapped and will continue to obstruct the proper direction of a normed cultural development of our society.

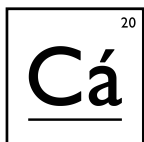
The nature, place and task of the church cannot be seen apart from man's God-given task to christianize society. This, of course, is possible only when we are IN the world, without being OF the world. The hierarchic Roman Catholic solution as to what society should become, and the suggested solutions of the humanists, socialists and pragmatists are, although artificial and not conducive to a true society, nevertheless, patterning, determining, and setting the course for the society of today and tomorrow.

The christian way of life, the christian confession and a christian society are mutually and inseparably related. A christian society presupposes the recognition that man's total life must be subjected to the Word of God, and that Christ-believing churches become fully aware of their nature, place and task in society. This can be seen only when we develop a truly reformational view of society. And both of these are, in turn, based upon the very crucial, biblical revelation that human life is religion and that religion is human life. When religion or life is not lived to God's glory, it is false, **apostate**. Then life has within itself the seed of death and, when sin is full-grown, life disappears. This is the law of sin. But when life or religion is lived covenantally before the face of God, it is true and abiding. Then the seed of death is turned into life and the evil of deformation, also in society, is turned into the blessedness of re-formation.

Sola fide coram Deo vivere!

Such a life lived before the Creator-Redeemer is not a dream or fantasy but concrete reality. The established churches are societal institutions with a very important task: the proclamation of the abiding Word of God in a culturally-historically relevant manner. This makes the church so awesomely significant and relevant in and for society.

May all the churches, the church leaders and the church members see and acknowledge this ever more fully. May the day arrive when our society and also our nations will snatch for and hold tight the 'slip of the cloak' of God's people, rather than seek to excommunicate them with their churches from society.



**Cántaro Institute Digital Library**

(1980-2018) Reformational Publishing Project

(2019-2022) Reformational Digital Library